

OUR CONVICTIONS REGARDING CHRISTIANS IN A TURBULENT CULTURE

September 2022

All scripture quotations are from ESV unless otherwise noted.

In our effort to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, we—the Christians of Christ Fellowship of Hannibal—consider it wise to comment on the growing turbulence of the culture around us in these United States of America. We have observed a slow but radical shift in our culture, twenty years or more in its progress, but consistently trending toward extreme political discontent, fragmentation, and violence, all of which have permeated every branch, level, institution, and demographic of this nation. Although most of this trend has not been distinctly anti-Christian, some of it has been, and that has been enough to make many Christians invest themselves fully into the current controversies. In order to stand before God with a clean conscience, we will now endeavor to express our convictions regarding this cultural turbulence, defending them from Scripture and plain reason, so we can better instill these convictions within the members of our church. We offer this statement to other Christians for their guidance, and we offer it to any outsiders who would examine us on these matters.

Section 1 Guiding Principles

Our response to the increasing turbulence of American culture is founded upon these nine principles.

(1) God is just and rules with justice. God's justice is neither his conformity to some standard higher than himself,¹ nor his own arbitrarily invented standards,² but God's justice is in his very character,³ eternally shared among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴ And since God himself is just, justice is woven in the very fabric of the world he created,⁵ especially among humankind, who are created in his image.⁶ God's justice is revealed in his government of the world, especially his government of humans and angels,⁷ whether they be righteous or wicked.⁸

¹Rom 11:33-36 ²Ps 89:14 ³Isa 30:18 ⁴Ps 45:4-7; Mic 3:8; Isa 42:1; Matt 12:18 ⁵Deut 32:4

⁶Gen 1:26-31 ⁷Ps 82 ⁸Gen 18:35; Deut 32:41

(2) God created mankind in his own image to rule justly over the earth. God's creation of men and women brought his good creation to a very good finale, for we alone on the earth are created in God's image, which means we alone can rule this earth with a high sense of justice. Government of the earth was granted to us on the very basis of our commonality with God, and only in ruling justly do we reflect his glory and fulfill our role.

Gen 1:26-31; Ps 8:3-8; Ps 72:1-2; Prov 8:12-16; 1 Cor 6:1-3;

(3) Mankind has surrendered control of the earth, with its governments, institutions, and cultures, to Satan. When Adam and Eve turned to wickedness under the guidance of Satan,¹ we became his slaves,² and we also became powerless to free ourselves from that slavery.³ For this reason, we no longer primarily reflect the justice of God in our dealings with each other,⁴ but we primarily reflect the injustice of Satan, so that even our most just societies are inescapably plagued by willful injustice.⁵

¹Gen 3:1-6 ²John 8:44; Rom 6:15-16; 2 Cor 4:3-4; Eph 2:1-3; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Heb 2:14-15

³Jer 13:23; 17:9; Rom 8:6-8; 1 Cor 2:14 ⁴Eccl 7:29 ⁵Ps 2:1-3; 14:1-3; Rom 3:9-18

(4) The injustice of Satan and mankind exists only by the decision of God. Though we confess God's supreme power,¹ his limitless knowledge,² and his genuine goodness,³ we also confess his impenetrable and lofty wisdom.⁴ Therefore, we submit to his purposes in ordaining an earth conquered by Satan and permeated by injustice for however long God will.⁵ Indeed, such injustice only continues to thrive by his patience and will.⁶

¹Eph 3:20 ²Prov 15:3 ³Js 1:13 ⁴Rom 11:33-36 ⁵Ps131:1-3 ⁶Rom 9:19-23; Eph 1:11; 2 Pet 3:9

(5) No one has suffered greater injustice, while displaying greater meekness, than Jesus Christ. Lest anyone think that God is distant from us in his toleration of injustice, we proclaim that the Father has lovingly saved the world, according to his own plan, through the injustice suffered by his Son.¹ Although the Son existed in the form of God from all eternity, he emptied himself to become a man, further humbled by an unjust death.² Of all people in history, Christ alone was perfectly blameless and wholesome,³ and yet he chose to obey his Father⁴ in meekly enduring scorn,⁵ betrayal,⁶ a sham trial,⁷ and crucifixion, the cruelest form of execution available to him.⁸

¹John 3:16-17 ²Phil 2:5-11 ³Matt 11:28-30; John 1:9-13; 8:46; Act 10:38; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15
⁴Mark 14:35-36; John 10:17-18 ⁵Luke 7:31-35 ⁶Matt 26:47-50 ⁷Mark 14:53-64 ⁸Luke 23:13-25

(6) Christians will likewise suffer injustice for the duration of this age. Though God has redeemed us in Christ from sin, he has also purposed, and warned us, that we will be a hated, persecuted minority on the earth.¹ Therefore, we have no delusions of establishing a truly Christian nation in which true justice may be realized among us.² On the contrary, we expect that mankind, under the direction of Satan, will treat us how they treated our Lord.³

¹Matt 7:13-14; 1 Cor 1:18-31; 2 Tim 3:12 ²Matt 24:9; Rev 19:18 ³Matt 10:24-25; John 15:18

(7) Christians should imitate Jesus Christ in his meek endurance of injustice. Though human societies are naturally corrupt, just as humanity itself has been corrupted by Satan, still people are prone to resist injustice, even to extreme measures. Against this trend, we Christians ought to imitate Christ in meekly enduring even the worst of injustice, taking the opportunity to love our enemies.

Matt 5:5,38-48; 10:16; Luke 6:27-32; 10:3; Acts 7:59-60; Heb 10:32-34; 1 Jn 5:4

(8) Christians should also imitate Christ's passion for mercy and justice. Christians have been commanded by God to imitate his treatment of the poor and oppressed, seeking justice for, and showing mercy to, the same.¹ As Christ himself did when he was on the earth, we can do this best in ways which are personal and which communicate the hope of the gospel.² In so doing, Christians bring God's justice to light in a world otherwise filled with darkness.³

¹Luke 3:10-14; Js 1:27 ²Luke 4:16-21 ³Matt 5:14-16

(9) Only God can deliver us from injustice, and he will. At his return, Jesus Christ will establish justice forever by overcoming Satan and all sinners,¹ delivering and perfecting his people,² and recreating the world to reflect the glory of God,³ including his justice.⁴ The meek will inherit the earth.⁵ Until then, we have victory over injustice through our faith,⁶ hope,⁷ and love,⁸ by which we patiently wait for God.⁹

¹Rev. 14:10; 19:19-21; 20:7-15 ²2Thess 1:1-10; 1 Jn 3:2 ³Col 1:15-20; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-4
⁴Isa 1:1-10 ⁵Matt 5:5 ⁶1 Jn 5:4 ⁷Rom 5:1-5 ⁸Rom 12:14 ⁹Rev 14:12

Section 2

Hierarchy of Relevant Scriptures

As Christians, we seek to conduct ourselves in the world around us according to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. The whole Bible has been given to us, and is what

we call 'the word of God' and is meant to teach believers concerning life and godliness. Central to that instruction is the lordship of Jesus Christ over the world, and Christians in particular. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, instructed from the whole Bible, we seek to organize our lives first under his lordship. We inform that effort with the entire counsel of God's word, that we might honor him in obedience—living good, loving, and holy lives.

Our approach to the Scriptures on this issue of living within a turbulent culture requires us to establish some categories. This gives us a means to weigh which commands apply directly, and which commands apply indirectly. The more similar our circumstances are to the original recipients of a particular command, the more weight we should give it in our consideration of how we ought to conduct ourselves in a society like ours. The same general practice should be followed when applying the examples of godly people in Scripture: we should weigh them according to the degree their circumstances are similar to our own. We submit the following categories as helpful divisions for texts we might consider, listed in order of relevance, with examples.

(1) New Testament descriptions of Jesus Christ—specifically his teaching and example

There is no more central and relevant data for the believer than the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. This truth is clear not just from Jesus himself, who claimed and proved his right to possess supreme authority,¹ but also from Moses who foretold of Jesus and his final authority over all men,² and of Paul, who wrote, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord, both of the dead and of the living."³ As we consider his example, we find in him the most innocent man who, therefore, suffered the worst oppression of all,⁴ but who nonetheless rejected the revolutionary mindset of his culture.⁵ It is this example that is repeatedly held out for the believer to imitate throughout the New Testament.⁶ As followers of such a Lord, we ought to embody his own priorities and concerns. His words should set our trajectory and starting point. *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."*⁷

¹Matt. 11:27; 28:18; John 10:38 ²Deut. 18:15-19 ³Rom. 14:9 ⁴Luke 23:4,13-25; Matt. 27:3-5

⁵John 6:15 ⁶1 Pet. 2:19-24 ⁷John 18:36

(2) New Testament descriptions of Christians living between the two advents of Christ, and commands issued to them

In terms of relevant commands given to believers, beneath the teaching and example of Jesus himself comes those portions of Scripture which approvingly describe the behavior of these believers, and also any commands given directly to them. All Christians live contrary to the culture that surrounds them.¹ But such contrariness is not always lived out in a turbulent culture. However, in the New Testament we mostly meet believers who suffered their own kind of turbulence, often experiencing violent oppression.² Therefore, their example is very important for our current study on the matter. In summary, we learn from such a consideration of these Christians and the commands given to them that we should seek to cultivate an eternal perspective willing to bear temporary hardships peacefully, waiting for Christ to deliver us upon his return.

Two passages from the apostles should be sufficient for our purposes here. First, from Paul's first letter to Timothy, is a passage demonstrating that the believer should have a preoccupation with the spread of the gospel, while also pursuing and praying for peace

in the wider culture, allowing Christians to carry their witness for God throughout society while maintaining dignity. *“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*³

The second passage we wish to put forward to demonstrate the main thrust of New Testament teaching is from Peter, and shows that God expects believers to suffer for righteousness' sake—and to not retaliate when they suffer, but to honor Christ as Lord—conducting themselves with gentleness and respect. *“But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.”*⁴

¹ 1 Pet. 4:4 ² Acst 7:54-60; 12; 12:2; Rev. 2:10,13 ³ 1 Tim. 2:1-4 ⁴ 1 Pet. 3:14-17

(3) Old Testament descriptions of God's people living as exiles or sojourners in nations or countries not their own, and commands issued to them

Following those New Testament commands and approved examples, we turn to the Old Testament. Old Testament believers were usually in a very different cultural situation than we are in now. However, the most immediately similar portions concern those matters dealing with God's people when they were living as exiles or sojourners in societies not their own. In those conditions we have several examples and several commands. These portions are instructive for us in that they demonstrate the sort of lives that are approved by God for a people who have no expectation of great or lasting political power within their society. These believers were merely temporary residents in the system they lived under. While God's people are not to go in the same direction as the world around them, neither are they to be unnecessarily contrary to that society, but are to be the sort of people who render good service to the society around them. As an example, we would cite Daniel. Consider this description of Daniel: *“Then the King gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.”*¹ And then consider this report about him from four chapters later: *“Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. Then these men said, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”*²

¹ Dan. 2:48 ² Dan 6:4-5

(4) Old Testament descriptions of godly Israelites living in Israel under the dominion of a foreign power, and commands issued to them

In this category we would find godly Israelites living in their own land, but under a foreign power, and therefore subject to rules they would find objectionable, and living under a ruler who had no sense of duty toward them under God. Many times in such circumstances the people of Israel would seek to fight fire with fire, and would turn to the world for power and methods of turning back the rulers they rejected. The Scripture

repeatedly uses language like the following to address believers in these circumstances, facing these temptations: *“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!”*¹

¹Isa. 31:1

(5) Old Testament descriptions of godly Israelites living in Israel under a wicked, Israelite ruler, and commands issued to them

Passages fitting into this category would come from a situation in which the godly Israelites are living under a wicked king, but a wicked king who was part of a system whose laws were righteous and established by God himself. One example of this category is implied in Exodus: *“You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.”*¹ No matter how wicked a ruler became, cursing a ruler was never lawful in Israel.

¹Exod. 22:28

All of these categories of texts are relevant to us, but they certainly have a hierarchy; acknowledging that will help us to rightly divide the Scriptures and comprehend our duty as Christians in such times as these.

Section 3 Forms of Injustice

Having established some guiding principles and a hierarchy for applying Scripture to these turbulent times, we now turn to the sorts of injustice we may face, or do face, and how we generally ought to respond according to our faith in God through Christ, so we may be pleasing to him in all things.

(1) Dedicated Anti-Christian Policies

Christ has taught us to expect the nations of the world to be hostile toward Christians in particular, even if the people of a given nation act justly toward one another: *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*¹ This being the case, Jesus also forewarned us about governmental efforts, in every nation, to oppose and even kill us: *“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”*² Although Christians in these United States have always enjoyed great peace, even privilege, we could not have expected this to last forever, given the warnings of Christ. Our days of holding cultural sway over this nation are long gone, and we now see continual efforts to squeeze us out of the public forum and compel us to live contrary to our faith.

When earthly authorities seek to compel us to disobey God, or to hinder the work of God, we must always imitate the apostles in their answer to the Sanhedrin in the early days of the Jerusalem church: *“So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’”*³ In such cases, we have a divine mandate to disobey such policies according to the example of the apostles just quoted, declaring

our intention to disobey and welcoming punishments⁴ as the will of God, who orders all events for our good.⁵

¹John 16:18-19 ²Matt. 24:9 ³Acts 4:18-19 ⁴Acts 5:41-42; Heb. 10:32-34; 1 Pet. 2:13; 4:12-14

⁵Rom. 8:28

(2) Unjust Policies, Not Necessarily Anti-Christian

Christians will never be the only segment of the population afflicted by governmental injustice. The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.¹ People who find their way into positions of power and influence may be expected to act with similar evil intentions toward those under them. Even in Israel, a nation founded by God himself, injustice was expected, so that Moses had to exhort the people against it, saying, "*You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*"² Given the great failure of Israel to live according to this law, we may expect even worse injustice from nations openly opposed to God.

Just as Moses spoke the verdict of God against injustice, we Christians must also speak for God and condemn whatever injustice may be at work in our respective societies. Such condemnations formed a large part of the message of Israel's prophets, such as Micah, who said, "*Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones, who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron.*"³

While Christians often have no trouble speaking against unjust policies which target them or, at least, make life difficult for them, Christians are not always consistent in speaking on behalf of others. And yet, Paul says that God is the savior of all people, especially those who believe.⁴ If we are to imitate God⁵ as we ought, then we must at least speak on behalf of the oppressed. Therefore, we should examine those who claim to be subject to injustice, see if their claims are true, and speak accordingly. We must especially do this for the poor and needy, for in this we will most imitate God, who raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.⁶ So we should always remember the poor, as Paul was eager to do,⁷ and as Christ himself did, speaking against those scribes and Pharisees who devoured widows' houses.⁸

¹Gen. 8:21 ²Deut. 16:19-20 ³Mic. 3:1-3 ⁴1 Tim. 4:10 ⁵Eph. 5:1 ⁶Ps. 113:7 ⁷Gal. 2:10 ⁸Mark 12:40

(3) Alleged Government Conspiracies

Although conspiracy theories have been ever-present in American culture since President Kennedy's assassination, only recently have we seen conspiracy theories become a regular part of political discussion, to the point that they dominate the rhetoric of certain groups. Whether it's institutional racism or cabals of Satanist pedophiles, Americans now conduct politics by accusing each other of conspiracy. In all this, we must remember the challenge issued by Jesus to his opponents, "*Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.*"¹ Our nation's legal system has historically tried to implement this wisdom by assuming innocence until guilt is proven in court, as determined by a jury of peers. Sometimes, perhaps, conspiracy theories will be proven true, as with the Watergate scandal. But we should always forestall judgment until the accused have their day in court.

¹John 7:24

(4) Unprovoked or Excessive Government Violence Against Citizens

Under this heading, we find the greatest occasion for Christians to prove how fittingly we are called Christians—"little Christs". As we have mentioned several times so far, Christ was certainly the recipient of excessive, unjust violence at the hands of worldly powers. They arrested him out of envy, struck him in mockery, plucked out his beard to spite him, flogged him brutally, and finally set about to suffocate him to death on the wearisome cross. Though he might have called twelve legions of angels to deliver him or let his disciples defend him,¹ instead he destroyed those dark powers by letting them destroy him, defaming them forever in the pages of history, and earning by his sufferings a place at the right hand of God, from which he comes to judge the living and the dead in justice.

Far from advocating a passive, apathetic, or sheepish response to violent injustice, we believe that these two thousand years since the murder of Christ have proven that suffering and dying blamelessly is both more glorious and instigates greater change than armies and weapons ever could. Therefore, we believe it is better to turn the other cheek to those who strike us,² and we try to model this for all mankind, as our Lord did. When we ourselves are not the ones suffering, we must speak on behalf of those who are afflicted in this way, as stated above. On occasions when we must do more than speak, we should still conduct ourselves uniquely, as the people of God, which this paper will address below.

¹Matt. 26:51-53 ²Luke 6:29

Section 4 Possible Responses to Injustice

Being in the world but not of the world, Christians must make a special effort not to respond to these turbulent times in the same way, or from the same motives, as unbelievers do. Therefore, we will now comment on common, worldly responses to perceived injustice, assess them scripturally, and either describe the Christian version of those responses or else strictly advise against those worldly responses.

(1) Covert Disobedience

When truly unjust policies are being enforced, people very often respond by disobeying those laws—but covertly in order to escape punishment. As Christians, we do have scriptural precedent for such covert disobedience when we must do good to all¹ and abstain from every form of evil,² and when we must be free of punishment in order to do so. For these reasons, the midwives in Egypt secretly allowed newborn sons to live despite Pharaoh's command,³ and Obadiah hid prophets when King Ahab would have murdered them.⁴ We must also covertly disobey any law which hinders our efforts to preach the gospel to all creation,⁵ even if it means printing illegal Bibles and smuggling them into restricted countries or providing them to our neighbors.

However, we must avoid the temptation to cloak selfish and worldly desires with moralistic language. Some people do this, like those who stockpile illegal weaponry or dodge paying taxes, neither of which is required in the Christian life, however unfair the laws or the taxes may be. Also, we must remember commands to be submissive to the government⁶ and to be at peace with all people, as much as it depends on us.⁷ Therefore, covert disobedience can only be justified by proving that God grants us an

exception to his own rules. It is justifiable when part of the Church's great work: testifying to Christ as Savior and spiritually subverting the world system enforced by Satan.

¹Gal. 6:10 ²1 Thess.5:2 ³Exod. 1:15-22 ⁴1 Kgs. 18:13 ⁵Mark 16:15 ⁶Rom. 13:11ff ⁷Rom. 12:18

(2) Public Condemnation

Although many individuals in our culture cry foul about perceived injustices or wrongdoing, most of this is empty rhetoric and hypocrisy. As Christians, we must model our public condemnation of sin on holier examples, like the prophets who thundered God's word in favor of the poor, the needy, and the afflicted;¹ or like John the Baptist when he confronted Herod about his public sin;² or like Paul seeking justice for himself in the court of Caesar.³ In doing so, we act according to the Holy Spirit within us, who came to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.⁴

However, to condemn authorities or institutions in public will often lead to punishment, which may cut short the usefulness of the speaker in other ways. To refer to an above example, Obadiah could have decried King Ahab for persecuting the prophets, but then he would have been executed, imprisoned, or stripped of his influence, in which case he could not have secretly hid the prophets. We must be wise as serpents while being harmless as doves.⁵ Christ himself commanded us to flee to another city when persecuted,⁶ so we are not always required to offer ourselves up to death or punishment. Perhaps, then, we should err on the side of covert disobedience until public condemnation becomes necessary.

Nonetheless, in any situation, we should be willing to endure the cross and despise the shame, as our Lord did.⁷ And on any occasion when we are compelled to speak truthfully about our convictions or activities, whether in a court of law or due to a direct question, we should always be truthful and entrust ourselves to God, like when Jesus freely confessed himself to be the Son of God before the Sanhedrin, though it meant death for him.⁸

¹Amos 2:4-8 ²Luke 3:18-20 ³Acts 25:11 ⁴John 16:8 ⁵Matt. 10:16 ⁶Matt. 10:23 ⁷Heb. 12:2 ⁸Mark 14:61

(3) Civil Disobedience

Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. have forever proven the effectiveness of civil disobedience for lasting change. In some ways, the Christian life requires a kind of civil disobedience, as when the apostles publicly and meaningfully refused to be silenced by the Sanhedrin.¹ We perhaps saw something like this recently when churches continued to meet despite coronavirus restrictions, doing so respectfully and with principled, well-argued explanations (and not with angry shouts and inflammatory words).

And yet, Scripture portrays civil disobedience as the exception rather than the rule for us. We are to live tranquil lives of righteousness, dignity, and peace,² something very difficult to do if organized protest is your way of life. *"Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler, but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."*³ Peter's contrast here should give us pause before staging a protest or sit-in. Such activities can unintentionally harm others at the same time, and they overall set a very different tone for Christianity than what Jesus modeled, who never quarreled nor cried out nor lifted up his voice in the streets.⁴

¹Acts 5:28 ²1 Tim. 2:2 ³1 Pet. 4:15-16 NASB ⁴Matt. 12:19

(4) Vigilantism

Vigilantism occurs when a person attempts to enact justice apart from established legal means, whether for personal vengeance or otherwise.

(a) Personal vengeance is never a good reason for vigilantism, for the individual would be better served by leaving such matters to God, who delivers justice in due course. We would be better disciples of Christ by loving, praying, and sacrificing rather than repaying evil for evil. We should act in humility toward God in his world, where he has claimed sole rights to vengeance, and commanded us to overcome evil with good.¹

¹Romans 12:17-21; cf. Prov. 20:22; 24:29

(b) Concerning vigilantism as an effort to enact justice within society, we must tread carefully.

Admittedly, we have examples on both sides. On the one hand, there are positive examples of Old Testament individuals enacting justice upon lawless oppressors—consider some from the time of the judges in Israel,¹ or even Abraham rescuing Lot and the people of Canaan.² Added to that are the emphatic commands from God to defend the oppressed and rescue those in danger of death.³ These passages seem to indicate that, where an established and reliable law-enforcing authority is absent, God's people have both the freedom and duty to uphold justice.

However, in the West, we are generally blessed with strong governments that seek to balance the scales of justice in some way. Similar to the New Testament Christians under Roman rule, we simultaneously live under a strong government presence made up of mostly just rules and mostly unjust rulers. In that context, their example was not vigilantism as an answer to societal woes,⁴ but rather prayer and a godly life.⁵ We ought not forget the example of King David in this case either. He had many opportunities to kill King Saul, a man who wrongly hunted his life, and who had overstayed his position as king. Yet, David never took this matter into his own hands out of respect for the office and loyalty to God.⁶

Therefore, in considering vigilantism, and the practical doubts we may have about the presence of a reliable authority for justice, we must have regard for what is honorable in the sight of all, even unbelievers.⁷ If our actions bring shame upon us, we thereby bring shame upon Christ. But if we act honorably, we honor him.

¹Heb. 11:32-33 ²Gen. 14 ³Prov. 24:11 ⁴Matt. 26:52 ⁵Acts 12:5; Js. 3:13-4:2 ⁶1 Sam. 24:6 ⁷2 Cor. 8:2

(c) Finally, the example of Jesus driving out the merchants and money lenders from the temple may be attempted by some as an argument for vigilantism, against what we have stated above. However, it must be remembered that Jesus does not appeal to the absence of an established, reliable law-enforcing authority, or even to the failure of that authority (though he could have). Rather, he appeals to his own unique authority as the divine Son of David.¹ We would do well to remember his words to Peter: *"Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword."*²

¹The crowd demonstrates this with their cries of Hosanna, a Messianic slogan from Ps. 118 (Mark 11:9-10), and Jesus implies this by referring to the temple as his Father's house (John 2:16). ²Matt. 26:52

(5) Violent Protest

Violent protest goes a step further than the previous two categories. First, it is like vigilantism, but with more people involved, usually directed at the government, with people acting violently for the outcome they desire. Second, it is similar to civil disobedience, except that the peaceful protests so essential to civil disobedience

become violent, as protests often do. Christians are forbidden from partaking in violent protests, as we are to be submissive to the governing authorities.¹

While Christians are not forbidden from all forms of protest, most are conducted by a very mixed group of people, with varied goals and objectives. This makes it hard for Christians to participate in such activities while maintaining a distinctly Christian voice.² For that reason, and the risk of a peaceful protest becoming violent, our general counsel is to avoid most protests altogether.

¹Rom. 13:1-7 ²Matt. 5:13-16; Luke 14:34-35

(6) Peaceful and Armed Secessionism

Secessionism refers to separating from a larger body to form a new, smaller group, governed in a different way, by different people. This has recently become an issue in the United States. For example, Texas has often raised the question of whether they might leave the union. As Christians, we must remember that these calls for secession, so long as they can remain peaceful, are certainly open for Christians to support. Perhaps people would be better served if ruled by different laws and different rulers.¹

As Christians, we also ought to be asking which type of political arrangement is likely to provide the church with a *“peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”*² Because we have already been separated from the world system and ushered into a heavenly city, we are very unlikely to take up arms against others, seeking to change our form of government. In addition, Jesus forewarned us that a great deal of persecution was coming our way. His instruction was to flee from one city to the next when that happens.³ He envisions his followers sometimes moving from place to place without a real home.⁴ Perhaps when Christians are persecuted, it is sometimes they who should leave, rather than wrestling control away from existing authorities, or even taking up arms.

¹2 Chron. 2:11 ²1 Tim. 2:2 ³Matt. 10:23 ⁴Matt. 8:18-20

(7) Overthrow of an “illegitimate” or legitimate government

This response is a step more radical than previously considered. The overthrow of an existing government is not something that Christ has left open to private Christians. To be sure, Christians may join a legitimate military, and may fight against other nations as part of that military, glorifying God with their sacrifice.¹ However, for the private Christian citizen, God's word remains: *“Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.”*²

There remains one important caveat in all of this. Namely, any person who is part of the government has a duty under God both to those he governs and also to those who govern him. Depending on the nature of the governmental system, he may use his legitimate authority to resist a corrupting, illegitimate use of the government's power, for the good of those he governs. He is a lesser magistrate whose intermediary position requires him to balance conflicting duties under God.³

Very often, discussion of whether a government is legitimate derives from discussion about whether elections are legitimate. Claims that the 2020 Presidential Election was “stolen” from Donald Trump have been a major talking point since that election ended. Before that, Democrats alleged that the 2016 election was stolen from them due to interference from Russia. Such claims are often refuted, despite their continuing role in political discussions. But claims about illegitimate elections are much older. George W. Bush was declared the winner of the 2000 Presidential Election despite controversy over

voting in Florida. Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election despite doubts about his citizenship. History affords many such examples. The fact is, such claims arise from dissatisfaction mixed with confirmation bias, rather than hard evidence and objective investigation. Therefore, we advise people not to give weight to such claims.

Additionally, even if an illegitimate government has taken effect through an illegitimate election, everything we said previously still applies: the overthrow of an existing government is not something that Christ has left open to private Christians. Concerned Christians should use existing structures and methods to redress any grievances from such an election. Moreover, every New Testament Christian lived under forms of government we would consider questionable, so the Christian life is not compromised by such a government.

¹Luke 3:14 ²Tit. 3:1-2 ³Jdg. 15:9-13; 2 Kgs. 1:9-15; Ezek. 22

A Final Appeal to Christians

Many have observed that the partisan divide among Americans has been growing starker and fiercer over the past few decades. Moderates, independents, and third-party voters are becoming rarer and rarer, and people aligned with the two major parties drift further from the center in every election cycle. Meanwhile, elected officials in both parties stoke the fires of discontent, dehumanizing and demonizing their opponents with reckless speeches to growing crowds, who then go forth to commit acts of vandalism and violence in the name of justice. Peacemakers are few, and they long for the days when politics was boring.

Christians have never, perhaps, stood aloof from American politics, and we certainly do not stand aloof in these turbulent times. Various Christians have joined in the work of both major parties, doubtless seeking to fulfill the will of God in so doing, but being lost in the sea of angry faces, their voices muted in the storm of angry shouts, so that their efforts are in vain. And yet, we persist in our partisanship, believing that "too much is at stake in this election" for us to oppose the sins we see in our own parties. And so we all support our respective candidates, shouting that God wills it.

As a result, people of either party hold Christians in derision who side with the other party, and Christians hold each other in derision, separated by the political aisle, though they ought to be united in the Spirit in the bond of peace in Christ. Our trumpet therefore makes an uncertain sound, and no one assembles for battle, as we try to preach the gospel and persuade people to repent and believe. No revival, no great awakening rains down on us from God, even though we need his power now more than ever, as the earth dries out and our own fruitfulness withers, while sin abounds in greater measure and boldness.

Nowhere is this partisan divide, and the weakness it brings, felt more acutely (though perhaps we have become numb to it by long duration) than between black and white Christians. Christians of other ethnicities certainly have their stakes in the political game, and they side with either party as they see fit, but black and white Christians are especially marked in their party allegiances. Typically, white Christians vote Republican and black Christians vote Democrat, with only some variation. And so, too often, the old racial wars persist even among us, believers who ought to be one, since in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither barbarian nor Scythian.¹ The Church can be a great example to the world that its various races can best live in love under Christ, but instead we have settled for the fires of riots and the slurs of bigots.

Perhaps our partisanship will boil until it blows up into a civil war, as some fear. As it stands now, that war will not only result in brother fighting brother, but brothers and sisters in Christ warring against each other in a vain, worldly conflict, while the armor of God rusts from lack of use and souls perish for all eternity. Whatever partisan strife now ails us, it will be twice as hard to heal after the shots are fired and Christians lie dead from each other's weapons. Will it really be, in that day, that Christians spill the blood of one another, after Christ shed his own blood for all of us? Instead of laying down our own lives for one another, as Christ commanded, will we take each others lives? And if we commit such sins, how long will it take us to outlive that disgrace, not only in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of the world?

With such a grim prospect ahead us, Christians ought to undertake a more radical course of action than any rioter or assassin ever dreamed. We should take it upon ourselves to become the peacemakers we were meant to be. If it is too much for us to leave our respective parties and agendas, then the Church should use its multi-party membership to seek the common ground, the creative compromise, the bipartisan solution. Let each political party marvel at us, as they look up from their degenerate plotting to see Christians charting a path forward for the nation by mutual understanding, patient effort, and fair play. Let Democratic Christians and Republican Christians, black and white, spend less time with their own parties, less time frequenting their preferred media sources, and more time with each other, fellowshiping in Christ and—incidentally—forging a new America composed of truly united states.

¹Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11