

Perhaps the most striking run-in occurred in Philippi, recorded in Acts 16. The governing authorities in Philippi unjustly arrested Paul and beat him publicly before locking him up in prison for the night. As we know well, this was all the more unjust because Paul was a Roman citizen himself! Eventually—the next day—Paul reveals his citizenship and brings shame on these governing authorities, but don't we wonder why he didn't bring his citizenship up earlier?

Perhaps he was caught up in the moment and it just escaped his mind, either out of fear or confusion. Eventually, we will see him recall his citizenship before things get out of hand in Acts 22:25. However, in Philippi Paul submitted to these governing authorities in a rather extreme manner.

Consider what else happened between Paul's beating and his citizenship claim. In the middle of the night in Philippi, there's an earthquake that gives all the prisoners a chance to escape from their imprisonment—and it's safe to say that by now Paul has had time to reflect on his unjust imprisonment, and how his Roman citizenship could be invoked at any time. Paul could rightfully walk out of this prison at that moment.

The jailor didn't know Paul was a citizen at this moment, but he knew the prisoners had a chance to seize their freedom. The situation looks so desperate to the jailor that he is about to kill himself, when Paul yells out the shocking words, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

And what is the result of Paul's submission to unjust governing authorities?

The jailor "took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family." Paul was able to preach the gospel to more people as he submitted to the unjust government in Philippi.

So, what does all this have to do with our divisive political situation today?

It's good to recognize that the political problems we might see today aren't often as extreme as what Paul experienced. Paul's words about submitting to governing authorities did indeed include unjust authorities, as did his words about respect and honor. Elsewhere, he urges prayers for them as well.

In a political climate of divisiveness and hyperbolic rhetoric, Christian leaders might indeed follow Paul's example—and God's

Word—to lead with respectful, honoring speech and prayers for governing authorities, whether we agree with all their moral, economic, and governing decisions or not.

As far as we know, Paul invested no energy to fight for a better political system in Philippi, nor did he disparage those leaders publicly. The New Testament certainly gives general believers no guidance to do so—even though we know the early Church included people of means and political power.

Why such silence on politics? One might imagine that Paul didn't think Christians could have any influence on the political systems of that day, but the New Testament itself wouldn't support that. As mentioned before, the Church included some influential figures. More than that, Paul himself gained hearings with several government officials throughout the Roman world: Sergius Paullus in Cyprus; Gallio in Achaia; Felix, Festus, Herod in Caesarea Maritima; and he was even able to appeal to Caesar himself! I doubt it would be very easy for many of our pastors today to gain a hearing with so many major government officials.

The likeliest reason Paul didn't involve himself in political issues is because his attention was focused elsewhere. Paul really cared about preaching the gospel and seeing people—even jailors and their households—come to faith. Which leads us to the next text to consider.

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"

¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

²² To the weak I became weak, that I might

win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

Preaching the gospel was the number one priority for Paul, and he was careful to not let other things become obstacles to that priority.

In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul is using himself as an example for the Corinthians. In the greater context of chapters 8 and 10, Paul discusses whether or not the Corinthians should eat meat that's been sacrificed to idols. His general answer is, "you have the freedom to do it, but maybe you shouldn't—it might create an obstacle for others." This is where his own example comes into play.

In chapter 9, Paul brings up a few places where he has freedom or rights that he denies himself in order to help people hear the gospel. After starting with a discussion of marriage, Paul also goes on to talk about finances. He even asserts that the "Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Paul has every right to ask the Corinthians to support him financially. However, right before our text he says, "But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting."

So that's why he's talking about "boasting" as we come into verse 16. If Paul's going to boast about anything, it's somehow going to point back to his sincerity in following Jesus's call on his life—even if it's making his life harder than it has to be.

Remember that when Paul first came to Corinth he worked with Aquila and Priscilla, because they were all tentmakers. Paul was bivocational in his work when he needed to be. We know he received support from other churches at times, but we also know that for some reason, in Corinth he decided he'd preach for free.

Why? Paul's priority was preaching the gospel. And if finances might ever get in the way of real people receiving the gospel, Paul is ready to remove that obstacle. If someone might not believe Paul because he's making money from his preaching, Paul happily will do without payment so that people will hear his preaching with sincerity and believe in the gospel of freedom.

In Paul's freedom, he is free to give up anything, or take on anything, in order to free other people with the gospel.

To the Jews? To those under the law? He'll appeal to his righteousness under the law. Paul had been a Pharisee, zealous for the traditions of his forefathers. When he came into a new town, he'd go right to the synagogue and preach Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel!

And Paul even taught this to his companions. When Timothy joins Paul in ministry Paul has him circumcised in order that the Jews might better receive the message. He was a Jew for the Jews!

But Paul wasn't Jewish for the gentiles! He writes to the gentiles in Galatia—don't get circumcised! You're free from having to follow this law to please God! In fact, he boasts about how he didn't compel Titus to be circumcised, so that the gospel of freedom might be clear to the gentiles. Paul was careful to keep the Jewish law before Jews, but he wouldn't allow anyone to impose the Jewish law on gentiles. He was a gentile for the gentiles too.

That got him into trouble sometimes, but he had a reason for what he was doing. He was becoming all things to all people for the sake of the gospel—just what he says here in 1 Corinthians 9.

So what does all this have to do with our divisive political situation today?

Can a Christian be a Democrat? Can a Christian be a Republican?

In your freedom you can, but avoiding obstacles for other people is way more important than political allegiance. If your political stances are going to get in the way of real people hearing God's real gospel, your priorities are getting out of balance.

Perhaps the better question for us would be: How can a Christian leader be a Democrat to the Democrats, and a Republican to the Republicans?

This doesn't mean that you have to lie and be disingenuous depending on whom you're talking to. But there are valid concerns that can be affirmed from both parties, and valid problems with both parties as well. Instead of digging in and arguing for one side or another, Christians have the freedom to not get overly focused on political stances, because we are focused on more important things—namely, preaching the gospel. If a conversation turns political, perhaps affirm what can be affirmed—if that's even necessary

(maybe silence is better)—in order that those you're talking to might not have an obstacle set up by political stances that could turn divisive.

But someone might respond, "Christians need to care for real people, in real needs, and that inherently involves politics." Certainly, some of what has been said above responds to this objection. But more can be said about this. Which leads us to the next text to consider.

Revelation 21:1–6

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation concludes with some of the most beautiful imagery that speaks to the real needs of every real person—and this depiction in Revelation 21 is the ultimate "political" kingdom where Christians need to direct all people as we preach the gospel.

There are many different ways to understand various parts of John's Revelation, some of which is, admittedly, quite unclear. Regardless, it certainly touches on political kingdoms on earth, but it does so from an eternal, heavenly perspective. As it does so, it demonstrates that all earthly kingdoms are temporary. In many respects, these earthly kingdoms are often depicted as even being against God.

Yet, Revelation does not call for political action. If Revelation demonstrates anything, it demonstrates how earthly kingdoms cannot, and never will be, the hope of believers. Revelation paints a picture where there is one kingdom of hope, and it is God's eternal kingdom.

To put the best construction on political stances, people care about politics because they

believe political involvement will do good to other people. People believe in their political stances because they hope that their political parties will bring about needed good in a hurting and broken world.

However, Revelation helps unmask all political kingdoms as ultimately tainted, ultimately sinful, and ultimately hopeless. All earthly kingdoms are temporary, so Christian leaders cannot invest too much time, energy, and hope in earthly kingdoms.

But that doesn't leave us hopeless! Revelation 21 is all about the final, ultimate, perfect ending to the longings and pain of this world. While earthly kingdoms will always disappoint, God has promised a final kingdom that will "wipe away every tear." A kingdom with no death! A kingdom with no mourning, nor crying, nor pain!


So, taking these three New Testament texts together, we find some helpful guidance for pastoring in a divisive political climate.

First, from Romans 13 we hear the positive exhortation to honor and submit to governing authorities, even those that might be unjust. So, pastors can honor and submit, providing a role model for those who tend to foster political divisiveness.

Second, from 1 Corinthians 9, we are reminded that our actions can have an influence on whether or not people hear the gospel from us. So, pastors can avoid arguments about politics in order to avoid setting up obstacles for the preaching of the gospel.

Finally, from Revelation 21, we are reminded that all earthly injustice will finally be resolved at the renewal of all things. Like Paul, we can endure injustice now because of our eternal hope. More than that, we can proclaim this eternal kingdom to a dying and broken world that doesn't know where to look for hope.

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TEAR HERE

Politics and the Text

Dr. Daniel Berge
Professor of New Testament



I don't know if the Church gets much more divided than during an election year. 2024 is shaping up to be no different. In some ways it already feels like the continuation of a big, divisive argument that's been going on for years. We could try to place blame for this, but there's a good chance blame would only lead to more division.

How should pastors think about this, and what can they do?

How might pastors shepherd their flocks so that Jesus's words in John 10:16 might ring true, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." In this divisive climate, can we really hope to lead one flock?

In John 10:16, Jesus proclaims that his sheep will listen to his voice. In the CLB we proclaim that God's Word is our faithful rule and guide. If we want guidance on how to do this, we should turn to the very Word of God, and the New Testament has plenty of help to offer us.

Therefore, this article will consider three key New Testament texts to help us think about shepherding the one flock in our divisive political climate. There are certainly other relevant texts that could be considered as well. But these texts will help us think about our own positions more accurately, and could even lay the groundwork for a sermon series you might consider leading your congregation through this year.

Romans 13:1-7

"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.² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,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.⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

This text sounds fine in an abstract theological treatise, but it can be a lot more challenging when it's placed in a historical context. We might quickly think about how this text doesn't fit situations like Nazi Germany or Genghis Khan's brutal regime. Scripture does indeed give us license to obey God rather than man in certain situations. However, keep in mind Paul's experience with the governing authorities of his day. They weren't always "just."

Paul did indeed write Romans 13 before consistent persecution of Christians broke out in the Roman empire, so we can't force that level of dissonance into this text. However, we do know Paul had plenty of run-ins with governing authorities—even before writing Romans 13!

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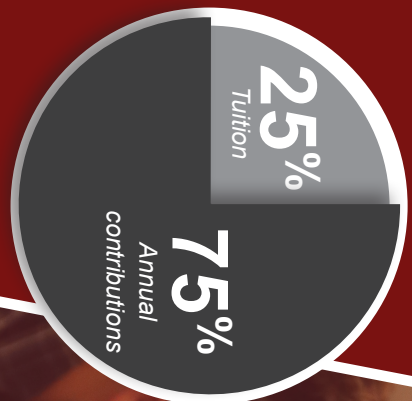
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