

Missing the Mark?

I Pledge Allegiance – Part I

Romans 13:1

Introduction

The beginning lines of our Pledge of Allegiance were written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy. Bellamy was a socialist who also happened to be a Baptist minister. He was heavily influenced by a relative who had written that utopia within any society was possible, given the dedication and unity of mankind.

The original pledge was written to celebrate the anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. It was published in a children's magazine and was intended to stress the unity of the states as it declared,

*I pledge allegiance to my Flag,
and the Republic for which it stands;
one Nation indivisible,
With Liberty and Justice for all.*

Twenty-five years later, there was growing concern about the many immigrants who would not know what "my Flag" stood for. In 1923, the wording was added to the beginning line, "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States." One year later, "of America" was added, so that the pledge now read,

*I pledge allegiance to the Flag
of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands;
one Nation indivisible,
With Liberty and Justice for all.*

Thirty years later, in an attempt to differentiate America, with its belief in a Creator, from the spreading communism and atheism of other nations,

the words "under God" were added. After these words were ratified, President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote, "From this day forward, the millions of our school children will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and schoolhouse this . . . patriotic oath and public prayer."

Note those last words – it was unapologetically conceived as a prayer.

Now, fifty years after Eisenhower applauded the new pledge, it is becoming the center of a growing controversy over that very issue – it is undeniably an oath and a confession; a public prayer; a declaration of the sovereignty of God. If you were an atheist, you would not want to say it either.

This is the reason Michael Newdow, the atheist father of a third grader, challenged the state of California for allowing a teacher to lead his daughter's class in the Pledge of Allegiance. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with him and declared such an act as unconstitutional.

However, in June of 2004, the Supreme Court reversed that decision. In the process though, the Supreme Court sidestepped the issue of separation. They overruled the lower court because they held that the father of this third grade daughter had no right to speak for her since he was presently involved in a custody dispute over her with his former wife. The Court rather neatly begged off on addressing the weighty issue of church and state as it relates to the Pledge of Allegiance.

There is no doubt that we are living in days of great erosion concerning issues of church and state.

What do the apostles mean when they tell us to live in quietness (I Timothy 2:1-2), to be submissive to rulers and authorities (Titus 3:1), and to be subject to every human institution, including the emperor and governors (I Peter 2:13-14)?

What does Paul mean when he writes Romans 13:1?

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

- What does this text imply about the role and authority of the government and the role and authority of the church?
- How do the state and the church live in co-existence?
- Are there unique roles for each? Evidently, Paul believed the government of Nero was ordained by God.
- How do we apply this perspective in the twenty-first century?

Do you really think I am going to answer all of these questions today?!

Before we even get to the answers, I want to raise the questions. In fact, I expect to trouble you some; to provoke your critical thinking faculties to ask questions about the contemporary church age that we live in.

I will never forget my former professor, Howard Hendricks, saying this statement in class one day: “In every generation, the church at large has missed the mark somewhere.”

He then, pointed his finger at us and asked, “Do you know where it is missing the mark today?”

I am personally convinced that one area in which the church is missing the mark, is in its relationship to government. Specifically, in its desire for political influence in hopes of stemming the tide of immorality and evil.

Frankly, we have arrived at a point in our country’s history where the state is deeply confused over its relationship with the church. What has become known as the wall of separation between church and state has nothing to do with our founding father’s intentions.

Our founding fathers intended to create protection of the church from the state – from state imposed religion. Instead of protecting the church from the state, the amendment is interpreted to pull

the drain and wash away the influence of the church – in effect, the slow riddance of religious expression. It has become the separation of state from church; the separation of state from God.

So today, you can use the constitution to defend someone’s right to look at pornography in the locker room, but not the Bible in a classroom. For example, an elementary school girl in Virginia was told to stop reading her Bible on a school bus because it violated the separation of church and state.

Today, the constitution is being twisted to defend the right to all sorts of things. You have the right to use profanity, but not the right to mention God respectfully. So, in Decatur, Illinois, a primary school teacher who discovered the word *God* in a phonics textbook, was able to order his seven-year-olds to color over it so that it could not be seen.

The only thing that ever brings any change in this politically correct culture which intentionally shuns God, is a war – or an act of terrorists. Then, suddenly, our leaders on both sides of the aisle, from the most powerful to the least influential are calling on America to pray and assuring grieving loved ones that they are in our prayers.

The state is deeply confused about its response and its relationship to the church.

On the other hand, the church is equally confused. I am convinced that the greater problem, the greater danger, the greater loss is not the degradation of our society that loves not God or the Bible. The greater danger is not the erosion of values, the desire of our country to strike God from textbooks and courthouses, or even the slouching of our country toward Gomorrah, as one author put it (Bork). Greater than the degradation of society’s fall from grace into greater and greater evil, is the distraction of the church and the diversion of the church’s resources, manpower, and objectives.

It is the church that has left its first love – a church that seems to believe that making disciples one at a time, is not enough of a victory. It is too slow – as if Jesus Christ was a failure after nearly four years, to have only eleven men and a handful of women who believed what He said. If He were planting a church or starting a mission outreach today, He would be considered a dismal failure.

The church has become deeply confused in regards to its relationship with the state and its position and posture toward the issues of our day.

The greatest loss in our generation is the perspective and purpose of a church that has come to

the erroneous conclusion that a strong America is the same thing as a strong church; that a conservative victory on some level is equal to a Christian victory; that a moral culture is necessary for the church to have a spiritual impact.

Have we actually forgotten that our relationship to society is not to reform it, but to redeem it – one person at a time? Have we forgotten, in our power push for moral activism, that a man with good morals will die and go to hell as quickly as a man with bad morals?

Romans chapter 2 already delivered the shocking news that the man with a taste for religion and proper morals is as much on his way to hell as the man in Romans chapter 1 who has a distaste for God and a love for perversion.

Ladies and gentlemen, the church's mission is not to make bad people good, or good people better. Our mission is not moral reformation, but spiritual reformation.

Politics can never achieve that end. The state does not have the equipment to bring about lasting change. Only the gospel delivers a new nature. The courts do not have the tools to bring about spiritual change.

A classic case of this in the last two hundred years was the church's role in prohibition. This involved the efforts of wonderful people – many of them women, pastors, and Christian leaders – who succeeded in outlawing alcoholic beverages. Only, however, to create an incredible opening for crime to organize and reap millions of dollars filling the void. Popular opinion eventually reneged and the church lost twice.

This may shock you, and if I had been living then and preaching what I am preaching now, it would have shocked them, but I would say it anyway – the goal of the church was never to make drinking illegal, though I would be glad if the state so moved. The mission, energy, and investment of the church was not then, and is not now, to clean up the evils of society, but to evangelize society.

Think about this – what if:

- homosexuality was illegal;
- abortion was outlawed;
- sexual relations outside of marriage was unacceptable;
- prayer was back in the classroom;

- the Ten Commandments were re-hung in the courtrooms.

What then? Are people going to heaven? Has the mission of the church advanced?

Suppose we could turn the clock back to the good old days – with shared boundaries of morality; a basic respect for God; a basic underpinning of absolute truth – to a time when there was embarrassment over adultery; when sexual acts and aberrations were kept in the closet. Would we breathe a sigh of relief then?

What if we had our every way in Washington, DC – evangelical counsel was the only counsel accepted; every piece of legislation we cared about passed in our favor? Would we wipe the sweat off our brow?

I believe the church today would – because the church at large has forgotten the nature of our battle. We are sweating over good things, but over the wrong cause.

This does not mean that we do not care what society does! Given our current freedom, we vote against evil at every opportunity and rejoice when the court reveres moral purity. For those called into civil service, you should utilize that framework to shine as a light and influence those around you, just as a college student should seek to influence his roommates.

At the present time, the church has vast privileges. However, a privilege is not a prerogative. The church in America has turned privileges into purposes.

May I remind you, as I continue my introduction of Romans 13, which is about all you are going to get today, that you can bring a pig inside your house, give him a bath and put a bow around his neck, and marvel at how good he smells. You can say, "There now, Mr. Pig, this is the right way to live." And Mr. Pig will grunt back in agreement. But the minute you take that pig out for a walk and pass a mud puddle, he is going to do a high dive right into the middle of it, isn't he?!

The problem was that you cleaned the outside of the pig, but not the inside. You changed his environment, but not his nature. You brought him into your home, but you did not change his heart.

That is the problem with the distraction of the church today. It has bought the logic that if we can just keep sodomy illegal, we will have won a victory.

That depends on how you determine victory. Victory is not changing the behavior of our culture, unless we have first changed its belief about who Jesus Christ is and how He alone transforms. Spiritual transformation does not happen from the outside in, but from the inside out.

The hope for Washington, DC, and our culture is the same as that for the person who works in the cubicle next to you. It is Jesus Christ's saving gospel, and a transformation of their heart by way of the cross, so then, their voting decisions and moral parameters; their vocabulary and goals will be radically reversed by the renewing of their mind as a result of the penetrating, life-changing word of God.

When Paul entered the Las Vegas of the ancient world, known as Corinth, it was a city so wicked and so decadent that if you wanted to say a woman was "loose," you would say she was a "Corinthian girl". The church in Corinth would be composed of former embezzlers, homosexuals, adulterers, idolaters, and drunkards (I Corinthians 6)

Paul never started a campaign to clean up the city's morals; never organized voters to fill government positions with Christian friendly officials. No doubt, Christians would speak their mind about pornography, prostitution, gambling, adultery, homosexuality, idolatry and every other sin that plagued Corinth. However, their mission was not to clean up Corinth, but to deliver the gospel to people who would then, become new creations in Christ.

Paul would write to officials who served in Caesar's household. He wrote not a word of undermining or influencing Caesar. He wrote not a whisper of conspiracy, unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer who made the mistake of Peter and drew his sword in plotting with others to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He wrote not a word of secret meetings to overthrow Rome.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do not find anything in the New Testament letters to the New Testament churches about mounting a cultural war.

This was the error of Peter. He determined that the political views regarding Jesus Christ had reached a point of no return. They were about to arrest and lead away an innocent man – the God-man, no less. So Peter drew his, what? His sword! He said, in effect, "I will fight this cultural digression with the same weapons they are using against us."

In other words, "I'll match sword with sword; political muscle with muscle."

Peter drew blood. An ear fell to the ground. I can just imagine the silence. Then, Jesus Christ reached out and healed that man's ear – immediately stopping the pain of the one who had come to bring Him great pain. Jesus looked at Peter and said, "Have you forgotten that if I wanted to, I could call twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26)

In other words, "Peter, if we wanted to fight them using their weapons, I could snap My finger and call to My side 72,000 angels."

When Paul wrote to the Roman believers there was no record of any Christian on the Roman senate. There was no Christian political lobby; no watchdog committee to make sure that the interests of the Christians were being addressed. There were no courts where false accusations against Christians could be resolved. In fact, when the barbarians sacked Rome, the Romans decided that it was the Christian's fault and persecution intensified.

When Paul wrote the book of Romans, we have no reference, much less encouragement, to overthrow Nero. Instead, he writes a text of scripture that probably confounded them.

Two declarations of Romans 13:1

Romans 13:1 clearly declares two things.

1. Submission to government is the command of God.

Paul writes,

Every person is to be in submission to the governing authorities. . . .

This is not a suggestion; this is a command.

Other passages will deal with responding to government when they demand that we violate the clear command of God. Then we say, with the apostles who were told to stop spreading the gospel, that we will not.

2. The institution of government is the creation of God.

Paul goes on in verse 1, to write,

. . . For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

We will dive in deeper to discover what Paul means, but one thing is certain – if Paul was talking about Nero, and Rome, and his godless culture, propped up by idolatrous leaders, what could that mean for us?!

Observations From Romans 13:1

Let me make six observations as I introduce this passage in Romans chapter 13.

1. The Christian is to obey the civil laws of government, regardless of that government's response to the gospel.
2. We are not to believe that a moral government or nation is necessary to have a thriving church.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, the culture was at its most depraved level. There were no sexual norms – heterosexuality was considered prudish; the emperor publicly married both a man and women; pedophilia, adultery, and idolatry were rampant.

This was the century that Christ determined was the century in which to plant the living church – and the church thrived.

3. It is not necessary for the church to have influence and freedom in order to be faithful!

The church in China is surprising the free world with its incredible growth!

4. We are not commanded to battle cultural immorality or even expected to diminish it; but to demonstrate purity.

Have you ever noticed that a lighthouse never once calmed a storm! It never redirected a hurricane. It never calmed the rolling ocean.

The church is a lighthouse. We shine brightest when culture is darkest.

5. We have never been told to depend upon God and at the same time, pin our hopes on reversing cultural trends.

The moment we believe this, we will disband the purpose and mission of the church to make disciples. Instead, we will focus on giving society a bath – trying to put a bow around its neck; trying to convince it that, “There, isn't this better?”

When the Ten Commandments are taken down, the church refocuses its energy on getting a secular courtroom to house the Ten Commandments. Everyone in their right mind knows they should, simply because the laws of God form the very basis of our judicial system.

However, what caused our society to reach the point where the Ten Commandments are no longer wanted? *That* is the issue!

Well-meaning brothers and sisters in Christ are saying that we must keep the Ten Commandments in the courtrooms or all is lost in this culture war.

If there was ever a verse to restore the mission of the believer in our times, it is this verse of Paul's direction to Timothy. Listen to the words Paul wrote to Timothy, a young pastor trying to keep the church on course, during a time when the church naturally wondered how it should live in the face of an ungodly world.

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, (1 Timothy 2:1-3)

You will not find the slightest suggestion that we fight government with the same weapons they use; that we fight power with power; that we attempt to stem the digression tide of perversion with coalitions and boycotts and sit-ins and marches and the like. Our weapons are not the weapons of the world. We were never given a biblical expectation to wield political power and settle political appointments.

Go back in history to the time when Constantine made Christianity the religion of his culture. Baptisms were politically correct and allegiance to the church was expected. What was the result? The church became as corrupt as the world it tried to reach.

God has not called the church to replace or repair or revive government. According to Romans 13, as we will see in detail later, God has ordained the governments of this world for a purpose, and the church has been ordained for another purpose.

The truth is very clear, however, from Romans 13:1. God is sovereign over the governments of the world. Jesus Christ is in control of the nations of this world – not one day, but now!

Paul made this clear as he preached to the Athenian leaders in Acts 17:26. He said,

. . . He [God] made . . . every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,

In other words, it was God who had created their boundaries, their borders, their might, and the length of their existence as a nation.

This has not changed in the twenty-first century. God is not in heaven wringing His hands over the future of America. He is not breaking a sweat over the turmoil in the Middle East. He is not concerned with the ever-present menace of Russia nor the growing antagonism of China. He is not wondering which country will do what, next.

Neither is God hoping the Supreme Court in America will protect the church.

Have we forgotten – God is the sovereign ruler over the nations? God has never been elected! And, He is not up for re-election any time soon!

We, who are citizens of heaven, belong to the royal family of the coming King.

We are about to learn in Romans 13:1, that we should be model citizens of whatever country we belong to – praying for our leaders, acting as salt and light, shining in the darkness and creating a thirst for God.

We are told, in fact,

For our citizenship is in heaven . . . (Philippians 3:20a)

We finally and ultimately, pledge allegiance to heaven.

Does that mean we cannot pledge allegiance to our country? Certainly we can. In fact, while it remains a confession of the sovereignty of God, I recommend you pledge as often as you can. When you get to the part where it says, “one nation under God,” talk louder! Just remember that your ultimate allegiance is to another country.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians that their citizenship was in heaven, he used the Greek word “politeuma” for citizenship. That is actually the word from which we get our word, “politics”. Paul is effectively saying that our politics are in heaven. We are to lobby heaven for God’s cause on earth. We should recognize that our watchdog committees are in the heavens. We are to speak and act as ambassadors of our heavenly country. Paul reminded the Corinthians of this when he wrote,

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, . . .

And, the content of your diplomatic assignment is,

. . . we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:20)

Paul encouraged our purpose to be entirely redemptive. If hearts are changed by the Spirit of

God, then the way of thinking will be changed and the goals will be changed and the policies will be changed and countries can be influenced to change as well.

It is change from the inside out!

“If we do indeed, then in the midst of our stormy world, hell-bent on swamping the church and dashing it to pieces . . . if we are indeed firmly fixed upon the rock, then we should not act as if we are clinging to our last piece of driftwood.”ⁱⁱ

It is time for the church to go back to the business of being the church. That does not mean a Christian cannot be involved in politics anymore than a Christian cannot be involved in building computers. If that is the arena God has called you into – like Daniel of old – raise your voice for the glory of God in that administration.

For Daniel, two kings bowed their heads to the glory of Israel’s God. Three administrations were deeply influenced by Daniel’s character. He did not undermine Darius. He did not plot against Nebuchadnezzar. He did not raise up Hebrews against Belshazzar’s blasphemy against the sacred things of God.

He shone! And God chose to bless Daniel’s influence – which included being thrown to the lions.

However, do not overlook the fact that at the time of Daniel’s godly influence, God chose to bring an end to each kingdom and each administration – even after two of the kings trusted in the God of Daniel.

In fact, one underlying message of Daniel’s prophecy is that the kingdoms of this world will all pass away until we enter the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, let us not forget our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of darkness; our battle is not cultural, it is spiritual.

In case you have not caught it clearly enough yet, let me say it in the following way, and this is my sixth and final observation in this introduction of Romans 13.

6. We have not been called by God to save America – anymore than Paul was to save Rome, or Martin Luther was to save Germany, or Charles Spurgeon was to save England. We have not been called by God to save America – we have been called by God to save Americans.

America will one day fall – heaven will not.

The city of man, Augustine reminded us, will one day be destroyed as God recreates a new heaven and a new earth . . . but the city of God will last forever.

In the meantime, for the last 2,000 years, this is the mission of the church – go into the city of man, through whatever avenue God has allowed you, and make disciples for the city of God. “Baptizing them and teaching them to obey what Jesus Christ commanded us to do.” (Matthew 28:19-20 paraphrased) It is time for the church to become satisfied once again with obedience to this unique commission from God.

Think of it – we have weapons the world does not have; we have power the governments of the world could not imagine. We have power over death. We have power over the grave and hell itself. We

have One who is living within us who is greater than he that is in the world.

We are standing on the rock – in the middle of a storm. So let us stop acting as if we are scrambling for a piece of driftwood in case the rock goes under. The church of Jesus Christ is not sinking. Though they try,

. . . the gates of Hades will not overpower it [the church of Jesus Christ]. (Matthew 16:18b)

We are ambassadors of the King – sent to introduce our world to the true gospel, which is true power – for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

Let us get back to the business of being the church!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/13/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Erwin Lutzer, Where Do We Go From Here (Moody Press, 1993), p. 25.