



Engaging Culture

A Biblical Case for Christian Influence into Government

acl
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voice for values

STUDY 2

BRINGING TRUTH TO POWER

In our first session last week, we zoomed out to the big picture, to the truth of God as sovereign Creator and Lord of all. We were reminded that God is God of creation and God of salvation, that He reigns over the nations and over the church, that Jesus is Lord of all. The implications of this are that God gives government its authority and its purpose, and He is the ultimate power and authority to whom all people, including government, are accountable.

Today we turn our attention to further implications of this for the church and for Christians, in interaction with government.

GK Chesterton is believed to have once said:

“When you cease to believe in God, it’s not that you believe in nothing, it’s that you believe in anything.”¹

In many ways, I think this describes the soul of our nation and other Western nations at the moment. Many people don’t pursue truth anymore, in fact postmodernism tells people that truth is unknowable, it is relative, it is personal; it’s definitely not absolute, particularly when it comes to personal morality. Interestingly in contrast, many people have very definite, very absolute views on social or public morality. This relativism has led to much pain, misery and hopelessness in our communities.

John 18:33-38 (NLT)

³³ Then Pilate went back into his headquarters and called for Jesus to be brought to him. “Are you the king of the Jews?” he asked him.

³⁴ Jesus replied, “Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me?”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate retorted. “Your own people and their leading priests brought you to me for trial. Why? What have you done?”

³⁶ Jesus answered, “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.”

³⁷ Pilate said, “So you are a king?”

Jesus responded, “You say I am a king. Actually, I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.”

¹ Source unknown. See <http://chesterton.org/qmeister2/any-everything.htm>

38 “What is truth?” Pilate asked. Then he went out again to the people and told them, “He is not guilty of any crime.

Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

This is an age-old question, it’s nothing new. And the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth as Paul said to Timothy², has a mission to declare the truth, and defend the truth.

This applies to our society in general, at a personal level and a corporate level in public debate, and it also applies to our governing authorities.

Tom Gilson of Campus Crusade for Christ says, *“The central political tragedy of our day is not any of the decisions being made regarding...abortion, marriage or morality. Nor is it special interest group influence, campaign negativity, or even governmental encroachment on our freedoms. It is that we have abandoned truth as the guide for our political processes. We’ve given up hope in it.”*³

Today it would seem there is an urgent need for Christians and the Church to be defending truth in the public square. When you move away from truth, from a clear understanding of what’s right and wrong, then we are at the mercy of any agenda, any ideology, and its consequences.

Charles Colson, in his book “The Faith”, refers to well known atheist Richard Dawkins.

Dawkins was once asked in an interview whether the words good and evil have any meaning for the atheist. He replied *“Even the question you’re asking has no meaning for me. Good and evil – I don’t believe there is hanging out there anywhere something called good and something called evil. I think that there are good things that happen and bad things that happen.”*

Colson comments *“According to this atheistic viewpoint, the attacks on America on 9/11 are not intrinsically bad, and bringing relief to tsunami victims is not intrinsically good. Preposterous!”*⁴

All this doesn’t mean that people like Richard Dawkins are devoid of morality or values. They have their beliefs about right and wrong, about morality. They have alternate moral systems which have deep flaws, as the example just quoted reveals. In his book, “The Gospel in a Pluralist Society”, Lesslie Newbigin (an American missionary to India) puts this challenge to the church powerfully:

² 1 Timothy 3:15 (NLT)

³ Tom Gilson, *Politics, Power, and the Abandonment of Truth*, <http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/articles/entry/12/14199>

⁴ Charles Colson, *The Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 60

“The Church cannot accept as its role simply the winning of individuals to a kind of Christian discipleship which concerns only the private and domestic aspects of life. To be faithful to a message which concerns the kingdom of God, his rule over all things and all peoples, the Church has to claim the high ground of public truth.

He continues,

“Every human society is governed by assumptions, normally taken for granted without question, about what is real, what is important, what is worth aiming for...Public truth as it is assumed...in the public debate about political and economic goals, is either in conformity with the truth as it is given in Jesus Christ, or it is not. Where it is not, the Church is bound to challenge it.”⁵

At this point, it's important to remind ourselves, that only God has a monopoly on the truth, not us. Truth is found in Jesus Christ. We need to remember this and maintain a heart of humility when it comes to bringing truth to power. The reality is that we are finite human beings, who depend on the revelation of God about Himself, His Son, ourselves and His world, and we don't always get it right. We don't have all the answers, we are all on a life-long journey of learning and growing in the truth God has revealed to us. God has revealed Himself through His word (special revelation) and through His creation (general revelation), and everything that is true is God's truth.

It's in the application of what God has revealed to us that humility is also needed. We must at all times 'speak the truth in love', remembering the grace of God in our own lives and His mercy toward us.

Many of the challenges which our world and our governments face are complex. They are not simple. And what is needed by us as the people of God, is careful theological reflection, a good knowledge of the Scriptures, and a good understanding of the issues, enabling us to engage with wisdom, substance and humility.

Also in many cases, while what is right and wrong in a given situation may be clear, the best policy or legislative response might not be so clear.

Once again, we can see some poignant examples in Scripture of God's people speaking truth to power in very specific circumstances.

Daniel 4:27

'King Nebuchadnezzar, please accept my advice. Stop sinning and do what is right. Break from your wicked past and be merciful to the poor. Perhaps then you will continue to prosper.'

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 222

John the Baptist

Luke 3:18-19 John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people. ¹⁹ *“John also publicly criticized Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for many other wrongs he had done.”*

Paul

Acts 24:25 *“As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. “Go away for now,” he replied. “When it is more convenient, I’ll call for you again.”*

These few examples illustrate a commitment to bring God’s truth to leaders and government, but in our time and generation, do we have the courage to declare and defend the truth to those in authority over us?

In today’s world of so-called ‘tolerance’ when Christian viewpoints are viewed as discriminatory and narrow-minded, it takes courage to get our hands dirty, play our part, and enter the public debate, speaking truth to power. Tolerance today is taken to mean that all ideas are equally valid. But the truth is all ideas are not equally valid. If you don’t respect other people’s opinions, then you’re seen to be intolerant. True tolerance is showing respect for people in spite of their ideas or opinions, not because of them. We can disagree with someone’s beliefs, but still respect them as fellow human beings created in God’s image. Let’s debate the ideas and criticize ideas, but not attack people in the process.

Billy Graham recognized this when he said back in 1962,
“In the face of all kinds of conditions screaming to be rectified, too many of us find ourselves afflicted with moral laryngitis” - (A Time for Courage 1962)

Isaiah 5:20-21

²⁰ *What sorrow for those who say
that evil is good and good is evil,
that dark is light and light is dark,
that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter.*
²¹ *What sorrow for those who are wise in their own eyes
and think themselves so clever.*

Time and time again through the Old Testament, God gives a message to His prophets, not only for His people Israel, but for pagan Gentile nations as well. We see examples of this in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habbakuk and Zephaniah. It was usually a message of the rulership of God and His sovereignty over the affairs of man, or a message of judgment because of the disobedience of the people.

Dr Martin Luther King Jnr summed up the role of the church in this regard when he said, "The church...is not the master or servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, but never its tool."⁶

The world is facing many challenges as we've already mentioned, and it desperately needs the voice and influence of the church to bring truth and it's worldview to bear.

Worldview

Everybody has a worldview, a way of viewing the world, a set of beliefs and values by which they seek to live. Nothing in this life makes sense unless we related it back to God. We develop these false dichotomies, such as a divide between the sacred and the secular, or the physical and spiritual, instead of seeing all of life as one, and God the Creator as the Source of all life. In the beginning God created...

"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."⁷ (C.S. Lewis)

When it comes to the issues facing our community and nation, issues of righteousness and justice, we have something so important and unique as Christians to bring into the public debate. We have knowledge about God, the world and how God relates to the world. We have an understanding of God as Creator, of Jesus as Lord, of the fallen-ness and broken-ness of man and the world in which we live, we understand the hope of redemption and restoration, we understand the reality of good and evil.

Abraham Kuyper is quoted famously as saying:

"...there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"⁸

This is a significant challenge to the dominant worldview of humanism or secularism in Western culture today. It says – there is no God, therefore there is no absolute morality and there is no transcendent meaning or purpose in life. The consequences of this are that there is no accountability to a higher power, there is no absolute truth to which we must submit, morality is relative to the individual, and the only hope is for pleasure and happiness in this life, in the here and now.

Tragically too, those with the least power behind their world view are most likely to be the casualties. We have seen historically, that systems which do not align with true morality quickly descend into not only a competition of worldviews, but often violent ones as the Nazi, Stalinist and Pol Pot regimes perhaps most recently illustrate. We can see that even our Western cultures with their strong Christian heritage, are vulnerable to the discarding of rights as we discard faith.

⁶ <http://www.mlkonline.net/quotes.html>

⁷ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i_believe_in_christianity_as_i_believe_that_the/201459.html

⁸ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty", in Bratt, James D., *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 488

We must challenge the worldviews and belief systems that lead to destruction of human lives, causing pain and hurt.

Again, Lesslie Newbigin says:

“If this biblical interpretation of the human story, with its center in the double event of Jesus’ death and resurrection, is our clue, then it will follow that we are called neither to a simple affirmation of human culture nor to a simple rejection of it. We are to cherish human culture as an area in which we live under God’s grace and are given daily new tokens of that grace. But we are called also to remember that we are part of that whole seamless texture of human culture which was shown on the day we call Good Friday, to be in murderous rebellion against the grace of God.”⁹

Christian singer/songwriter Graham Kendrick wrote a song which begins:

“Who can sound the depths of sorrow in the Father heart of God, for the children we’ve neglected, for the lives so deeply scarred...We have scorned the truth you gave us, we have bowed to other lords...We have sacrificed the children on the altars of our gods”

Time and time again the nation of Israel followed and worshiped the gods of the pagan nations, turning away from the LORD. Today our culture worships the gods of money, fame, sex and power. We see this everyday in the newspapers, on the TV, in the lives of both celebrities and everyday citizens.

What hope does the world have to discover the truth about God, about life, about our humanity, if the church is not the salt and light we’re called to be, if we don’t speak truth into the public arena?

In the next session, we turn to the application and outworking of this worldview in and through our lives, but for now the discussion questions will ask you to examine the source of truth, its purpose in civil society, and examples of where we need to better represent it.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 195