

American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont, MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org

Encouraging Christians to guard their hearts

October 2015

How the State Serves Salvation

by Jonathan Leeman



Don't put too much hope in government. But don't give up on it either. Churches need good governments. In fact, God gave the world governments so that churches can do their work in peace. The government's work is a prerequisite to the mission of the church and salvation, just as learning to read is a prerequisite to reading the Bible.

A culture and its political institutions might turn against Christianity, but Christians should strive to make an impact as long as they have opportunity. It can get worse. Just ask the Christians in China or Iran.

A Stage for Redemption

Think back to the Bible's first chapters. After the flood, God gives Noah the same commission he gave to Adam ("be fruitful and multiply"), only this time God provides a charter for government: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6).

The immediate purpose of Genesis 9:5-6 is to render judgment and keep the Cains from killing the Abels, just as the immediate purposes of highway guardrails is to keep cars on the road. But the ultimate purpose of government is to provide a platform for God's plan of redemption, just as the ultimate purposes of those guardrails is to help cars get from city A to city B.

Genesis 9 comes before Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham for a reason. Government provides a stage on which God's redemptive drama can play out.

Paul, therefore, observes that God determines the borders of nations and the dates of their duration so that people might seek

Him (Acts 17:26-27). People need to be able to walk to church without getting mauled by marauders. They cannot get saved if they are dead. The work of government, in short, provides a platform for the work of the saints.

Two Kinds of Governments

Two basic kinds of governments, then, show up in the Bible: those that shelter God's people, and those that destroy them. Abimelech sheltered; Pharaoh destroyed. The Assyrians destroyed; the Babylonians and Persians, ultimately, sheltered. Pilate destroyed; Festus sheltered. And depending on how you read Revelation, the history of government will culminate in a beastly slaughter of saintly blood.

Romans 13 calls governments servants; Psalm 2 calls them imposters. Most governments contain both. But some are better than others.

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Bad Governments

Yes, Jesus will build His church. No, the worst governments cannot stop the Holy Spirit. Yes, God often moves underground, undisclosed to governments.

But bad governments, from a human standpoint, really do make the church's work difficult. The slaughter, evacuation, and near-extinction of Christians in portions of Iraq and Syria today testifies to this fact, as did the Muslim occupation of North Africa in the latter centuries of the first millennium.

In *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Samuel Hugh Moffett observes:

Sharp persecution breaks off only the tips of the branches; it produces martyrs and the tree still grows. Neverending social and political repression ... starves the roots; it stifles evangelism and the church declines. Such was the history of the church in Asia under Islam, until ... Tamerlane swept the continent with the persecution to end all persecutions, the wholesale massacres that

gave him the name of "the exterminator" and gave Asian Christianity what appeared to be its final, fatal blow.

By the same token, Christians should be concerned about those in European governments who want to classify belief in God as a mental illness, or to criminalize proselytizing Muslims, or to ban homeschooling because it allows children to be indoctrinated. Christians in America, too, should take incursions against religious liberty seriously.

What Now?

Four lessons follow:

(1) Pray. Paul urges us to pray for kings and all in high positions so that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives. "This is good" and "pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3-4). We pray for our government so that the saints might live peaceful lives and people will get saved.

(2) Engage. We render to Caesar what is Caesar's by paying taxes, yes, but in a democratic context,

we also do this by voting, lobbying, lawyering, or running for office. Even in an empire, Paul, for the sake of the gospel, pulled the political levers he had. He invoked his citizenship and appealed to Caesar. Steward opportunities while you have them.

(3) Evangelize. Moffett observes that what finally killed the advance of Christianity across Asia "was not the persecution of a Tamerlane, though the permanent effects of that ravaging destruction still linger. More crippling than any persecution was the church's own long line of decisions ... to compromise evangelistic and missionary priorities for the sake of survival."

(4) Trust. Jesus will win. That is our only source of hope for tomorrow and strength for today.

Finally, let me offer thanks to the Christians who work in government, whether politicians or police men. It might feel futile at times, but you're building a stage for the drama of redemption.

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