
Justice & Politics

DAVE BAST

The Christian understanding of justice is not only about right and wrong, or fair consequences, it is also about transformation and reflecting God's kingdom here on earth. As Christians, how do we apply this idea of justice as transformation to our involvement in government and politics? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, I was at a fundraiser a few weeks ago for a Christian who is running for state office, and he shared with us who were there his values, something of his vision for serving in government; and I was just impressed again as I have been in the past with Christians who are willing to take that plunge into the political world and seek to live out their faith in politics.

DAVE BAST

Well, there are a lot of them taking the plunge right now, as we are in another election cycle, and it is a real anti-incumbent mood. I don't know that it has ever been quite so hostile toward government and toward politicians and those who are involved. There is a real sense of throw them all out, you know; kind of a dissatisfaction. It is difficult to even attract good people to run for office, given what it involves.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is; and you know, as Christians we have often had such mixed feelings about politics and government. You have Christians on one side that basically say: hey, don't even get involved.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

There are other people who basically see government as a way of advancing a very distinct Christian agenda. You know, trying to find where we move appropriately as Christians in the world of government I think is a big challenge.

DAVE BAST

Well, what does the Bible say about government? That is where we want to start, as usual, and try to explore what scriptural attitudes are.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, you know, Romans 13 is really the classic passage about the relationship of a Christian to the political world, and let me just share the first few verses of that chapter.

¹Let every person (says Paul) be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval. ⁴For he is God's servant for your good; but if you do wrong be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience; (and then Paul says) ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay 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.

DAVE BAST

So, you cannot have a much higher or more positive view of government than that from Romans 13. Paul says more than once that those who rule us are God's servants...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, they are ministers of God. In fact, the great reformer, John Calvin, said that government service was as high or higher a form of ministry as service in the Church.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you read a passage like that and it is clear that government is not an institution that has been caused by the fall into sin. It would be here even if the world had never fallen into corruption, because we need some institution that is going to tell us where to lay out the roads, and where we are going to build a school. Government is just simply part of what it means to live in community.

DAVE BAST

It is one way that God rules the world – rules human society; that is what he means by saying they are servants or agents of God; and therefore, we have certain duties as Christians toward government. One is obedience, honor, respect, and even paying taxes he says. You know...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The government is not stealing our money when it taxes us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; literally it says in the text: Pay back to the government. The idea is you have received something from the government for the taxes that you have paid; but you know, you look at that passage, Dave, and it is so positive about government. It basically, I think, almost presents an ideal case, because, well, we are going through times when people are protesting things even here in this country – in America; and government is not always perceived in such a positive light.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is a reason why it is not so easy to just apply the Bible to politics. Let me read another passage from another Chapter 13, and this is from the book of Revelation in the New Testament – Revelation 13: ¹...and I saw a beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads with ten diadems on its horns, and blasphemous names on its heads... ⁵and the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority... ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name... ⁷and it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

Now, that is a highly visual, symbolic picture of government...

BOB HEERSPINK

Of government.

DAVE BAST

The same government, in fact... that is the Roman Empire!

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the government Paul is talking about in Romans Chapter 13.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; so what is the deal? Which is it? Is it this God-given authority and servant or is it this blasphemous monster that makes war on the people of God; and which must be resisted, by the way.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right...

DAVE BAST

That is the key.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if you think about the government as God's servant, here is an example in Revelation 13, where John is saying: No longer does government see itself in that role. It has gotten out of control.

DAVE BAST

Right; you ask what is different here. It is a different time. Paul is writing probably in the mid 50s, John perhaps around 90 AD, maybe even the mid 90s; so 40 years have elapsed between these two passages; and the key thing that has changed is that the Church has grown to such an extent that it is no longer seen to be part of Judaism. This is important to understand in the historical context. The first Christians were simply understood to be a subset of Judaism and Jews were allowed to practice their religion in the Roman Empire; but when it became clear that Christianity was a different sort of faith, and it was primarily gentile, then it was seen as a threat by Rome; and so the subsequent emperors later began to conduct fierce persecution against the Christian faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; the Church found itself in a situation where government was opposing their very commitment to Christ. You know, this situation of how are Christians to deal with government...we really need to think through that, I think, practically. I think we would have to say that today government isn't perfect; nothing is perfect on this side of eternity. We would say that most of the governments around the world are not to the stage of the Roman Empire. How do we negotiate our way in the middle as Christians? That is what we really want to talk about next on this program. We have someone who is going to be joining us, Dr. Douglas Koopman, from Calvin College, and he is going to be sharing some insights as to how to live out our lives obediently as Christians in the political realm.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. We have been talking about what it means to bring our Christian faith into the realm of politics. How do we approach our role in government when actually government can, as we saw from scripture, be both God's servant, and it can become a beast. How do we find our way in the world today

in terms of responding appropriately as God's people?

DAVE BAST

And we have a guest with us today who is going to help us explore those issues. It is Dr. Doug Koopman, who is a graduate of Hope College and Wesley Seminary, and also the Catholic University of America. Dr. Koopman spent 15 years in Washington as a congressional staffer and aide, and since 1995 he has been Professor of Political Science at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Welcome, Doug, to the program.

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Well, thanks for having me, Dave. I really appreciate being here.

DAVE BAST

We are wrestling with a Christian view of the political system, and we have seen that it is not so easy to take the Bible and just apply it directly to our governments, whatever kind of country or system that we are part of. How do you handle that issue? How do you read the Bible and apply it to politics as a Christian?

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Well, I do think it is good that we are in a series about justice, because I think justice is the fundamental thing that people who work in the political system have to think about; and also people who choose our political leaders, which is who most of us are. We are not actively involved in the system, but we are choosing leaders; and I think the right question to ask is how does politics contribute to justice in society? What does it do to help social justice happen in society and what does it somehow prevent doing? So in some sense, government is the place that allows individuals to be just individuals or institutions and families and churches and schools to be just in that world, in that sphere in which they are active. Sometimes that is a more active role for politics and sometimes it is a more passive role for politics, partly depending on the issue, partly depending on what country you are in; so it is hard to draw very quickly day-to-day guidelines from a Bible that is within one cultural context; and even though it applies to all of us today in all circumstances, to make that translation is pretty hard – it is quite difficult.

BOB HEERSPINK

As Christians we have really disagreed sometimes about how involved we should be in politics even. You know, the Anabaptist tradition saying: Well, let's keep our distance; and then, of course, on the other side there has been a history of state churches in some countries. What is the role – what is the middle ground for us to walk as Christians?

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Yes, I do think the Bible does apply to thinking about political issues, and what I look at, I look at Romans 13, the description by Paul about what government is created for; for order and for the good; but also I think a very fruitful way to look at it is how the prophets in the Old Testament, who are connected to the king of Israel, usually one of the kings at various times in Israel's history, and what do they critique about what the king is doing and what is happening in the country?

DAVE BAST

Isn't that a problem, though, given that Israel was a theocracy? They were the people of God. Can we just, one-to-one, sort of apply what is said to a godly king or an ungodly king to our situation, where we really have secular states?

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Right; well, some of it you can't because in a theocracy you are enforcing not only the laws of the church – the religious laws – but you are also trying to enforce things about general, common public life or political life or social life. Are you taking care of the poor? Are you taking care of the visitor or the stranger in your midst? And so there is a little bit of care involved in this; but in a secular society clearly you do have interests, or a multi-religious society... I think of America as more multi-religious than secular... There are

common themes: That you care for people on the margin; are people on the margin being cared for? Is justice being done in interpersonal relations? Is there a peace in the nation and across nations? Those are the goals, and those are goals whether they are particularly Jewish or particularly Christian or not. So there is some care in reading through the prophets' critique of what the kings do; but there are some common goods and goods that a multi-religious or secular society should follow that the prophets usefully talk about.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, there is a prophetic role, you are saying, for Christians as we stand over against the political issues that we face?

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Yes; I do think a fundamental role of people of faith, or one of the major roles, is to be prophetic. Christians acknowledge that we are not perfect. We acknowledge that we have standards to which we do not quite always live up; and institutionally I do think it is the role of the Church to say: hey, we are a good nation, or we are a good state; but this is where we are not quite measuring up to a particular standard that I as a person of faith – and that prophetic role or that pointing out where we are not quite perfect is a role of people of faith in churches; I do think so.

DAVE BAST

One of the things I struggle with a little bit is the increasing secularism in our society as a whole; and sort of the drive to eliminate references to God, even; let alone arguments from our theological convictions; and I just wonder how long it is possible even to appeal to a common vision of justice – of righteousness – in society? Can we argue from our belief in God as Christians? Can we do that in a multi-religious society, as you termed it, or do we have to kind of back off and just try to appeal to reason or some other standard?

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Should we be explicitly religious when we make arguments in the public square, say in the United States of America or Canada or other countries? Certain people of faith disagree on this, but I think people are religious. Everyone is religious, consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, in that we all have a view of what the world looks like, what true reality is; and we would be denying who we are if we... not only set aside our faith.

DAVE BAST

Right; not only who *we* are, but who *God* is...

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Who God is.

DAVE BAST

I mean, one thing that strikes me is how can we pretend that there is no God? It is not only who we are, but God is real; and to leave him out of the equation somehow, or not mention him strikes me as being absurd...

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Yes, our fundamental belief about: Is there order to the world? Is it headed somewhere? Is there eternal life? Is there a direction to creation? Yes, these are fundamental arguments that people who call themselves secular, they make assumptions about that, too; and they are to some extent being dishonest if they say: No, let's just talk about rationalism. Well, we argue with rational means based on these presuppositions, which are fundamentally religious, and people of the Christian faith and biblical faiths are in that way more intellectually honest in saying: hey, my faith tells me that reality is like this, and that is my basis for political involvement. I think that is the honest way.

BOB HEERSPINK

As we look at political issues, we cannot help but address who we are as human beings, and our relationship and our responsibility for other people. It strikes me that in the political world today there is so much individualism afoot that the concept of the common good is often lost; and that to me seems to be a very biblical concept; that we are our brother's keeper and that we are responsible for those around us.

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Yes; I think the fundamental truth of the Bible is that we are not lone individuals. I mean, from the creation story in Genesis God creates Adam and says: It is not good that man be alone; that he be with Eve in a relationship; and also Jesus – the stories of Jesus – the phenomenal thing about, I think, when you read Jesus in the Gospels is that he is always bringing people from the fringe of the crowd into the center. He pulls Zacchaeus in; he pulls different people in to the center. He is including people at the margin into the conversation about what the kingdom of God is like. We are not isolated individuals. The strange thing about the United States of America is, a lot of our public language is about individualism, but we live in community – we live in our family, we live in our church, we live in our neighborhood; and we identify ourselves by to what we are connected: We are a graduate of a particular college; we are a fan of a particular sports team; or we buy a particular type of automobile: we are Chevy fans or Honda fans. We are not isolated individuals. Our political language is largely individualistic, and so we are tempted a little bit to be too libertarian; but we live our lives connected to other people, and that is what gives meaning to our lives.

DAVE BAST

And there is a communal sense of justice, too, that we are obligated for. That struck me. I was reading something recently; you know, some people argue: Well, don't blame me for America's misdeeds because I didn't do that; but yet, we want to take pride in America's great deeds, too, so we feel patriotism; and we somehow feel connected to the Revolution heroes and the Civil War heroes, but we don't want to take responsibility for some of the bad things.

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Right; you know, it is a natural tendency, but we are connected to all of that. As Americans, we are connected to the very fine things, and America is a wonderful nation, and Western culture is a good culture, but we are also connected to the negative parts of that as well, and the temptation is always to affiliate ourselves with the good and not be responsible for the bad, but we really should not do that.

BOB HEERSPINK

So Doug, as we are coming in for a landing – we don't have too much time left – just to give our listeners and to give us a perspective on: Okay, what can we do as Christians? What practically can we do to engage in our Western culture political issues from a Christian point of view?

DAVE BAST

The duties of a Christian citizen, let's say.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

Well, I think to study your nation, your state, your local... just to understand the social and political culture where you are, because American political culture is different than Canadian and it is different from other countries. American political culture is very localized, and it relies a lot on voluntary associations and non-profits...to understand that. So, to educate yourself about where you are living in the world and locally; but I do think honestly prayer and discernment. Most of us are choosing leaders, and I think those leaders have to be wise, they have to be broadly experienced, and people of integrity and honesty; to not over-promise what politics can bring, but also not to despair that politics can bring nothing; and to be able to discern... we have

so many choices in elections in Western democracies...to discern who to support. It is a very difficult thing to do, and we have to bring both study and prayer to that; and I think a personal connection. We are in a highly connected world, and just to let people in public office...connect to them and let them know that you are praying for them and concerned about them and supportive of them as people in a difficult job. I think those are very important things: To study in prayer and connection.

BOB HEERSPINK

And to really, I would imagine, engage the system, because there are so many people who just walk away from it. They don't know who the candidates are, the issues are; they will not vote.

DOUGLAS KOOPMAN

It is a very important system. Our tradition supports public engagement and involvement. It is confusing, but a lot of other systems are confusing, too; but just to hang in there and persevere because it does do important things to bring justice broadly in society.

DAVE BAST

Dr. Douglas Koopman, thank you for joining us, helping us to dig into this issue. In a moment we will be back to wrap it up.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So today we have been talking about justice and politics and the role of government and our Christian attitude toward it based on the Bible. It is God's servant when it is doing right, but government can also turn into a kind of monster if it sort of takes the place of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, Dave, as I think about what it really means to be a Christian in politics, it really strikes me that we have to think of politics as bigger than just government; and that would suggest that we have roles as Christians, even if we don't serve in government office.

DAVE BAST

Well, I took that away from our conversation with Doug Koopman. Toward the end he mentioned the fact that politics also includes the voluntary associations. It is on a local level that is maybe most important, where we can plug in as Christians. Often we are only involved in our churches.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

I mean, I am guilty of this myself.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; yes, we so focus in on our Christian organizations, getting involved with other Christians, that sometimes we really leave the broader society issues – we leave government involvement – to other people.

DAVE BAST

Politics is ultimately about the good of our communities, and whether that is a national community or for most of us more importantly even, the local community; and that is where we need to plug in our Christian witness, our Christian work, and our Christian convictions.

BOB HEERSPINK

We need to have the courage to recognize as Christians we have a lot to say about our communal life, in our own neighborhoods, in our own cities...

DAVE BAST

So, I guess our point is, get involved...

BOB HEERSPINK

Get involved.

DAVE BAST

And vote wisely as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

But we would like to know what you think because listeners like you are what make *Groundwork* what it is. So we would love to hear from you, to interact with you. You can do that by visiting our website: groundworkonline.com. Let us know what you think.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-politics>

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