

Christians & Politics: States and Statism

Seeing Government Through A Biblical Lens

By Jesse Phillips

Unless you have been stranded on a deserted island in the South Pacific for the last 18 months, you are undoubtedly aware that America is engaged in a political process technically called an “election”, which in reality at times seems more like all-out warfare. Ah, the beauty of representative government.

All humor aside, dual-citizenship has always been an important issue for Christians to wrestle with. On the one hand we are citizens of God’s Kingdom, while we still have certain obligations pertaining to our earthly citizenship. And these seasons of election, in which all citizens are called upon to exercise their right to vote and be part of decisions that greatly affect our nation, provide us an opportunity as Christians to reflect on our two citizenships and discuss how we as Christians are to act as citizens of both the heavenly and earthly kingdoms. As pastors, we want to be faithful to lead you effectively and accurately during all the seasons of your life, including political ones.

R.C. Sproul writes an excellent article called “Statism” in the *Tabletalk* periodical (September 2008). I would highly recommend anyone who has not read this article to find a copy of *Tabletalk* and digest this issue. There are many helpful articles therein on these and other important issues for Christians to discuss this election cycle.

Dr. Sproul draws a contrast between the ideas of a state and *statism*. According to Romans 13, God established the state and gives it the responsibility to use force to restrain evil. The state, including governing officials and laws, are evidences of common grace toward humanity. *Statism*, however, occurs when the state takes on a position of superiority over God, rather than being subservient to God.

As Dr. Sproul writes, “*A decline from statehood to statism happens when the government is perceived as or claims to be the ultimate reality. This reality then replaces God as the supreme entity upon which human existence depends.*” I have summarized these two concepts in the following definitions, which side-by-side demonstrate some clear differences with powerful implications for Christians.

State: *expression of civil authority intended to punish evil and promote good as a means of common grace.* **Statism:** *a philosophy that makes us dependent on the state rather than God—a belief that the state is not under the authority of God but exercises autonomous reign over citizenship.*

The main difference between state and statism is that the latter is a rejection of clear biblical teaching that the state does not have autonomy. It is not free to act as it wants. Scriptures very clearly teach that the state is not God’s rival or master, but is in fact a slave of God.

“*For there is no [governing] authority except from God*” (Romans 13:1). A state does not have any legitimate claim to authority independent of God. No state would have any authority had the absolutely sovereign God not chosen to grant it. Dictators may rise and appear to grab authority for themselves, but even world rulers are as dependent as spoon-fed babies, only able to grow strong as God’s hand feeds them and grants them earthly power. Such dictators are portrayed

by Peter as God’s messengers sent to do his will (1 Peter 2:14).

In fact Paul’s command to “*be subject to the governing authority*” in Romans 13:1 amounts to a command to obey God himself, because “*whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed*” (Rom. 13:2).

As Christians, we are not dependent on or supremely loyal to government. Although 1 Peter 2 and Romans 13 contain very strong warnings against developing a rebellious attitude toward civil authority, our primary obedience is not to any nation-state, but the Word of God, the Church of God and ultimately to Christ, the Son of God. We can reject the philosophy of statism as patently unbiblical because it contradicts clear biblical teaching that all forms of government, from dictators to democracies, are slaves to God, not free from God.

Church & State

The founders of American government seemed to have a good grasp of this. Although America was not a theocracy and was influenced and led by men with a variety of backgrounds and worldviews, there did seem to be a better understanding of Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2 when our nation was founded than there is today.

Throughout our history, America has promoted the idea of separation of church and state, which was originally intended as a check against an aggressive state asserting itself as autonomous and supreme. The founders realized that human nature is such that tyrants will abuse power and use the authority God gave them for evil purposes, harshly subjugating their citizens for their own selfish gains, instead of promoting good and punishing evil. As a result, our founders implemented checks and balances against such abuse. It was in this context that the phrase “separation of church and state” was first coined.

But, as Dr. Sproul says, this very concept that was originally intended to prohibit the abuse of statism, has been used to actually accomplish that very thing. “*In America, we have a long history of valuing the concept of the separation of church and state. This idea historically referred to a division of labors between the church and the civil magistrate. However, initially both the church and state were seen as entities ordained by God and subject to his governance. In that sense, the state was considered ‘under God.’ What has happened in the last few decades is the obfuscation of this original distinction between church and state, so that today the language we hear of separation of church and state, when carefully exegeted, communicates the idea of the separation of the state from God. In this sense, it’s not merely that the state declares independence from the church, it also declares independence from God and presumes itself to rule with autonomy.*”

Dr. Sproul then goes on to list some of the practical ramifications of this ideological shift, such as the exponential growth in government which now “engulfs all of life”, including education, economy and a banishment of the church from the public square. “*Throughout the history of the church, Christianity has always stood over against all forms of statism.*”

Statism is the natural and ultimate enemy to Christianity because it involves a usurpation of the reign of God. If the state is to thrive and continue to be useful in the way that God intended it, to protect its citizenship by punishing evil and promoting righteousness and justice, then Christians “need to be vigilant about the rapidly approaching elevation of the state to supremacy.”

Spiritual Ruin of Statism

The by-product of statism is *dependence*. If a state is truly supreme, and viewed by its citizens as supreme, then everyone who lives in that state is supremely dependent on the state. This is a greater and more immediate spiritual danger than the passage of unbiblical laws, restrictions or even persecution.

As Christians, we recognize that God alone is supreme. Consequentially, God is the one we obey and depend on to meet our needs. There is a correlation between supremacy and dependency. You will always depend on the one with the highest authority you know. Who is there to help you and give you what you need? Who can provide for you and defend you? Who is there better to do this than the one who rules and owns it all? This logic is behind Paul’s rhetorical question, “*If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, how will he not graciously give us all things?*” (Romans 8:32). God owns it all, and he benevolently offers to give us “all things”, even his own beloved Son. Because he owns everything and provides all we need, we are dependent on him alone for life and salvation.

But there is a sinister poison interjected with the onset of statism, which can go undetected in the hearts and attitudes of Christians at times. The danger of statism is that it replaces dependence on God with dependence on government. After all, if government is supreme and outside of God’s authority, then our livelihood as citizens depends on the state. The danger of statism is two-fold. It interjects conflicting loyalties into our dual citizenship, and it eats at the heart of Christian faith by its luring temptation to depend on the state for things only God can provide.

First, statism interjects conflicting loyalties into our dual citizenship. We are commanded by God to be subject to the governing authorities for the precise reason that they are subject to God and commissioned to do his will, punishing evil and promoting good. The problem with statism is that it rejects the premise that God has any authority over human government. The state then becomes a vehicle that doesn’t punish evil, but promotes it, and doesn’t promote good, but punishes it.

We see this with issues like abortion, whereby the state willingly and knowingly promotes evil, not only exonerating paid doctors and parents for the killing of children in the womb, but actually prides itself in the ostentatious claim that such a pre-meditated act of violence on the innocent is a “right.” How can a Christian knowingly obey such a state, when God’s word so clearly denounces such evil? Additionally, there are many good things that the state punishes (i.e. limiting expressions of religion such as prayer in schools). How can we be subject to a state when such a loyalty would require us to neglect or disobey God’s Word?

This is the immorality of statism. Many times it requires civil disobedience from Christians who remember Christ’s clear teaching that we cannot serve two masters. We

will always end up hating one and loving the other if they are in conflict with each other (Matthew 6:24). Statism can lead to spiritual ruin for Christians who prefer the ease of compliance with the state to the neglect of living in full accordance with God’s revealed will. Christians who sit idly by, accepting certain social norms as permissible, even when the Bible and conscience says they are wrong, are at risk of spiritual apathy.

Second, statism lures Christians to stifling dependence on the state for things only God can provide. When your mortgage is too hard to pay, your medical bills are too high and gas prices are steep, it can be very tempting to hear many promises made by the government for handouts with relief and joy. I recently filled out some tax forms and was hoping for extra money to be returned. It was not because I had paid money that I wanted back, I just thought I was eligible for some tax credits that were not dependent on taxes I paid. In other words, I was hoping the government would cut me a check because I had some stuff I wanted to pay for.

God’s word says that he is my provider (1 Timothy 6:17), and his means of provision is the honest wages of the worker (1 Timothy 5:18, Luke 10:7). “*You work hard and be generous and I’ll care for you,*” is the essence of God’s Word on the matter. We can’t afford the government (or anyone else for that matter) to try to care or provide for us in the place of God. God is the sole source of our dependence. If he cares for the sparrows and lilies, he will care for us as well. Anything that seeks to replace God and his means of provision for essential needs is idolatry and dishonest gain, not to mention a bit less resourceful than the one who holds the waters of the earth in the palm of his hand.

When we begin to develop an entitlement mentality, viewing government programs and benefits as necessary provision, we are enslaving ourselves to unbiblical dishonest gain. The spiritual effect of this is that the cultivation of trust in God and his beautiful means of providing for us, and the intimacy and affection that is meant to produce, is replaced by a misguided trust in government and the inevitable moral decay that must result from such idolatry.

Looking ahead

The tension between state and statism provides a wonderful opportunity for Americans to be involved in the political process. It is only through vigilance that the decline into statism that Dr. Sproul spoke of can be prevented. In many ways, this decline has already begun in our country.

Our goal for political involvement as Christians is to ensure as best we can that the state does not claim for itself autonomy, but functions as God wills, promoting good and punishing evil. We will discuss more of the specifics of how to do this in later installments of this short series. For now it will suffice to say that Christians who are eager to obey God and to subject themselves to governing authorities as an act of obedience to God, should strive to vote and influence the system in a way that preserves their government’s function as a sword of justice and advocate of righteousness.

Next Week: ***Mrs. President? A biblical view of women in government.***

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