

## “How to Pick a President” 1 Peter 2:11-12

### Introduction

- [John Ortberg](#), author and pastor of a church in California, did an experiment with his congregation. I want to do the same experiment here this morning. I want you to think about all the political races that are up for election this year, from the presidential race right on down the line, the Senate, Congress, state offices, local offices, school board positions, down to the lowest political office up for election.
- Imagine with me that Christians were able to agree on who the preferred candidate was and elected all the quote unquote right people from top to bottom. They were all voted in. The preferred Christian candidate, whatever that looks like, from top to bottom, they were all elected. Imagine with me that all of those elected officials then passed all the right legislation. They created and implemented all the right policies. Every single piece of legislation, every tax code, every policy, every school proposition, everything that Christians want to see, whatever those things might be, they were all put in place.<sup>1</sup>
- Is that the goal? Is that what we as Christians are trying to do? When Christians engage in the political process is that what we are trying to accomplish? Is our goal to induce Caesar to swallow as much Christianity as it can without choking? Suppose the dream scenario I just described really happened. Do we then win? Do we get a trophy? Let me ask you this. How much would really change? Would the hearts of parents be turned toward their children? And vice versa? Would marriages stay together? Would the inner cities somehow magically heal themselves? Would greed disappear from Wall Street? To quote Ortberg again, “Would you finally become the woman or man you know you ought to be?”
- [T.S. Elliot](#) summed up the problem like this when he said, “We want a system of order so perfect that we do not have to be good.” Listen to me. Politics is not the answer. Don’t mishear me. I am not saying politics is unimportant. Politics is important. However, I think we as Christians expect too much of politics. Psalm 146:3. *Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.*
- What I want to address this morning is not who to pick for president but how we as Christians should think about the political process. We are the church. And I want to begin with this. [[Slide #2](#)]

### Proposition

- **The chief political task of the church is to be the community of the cross<sup>2</sup>**
- Our chief political task is not to control the Democratic Party or the Republican Party or the Libertarian or Green, or any other political party. We are the church. Our main political task is not motivating people to get involved in politics. The most political thing we can do is live out who we are more fully. Or to quote [Stanley Hauerwas](#) and [William Willimon](#), “The main

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<sup>1</sup> “Non-prophet Preaching: In an election year, is “Don’t talk about politics” good advice?” by John Ortberg, *Leadership Journal*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Resident Aliens*, p. 47.

political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price.”<sup>3</sup>

- We have placed too much hope, too much trust, too much emphasis, too much responsibility in government for things we as the church must do. The best social strategy, the best political strategy we have as Christians is to live out our calling as the Church. **The chief political task of the church is to be the community of the cross.**

### Transition

[Slide #3] This morning we’re going to look at...

### Organizational Sentence

- **Two texts that shape our view of politics and government**
- The first is 1 Peter 2:11-12. The second is Romans 13:1-7. My goal is to show you from these two texts why and how the chief political task of the church is to be the community of the cross.

### Transition

Turn to 1 Peter 2:11-12. Listen to Peter’s words. *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* Peter’s words here remind us [Slide #4] that **as foreigners and aliens we view politics with a measure of detachment.**

### Main Points

- Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live life in another country, in a foreign culture? I have struggled all week with how to communicate this when most of us know of no culture other than the culture of our birth. We are so acclimated to our surroundings. Everything is familiar to us. It feels right. There’s an equilibrium and rhythm to life that is second nature to us as native born citizens.
- As much as you can, think about how you would feel if you uprooted your family and moved to a non-English speaking country. Every attempt at communication is awkward. All the hand signals and pointing. It’s easier not to speak. Imagine turning on the television and not understanding a single word. Forget about trying to read the paper. Everything smells different. There’s a different pace to life. So many weird traditions you just don’t get. Crowds are difficult because people look at you funny; you don’t dress like them. You look like a foreigner. You can feel the eyes of others on you when you walk down the street. The culture shock and loneliness and sense of isolation are overwhelming. And the food? Three times a day you’re reminded of how far from home you really are. All you want is a taste of home but the grocery store doesn’t sell anything to remind you of home. The sense of alienation is overwhelming.
- Several years into the transition you’ve adapted; you know the language and can navigate yourself around. But you now face a different dilemma. You’re starting to forget your

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1989, p. 48.

homeland. Who are you really? Which culture do you belong to? You feel homeless like you're straddling the fence between two worlds. You feel guilty for accepting some parts of your new culture; like you've betrayed your roots. What would the people back home say? You wonder if you've become too much like the culture around you.

- But even on the days when your adopted home most feels like home, you're painfully reminded it will never really be home. As a non-citizen, you have no rights. At best your friends and neighbors tolerate your home country; the red white and blue shirt never comes out of the closet. You can't find a good job because, even though you can speak the language, you don't speak it well enough to compete with the native citizens. When the painful separation becomes unbearable, you dream of warm 4<sup>th</sup> of Julys and sparklers and baseball and apple pie.
- For us to understand Peter's words, in order for us to view the political process correctly we must learn to see ourselves, even if we are living in the culture of our birth, as strangers, aliens living in a foreign culture. As long as we are in this world we should have a certain level of detachment to the culture around us.<sup>4</sup>
- Several times in Peter's letter he describes Christians as foreigners. Look at 1 Peter 1:1. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world.* He says again in 1:17, *since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.* And again in 2:11. *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world.* Peter calls them this not just because his audience lived in foreign countries.
- Peter's point is that Christians, regardless of where they live, belong somewhere else. Our true citizenship is in heaven. All of us, every single one of us in this room, if we are a follower of Christ, we're foreigners. Like Peter's audience, we're sojourners. We're aliens. We're *strangers in the world*. All Christians, even those who are American citizens, are aliens. And this perspective has profound implications when it comes to politics.
- If you disagree, if you think these verses have nothing to do with politics then why does Peter move from his words here in [verses 11-12](#) to politics and government in [verse 13](#)? Our status as aliens and strangers has everything to do with how we view politics. It means [we view politics with a measure of detachment](#). Let me explain.
- Normally aliens, foreigners aren't able to participate in the political process. Right? They are forced to watch the political process unfold from a distance. As non-natives, they can't vote. They can't hold office. They can't make policies. Therefore, they view the political process of their adopted country with a measure of curiosity and detachment. Since they have no rights the best way to be a good citizen is to represent their homeland well. In other words live in such a good way, as unofficial ambassadors of their homeland, that observing citizens see and notice and speak well of their native country.
- Or as Peter puts it in [verse 12](#), thinking of the church now, *live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* And that's what we are to do. **The chief political task of the church is to be the community of the cross.**

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<sup>4</sup> Reinecker, p. 752.

- See, things get confusing for us because, unlike Peter’s audience, we’re aliens with rights. As Christians in a democracy we have rights and a voice in government. That’s unusual in the history of the world. It’s something to be thankful for. But it’s also confusing to us. Because we have rights and a voice the temptation is to become too dependent upon the political process for work we should be doing as the church. We tie our identity as Christians too closely to our identity as Americans. We become too much like the culture around us. That doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t enter into the political process. We should. But our chief political task is not the establishment of a Christian nation. It’s to be the church. Otherwise, our identity as the people of God is compromised.
- In fact, Peter warns in [verse 11](#), look at verse 11, *to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul*. In other words, as resident aliens “assimilation to the values and lifestyle of the surrounding pagan culture is a constant concern.”<sup>5</sup> As I think about the church in the American context, one of the sinful desires we have succumbed to is the lure of power and political influence. The pagan world gets things done by grabbing power and exerting influence. Christians exert their influence by sacrifice and service. When we become too closely tied to power, or any one political party for that matter, we lose our ability to prophetically speak to the moral issues of our day.
- So what does this look like in practice? Let me ask it like this. What is the Christian response to abortion? Is voting pro-life people into office so that Roe v. Wade is overturned, is that the Christian response to abortion? The Christian response to abortion is that we adopt children. We serve and care for women who are at high risk for abortion. We show people by our good deeds, [verse 12](#), what it means to uphold the sanctity of life. As resident aliens that is our political response. **Our chief political task is to be the community of the cross.**
- You might ask if we should enter into the political process at all. Should we vote? Run for office? Absolutely yes. Both Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13 say we are to submit to the governing authorities. In a democracy that means we vote; our participation is part of our submission. We have a civic responsibility to be informed and to vote. But that is not our chief political task. We too easily forget that.

### Transition

Turn to Romans 13. Romans 13:1-7 is a [second text](#) that shapes our view of politics. [[Slide #5](#)] Paul says in these verses that [the role of government is to establish order so the good of Christianity can run wild](#). Listen.

- *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give everyone what*

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<sup>5</sup> Dictionary of New Testament Background, p. 1239.

*you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

- We don't have time to go through this passage in detail. We'll save a detailed study for after the election, November 9<sup>th</sup>. Right now I want you to see big picture of what Paul says about government. The purpose of government, government's role is to establish order. How so? By commending what is right, [verse 3](#), by punishing what is wrong, [verse 4](#), by collecting taxes, [verse 6](#), and using those taxes for the benefit of society. All these things give the picture of order. Government's god-sanctioned purpose is to establish order. That's the ideal. Or to quote the footnote in my bible, "rulers exist for the benefit of society—to protect the general public by maintaining good order."<sup>6</sup> Even the use of force, the *bearing of the sword*, [verse 4](#), is for the maintenance of good order. That's government's role. Plain and simple. The maintenance of order.
- Now the purpose of government establishing order is so that we are freed up to be the church. Listen to what [G.K. Chesterton](#) has said. "The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild."<sup>7</sup> That's what order does. It gives room for good things to run wild. And that, in some sense, is what government is to do; provide order so that we can do the good we ought to do, the good we need to do.
- Look at [verse 4](#). Paul says in verse 4, *For he*, meaning rulers, or more generically government, *is God's servant to do you good*. In other words, the provision of order is a benefit to us. But it goes deeper than that. I like how the Revised Standard Version translates verse 4. It says *he is God's servant for your good*. The function of government is to serve the good. The purpose of government is to provide a place for good to flourish; so that we might be the good, do the good. [The function of government is to establish order so the good of Christianity can run wild.](#)
- Flip back to 1 Peter 2. That's why, peppered throughout 1 Peter 2, it says things like [verse 12](#), *live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds*. And [verse 15](#), *for it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men*. [Our chief political task is to be the community of the cross](#)—to do the good we absolutely must do.
- See, that's why in places like China, where the church has no rights, no political voice, no power it still flourishes—even in the face of persecution. It flourishes, not because government is on the side of the church, not because the church has converted and transformed government, but because there is still some semblance of a well ordered society. As Christians all we're really asking of government is the provision of order so that we can do the good we need to do. So when people ask us what our political response to such and such an issue is, our response is the good we're doing over here, and the good we're doing over there.
- So what then is "the good" we ought to be doing? When you look at the voter guides Christians publish, when you talk to non-Christians, the perception is the good we ought to be doing is limited to two issues, abortion and gay marriage. Yes those are important. But a simple reading of scripture shows the good we ought to be doing is so much broader than two

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<sup>6</sup> NIV Study Bible, note on Romans 13:4.

<sup>7</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 140-1.

issues. It's much broader than red or blue, Republican or Democrat. Isaiah 1:17 says, *learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.* It's Job 29:8, *rescuing the poor who cry for help.* It's James 1:27, *caring for orphans and widows in distress.* It's Isaiah 58:10 and Psalm 146:7, *upholding the cause of the oppressed and giving food to the hungry.* It's fiscal responsibility and wise stewardship of wealth, James 5 from a couple of weeks ago. No single political party is the embodiment of the good we as Christians stand for.

- So, when it comes to picking candidates for office the criteria we should use to select those candidates looks something like this. Which candidate has the best understanding of the god-given purpose of government—the establishment of order? In other words, which candidate is competent to do what a ruler, a leader is supposed to do. [Martin Luther](#) once said he'd rather be governed by a competent Turk than an incompetent Christian.<sup>8</sup> There's wisdom in that.
- We should be looking for a candidate that has a clear sense of right and wrong or as one author put it, “a suite of values-soaked abilities.”<sup>9</sup> Are they prudent and wise? Are they just and fair? Are they courageous? If not, how then will they be able to commend good and punish wrongdoing?
- We should look for the candidate who has the best understanding of the good we Christians are trying to do; all the good, not just part of the good. And should the choice of candidates before us demonstrate limited or incapacitated ability to commend good or punish wrong then we cast our vote as best we can, with a level of detachment, as aliens and foreigners, as citizens of another kingdom, knowing that God is in control and that one day our King returns. And until that day comes, regardless of who wins the election, our job is still the same. We get down to the business of being the church, of doing the good we ought to do. **Our chief political task is to be the community of the cross.**

## Conclusion

- In John 18:36 Jesus said, *my kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is not of this world.* So many in Jesus' day missed Him because they were looking for the establishment of an earthly, political kingdom. May it never be said of us that people missed meeting our King because they were unclear about the kind of kingdom we were building. Pray with me.

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<sup>8</sup> Source unknown.

<sup>9</sup> “How to Pick a President: Why Virtue Trumps Policy,” by Daniel Taylor & Mark McCloskey, *Christianity Today*, June 2008, p. 23-28.