

Romans 13:1-7 & Philippians 3:20-21

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Reign of Christ

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / November 7th, 2021

I loved going to Awana club every week when I was a kid. If you're not familiar with this part of the Christian subculture, Awana is a weekly after-school program where once a week, kids gathered at church to eat snacks, play games, memorize Bible verses, and sing worship songs. And I loved it! One week when I thought I wasn't going to get to go, I had a major meltdown. I memorized so many verses I got my Sparky award and Timothy award. And I can only remember 2-3 verses today.

I'm grateful for my time in Awana and all it taught me. But looking back, there is something I question. But I'm not just picking on Awana. My experience provides a snapshot of a much bigger evangelical tension. At the beginning of every Awana club time, we would line up and parade the American flag, Awana flag, and Bible forward. I felt lucky if I got to hold a flag. The Awana flag code says to raise the national flag higher than the Awana flag.¹ With our hands on our hearts, we recited the pledge of allegiance.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Then we'd pledge allegiance to the Awana flag and the Bible. Maybe we were trying to be like the school system. But I think as part of [this sermon series](#), we need to ask ourselves an uncomfortable question. Is this appropriate? Raising the American flag, or any nation's higher, sends a message, doesn't it?

I walk into churches all the time that display an American flag and a Christian flag on the platform. U.S. flag code says that even in churches, the American flag must be displayed either higher than a church flag, or to its right, a place of "prominence."² What message does that send? Have you ever stopped and looked at a Christian flag? Have you ever noticed its colors? Red, white, and blue. God and country.

Is to be a good Christian to love God and country? I want to ask a question we need to answer, not from our personal preferences, but according to scripture. How are Christians supposed to relate to their country?

God calls us to submit to our government.

Our passage today twice talks about being "subject" to the government and recognizing it as a God-given authority in our lives.

Romans 13:1, 5 (ESV)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. . . . 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

Paul is saying that God institutes every government for our good. This is amazing because Paul didn't write this under democratic rule but under the Roman government, which was more like a dictatorship. After Paul wrote this, Nero came along and burnt Christians at the stake. But still, Paul calls believers to be "subject to the governing authorities."

The Greek word for "subjection" is "hypotasso," which means subjection. To be subject to something is to recognize and abide by its authority. I got pulled over a month after getting my driver's license when I was sixteen. I submitted by getting my driver's license ready and giving it to the officer, recognizing his authority

to ticket me. Thankfully, I only got a warning. I got a ticket in DC when I drove in the HOV lane a month after I'd moved there. I submitted by paying my ticket. If I'd refused to do either, God also gave the government the authority to punish me, or hold me in contempt, to "bear the sword." Submission involves recognizing God-given authority but does not necessarily mean obedience. That's a different Greek word.

Sometimes submission involves obedience, but sometimes submission involves humble and respectful disobedience. Paul showed compliance to Rome by submitting himself to their judgments, yet also calling on his rights and privileges as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:22-29). Paul had to remind the government of its role to protect its citizens, and sometimes we do too. As believers, God calls us to accept the authority he has placed over us in government, which sometimes involves resistance and, other times, compliance.

Romans 13:6-7 (ESV)

For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

One of the best parts of having kids is deducting them on your taxes, right? I don't know anyone who likes paying taxes, but Paul says to pay the government. He doesn't say only to pay them if they use it on defense or education or if taxes are low. Instead, he says to pay what is owed. The government would have used these funds to pay Roman soldiers who abused Jews and Christians in Paul's time. Paying Roman taxes was controversial, more than it is today (Mark 12:13-17). believers go one step further. We respect and honor the government, not because we like Biden or Trump or the next President, but because we recognize what greater authority gives them their local authority. *God calls us to submit to the government.*

The government derives its authority from God's authority.

Let's look back at Romans 13:1-7 again:

- V1. "For there is not authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."
- V2. "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed..."
- V4. "for (the government) is God's servant for your good... For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

Why did Napoleon crown himself instead of the Pope? Because he derived his authority from himself, not from the church. The Bible says God institutes all authorities, good and evil (1 Peter 2:13-16).

Daniel 2:21a (ESV)

He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;

God doesn't just leave kings to do what they want once in office but directs their hearts.

Proverbs 21:1 (ESV)

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;
he turns it wherever he will.

But this is shocking because there have been a lot of bad governments in our world. Did God direct Mao to kill 70 million people? While God may institute governments, he never causes evil but can somehow, mysteriously, work through bad governments to bring about his plan. And so, we as Christians are called by God to submit to government, but that is different than obedience.

Sometimes we obey, like by paying taxes and abiding by laws, but if those laws or commandments ever contradict scripture, we obey God's laws instead of man's. For example, the government permits alcoholism, but while Christians can drink alcohol, we should not become alcoholics. How about much harder examples? The government permits self-defense, but Jesus says to love our enemies. What should we do? The government permits abortions, but scripture values life. What should we do?

When should we submit? When should we obey? And how should we love our country? Should we love God and country? According to scripture, to be a good Christian is to love God and submit to country. But our allegiance must belong to God and God alone.

Our total allegiance must belong to God and his kingdom.

Jesus taught his followers a prayer that reminded them of where their allegiance should be. It goes like this:

Matthew 6:9b-10 (ESV)

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus didn't teach us to pray for the advancement of any earthly kingdom but to pray for the arrival of his Father's kingdom, “Your kingdom come, your will be done!” By praying these words, we are reminded of where our true allegiance must be as believers—with our heavenly Father and his kingdom. When Jesus came preaching, the thing he talked and preached about the most was the kingdom of God. “The phrase ‘kingdom of God’ appears 162 times in the New Testament.”³ The very “gospel” message (gospel means “good news”) is about the kingdom of God.

Mark 1:14-15 (ESV)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

The good news about Jesus is tied directly to the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:1). Jesus doesn't say, “The kingdom of God is coming” or “is almost here,” but “the kingdom of God is at hand!” That means God's rule and reign have arrived! The promised king has arrived, the descendent of Eve come to crush the serpent, and it is God himself (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 9:6-7; Colossians 1:13-14).

When we “repent and believe in the gospel,” we turn from our allegiance to Babylon, whichever Babylon God has placed us in, and we pledge ourselves to king Jesus. We live according to his kingdom ethic, the Sermon on the Mount, and we follow him back into the kingdoms of this world as agents of his heavenly kingdom. Chuck Colson put it this way, “the Christian's goal is not to strive to rule, but to be ruled.”⁴ We don't go grabbing “power over” others to enforce Christ's kingdom, but exerting “power under” others by sacrificing for our neighbors, loving them, and sharing Christ.⁵

Our allegiance must be to Christ and his kingdom above all else. When we mix allegiances with God and country, we get events like the January 6th, 2021 insurrection, where those who claimed to be Christians stormed the U.S. Capitol, even waving a Christian flag as they did it.⁶ This week I watched the HBO documentary about the insurrection, Four Hours at the Capitol. If you watch it, and it's painful to watch, you will see people pray and call on the name of Jesus and wear t-shirts talking about God and country as they commit acts of terror. That's demonic. “What do you get when you mix religion and politics?... Politics.”⁷ “No one can serve two masters”(Matthew 6:24). God or country?

C.S. Lewis warned against mixing extreme “Patriotism” and extreme “Pacifism” with religion because we tend to bend our faith to do the will of our political cause. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote as if a wiser, more experienced demon was writing to his younger protégé about how to entrap a Christian. The older demon writes:

Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the ‘cause’, in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war-effort or of Pacifism. . . . Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man. . . .⁸

Remember, C.S. Lewis is not writing to America but Great Britain. To be defined as people by absolute love of country or hate of country is unbiblical. The country where we are born can be a gift from God, but it must never become an idol. God calls us to submit to the government but recognize where its authority comes from and have ultimate allegiance to him. This is why we as Christians need to go back to a very simple yet radical confession of the early Church.

“Jesus is Lord.”

Have you ever confessed, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior?” That’s what it means to be a Christian, right? But do we understand what we’re confessing when we say that? I’ve heard a pastor says, “Jesus is my leader and forgiver,” which I think is pretty good but doesn’t quite get at the radical nature of these titles. One author writes of the historical context, “Two common titles used for the Roman emperor were lord (kurios) and savior (soter).”⁹ Here’s what Paul says when he uses these titles:

Philippians 3:20-21 (ESV)

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

We underestimate the power of what Paul is saying here. Maybe you’ve heard of the Battle of Appomattox, where the Civil War ended. A battle like that took place outside of Philippi, to whom Paul is writing. Do you remember learning about Brutus assassinating Julius Caesar? “Et tu Brute?” That sparked a civil war between Mark Antony and Octavian against Brutus and Cassius.

Their civil war came to a head outside of the city of Philippi, where Cassius and Brutus lost. Antony and Octavian rewarded the city for their part and made it into a “Roman colony”(Acts 16:12). They likely granted Roman citizenship to many of its people and retired military veterans and their families there. So, Philippi probably had a significant patriotic presence who strongly identified with their Roman heritage.

This is like if we sent out mass-mailers to the area in and around Hanscom Air Force Base, to all the current and retired military, telling all the Christians that they are no longer citizens of America. They are citizens of heaven, and their Commander and Chief, their President, is Jesus.¹⁰ “Christ” means God’s anointed king. Do you mean Jesus is my President every time you say Jesus Christ? To be a dual citizen is to be a citizen of two countries and have all the rights and responsibilities of each. But if what Paul says is correct, our heavenly and earthly citizenships are not equal. One far outweighs and challenges the other. Here’s how Preston Sprinkle, one of my favorite authors explains Paul’s patriotic Roman context:

Lord, savior, son of god, god, peace, justice, and gospel. These were all familiar terms used to praise the Caesars of Rome. When Christians stole these titles and applied them to a Jew who was crucified

as a revolutionary, they were bound to start a fight—especially in a patriotic city like Philippi. Roman military vets, who had sacrificed for the peace of Rome, would be particularly offended.

When Paul hails Jesus as Lord and Savior, we need to hear a faint first-century echo: *Caesar is not.*¹¹

Biden is not. Trump is not. America is not. The Republican and Democratic parties are not. *Jesus is Lord.* This is treason. Our heavenly and earthly citizenships are not equal. As Christians today, people who profess Jesus as Lord, we need to be very careful about how we think of God and our country. I believe a general sense of patriotism can be good, but that something called “Christian nationalism” is sinful. Let me explain:

a. Patriotism – Love of a people and place (not state and power).

Good patriotism helps us love the particular time and place in which God has placed us.¹² It’s good to love your neighbors, your community and appreciate the country God has given you and the freedoms it affords. We express our love for our country, our patriotism, by seeking its shalom. We recognize we live in Babylon, but it’s “our Babylon,” so we love and serve it. Yet loving our nation includes critiquing it when it falters and calling it to God’s vision for justice and flourishing. But patriotic love is different than allegiance to “the state and its power.”¹³ When we begin to exalt in the state and its power and swear our allegiances to it, healthy patriotism turns unhealthy and even idolatrous.

b. Christian Nationalism – My nation is God’s nation.

Christian nationalism sees America (or Great Britain or any nation) not as Babylon but as a second kind of Israel, God’s special and favored Christian nation.¹⁴ But, I do not believe any nation, including America, can be a Christian nation because Christianity is not a set of values or policies. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus has already manifested his kingdom in this world in tiny kingdom “outposts” and “embassies,” called... the church.¹⁵ No nation is the second Israel, except for God’s people, Christ’s bride, the church, which is all people from all times and places who God has saved, both in the Old Testament and New.¹⁶ So, to believe any nation is a Christian nation is to misunderstand Jesus’s kingdom and his Lordship over all nations. Do you hear how radical it is to say...?

“Jesus is Lord.”

But here’s the surprising part. Bruce Riley Ashford puts it like this:

To the extent that we truly do acknowledge Jesus as Lord, we will engage the Caesar before us with compassion, respect, and wisdom, speaking and acting in ways that contribute to the common good. In other words, the more we pledge allegiance to Christ, the better citizens of the United States of America we’ll become.¹⁷

The more we live a kingdom ethic, the more we embody the Sermon on the Mount in our nation, the better citizens of our nation we will be. We will seek the good of others before ourselves. We will care about our communities and follow Jesus into any part of society to love our neighbor there.

Jesus is not like any earthly king. His enthronement wasn’t like Napoleon’s, full of ego and pride. His enthronement did involve a crown, a crown of thorns, and a royal robe of purple as he suffered and bled.¹⁸ His scepter was a spear thrust in his side.¹⁹ He was lifted, high and exalted on a cross, and above him, the state nailed a declaration that he was indeed a king.²⁰ And he did all that not to be instated as Lord of our nation, but Lord of all countries and powers. Jesus has ascended into heaven, sat down at the Father’s right hand, and is now ruling and reigning over all nations, including ours.²¹ Will you come and bend the knee before the king of king, Jesus? And will you confess that “Jesus is Lord” and live like he is Lord? Not Caesar, not the President, not your political party, only him. *Jesus is Lord.*

Benediction – **Jude 24-25** (NIV)

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my sixth sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, the *Reign of Christ*. Here are a few follow-up steps to continue to pray and process:

Study: Take time to reflect on the “kingdom of God.” Go to BibleGateway.com and type “kingdom” into the search bar. Notice all the times it shows up in the Old Testament and New. Read through some of the verses. What themes do you notice? What is the kingdom of God in the New Testament? What surprises you about Jesus’ kingship? How does Jesus’ kingdom challenge the political and social orders of his day?

Listen (sermon): Listen to Pastor Tony Evans preach on “[The Concept of Kingdom Voting](https://youtu.be/Pp52RqtW_XY).” Tony describes how God calls Christians to operate differently, according to the kingdom of God. YouTube: https://youtu.be/Pp52RqtW_XY (Sep 7, 2020; 36 minutes).

Listen (podcast): Listen to Skye Jethani interview retired NFL football player Derwin Gray about the Lord’s Prayer: “[Holy Post Episode 477: Rethinking the Lord's Prayer with Derwin Gray](https://youtu.be/arOGhzIYvbE?t=3012).” The interview starts at 50:12. Derwin and Skye touch on the kingdom of God and many of the same themes from my sermon. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/arOGhzIYvbE?t=3012> (start at 50:12; about a 30-minute interview). The *Holy Post* podcast is my favorite podcast. I listen to it regularly.

Read (intermediate): This is, perhaps, one of my favorite books, and yet also one of the most challenging books I have ever read (and re-read) to our modern 21st century way of thinking about God and country, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* by Preston Sprinkle ([original edition](#), [new edition](#)). Sprinkle does a deep dive into what the Bible says about nations, kingdoms, wars, and our citizenship as Christians. If you want to be challenged, this will do it.

Worship: Listen and enjoy the song: “[Father, Let Your Kingdom Come](#) (featuring *Urban Doxology*, Liz Vice, and Latifah Alattas).” The song is a joyful 5 minutes. Thank God for his kingdom and pray his kingdom come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom of God is a big topic, and trying to live in light of it in our modern 21st century can feel very challenging. Let’s talk about it more at next week’s Christian education class.

With love,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

P.S. If there was something in my sermon that struck a nerve, and you’d like to push back or talk more privately, my door is always open. I also invite you to bring your opinions, even strong ones, to our Christian Education hour so we can process them as the church body.

Sermon Slides

See this week’s [sermon on our website](#).

Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small group coming soon.

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Endnotes

1. “Flag Ceremony,” Awana Clubs International, 2008, accessed November 6, 2021 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57fea07646c3c4ab503eaa95/t/591a339a1e5b6cd20966d87b/1494889370226/FlagCeremony.pdf>. “Flag bearers face each other, holding the Awana flag lower than the national flag.”
2. “Displaying the Falg with other Flags,” United States Flag Store, published 2009, accessed October 28, 2021 <https://www.united-states-flag.com/displaying-flags.html>.
3. Eugene Cho, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: A Christian’s Guide to Engaging Politics* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2020), 105, Kindle.
4. Charles Colson, *God and Government: An Insider’s View on the Boundaries Between Faith & Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), chap. 6, Kindle.
5. Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 14, 31, Kindle. Boyd has a different perspective than I do on how to interact with Government, but I like his power over vs. power under conception.
6. Robert P. Jones, “Taking the white Christian nationalist symbols at the Capitol riot seriously,” Religion News Services, published January 7, 2021, accessed October 28, 2021 <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/07/taking-the-white-christian-nationalist-symbols-at-the-capitol-riot-seriously/>.
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8. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1942) 34-35, Kindle.
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12. Paul D. Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?” Christianity Today, February 3, 2021, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>.
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14. Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014) 115, Kindle.
 15. Jonathan Leeman, *How The Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020) 144, Kindle.
 16. Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:29, 6:16.
 17. Bruce Riley Ashford, *Letters to An American Christian* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2018) chap. 3, Kindle.
 18. Jon Collins and Tim Mackie, "Gospel of The Kingdom," YouTube, February 19, 2016, accessed February 6, 2021, <https://youtu.be/xmFPS0f-kzs>. See also John 19:2.
 19. John 19:34.
 20. Isaiah 52:13; John 19:19.
 21. Psalm 110:1; Mark 14:62; Acts 1:3; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2.