

Living as a Christian in a non-Christian World

The term *Christian nationalism* is very much in use in media discussions about American politics these days. While I find it impossible to discern what people mean by *Christian nationalism* in every instance that it is used, the term has problems with both the Biblical and historical ideas of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Biblically speaking, a Christian is a person of any ethnic, economic, or citizenship background who by faith accepts baptism and commits to living a life of obedience to Jesus Christ. There are instances in Scripture of entire households who become Christian, but there is no concept of Christianity controlling the apparatus of an earthly government in the New Testament.

In generations following the New Testament, there are stories where not only did individuals and households become baptized followers of Jesus, but clans and tribes of people collectively (or at the command of their tribal leader) accept baptism together and declare their entire tribe to be Christian. When this sort of thing happens on a tribal level, however, there begins to be a breakdown in what it actually means to be Christian, because there has never been an example of an entire tribe of people who wholeheartedly embrace lifestyles of obedience to Christ. Disciples of Jesus are individual people, and tribes of people have always been a mixture of wheat and tares (to use Jesus' analogy).

Our modern world is made up of nation-states (like the various countries of Europe) and empires (collections of states and ethnic groups such as the United States). These political entities are so large that applying the term *Christian* to any of them is incompatible. The closest political entity in the Bible to which we could compare the United States is the Roman Empire, and this is precisely the structure under which the Christians in Asia Minor were living when Peter wrote to them.

Like the sojourners of Peter's day, we should never be under the illusion that we can somehow "Christianize" an entire empire. This has never happened in the history of the world and will not happen until Jesus himself sits on the throne as King. So how can we influence the community around us which does not embrace Jesus as Lord? This is the question Peter is answering for the exiles.

1 Peter 2:11-17

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the

ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

We could easily find political applications of this passage in 1 Peter to our lives. If your group finds this as a good way to inform political discussion, that is great. But the most relevant application comes to how we live our everyday lives.

In his sermon on this passage, Austin gives us four instructions on how to live as sojourners and exiles in the world.

- 1) Don't surrender to the passions of the flesh. (v. 11)
- 2) Let your conduct shine brighter than the criticism of others. (v. 12)
- 3) Obey the laws of man. (v. 13-15)
- 4) Live with integrity/character. (v. 16-17)

Discussion Questions

- **Why do you think abstaining from the passions of the flesh is the first command in this passage? (v. 11)**
- **What are the most pressing and tempting "passions of the flesh" from which we have to abstain today?**
- **How does Peter say Christians should counter slander from outsiders? (v. 12)**
- **Have you ever seen Peter's prescription for countering slander work?**
- **How does a person move from being a critic of Christians to being one who gives glory to God?**
- **What is the appropriate role for government? (v. 14)**
- **How can we understand government as legitimately bearing the authority of God?**
- **Why does Peter say we should submit to government?**
- **How can Christians do a better job of giving submission and honor to God's servants in government?**
- **Why does Christian freedom lead to disciplined living instead of lawlessness? (v. 16-17)**