

GOD AND POLITICS

Mark Dever has provided an insightful exposition of what it means for us to 'render unto Caesar what is Caesar's,' casting a positive vision for Christian engagement in politics. Highly recommended.

SAM ALLBERRY, AUTHOR OF *IS GOD ANTI-GAY?*

There's no one I trust more than Mark Dever to teach what the Bible tells us about Christianity and government. I commend this book to you.

COLIN HANSEN, THE GOSPEL COALITION

This is a little book full of big surprises. There are many books about God and politics but few that are all about Jesus and very few that are about one verse in the Bible. Mark Dever superbly unpacks Jesus' surprising response to his opponents question, which Jeremy Paxman would have been proud of – is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? He has become every politician's favourite author by daring to thank us for 'doing God's work'. But Mark does not let you or me get away with just giving 'that coin back to Caesar' given his clarion call to 'give yourself to God'. He sets out Jesus' wonderful vision which goes deeper and higher than politics. It leads us to grow in our respect for politics and our hope for better to come.

DAVID BURROWES, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, UK

GOD AND POLITICS

JESUS' VISION FOR SOCIETY,
STATE AND GOVERNMENT

MARK DEVER

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NO VISION?

“That’s the problem with Christianity,” my friend told me. “You have no vision for the state, for society as a whole.” He was a Muslim but had become a good friend. I remember where we were when we had this conversation. I had had others like it before but not with as good a friend as this man had become. He had been a guest in our home recently and as we were talking together he expressed how thankful he was that my wife and I were trying to raise our children to be ‘holy’, as he put it. We both commiserated about the moral state of late twentieth century Britain where we then lived. And then he said this, ‘That’s the problem with Christianity. You have no vision for the state, for society as a whole.’

Is he right? Does Christianity have a vision for the state or for society as a whole or is Christianity, as my friend implied, so heavenly minded that it is of no earthly good? This difference between Christianity and Islam has often been noted.

Marx and Freud thought that Christianity had a pacifying escapism. Later Communists had been more suspect of its revolutionary implications. Some rulers have condemned it as treasonous while others have found Christians to be useful dupes. In the name of Christ some people have withdrawn into lives of hermits or monasteries or Amish enclaves. In

the name of Christ others have imagined their faith lived out in military crusades or in cleansing purges where those who are theologically wrong are burned to death, or where slavery is abolished, or abortion is opposed.

In the West and in our day, writers wonder about the impact of Christian faith on public life. David Brooks wrote in *The New York Times* wondering if US Christian writers and preachers like David Platt signal a new spirit of responsibility and frugality and repentance for excess. Brooks notes that after times of boom in America, when bust follows, there are always creatures who come in and preach frugality.ⁱ

In the US, intellectuals speculate about the vanishing of Protestants and in the upper echelons of our legal community, politicians speculate on what the effect of the evangelical vote will be on the coming elections. In an increasingly multicultural setting in many countries, politicians wonder about the effect of religious groups on voting patterns. And older Christians simply wonder what has happened. They wonder what they have done in their own lifetimes that have caused things unthinkable in Eisenhower's America or Churchill's and Macmillan's Britain to now be the case.

TV quickly moved from appearing to support families to undermining them instead. Divorce and abortion have moved from being illegal to being

inalienable rights. Births to married couples have become rarer, while illegitimacy and co-habitation, once unacceptable, are now the norm in many communities. Pornography floods our societies, and in our brave new world, it is more acceptable socially and legally for a man to have a husband than for someone to pray publicly in a school in the name of Jesus.

Is my Muslim friend right? Does this show us the problem that there is with Christianity? As Christians, those who recognize Jesus Christ as God Incarnate and who worship Him, what do we do? How does Jesus teach us to think about these matters? Let us consider that as we join Jesus in the last week of His earthly ministry.

JESUS ON THE SCENE

I want to take you to Mark chapter 12 verses 13–17. But because of the seriousness of the topic, I am going to be quoting from all over the Bible to try to help give us a biblical theology in this area. Mark 12 verses 13–17 says:

¹³ Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were amazed at him.

We see, after a ministry around the countryside in Galilee and beyond, that Jesus has now gone south to the capital of Judea, Jerusalem. It is a national

week of religious celebration, their Passover. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims stream into Jerusalem bringing sacrifices. It is a kind of Christmas retail season for the folks of the temple. I mean, this is when all the big sales happen. It is the apex of the year, the zenith. It is into this important context that Jesus has come, raising the people’s expectations and, with that, the potential for trouble.

He enters the city on a Sunday afternoon. We call it the “triumphal entry”. He then goes to the temple, doesn’t say anything and walks back out into the evening. He and His disciples, like most of the pilgrims, would stay outside the city. There weren’t hotels. There wasn’t room in Jerusalem for these thousands of pilgrims, so they would go out to one of the villages where they might have a relative or know someone, and would have arranged to stay there. Jesus and the disciples, each evening of this week would leave the city, walk down the valley, across to the Mount of Olives and stay in the nearby village of Bethesda.

Jesus goes back into Jerusalem on the Monday, and this time He creates a scene in the temple courts. He dramatically interrupts the commerce and He condemns the stewardship of the religious leaders as corrupt.

It is now the next day, Tuesday, which in Mark’s Gospel covers chapter 11 verse 20 through the rest of

chapters 11, 12 and 13. It is a long day of controversy and parables, as the priests were trying to trap Jesus. You see there in chapter 11 verse 27 that Jesus arrives on the Tuesday in the temple courts, these huge precincts outside the temple building itself, which were part of the temple complex. As soon as Jesus arrives a kind of executive committee of the ruling body, the Sanhedrin, publicly ask Jesus for His credentials. They want to know by what authority He had done what He had done the day before.

They were trying to trap Him, but He exposed their corrupt self-interest to the people and then he told the story or the parable you see in chapter 12 verses 1 to 12, in which Jesus clearly implies that God's Son has come, that He is God's Son and that He has come to reassert God's ownership over His people. But in this parable He prophesied that they would reject Him and they would kill Him and they would then in turn be judged by God. And you can see their response, in verse 12. "Then [they] looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away."

VERBAL AMBUSH

But, though they went away, they figured out something else to do. In verse 13—17 it says, "Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, 'Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?' But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. 'Why are you trying to trap me?' he asked. 'Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.' They brought the coin, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. Then Jesus said to them, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' And they were amazed at him."

You see the depth of the opposition that is evident as natural enemies join together. The Pharisees are the pro-populist Jewish party, the party of the people. They don't like the Roman rule. The Herodians are the servants of Herod, the puppet king that Rome put on the throne. They don't do anything together. But here they are. The freedom fighters and the collaborators working together. Now they are a "they". They are sent from the they of verse 12, which is the they of chapter 11 verse 27 (the chief

priests, elders and teachers of the law), and they form this unlikely combination we read of in verse 13 to purposely catch Jesus. This was a premeditated verbal ambush. They conspired to deceive Him with flattery but, as it says in verse 15, “Jesus knew their hypocrisy.” They came in malice to trap this man of truth. The religious game wardens had gone out hunting that day.

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life, seeking as Mark says, to trap Him. They come dragging their bait behind them and throwing it out to Him, “a little question”. They have worked on it. It is a very particular question, meant to glisten and attract this would-be Messiah. Have you ever been asked one of those questions that you didn’t want to answer?

Consider for a moment the dark irony of their mission; lying about the truth to the one who was the truth. Sinning against the holy one who made them in His image to bear His holy image. Seeking to kill the one who would be their only hope eternally. Lying to the truth, ignoring the way, seeking to kill the

TO PAY OR NOT TO PAY?

Here they asked that kind of question to Jesus. It was a good question for their purposes. “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” This is not a kind of “Do you like taxes or not?” question. This is 100 times more emotionally charged than that. When you understand this setting, the tax that is referred to is the Roman imperial tax. Every adult male had to pay it; they used a denarius coin. It was about a day’s wages. They paid it with this.

We actually get our word ‘census’ from the word for this tax. It is how they kept track of the population of the empire. It is how they funded the troops that occupied Jerusalem. One denarius for one male. It was hateful to the Jews. They could not stand this tax. Every single coin like that in circulation was a sign of their subjugation to the Roman Empire. Every single coin proclaimed that Caesar was their Lord now and it even claimed He was God on the coin. They hated that coin. They hated that tax. It was that tax back in AD 6 that had caused the revolt up in Galilee that the Romans had put down. It would be that same tax 60 years later that would cause yet another revolt, in AD 66, that the Romans would put down. Taxes are often associated with revolutions.

A PAGAN STATE IS A LEGITIMATE STATE

The first thing we should note from this is that Christians are good citizens, or at least we should be. We get this from the surprising first half of Jesus' answer there in verse 17 when He says "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's". Now, I say surprising not because those words are surprising to most of us, they're not. Those are some of the most famous words of Jesus. But, I say surprising because at the time He spoke them they were unexpected. They were startling. This rabbi apparently trying to gain popularity in the temple precincts just endorsed using an idolatrous coin to pay a tax of the Roman oppressors. They were shocked at these words that Jesus speaks. He got out of the rhetorical checkmate that these leaders tried to put Him in.

But, too many readers admire Jesus' rhetorical dexterity and miss what it is that He is actually teaching. This is more than just a clever reply. In this short answer, Jesus establishes a biblical theology of government, and He applies it to the new phase in history of God's people that He was beginning. While it is going too far to say that Jesus' statement here established a wall of separation between church and state, or made the state secular; I think

The Pharisees and Herodians were trying to either expose Jesus as a fraud, a pretend Messiah who had no plans to deliver Judea from Roman domination, or as a revolutionary, who was opposed to the tax and therefore liable to the full weight of Roman punishment. That was a very appropriate question to come from this unlikely assortment of pro-Roman Herodians and pro-Jewish Pharisees. It was

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a kind of heads I win, tails you lose question. No way around it. It was very clever. They made Jesus choose between the Romans or the people and whichever one He picks, He loses the other and His mission is sunk. They had done a good job on the question. He would lose by answering this question, either His popularity or His life.

But you know, even more amazing than their question was Jesus' answer. And that is what we want to give most of our time to. What does it mean for us to follow Jesus in this teaching? In what He says here? And does it have anything to do with that objection that my Muslim friend raised so many years ago now? Should Christians have a vision for society, for the state, for politics?

Jesus' affirmation of paying taxes to the Roman government does show that even a pagan state is a legitimate state. That was an amazing thing for Him to say.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE GOOD CITIZENS

I remember once being asked to address the Libertarian Society at Cambridge on why society needs a state. I remember, as I researched and thought about it, I was impressed by what a deeply biblical thing human government is. Human government is not legitimate fundamentally because the government controls the army and the police. You know, "might makes right". Human government is not legitimate because of some social contract made somewhere back in the mythical, mystical mist of time.

Human government is not legitimate fundamentally because of an election – *vox populi vox dei*, the voice of the people is the voice of God.

Human government is not legitimate fundamentally because of a Marxist idea of inevitability, or merely for economic necessity or some psychological need we all have to be controlled.

Let's think for a moment about what the Bible teaches about government, and put Jesus' teaching here in the larger context of what God has revealed.



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