
Christian Engagement in Societal Issues

DARRELL DELANEY

It is an understatement to say that for Christians there is a tension between complacency and courage in our interactions with governing authorities. When it comes to the government, do we go along to get along, or confront and replace? Today on *Groundwork*, we delve into the complexities of Christian engagement in societal issues; discover practical insights and biblical wisdom that empower you to stand for righteousness while navigating the intricacies of governmental authority. Join us as we invite you to actively engage and embrace your role in shaping a more just and God-honoring society, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in episode two of our three-part series on Christians in society, where we delve into some complexities of faith in a world with diverse cultures, ideologies, and authorities. In the first episode, we talked about how to disagree without being disagreeable, and how do you handle conflicts when people slander and when people talk against you, and how do you respond? In this episode today, we are going to talk about how to engage government authority.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This whole series is about trying to figure out how to be a Christian, how to be Christlike; in fact, the main theme of the third program in this series...the next one after this program...will be Christlikeness; and the need to try to be Christlike in all areas; and particularly, in this one now, just over against the wider society in general, how do we view culture? We are going to talk about that here, but then also, as part of that culture, how do we regard the governing authorities? What is the Church's relationship...the individual believer's relationship...to the powers that be?

But to get us going on the cultural question first, Darrell, we can turn to the work of a very influential 20th Century theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr.

DARRELL DELANEY

Before we jump into Reinhold, I just want to make sure that we acknowledge the fact that there are some people who have a lot of anxiety around this. There are some people who don't know how to navigate it. They are overwhelmed; they are like, there are too many rules; there are too many clauses; there are too many things to understand; and some would take the disengaged position, where they are like: I don't want to deal with it; I will just let it happen; and there are others who are so actively involved, and they get overwhelmed. So, the fears and anxieties are not unfounded; and the good news is, the Bible has a way to acknowledge tensions. The Lord in his wisdom has given theologians and people who think very carefully about it; enter Reinhold Niebuhr, and he has a book called *Christ & Culture*, and he outlines five distinct views on how Christians should relate to culture and authority; and there are certain churches and denominations who have aligned themselves under different stances, and I would like to just unpack some of those stances.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there are five of them. We cannot spend a lot of time on any of them, but the first one is Christ *against* culture; and this is the one that sort of says there is such a fundamental divide between the Church, let's say, the Christian community, and the wider world that basically the only way to keep yourself pure is to withdraw—to not engage the culture at all—to set yourself apart. So, we can think of Mennonite, Amish traditions, Anabaptist groups that literally reject the aspects of modern life, like, you know, electricity or cars and the like. There is such a divide, that they take very seriously the call: Come out from among them and be ye separate. That is sort of the leading verse for Christ *against* culture; but then, I don't know if it is the opposite, Darrell, but then the next one is Christ *of* culture.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and Christ of culture says: Oh, well; we can actually integrate some of the Christian values with some of the cultural norms that are happening right now; and so, they find a common ground within the existing structures and cultures. You know, you have a lot of mainline Protestant denominations that go along with this one, even the Episcopal Church and United Methodist Church, that embrace elements of society and social advocacy for example: They want to promote dialogue with governing authority; so they found a way...I don't know if it is a happy medium or not...I do know that they are interested in being involved in society and not running away from it or being away from it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; a third model for Niebuhr: Christ *above* culture; and this one...in my opinion, there is partial truth in all five of these, by the way...but this really recognizes the transcendence of Christ; his Lordship over everything; he is superior to any secular authorities that are out there; and so, what we need to do in our lives is just align with Christ, while we are *in* the culture, but we answer to a higher power, basically, right? Christ is above culture. There is another where Niebuhr had Christ and culture in *paradox*. There are tensions between our spiritual ideals and the realities of the world, but we try to navigate those tensions; we try to keep those in creative tension. We try to uphold biblical principles while also engaging in civic responsibilities. We recognize that they are two very, very different realms—different spheres—we are going to talk about later in this program from Abraham Kuyper. So, that is that one; and there is a fifth one, finally.

DARRELL DELANEY

Christ *transforming* culture, which has an optimistic look on cultural engagement; and there is potential for transformation through Christian influence that can happen in the culture. So, we are called to be agents of transformation—we are called to be ambassadors for Christ; and we can actually involve ourselves and allow God to use us as lights in dark areas and dark places. There are different views. These are five of the different views that Niebuhr had. What is the Christian supposed to make out of all of this is that we need a lot of discernment and a lot of scripture to teach us; and Romans actually speaks to how we are supposed to interact with culture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Romans 13:1-7; very interesting passage. We will just read it in a minute and then we will comment on it. Paul writes to the Christians living in Rome: Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended*.⁴For the one in authority is God's servant (the Greek word there is *diakonos*—God's servant—God's *deacon*) for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, (then it goes on to say, again, they are God's servants).⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe them taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

So, very, very interesting words there in Romans 13; and I think, Darrell, they are the more interesting when we remember who were the governing authorities Paul was talking about here? Caesar!

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, who had no respect for God, who thought he *was* God. That makes this even more challenging.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it does, because it says that God has established that authority and God is the one who put that authority in place; and God is giving us the way to respond in that situation. It also picks up like that in 1 Peter Chapter 2, where it says: ¹³Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do what is right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing good, you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Now, I know we don't have any emperors right now, but I mean, the president, king, prime minister, senator...a governing official can also be inserted there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, for both Paul and Peter, given that they were talking about Roman authorities, who actively persecuted the Church, who were godless; it was almost a cult...a pagan cult...the whole Roman government; it is quite remarkable that they still say: Honor those people. We are not talking about just some popularly elected president or prime minister who is, you know, kind of a nice person and...no; we are talking about a very, very harsh regime of the Roman Empire; and even so, do what we said in the previous program...the first program in this series, from Peter...we were looking at 1 Peter 3...to be polite; be civil; be respectful. You need to regard the authorities as ultimately gaining their authority from God. But scripture has more to say on this. We are going to delve into that...dig into that in a minute; so, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and in this segment, we have been talking about how to dig into the complexities of how to engage the government and society, knowing that as believers, we don't always agree with everything that is happening; and basically, you brought out a very interesting thing in the last segment, Scott, about how Peter and Paul are telling the disciples and every Christian to honor the government, even though Caesar and the emperor are trying to eliminate Christians and Christianity; and it shows the concept that, oh, there are some things that are *not* perfect about the government. It can be tainted and it can be... Because of total depravity, we know that everything humans do is tainted with sin; and so, we know that there is a complexity there where we are called to honor God under these structures that he has established, but they have been tainted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Everybody; there is no one righteous, not even one, Paul wrote in Romans Chapter 3. All turn away. So, we were called...as we just saw in the previous part of this program...we are definitely called to honor the emperor, honor the president, honor the prime minister, honor the governing authorities as God's—*diakonos*—God's servant; but that doesn't mean we are blind. So, now we are going to nuance that a little bit, so we are going to... We already established that; that should be our baseline; however, there are limits, right? Acts 5:29: When the governing authorities told the disciples...the apostles...to be quiet, Peter and the apostles answered: "We must obey God rather than people." That is true. Now, a lot of the time in our lives, Darrell, I think we can honor God and the ruling authorities at the same time, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You don't have to agree with every governmental policy to faithfully pay your taxes. You don't have to always like whoever is the president or the prime minister at any given moment, but you can still respect them; but then, there are lines; and if you are called to renounce your faith, if you are called upon to, by law, do something you regard as immoral, you have to engage in...and we will talk about this a little bit later...from Martin Luther King, Jr...some civil disobedience. But we also want to talk a little bit, Darrell, about how we regard the government, and maybe we can get a little help there from the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, Abraham Kuyper has this notion called *sphere sovereignty*, and he talks about how God has established these distinct spheres of authority; and government is one of those spheres. I think the notion of that comes from Psalm 24:1, where we read: The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ²for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

The idea that these things were not originally designed to be tainted and marred by sin, but God had an order to things that he wanted to establish. Government is one of those sectors, if you will; and God will be honored in those places, even though there is some taintedness now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The other thing that I think we really can draw from Abraham Kuyper and his sphere sovereignty...so, you know, there are lots of different spheres...I cannot remember how many, but there is the sphere of the Church; the Church is its own sphere. There is the governmental sphere, and education sphere. There are lots of different, you know...business sphere. The other thing that Kuyper wants us to remember that we often forget is that you don't want to treat the government like it is supposed to be the Church. You don't expect the government to do the work of the Church; and you don't expect the Church to do the work of the government. Keep those things straight...keep those things separate...because if you...Kuyper, you know, would warn if you mess those up, if you confuse your spheres, then you are going to ask something of somebody that isn't really what God is calling them to do. But again, we do recognize the Church is a separate sphere from the government, but what if the government calls on us to do something bad? What if the government sanctions policies that show favoritism or that prop up things that stratify people into various realms of worthlessness or worthiness; then what?

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that you brought up a very interesting point, and it is that, I think, some of the people today are having challenges because they are expecting the government to be their spiritual and moral authority. They are expecting the president to be their spiritual and moral authority. Well, we know that that is not what it is called to do, based on this teaching and based on what God has established; and so, some people are hurt and frustrated and let down when the character of people breaks down; but God did say that it would...you know, people would let you down in this way because that is not the standard that they are called to in certain spheres; and they have shown favoritism, which is what James 2 talks about, we are not supposed to do. He says:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there," or "Sit on the floor at my feet," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, what happens if whole societies, sanctioned maybe by the governing authorities, does this kind of stratifying of people; treats the rich in a different way than they treat the poor; treat white people differently than they treat black people or brown people? Well, then I think we are back to what Peter said in Acts 5:29. We have to obey God rather than people. So, sometimes part of our honoring of the governing authorities is calling to be their better selves, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here we can think of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement...civil disobedience...that was motivated to call the whole country...to call the government of the country...to be a better self, and to treat all people with justice and righteousness and fairness. Interestingly, though, Darrell, since in the previous program we really emphasized what we called Christian civility...what theologian Richard Mouw calls Christian civility...to be polite, to be respectful. We saw that in a couple passages in this program as well. Martin Luther King said: We resist, but we do it peacefully.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We don't become like the people we are resisting, because then we have been defeated. So, you can resist; you can stand up; you can call the government to a better self; and you do that, even, in Christlike ways.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is true; and you know, Dr. King has been known to say that an unjust law is no law at all; and so, you know, being able to navigate that in a situation that civil disobedience demonstrates...that highlights: Hey, we are holding you accountable to the standard that you said that you would do. We also see in scripture there are places like in Hebrews 11, when it talks about Moses, how he challenged the unjust authority of the Egyptian pharaoh, and we see the Israelites being liberated from slavery there; and we see that even though the governing authorities were established by God, they also have been tainted by sin; we can find hope, knowing that God has used these types of movements to abolish slavery and things like that. So, God can still do transformative, powerful things in the light of human condition and affairs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. As believers, when we know that we are standing up for deeply biblical principles, things that honor the image of God in every person...every person...not just the ones we like or look like us or dress like us...we see the image of God deep in all people, even though some people will say: You are not respecting the governing authorities when you call on them to change. Well, no; we actually are, in respectful ways, calling for transformation in culture, which is one of the things we looked at earlier from also Reinhold Niebuhr; but, as we close out this program in just a minute, we are going to look for some actionable insights, we might call them, rooted in scripture. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, in this final segment of this second episode in our three-part series on Christians in society, we have been thinking specifically about Christians interacting with governmental

authority, but we can think of some practical steps: How do we do this? What is our posture? And we have some ideas.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, first I think that we need to understand that God is calling us to have active participation in civic duties. We are called to vote, we are called to engage with representatives, we are called to write the letter to the town hall, we are called to go to the town hall meeting, we are called to advocate for justice, because these are tools that influence society; and a lot of people are kind of disengaged, thinking: Oh, well; I don't think I should vote; or: I don't think it is going to matter. But I think if we trust the Lord in the process, and we do our due diligence, then we can move the needle, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, somehow when you were just talking there just now, I was reminded of that famous verse in Jeremiah, right? Where the people are in captivity; they are in Babylon. You talk about people who are tended to disengage, like: I am not going to do... What did Jeremiah say...what did the Lord say through Jeremiah? Pray for the prosperity...

DARRELL DELANEY

Prosperity in the city...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; pray for the city, because if it does well, you do, too. Or you are going to saw off the branch you are sitting on if you just refuse to engage. So, yes; that is the first thing I think we can say: Vote, participate, dialogue with people who are in authority. Some Christians are called to actually *have* a role as a governing authority. They feel called to Congress...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They feel called to Parliament. Maybe they feel called to run for president or mayor or be on a township supervisor board. That, too, because we view...as we said earlier from Romans 13...because we view the governing authorities as God's deacon...as God's servant...certainly, when Christian people themselves are in positions of power, they can serve God in that way; recognizing that the government is not the Church, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have to keep that Kyperian sphere sovereignty stuff straight, but you can certainly participate. The second thing: Speak truth to power.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Christians are called to be the prophetic voice. We bring words from the Lord to the society that we live in; and there are two types of prophecy. One is forthtell...f-o-r-t-h...that means that we are talking to the generation in which we are called to live in, in the context, the *Sitz im Leben** if you will...the context in which we are living; and so, we are called to say: Hey, listen; this is God's standard; this is how much we have fallen short from it; and we also need to make sure that they don't contradict the biblical principles that we are called to. We also know that we can voice our concerns with courage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you know, when you think about speaking truth to power, I flash back to Mother Teresa of Calcutta; this diminutive nun, just this little, little person, you know, and how she one time, I think, came to the United States Congress, gave an address to the joint session of Congress, and just boldly called on people to be pro-life; you know, to protect innocent life. So, here is this little, little lady...a little nun from Calcutta, India, speaking truth to power and being courageous in doing it; and we are all called to do that. It is sort of like, you know, even though Israel was a different kind of society than any society anybody lives in now, you know, Nathan the prophet coming to King David to just confront him about that bad business with Bathsheba and Uriah. A dangerous thing to do, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is dangerous to speak truth to power, but it is something we are called to do.

DARRELL DELANEY

Additionally, Paul speaks to Caesar in Acts 25. He is like, wait a minute; I am a Roman citizen; I have rights here. So, I am going to use the legal system to actually address these things, and ensure fair treatment and make sure injustice is held accountable. I think also thoroughly too, we must use discernment and prayerful engagement, because we don't always know what we should do, Scott. I just want to be honest. I don't always know who I should vote for; I don't know how I should understand this policy; I don't know if it is going to benefit us, or if it is not going to benefit us; and I have to pray through and ask God to help. So, I mean, Proverbs 3:5, 6 says it very clearly: If you trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding and in all your ways acknowledge him, he will make your paths straight. And so, you have to discern. You cannot just blindly do everything. You actually need to actually take some time and pray through and say: God, show us the way; and he will.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, yes; sometimes things are pretty cut and dried, black and white. You kind of have a really firm sense of what is right; but a lot of times, we are in the muddled middle of various issues, and we have to ask God to give us wisdom and discernment; and I think also, Darrell, particularly in this deeply, deeply divided, partisan political time in particularly the United States, I think Christians also need to give each other a break; cut each other some slack; I am doing my best here; trying to discern who to vote for; trying to discern how to say the right thing; so, let's give each other a little bit of a generosity of spirit as we discern these things together.

As we do that, the last thing we will say for this program: Display endurance and hope to a watching world. As we engage with society, as we engage with the government, as we submit to the government, as we encourage the government, even when we have to challenge the government, we do it with endurance and hope, knowing that God's got this thing. The ultimate vision for what is going to happen; the ultimate governance of the world; the ultimate coming of all justice and righteousness is what we see at the end of the Bible. Revelation 21: [Then] I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death."

That is a reminder, Darrell, that even now, with other governing authorities in place, God's got this thing. Jesus is on the throne; and that is our ultimate hope; and that is what we need to show the world.

DARRELL DELANEY

And as we engage with society and governing authorities, we can actively participate, speak truth to power, exercise discernment, maintain endurance and hope in God and his sovereignty. When we embody those Christlike virtues with wisdom, we show the world who Christ is, and we effectively represent him. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we examine biblical wisdom for the relationship between the Christian Church and political power; and of the all-importance of Christlikeness.

Connect with us now at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information and to find more resources to encourage your faith. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee.

***Correction:** In the audio of this episode, host Scott Hoezee misreads Romans 13:3 and says “you won’t be condemned,” when the text actually says “will be commended.”

Note: *Sitz im Leben* is a German phrase often used in Biblical criticism which is roughly translated as “setting or situation in life.”

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/christian-engagement-in-societal-issues>

Printed on December 22, 2024