

Should government compel or restrict religion?

Is government inherently evil?

Should Christians avoid political involvement?

1. "Government should compel religion"

- Many Christians held this view in previous centuries; this view provided impetus for a number of European "wars of religion," both between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and between Reformed and Anabaptist groups.
- Over time, this view lost favor as more and more Christians realized that it was inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus and with the nature of faith itself
- While this view is no longer held by any Christian groups, other religions still promote government enforcement of their religious beliefs (i.e., Saudi Arabia's enforcement of Islamic law)
- The "compel religion" view is used as justification for the persecution of Christians
- In the US, support for religious freedom increased as the country sought political unity in spite of the variety of denominations and religions (i.e., Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Quaker, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Baptist); in 1779, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom.

a. Jesus distinguished the realms of God and of Caesar

- **Mt 22:21:** Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

b. Jesus refused to try to compel people to believe in him

- **Lk 9:55:** And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them.

c. Genuine faith cannot be forced

d. Not a worldly kingdom

- **Jn 18:36:** Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world."

e. Practical implications of rejecting the "compel religion" view

f. What about giving some tax benefits to churches?

g. The spiritual influence behind the "compel religion" view

2. "Exclude religion from government"

- This view is promoted by the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and much of secular society
- This view holds that religious belief should be kept at home and quiet, that there should be no influence from religious groups in the political process
- Examples: Colorado Constitution amendment; overturned death penalties; valedictorian's speech restricted, etc.

a. It overrides the will of the people

b. It changes freedom of religion into freedom from religion

- It distorts the meaning of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech..."

c. It wrongly restricts freedom of religion and freedom of speech

d. It was never adopted by the American people

- *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971): Government actions "must not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion"

e. It removes from government God's teaching about good and evil

- **Ro 13:4:** For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.
- f. Biblical examples of God's people giving counsel to rulers (Dan 4:27; Lk 3:19; Acts 24:25)
 - g. The spiritual basis for the "exclude religion" view
3. "All government is demonic"
- According to this view, all government power is deeply infected by evil, demonic forces
 - Those who hold this view usually prefer military pacifism
 - This view has been strongly promoted by Greg Boyd
- a. Support from Luke 4:6
 - **Lk 4:5-7:** And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."
 - b. The mistake of depending on Luke 4:6
 - **Jn 8:44:** You are of your father the devil....When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
 - The notion that Satan rules earthly kingdoms is in contrast with other clear biblical passages:
 - **Da 4:17:** The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.'
 - **Ro 13:1:** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.
 - **1 Pe 2:13-14:** Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.
 - c. But where did Jesus ever teach us to use force?
 - d. Support from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
 - e. This view leads to a "moral equivalence" between good and evil governments
 - f. Boyd's rejection of all governmental "power over" evil as "worldly"
 - g. Boyd says Christians should not even fight to defend their own wives and children, or their country
 - h. God has established both evangelism and the power of government to restrain evil
 - **Ne 4:14:** And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." (See also Gen 14:14-16)
 - i. Could more pacifism have stopped slavery, or stopped Hitler?
 - j. The more ominous implications of the "all government is demonic" view
4. "Do evangelism, not politics"
- Though this view is expressed often in personal conversations, the writers who tend in this direction qualify their statements by affirming the appropriateness of some political influence by the church, though they argue it will not do any spiritual or eternal good (Cal Thomas, John MacArthur)
- a. Too narrow an understanding of "the Gospel" and the kingdom of God
 - **Mt 28:19-20:** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

- b. The “whole Gospel” includes a transformation of society
 - **1 Jn 3:8:** The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
- c. Which parts of the Bible should the church not preach about?
- d. God leaves Christians here on earth both to do evangelism and to do good for others
 - **Ga 6:10:** So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.
 - **Eph 2:10:** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
 - **Mt 5:16:** In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
- e. God established both the church and the government to restrain evil
- f. Christians have influenced governments positively throughout history
 - The spread of Christianity and Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for:
 - Outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374)
 - Outlawing the gladiatorial contests (in 404)
 - Outlawing the branding of criminal’s faces (in 315)
 - Instituting prison reforms (in 361), stopping human sacrifice among the Irish, the Prussians, the Lithuanians, and the Aztec and Mayan Indians
 - Outlawing pedophilia
 - Granting property rights and other protections to women
 - Banning polygamy
 - Prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India (in 1829)
 - Outlawing the binding of young women’s feet in China (in 1912)
 - Initiating public schools in Germany (in the 16th century)
 - Advocating compulsory education of all children in many European countries
 - Opposing and often abolishing slavery in the Roman Empire, Ireland, most of Europe, and the US (more than 2/3 of the abolitionists in the US in the mid-1830’s were Christian clergymen)
 - The formulation of the Magna Carta (1215)
 - The formulation of The Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution of the United States (1787)
- g. But won’t political involvement distract us from the main task of preaching the Gospel?

5. “Do politics, not evangelism”

- This view holds that the church should seek to change laws and culture, and should de-emphasize evangelism
- This was a primary emphasis of the Social Gospel movement (late 19th to early 20th centuries)
- This view has **not** been advocated by leaders at Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council, the 700 Club, Concerned Women for American, the Alliance Defense Fund, the American Center for Law and Justice, or the Moral Majority.
- Yet, if we ever begin to think that good laws alone will solve a nation’s problems, we will have made a huge mistake
- Genuine change will happen:
 - (1) If people’s hearts change so they seek good rather than evil—the result of evangelism and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
 - (2) If people’s minds change so their moral convictions align more closely with God’s moral standards—the result of conversation, teaching, public discussion, and debate
 - (3) If a nation’s laws change to more fully encourage good conduct and punish wrong conduct—the result of Christian political involvement

All of the class lessons and outlines are posted on the class website www.christianessentialsbc.com.

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