Balancing Politics and Faith

Study 1: WHAT SHOULD OUR ROLE BE IN POLITICS?
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

Study 2: SHOULD CHRISTIANS HAVE POWER?
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

Study 3: IS AMERICA A NATION OF PAGANS OR CHRISTIANS?
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

Study 4: SHOULD CHURCH AND STATE BE SEPARATE?
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Study 5: HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO THE CULTURE?
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide
How Christians should practice “right politics”

As part of the Good News of the gospel, Jesus invites us into the community of his disciples, who are to influence society and take a stand when human and divine authorities are in conflict with each other. What kind of balance should Christians seek in their involvement with politics? How does the Bible inform us on how Christians should practice “right politics”?

Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

The Christian stance in the world is not apolitical. Christians don’t try to escape political responsibility by going off into the desert to live a separate existence. However, the way Christians are to be political in the world is through the corporate life of the church, which witnesses to the lordship of Christ over all. This study will help us think through what this means.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Do you think the United States is a Christian nation? Was it ever?

[Q] Were the terrorists correct, that we are a godless nation of infidels? If so, what should be done about it? What would a Christian nation look like? What would its values and policies be? How would it differ from the way the U.S. functions now?

[Q] If there were such a place as a Christian nation, how should people in it be treated who aren’t Christian believers, say people of other faiths or no faith at all? What form or branch of Christianity should prevail?

[Q] Should our national leaders be Christians? Or should they just be moral in their actions? Explain your answer.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: As part of the Good News of the gospel, Jesus invites us into the community of his disciples, who are a leavening influence in society.

Read Matthew 4:17–22; 5:13–16; and 13:33.

In Jesus’ day the Romans controlled Israel. In this setting, there were numerous religious groups defined by their relationship to the Roman Empire. The Essenes were like the Amish of their day. They attempted to maintain religious purity by withdrawing from the dominant culture. The Sadducees, on the other hand, sold out to the ruling empire and served as its lackeys. The Zealots were the liberation theologians of their day, who wished to overthrow the Romans by force. The Pharisees made what adaptations were necessary in order to carve out the religious space they needed to maintain the ritual purity of their faith.
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[Q] Jesus didn’t cast his lot with any of these groups. Why not? Discuss the flaws in each approach:

• The Essenes (withdraw)
• The Sadducees (sell out)
• The Zealots (rebel)
• The Pharisees (adapt)

[Q] How was Jesus’ mission different from all the other Jewish religious groups? What was his mission?

Jesus’ message was simple, though demanding: repent because the rule of God—not Caesar’s rule—is at hand, believe the Good News (of salvation), take up your cross, and follow me. In other words, live not just with me but like me, even if it means suffering and death. Living for Jesus meant—and still means—living with Jesus and with the circle of people who surround him—what we now call the church, but what in Jesus’ day were simply Jesus’ disciples.

This motley band of disciples he gathered didn’t withdraw from society; they didn’t try to control it or overthrow it; they didn’t even try to “just fit in.” Together—in their relationships with Jesus, with each other, and with people on the outside—they served as light, salt, and a leavening influence in society. Someone has called Jesus’ community the “contrast society,” which is different from saying it rejects the dominant culture. The rule that prevails in this community is love—what Paul called the more excellent way (1 Cor. 12:31b)—and servanthood, rather than people lording it over others (Matt. 20:24–27).

[Q] How does Jesus’ mission define our mission? Does that mean we can never be involved in politics? Why or why not?

Teaching Point Two: When human and divine authorities are in conflict with each other, Jesus’ disciples must obey God rather than human authority.

Read Acts 5:27–32.

Almost all Christians would say, yes, we must obey God rather than human authorities, at least when the two authorities—one divine, the other human—come into conflict with each other. Sure, there are some who so capitulate to the dominant culture that faith for them is merely something internal and private, or simply a superficial patina of religiosity.

But serious Christians, those who maintain that their primary identity is to be followers of Jesus
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Christ, will say that at numerous points in life lines must be drawn. The question is, on what issues: abortion, capital punishment, military service, purchase of stocks that deal in tobacco, alcohol, gambling, weapons manufacturing, or something else?

[Q] On which of these issues (or others) would you want to draw a line? And where should the line be drawn?

Teaching Point Three: God wills that justice and order prevail in this sinful world, and toward that end God ordains governing authorities to rule.

Evil is a reality of life in this world. People do bad things to one another. The innocent and weak need protection from the strong, the devious, and the greedy. Not all people recognize the lordship of Christ; for that matter, even Christians don’t fully live according to Christ’s lordship.

In order to prevent total social chaos and anarchy, some other order must be provided for those who don’t accept the more excellent way of love and the kind of servanthood that Jesus modeled. This is where government comes in. It provides that sense of order and stability in social contexts where otherwise the strong and the evil would prevail over the weak and the innocent. God provided the rule of law as a dike against evil and injustice (Romans 13:1–7). In the best of all possible worlds, it wouldn’t be necessary. But we don’t live in the best of all possible worlds.

Ideally, Christians shouldn’t need the rule of law since we are to live by a higher law (see 1 Tim. 1:8–11). Still, Christians are to submit to the ruling authorities. Keep in mind here, however, that the word “submit” isn’t the same word as “obey.” To submit is to willingly place one’s self under the ruling authority; negatively stated, it also means refraining from overthrowing or undermining it. But submit doesn’t mean blind or mindless obedience (remember teaching point two).

Some Christians believe that violence is never justified. Others say that though the state needs to use it, Christians shouldn’t participate in it. Still others would argue that Christians can participate in the use of force and violence within the constraints of government so long as it is used to punish, contain, or resist evil.

[Q] Which position most accurately describes where you stand? Why?

• Position #1: Violence by the state is never justified.
• Position #2: The state must use violence, but Christians shouldn’t participate in it.
• Position #3: Christians can participate in the use of force and violence to punish, contain, or resist evil.
Teaching Point Four: Christians are engaged in a spiritual conflict, not a physical one; spiritual warfare calls for spiritual weaponry.

Read Ephesians 6:10–18.

We are engaged in spiritual warfare, not warfare against other human beings. It is not terrorism that we are fighting against as Christians. Rather, there is spiritual warfare going on in the world, and the real enemy is spiritual—cosmic even—not human. We need to prepare ourselves for this engagement with God’s weapons of warfare: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. This is a formidable arsenal, one in which Christians should trust. Anything less is a denial of our faith in God and our allegiance to Christ as Lord.

[Q] What does it mean to our daily lives that we are in a spiritual war? How can we fight this spiritual battle?

Teaching Point Five: Christians do much of what other people do (get married, have babies, plant gardens), but with different motivation—faith in the God who holds the future in his hands.

Read Jeremiah 29:4–7.

When the Israelites were taken away into Babylonian exile for 70 years, Jeremiah’s advice for the exiles was twofold. One, they were to hunker down and plan for the future, building houses, planting gardens, getting married, and having children. That is, live as normally as possible. Two, they were to seek the welfare of the city, and they were to pray for it! Why? Because their own well being was integrally tied to the well being of their hosts. The kind of peace indicated here is not merely inner peace, nor does it mean simply the absence of conflict. It involves peace with justice, prosperity, and wholeness—personal and communal peace.

[Q] What does it mean to do ordinary human activities, but with a desire to worship God through every activity? Give examples.

[Q] What should it mean for Christians in this country to work for the well being of all people?

➢ How would that profit the Christian church itself?
➢ What would it mean in your own community for your church to work for everyone’s well being?
➢ How would that enhance the well being of the people in your church?
Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Sometimes we have to “step outside the box” in order to see things in new or clearer perspective. Toward that end, try to imagine this: You are from a foreign country. You and some other Christians are being sent by your home church to the U.S. as missionaries. Think about what missionaries do when they go to another country: they learn the language, as well as the history and culture of that country. As much as possible, they try to live like the natives, eating their food, living in houses similar to their neighbors’, perhaps even dressing like they do. For sure, missionaries remember they are guests in a host culture, which means they are respectful of the customs and mores of that society, even if they don’t like them or agree with them.

Do the following as a group or on your own this week:

• Imagine yourself as a missionary to the United States. What strategies would you use? Think fresh thoughts about the relationship between church and society in order to rethink your position as a Christian missionary presence in the wider culture. Think through ways you can be salt that seasons the society, yeast that leavens it, and light in places of darkness.

—Study prepared by Richard A. Kauffman, former associate editor of Christianity Today and author of numerous studies in this series.

Recommended Resources

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Teaching Point One: As part of the Good News of the gospel, Jesus invites us into the community of his disciples, who are a leavening influence in society.

[Q] Jesus didn’t cast his lot with any of these groups. Why not? Discuss the flaws in each approach:

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Teaching Point Four: Christians are engaged in a spiritual conflict, not a physical one; spiritual warfare calls for spiritual weaponry.

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Should Christians Have Power?

Increasing power in politics and popular culture holds great possibilities—and dangers.

In a Christianity Today article, Andy Crouch quotes film industry veteran Barbara Nicolosi as saying, “Within five to ten years, we will see Christians in Hollywood with real power.”

Is this statement cause for celebration—or should it make us tremble at the dangers of such power?

Christians have reason to be, at the least, ambivalent about this matter of acquiring worldly power. After all, Jesus walked this earth in extraordinary humility and taught that the path to greatness is through sacrificial service.

This lesson will look to Scripture and the example of Christ for guidance on the issue of power.

Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study. Also, search online and in magazines for photographs of prominent, powerful Christians in entertainment, business, and government, and bring them to the meeting.

Government leaders and entertainers are highly paid, newsworthy people. Some claim to be Christians. Many believers are proud of those Christians who have achieved fame and influence. Yet, ought we to be uneasy that some mix discipleship and power so easily? As the young man quoted in Andy Crouch’s article said, “When you say ‘Christians in power,’ I get really nervous.”

Discussion Starters:

Note to leader: Show the photos of powerful Christian people.

[Q] How have each of these people influenced the wider culture for Christianity?

• Name others who combine Christianity with worldly power and prestige.

[Q] Do you think of Jesus as a powerful figure? Give examples of how he demonstrated power or powerlessness.

Read Mark 10:35–45. In verses 42–45, Jesus juxtaposes dominating, imperialistic leadership with his own example of humble and sacrificial service.

[Q] How does the image of leadership in Mark 10:42–45 contrast with the qualities we expect of leaders today?

There was a day when Christians avoided contact with the world and withdrew from the culture. But over the past 50 years, evangelicals have succeeded in areas like politics and popular culture that once were considered off-limits.

[Q] Have evangelical Christians too whole-heartedly entered into the culture? Should we be “really nervous” about further acquisition of power? Why or why not?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Jesus called his followers to service rather than dominance.

Read Philippians 2:5–11.
Scholars believe this passage may have been an early Christian hymn that Paul quoted. It speaks of the self-emptying of Christ who, though he was “in the form of God,” did not act like we expect God to act. Rather, he took “the form of a servant” and “humbled himself.” Scholars sometimes refer to this passage as the “kenosis hymn,” from the Greek word for “emptying.” This humbling of himself was a major reason many did not recognize Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

[Q] What are some ways, in Scripture or in your personal experience, that God did not seem to act like an all-powerful deity?

[Q] How does the church sometimes overstress the power and glory of Christ without also stressing his humility and service, and vice versa? Give some examples.

**Teaching Point Two: Followers of Jesus are called to emulate Jesus—including his humility and service—in all we do and say.**

Jesus said much to his followers about what they were to do when they were persecuted, unjustly condemned, and forced to suffer for his sake. But he gave no specific instructions about how to run a bank, operate a newspaper, or rule over a city.

Constantine may have sold out the church when it was adopted as part of the state. Although imperial persecution of the church ceased, the church was tied to the mechanism of state power. Constantine became a friend of the church, but it was a friendship that demanded much of the church.

[Q] Does Jesus expect his followers to be permanently in positions of powerlessness, marginalization, and humility? Why or why not?

[Q] Can Christians serve and do good in the world by making allies with non-Christians, or does that always result in ungodly compromise? Give some examples.

[Q] How does the church sometimes damage its witness and weaken its effectiveness by being aloof from the world?

**Teaching Point Three: Christians ought to be uneasy about making alliances with the means and goals of this culture.**

Have evangelical Christians too easily, or too uncritically, bought into many of this culture’s definitions of power? With the example of Constantine, we need to remember that to get influence and power in the world, we sometimes endanger the truth of the gospel.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Satan offered Jesus power to do good (turn stones to bread), power to accomplish great spiritual feats (throw himself down from the temple tower), and political power (authority over all the kingdoms of the world). Jesus began his ministry by rejecting these tempting invitations. He resisted the attempts of his followers to make him a king, and instead knelt down with a basin and towel and washed their feet before he went to die on a cross.

[Q] Are Christians deluding themselves when they think they can exercise worldly power without damaging their faithfulness to Christ? Why or why not?

[Q] There are many ways our exercise of power can go wrong. In what ways can people in power be seduced and used by the very power they think they are using for good?


Here, at the Last Supper, Jesus shared with his disciples a picture of the peculiar nature of Christian discipleship. Jesus is waiting on the table, serving his followers, and what are his followers doing? They are debating who is greatest in the kingdom of God! Jesus reminds them that he is one who serves, and they should follow his example.


[Q] Give some examples of Christians who have demonstrated servant leadership.

Mel Gibson, who made a movie called *The Passion of the Christ*, says he is a devout Catholic and produced this movie because of his Christian devotion.

[Q] Is Gibson’s example a positive or negative one for the rest of us? Explain.

In response to a text like Luke 22:24–27, some Christians use this reasoning: Christians in the first century were persecuted and despised by the imperial authorities. Today we are fortunate to live in a democratic country where we have freedom of religion. Therefore, if we have the opportunity to use positions of power to accomplish good for our world, we ought to do so.

[Q] Does living in a country with religious freedom and a democratic government make Christians less likely to abuse power? Why or why not?
Teaching Point Four: Christians need to exercise careful, prayerful use of power and remain wary of its ambiguities and challenges.


In an attempt to entrap Jesus, his critics asked him if they ought to honor Caesar by paying taxes. Jesus famously replied, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.”

In response to this verse, one student said, “But Jesus doesn’t tell us what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.” Another student responded, “Maybe the vagueness of the answer means that when it comes to relations between Christians and the government, we are supposed to be permanently uneasy.”

Perhaps that is a good, biblical response to the dilemma of Christians in power. After all, it is impossible for anyone to avoid all means of power: we all have some amount of money, things, and influence.

[Q] In light of the biblical instruction on power and its dangers, can a strong case be made for all Christians to shun power? Explain.

[Q] Is power a necessary dilemma for all Christians? Why or why not?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Choose one of the following to do this week:

• Consider any pull you feel between power and your Christian faith. Ask God to show you any area in which you desire power more than to serve him. Be willing to let go of the power if it means a closer walk with Jesus.

• If you know anyone well who is in a powerful position, pray for them and offer to discuss these thoughts with them.

Close with prayer, asking for Christ’s guidance in our daily dilemmas and struggles to be Christians in a sometimes conflicted and demanding world.

—Study prepared by William H. Willimon, Dean of the Chapel and professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.
Recommended Resources


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Participant’s Guide

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Teaching Point One: Jesus called his followers to service rather than dominance.

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Is America a Nation of Pagans or Christians?

Has the nation finally abandoned its Judeo-Christian heritage, or are we making great strides for Christ?

It is an oft-repeated observation in churches that the United States is no longer a Christian nation, if it ever really was. But there’s also no question that Christianity looms large in our culture. Christians see that on the one hand, this culture has abandoned its Christian roots almost entirely, and believers must now act as spiritual guerillas, infiltrating the culture undercover to do what we can to stave off inevitable collapse. On the other hand, we see that Christianity still has enormous positive influence in our culture, and we should take heart that our salt still seasons society and our light still shines from a hill.

This study evaluates these two contrasting views.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:1–9; Isaiah 8:11–22; Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

Christians in America often debate how strong our nation’s faith is. Evidences of sin abound, and some strains of sin run so deeply through our culture and government that you might conclude that America has become a pagan nation. Yet, we also see enough evidences of genuine Christian faith that we should be encouraged.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] On balance, which of these two statements do you think most accurately describes the spiritual condition of our country? No fence sitters! (Ask for a show of hands.)

- “It would be a disaster for Christians … to go on dreaming that we can gradually change this formerly more or less Christian country for the better.” (Harold O. J. Brown, “A Decisive Turn to Paganism”)

- “Christians are living holy lives that are having an enormous impact within our society.” (Leith Anderson, “A Steady Christian Influence”)

In his article “A Decisive Turn to Paganism,” Harold O. J. Brown points to two pivotal Supreme Court rulings that he says effectively made the U.S. a pagan nation: Roe v. Wade and Lawrence v. Texas. Brown points to Roe v. Wade as “a clear repudiation of the biblical Judeo-Christian teaching that each human is made in the image of God,” and to Lawrence v. Texas because, in permitting sodomy, it repudiated “historic Christianity, the Bible, the Torah, and the principles of natural law that guided us so long.”

[Q] Do you see Brown’s point? Do you think he overstates the situation? Would you add other evidences to bolster his argument?

[Q] What encouraging evidences of Christianity’s influence do you see in American society?

[Q] Near the end of his article, Anderson includes a quote by Justin Webb, an atheist BBC correspondent. What do you think of it?

The Bible sheds light on both of these perspectives. The prophets, for example, were often pointing out the deadly consequences of a nation’s sin. But the gospel, as it is articulated throughout the Bible, reminds believers that we can make a difference in the culture in which we live.
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: When God’s people find themselves implicated in the wicked deeds of their society, they must seek God’s atoning mercy.


[Q] How might we appropriate the truth of this somewhat obscure Old Testament law? In what ways can we apply this text in forming our response to the sin in our country?

- In what ways can we pray that God will apply the atoning benefits of Christ’s death to the sins of our nation?

This is not an easy question to answer, but this text does seem to carry the idea that God’s people can be atoned for by Christ when we are unavoidably tied to the wickedness of our culture. It does not offer atonement for those who do not throw themselves on the mercy of God through repentance.

[Q] Can you think of other Scripture passages that could guide our responses to a pagan society?

Teaching Point Two: There will always be wicked people, but we can focus on the “good seed” that continues to grow to maturity.

Read Jesus’ parable about the wheat and weeds in Matthew 13:24–30 and his explanation in verses 36–43.

[Q] How does this parable explain our place as his disciples in the world?

[Q] Why would the enemy, Satan, sow wicked weeds among the Lord’s good wheat? What is he hoping to accomplish? Does it work, in your observation?

[Q] Ultimately, we do not believe the Lord’s plans are ever thwarted by Satan, so what possible benefit might our Sovereign Lord bring from believers growing in fields alongside Satan’s weeds?

Satan’s influence through the ungodly around us gives us an opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:13), to experience God’s power in our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:7–10), to develop obedience (Rom. 16:17–20), and to show forth the life of Christ in us, his disciples (Dan. 3:24–29; Acts 4:23–31; 5:17–42; 7:54–56).

Teaching Point Three: We, as God’s people, maintain our unique perspective on the sinful society around us by taking advantage of our unique spiritual privileges.
Read Isaiah 8:11–22.

God tells Isaiah how to keep his spiritual moorings in a society that gives God lip service but is determined to ignore both his warnings and his blessings. The tone is set in verse 11: “The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people.”

That is our challenge—to not follow the way of this people. Look again at verses 12–13.

[Q] The people around Isaiah feared two enemies to their north, even after God told them those enemies would prove to be no threat (Isa. 7:4–9). What are some fears of our society? Should we also have those fears? Why or why not?

[Q] Why is the fear of the Lord (v. 13) the antidote to the fears shared by the society around us? In particular, why does regarding the Lord Almighty as holy change our perspective?

God’s holiness is the measure of all that matters. The sovereign God decides what will happen according to his absolute sense of justice, his fiery righteousness, and his flaming truth. The future will not be decided by our political leaders or by international terrorists. The future will be decided by the Holy One! And what the Holy One decides about the future depends on how people respond to God’s holy standards.

Look again at verses 14–15. In the passages before this, Isaiah has mentioned three times that God will send one called Immanuel, “God with us” (7:14; 8:8, 10). Immediately after this passage, he points clearly to Jesus Christ (9:1–7). That is whom he means here in verse 14, when he says, “he will be a sanctuary.”

[Q] How is Jesus Christ our sanctuary? How do you hide in him when circumstances in our country are frightening?

[Q] We hide in Christ by trusting him, and we foster our trust when we read Scripture, pray, and fellowship with other believers. What happens to anyone who doesn’t hide in Christ, according to verses 14–15? Can Jesus simply be ignored?

Look again at verses 16–22.

[Q] Isaiah storms over how people in his day would listen to the dead rather than listen to the living God, yet when life falls apart, they curse God. Where do people in our day turn for counsel?

[Q] What good will it do if we “inquire of the Lord” for guidance if few of the movers and shakers in our society pay attention to God’s Word?
Scripture grounds us in the truth and reminds us of the rich benefits of grace and righteousness. Through that we ourselves become living “Scriptures” to the world around us, which will not likely listen to God any other way.

Look at verse 18.

[Q] How can we have this same kind of effect in our society?

**Leader’s Note:** We can do the three things taught in these verses: fear the Lord, hide in Christ as our “God-with-us” sanctuary, and pay close attention to God’s Word, the Bible.

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**Part 3 Apply Your Findings**

Christians are in the world, but not of it. We should never feel at home in our society. We can relate to both pessimism and hopefulness about our society. But no matter how we view our society, we can choose to be salt and light in it.

**Choose one of the following to do this week:**

- Any number of prophetic passages point out that we, too, may be led by the Lord to act as prophets in our society, speaking wherever we can—at the water cooler, in a class, in reading groups, or in political forums, for example—to decry wickedness and speak for righteousness and justice. Consider how God might want to use you in this way.

- Consider how you can impact our society by sharing the good news of Christ. Look up passages that point out that both by our proclamation of the gospel and by our righteous behavior people will be drawn to Christ, and society inevitably improved (cf. Matthew 5:13–16, 28:19–20; Acts 1:8; Philemon 6).

- Prayer is that mysterious, mighty tool God has put into our hands to change society on our knees. The prayers of Solomon (2 Chron. 5:1–6:42), Daniel (Dan. 9:1–27), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:5ff.), and many others give evidence of God’s answers to bold prayers for a society in sin. Spend time in prayer for your country.

—Study prepared by Lee Eclov, senior pastor of Village Church of Lincolnshire, Illinois.
Recommended Resources

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Is America a Nation of Pagans or Christians?

Has the nation finally abandoned its Judeo-Christian heritage, or are we making great strides for Christ?

It is an oft-repeated observation in churches that the United States is no longer a Christian nation, if it ever really was. But there’s also no question that Christianity looms large in our culture. Christians see that on the one hand, this culture has abandoned its Christian roots almost entirely, and believers must now act as spiritual guerillas, infiltrating the culture undercover to do what we can to stave off inevitable collapse. On the other hand, we see that Christianity still has enormous positive influence in our culture, and we should take heart that our salt still seasons society and our light still shines from a hill. This study evaluates these two contrasting views.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:1–9; Isaiah 8:11–22; Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Christians in America often debate how strong our nation’s faith is. Evidences of sin abound, and some strains of sin run so deeply through our culture and government that you might conclude that America has become a pagan nation. Yet, we also see enough evidences of genuine Christian faith that we should be encouraged.

[Q] On balance, which of these two statements do you think most accurately describes the spiritual condition of our country?

• “It would be a disaster for Christians … to go on dreaming that we can gradually change this formerly more or less Christian country for the better.” (Harold O. J. Brown, “A Decisive Turn to Paganism”)

• “Christians are living holy lives that are having an enormous impact within our society.” (Leith Anderson, “A Steady Christian Influence”)

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: When God’s people find themselves implicated in the wicked deeds of their society, they must seek God’s atoning mercy.

Teaching Point Two: There will always be wicked people, but we can focus on the “good seed” that continues to grow to maturity.

Teaching Point Three: We, as God’s people, maintain our unique perspective on the sinful society around us by taking advantage of our unique spiritual privileges.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Choose one of the following to do this week:

• Any number of prophetic passages point out that we, too, may be led by the Lord to act as prophets in our society, speaking wherever we can—at the water cooler, in a class, in reading groups, or in political forums, for example—to decry wickedness and speak for righteousness and justice. Consider how God might want to use you in this way.
Balancing Politics and Faith
Is America a Nation of Pagans or Christians?
Participant's Guide

• Consider how you can impact our society by sharing the good news of Christ. Look up passages that point out that both by our proclamation of the gospel and by our righteous behavior people will be drawn to Christ, and society inevitably improved (cf. Matthew 5:13–16; 28:19–20; Acts 1:8; Philemon 6).

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 зр Where Faith & Culture Meet, Andy Crouch (Zondervan, 2007; ISBN 0310280966) Discover how followers of Christ can become a counterculture serving the common good!

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Should Church and State Be Separate?

We must keep church and state separate—for the sake of the church.

The simple phrase “separation of church and state” is enough to get some people riled up, especially in the context of our public schools. None of us wants the government interfering with our—or our children’s—religious rights. And yet many seem to want the government to not only allow us to exercise those rights, but to essentially endorse them—because we are, after all, “a Christian nation,” or at least should be. How should believers view the separation of church and state?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1–7; Psalm 78:1–7; Daniel 6; Romans 13:1–7
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

In the article “Uncle Sam Is Not Your Dad,” Stephen L. Carter says,

“The idea that church and state should be separated is firmly grounded in Protestant theology. But the splitting of these two great institutions was only that—a splitting of institutions. Both were expected to continue to live under the rule of the one God.

“For example, when Puritan New England banned clergy from officiating at marriages, authorities were certainly not suggesting that marriage should no longer be governed by God’s rules. Rather, the goal was to avoid church corruption. The Puritans were reacting to the Church of England’s role in ceremonies they believed the Bible did not specifically entrust to the ministry.

“And when Roger Williams penned what seems to be the earliest American use of the metaphor—the garden and the wilderness, separated by a high hedge wall—he had in mind a wall protecting the garden from the wilderness, not the other way around.”

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What does the term “separation of church and state” mean to you?

[Q] Do you think of America as a Christian nation? Why or why not?

• How does your answer to this question affect your perspective on the church/state issue?

[Q] When you think of the public school system, what are some typical church/state conflicts that come to mind?

• Have you ever found yourself in the midst of a church/state conflict? Describe the situation and how it was resolved.

[Q] Name five or six ways a Christian student—or one of another faith—should be allowed to practice his or her faith on a public school campus.

• Now think of a few ways those same students should not be allowed to practice their faith at school.

Balancing Politics and Faith
Should Church and State Be Separate?

Leader’s Guide

• Should there be a limit to the ways public school students can exercise their religious rights, and if so, where should the line be drawn?

[Q] Stephen Carter also states, “Except for instruction in what is held essential to American life—and this category should be small—the parental prerogative should be absolute.” What are the “essentials to American life” that should fall within the schools' instructional jurisdiction?

• What do you think Carter means by “parental prerogative”?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We must allow some degree of government intervention.

While we don’t want the government meddling in our private lives—especially when it comes to our faith—the simple truth is that from a biblical standpoint, for society to function, we must allow some degree of government intervention. We want laws against murder, rape, theft, and even speeding, so we concur that the state should be able to legislate at least some behavior.

Jesus affirmed this—at least on the topic of taxes—when he said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Luke 20:25). But he quickly added that we need to find a right balance between allegiance to government and allegiance to the Lord, by saying we should also give to God what is God’s. Even though Jesus was talking about money, think of it in the context of today’s society.

[Q] Generally speaking, what in our society is “Caesar’s”? What is God’s?


[Q] How do we reconcile the fact that “there is no authority except that which God has established” (v. 1) with the existence evil, corrupt, or even incompetent politicians and other rulers? Can they carry out God’s will? Explain.

[Q] Does the Romans passage imply that we should obey the government no matter what? Consider, for example, Daniel 6. Daniel, a man of faith, decided to reject the government’s laws by praying to the God of Israel—a clear-cut case of civil disobedience. Do Romans 13 and Daniel 6 contradict one another? Does Romans 13 leave room for taking a Daniel-esque approach?

It’s important to remember that Daniel did not have a reputation for bucking the system. To the contrary, he was not only a model citizen despite living in a pagan kingdom, but he worked
the system so well that the king gave Daniel great political power and prestige (see Daniel 2:48). Daniel was so well loved that King Darius was devastated when he had to throw him into the lions’ den (Daniel 6:14, 16).

Daniel obviously abided by most of the government’s laws, but took a stand when those laws infringed on his practice of faith. He clearly knew how to pick his battles. In the New Testament, when Peter and some apostles were arrested for preaching, they appeared before the Sanhedrin, where the high priest reminded them they had been given “strict orders” not to teach in Christ’s name. Peter and the others replied, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:27–29).

**Teaching Point Two: We must determine whose responsibility it is to educate our children.**

Stephen Carter’s article concludes with these words:

“One might object that this proposal elevates the authority of the parents above the freedom of the child to choose. Precisely.”

**[Q]** Whose responsibility is it to educate our children? Explain.


- What do these passages say about a parent’s role in the education of children?

- What do they not say? Are all “religious” teachings the responsibility of the parents, and all “non-religious” teachings the responsibility of the state?

**[Q]** Proverbs 1:8–9 reads, “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.” What does this passage imply is the job of fathers and mothers?

- Do you think Solomon was referring only to religious teachings in this passage? Why or why not?

**[Q]** Paul gives some advice on this topic as well: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Was Paul referring only to religious and moral instruction, or to academic instruction as well?

- How can we exasperate our children in this process? Is it possible that fighting against a school system could be exasperating to our children? Why or why not?
Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Choose one of the following to do this week:

- Any number of prophetic passages point out that we, too, may be led by the Lord to act as prophetic leaders. Consider how to apply this study to your approach to the public schools, even if you disagree with their policies and/or curricula. Brainstorm ways in which you can make a difference in the public schools.

- Consider the teaching of Deuteronomy 6 to “impress on your children” the things of God. Think how well—or how poorly—your own parents did in this area. What did they do well that you want to repeat with your own children? What mistakes did they make that you want to avoid?

- Read the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and their civil disobedience (Daniel 3). What can you learn from this story? How might it apply to your own situation?

- If you are a Christian student, consider what you should do when you feel you are forced to learn something that goes against your faith, or when you are not permitted to share your own faith perspective. Read Luke 18:1-7. What does this passage say about what you might do?

—Study prepared by Mark Moring, managing editor of Christianity Today Movies.

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in the context of our public schools. None of us
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Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1–7; Psalm 78:1–7;
Daniel 6; Romans 13:1–7
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

In the article “Uncle Sam Is Not Your Dad,” Stephen L. Carter says,

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We must allow some degree of government intervention.

Teaching Point Two: We must determine whose responsibility it is to educate our children.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

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How Should We Respond to the Culture?

What does it mean to be a Christian in our society?

You will not find the word culture in the Bible.

We can, however, “tease out” some biblical principles that can help us think about culture.

This study will help us do that.

Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

To start the class, either show a short clip or recount an episode from a recent popular TV show. Be sure that whatever is used in some way reflects non-Christian values. Then ask your group members to pair off for discussion.

Discussion Starters:

Many TV shows reflect non-Christian values. The story lines often suggest that the chief end of life is bedding down with someone else—and not necessarily one’s husband or wife. Consider these options in relation to the program you’ve just seen.

1. Christians shouldn't watch programs like this.

2. Christians should do what they can to try to influence programming by pressuring TV networks to offer more family-friendly shows or by boycotting advertisers.

3. Christians should get involved in the entertainment business themselves in order to try to influence it for good.

4. Christians cannot influence the secular entertainment world; rather, they should create alternative programming and/or networks.

5. These programs really aren’t so bad. It’s just entertainment describing the lives of real people, after all.

6. Christians should watch these programs together and discuss them, asking themselves what they say about human nature and longing. Parents should watch these programs with their children and talk about the value conflicts they pose for Christians.

7. These programs simply reflect the depravity of human nature and should therefore motivate Christians to redouble their efforts to share the gospel with unbelievers.
Teaching Point One: God loves the world in spite of its evil.

Read John 3:16–18.

John 3:16 is most Christians’ favorite statement of the gospel. Yet some of us seem to skip over the first part: God loved the world—the world with all its sin, evil, and darkness. As the loving Creator, God wants to woo back his lost children. But there was a risk involved in sending his only begotten Son into this world in order to redeem it. What would happen if the world wouldn’t accept his Son? That was the risk God was willing to take. For the world. Because he loved the world. He was even willing to take the risk that his own Son—having become a man with a free will—might choose to do evil, rather than the work of his Father. Thank God, his Son resisted such temptations. Instead, he brought light into a dark world. Remember, this was the world that God so loved!

[Q] Reread this passage again. Each time the word “world” appears, read “human culture” instead. Does this cast another light on God’s stance toward culture, culture understood as patterns of human endeavor? If so, how did it affect you?

Teaching Point Two: Sin and evil are a reality in the world, but children of light do not have to walk in the darkness.


Christians cannot be Christian, nor can the church be the church, without some tension with the world and its cultures. John used the metaphor of light and darkness to talk about this tension. Paul often used another comparison for good and evil: the realm of the Spirit and the realm of flesh. Note, however, that Paul was not necessarily associating “flesh” with the human body or anything physical. Rather, “flesh” referred to everything in the world that opposes God’s Spirit. But here in the Ephesians text, Paul also uses darkness to characterize the Gentiles, by which he meant the people who were outside the covenant community.

[Q] Some would argue that culture is a value-free concept. Inherently, culture is neither good nor bad, but, depending on what values it supports, it can become one or the other. Others would say that since sin came into the world, culture is pervasively anti-God and therefore evil; and yet, because God created the world and wishes to redeem it, culture has the potential to be used for good ends as well. What do you think?
The strength of the Christ-against-culture view is that it reminds us that evil is a reality in human culture and that as God’s holy people we should flee from it. But this sometimes leads to a sectarian impulse that assumes that the evil is “out there”—not within us or within the church.

**Teaching Point Three: We must obey God first, then human authorities.**


**[Q]** How do we relate these passages to each other? Don’t they seem to conflict with each other, if not in principle, then in application?

The Acts passage provides the overruling principle for Christians: whatever allegiances or obligations we have to people must be subject to Christ. If human culture or authorities call us to do that which a biblically informed conscience doesn’t allow, then we have to disobey the human authorities.

On the other hand, there are human authorities—such as governments, police, and teachers—to whom we should subject ourselves. They are placed here for the good of the human community and culture; without them there would only be anarchy.

**Teaching Point Four: Christians are called to be salt and light in the world (culture).**

Read Matthew 5:13–16.

Read it a second time, inserting “culture” wherever “earth” or “world” appears.

**[Q]** Salt, when used as seasoning, shouldn’t call attention to itself, but rather to the food that it makes savory. In what concrete ways do Christians serve as salt within our culture?

**[Q]** Light is supposed to call attention to that which it illuminates. Where in our culture are Christians serving as light, dispelling the darkness?

**[Q]** What is the purpose of being salt and light according to verse 16 of this passage?

**Leader’s Note:** That people “may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

**Teaching Point Five: Christians are to spread the gospel in the world (culture).**

In order to fully understand the Parable of the Sower (see Mark 4:1–9, 13–20), we have to know how seed was sown in Jesus’ time. A farmer would sow seeds, then someone else would come
along and plow under the seeds. Some seeds would germinate, grow, and produce fruit; other seeds would not grow at all; and still other seeds would grow, but for one reason or another they wouldn't become productive.

Jesus seems to be telling his disciples to sow the gospel anywhere and everywhere, not worrying about what the results will be. Someone else will come along and plow the seeds under. And later, what produce there is can be harvested.

Some see this parable as an apt description of how Christians should live in our culture. We embody and share the gospel through acts of mercy and testimonies of faith. We don't need to worry about whether the ground on which we are “broadcasting” the gospel will produce. Some “seeds” will take hold and produce fruit; some won't.

In order to sow the seed, however, we have to use whatever “soil” presents itself to us in our culture. We have to use the language, the concepts, the art, and the musical idioms of the culture in which we live in order to embody and share the gospel within it. This is why, for instance, the church throughout history has used musical idioms of the day in its worship—not just to be “contemporary,” but to present the gospel in ways the world could appreciate. While the gospel never changes, its communication can be adapted to the cultural forms of any given culture.

**[Q]** How might we use the cultural forms of our own society in order to communicate the gospel?

- Where do you see examples of that already happening?
- What are the dangers of using secular contemporary forms in order to communicate the gospel?

**[Q]** What would be lost, for instance, if there weren't some Christians who emphasize the lostness of the world and separation from the evil of the world?

**[Q]** What would be lost if there weren't some Christians committed to transforming the world through missions, health care, education, business, politics, and the arts?

**Part 3 Apply Your Findings**

John G. Stackhouse Jr. maintains in his Christianity Today article, “In the World, but …”:

“God has called us to lives of difficult paradox, of painful negotiation between conflicting and competitive values, seeking to cooperate with God wherever he is at work. Such a position, full of ambiguity and irony, is also full of faith and hope.”
Choose one of the following to do this week:

- Think about instances in your own life when you were forced to make a difficult moral decision in which, perhaps, there may not have been black and white alternatives, only different shades of gray. How do you decide what to do in those instances? Think through what criteria you will use for such decisions in the future.

- In the coming week, be especially mindful of the values communicated in two areas: advertising and mass media. What goodness (light) do they reflect? What evil (darkness) is reflected in advertising and the mass media? Then think about how the gospel is “good news” for the darkness of our culture as you see it in these two arenas. How might the gospel be communicated or embodied using the cultural forms of the advertising and media worlds? Can you help with this kind of evangelism?

—Study prepared by former Christianity Today associate editor Richard A. Kauffman.

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**How Should We Respond to the Culture?**

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therefore evil; and yet, because God created the world and wishes to redeem it, culture has the potential to be used for good ends as well. What do you think?

**Teaching Point Three:** We must obey God first, then human authorities.

**Teaching Point Four:** Christians are called to be salt and light in the world (culture).

**Teaching Point Five:** Christians are to spread the gospel in the world (culture).

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### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

**Choose one of the following to do this week:**

- Think about instances in your own life when you were forced to make a difficult moral decision in which, perhaps, there may not have been black and white alternatives, only different shades of gray. How do you decide what to do in those instances? Think through what criteria you will use for such decisions in the future.

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