

## The Church and Politics Webinar (May 8, 2024)

---

Hello friends! Thank you for joining us today on our fifth webinar on The Church and Politics. So far, we've had Scott Reavely kick us off in January, Josh Lane in February, Todd Miles in March, and Josh Butler in April last month. Next month, Scott Reavely will return, and we will wrap up our conversations about The Church and Politics. I hope and pray that you have been better educated, encouraged, and equipped to have these conversations in your church.

Today, it's my turn to share with you what I've been learning. I hope and pray that what I say today will assist you on your personal and pastoral journey towards November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024—election day!

Friends, the 2016 and 2020 political seasons were very divisive for churches. The good news is that we're not the only Christians who have lived through a politically contentious season, and I believe we can learn from those who have gone before us and how they responded to such division.

We don't often think of this, but C.S. Lewis wrote during a politically contentious time. During much of his writing, his country was involved in a Great War with Germany, and the challenging issue for the Church of England was Great Britain's involvement in the war. Many were for the war, but some were not. Some saw it as a "holy war," and others were against it.

The pacifists believed that no Christian should ever support a war, and the others thought they had to fight to stop Hitler's advancing troops. When Lewis wrote, his biggest concern wasn't which side Christians would fall on, but whichever side they fell on would become the main focus of their lives. In his great book, *The Screwtape Letters*, his main concern was that Christians would actually trade in their faith for their political viewpoint.

For those who haven't read it, *The Screwtape Letters* is a collection of letters written from an older demon, Screwtape, to a younger demon in training, Wormwood. Each letter Screwtape wrote illustrated a way that our dark enemy tries to keep people from following Christ and, if they do follow Christ, to get us off track and make us ineffective in our walk.

In the seventh letter, Screwtape writes these words about war and which side he should try to steer his subject towards: *"Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. 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 favor of the British war-effort or of Pacifism."* – C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

I quote this because Lewis knew that a Christian could actually abandon their faith by pursuing politics. Along the way, Politics becomes more important than Jesus. When politics becomes the most important part of our faith, then Jesus, the church, and the Bible become mere tools to advance one's political viewpoint. This is how a Christian can leave Jesus for something less, for something else.

When we travel back in time to the world at the time of Jesus, we see that they had similar struggles in politics to those we have today. From the moment that the Jewish people moved back into their land after living in exile in Babylon, they attempted to regain their former glory



**SLIDE: *The Sadducees*** were supporters of the status quo and favorable to the Romans. They were the priests who ran the Temple and were wealthy and aristocratic. They dominated the Sanhedrin, lived Hellenistic lifestyles, and received Roman political support. They were very secular and had no problem divorcing their *beliefs* from their *behaviors*. As they adopted the lifestyle of the Hellenistic world around them, the Sadducees became increasingly secular, powerful, and wealthy. This group exercised immense authority in the nation by leveraging the political and economic advantage of running the Temple.

Jesus' life and ministry often angered the Sadducees. Jesus resisted the practices the Sadducees used to influence the common people and his open concern for the poor and needy posed a threat to the Sadducees' affluent lifestyle. The Sadducees were also frustrated when Jesus used Scripture, which they considered to be authoritative, as the basis for his arguments against them.

In Matthew 21, Jesus cleansed the Temple and stood opposed to the Sadducees for their buying and selling in the Temple. In John 11 after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, they plotted with the Pharisees to have Jesus captured and killed.

The Sadducees also ceased to exist when Rome came and destroyed Israel in AD 70.

**SLIDE: *The Pharisees*** were anti-Roman but still involved in political affairs. Their power came not from the Temple, but from the Synagogues that dotted the landscape of Israel. Their name means "the separated ones" and they dissociated themselves from anyone who did not practice a strict adherence to the Law. Their leadership in the Synagogues allowed them to control the common people by their teaching, practices, and influence in civic affairs.

Though Jesus did rebuke the Pharisees on several occasions, he did not condemn all of their practices. In fact, Jesus identified with the Pharisees in his own methods, teachings, and obedience to God's law, but he rebuked the Pharisees only when their human laws took precedence over God's laws or when the Pharisees made demands on people that they failed to follow themselves. Jesus instructed his followers to obey what the Pharisees taught but not to follow their hypocrisy. Matthew 23 holds some of Jesus' strongest rebukes of the Pharisees and their practices.

The Pharisees were the only group surviving AD 70 and AD135 Jewish revolts. Their group became the origins of today's Rabbinic Judaism.

**SLIDE: *The Essenes*** chose to withdraw from society and wait for God to destroy the Roman occupation. They believed the priesthood in Jerusalem had become corrupt, and so they took their marbles and moved out to the desert to live an isolated life to prepare for the coming Messiah. The Essenes grew disgusted with the compromise of the Sadducees, which they saw as idolatry, and chose to withdraw into the wilderness as a separated people. They believed to be the true priests and practiced rigid observance of the Law. They believed they had been chosen to prepare for the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Much of what we know about the Essenes is thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the caves in the desert of Qumran.

There is no known interaction between Jesus and the Essenes, but their community provides us with insight into Jesus' teaching. The Essene theology is remarkably close to what the early Church used. Some wonder if John the Baptist was an Essene, as his message and appearance mirrored theirs.

The Essenes, too, ceased to exist when Rome came and destroyed Israel in AD 70.

**SLIDE: *The Zealots*** are our last group and were violently anti-Roman and actively sought to overthrow the government for God. The Zealots were an offshoot of the Pharisees, who felt that Israel could only be free from the Romans if they took power by force. They hoped in a revolutionary Messiah who would deliver them. Their use of the sword to free Israel ultimately resulted in the destruction of the nation in AD 70. They practiced terrorism against the hated Romans, refused to pay taxes, and adhered carefully to the Law.

Simon, the Zealot, was one of the twelve disciples. In Jesus' group of twelve, one of them was Matthew, the Roman tax collector, and one was Simon, the Zealot. Can you imagine putting those two in a close-knit group for three and a half years?

There is nothing in the Gospels that reveals Jesus' message to the Zealots; in fact, Jesus' teaching was too pacifistic for Zealot ears. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught not to seek revenge or attack, to carry an enemy's pack further than required, and to actually pray for one's enemies.

**FRIENDS, JESUS DISAPPOINTED EVERY ONE OF THESE GROUPS!** Each of these groups represents, in a similar way, I believe, how Christians are living and acting today.

***So, what Can We Learn from The Herodians? I believe Herodian Christians live today.***

- Embracing the secular culture means rejecting the way of God.
- The present culture is fleeting and not worth pursuing.

***So, what Can We Learn from The Sadducees? I believe Sadducee Christians live today.***

- You cannot compromise and mix darkness and light.
- A love of power corrupts your heart.
- Your saltiness can lose its flavor.

***So, what Can We Learn from The Pharisees? I believe Pharisee Christians live today.***

- They preached one thing and yet lived another.
- They didn't practice what they taught.
- They lived for the praise of mankind.

***So, what Can We Learn from The Essenes? I believe Essene Christians live today.***

- Withdrawing from the culture is not the answer.
- You do not need to leave your world to love God.
- It does not benefit your world if you take your light and hide it.
- We are to be active participants in our world, not live in exclusive communities where people have to come and look for us.

***So, what Can We Learn from The Zealots? I believe Zealot Christians live today.***

- All who live by the sword will die by the sword.
- Power and might can never change the human heart.

*What will history record of Christianity and the Church in our generation?*

---

I want to take my beliefs and my posture from Scripture. Here are the pillars that support my political beliefs:

### **1. The Example of Jesus:**

When the Pharisees and Herodians set out to trap Jesus, they asked, *“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”*

*“But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied.*

*“Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’” Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV)*

In other words, “Pay your taxes to Caesar, but don’t give to Caesar what is God’s. The image of God is on you, not on some coin. Don’t give your ultimate allegiance to Rome or to Caesar or to anyone else.” I find it telling that Jesus did not directly teach about the politics of his day. He didn’t have any public discourse about it, nor did he talk about politics with his disciples.

Then, in John 18, Pilate interviewed Jesus, who had been politically ambushed by the Jewish leaders, and Pilate asked, *“Are you the king of the Jews?”* His answer? *“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”* John 18:33-36 (NIV)

Jesus disappointed the political people of his culture because he didn’t sign up to join their political movements. Friends, if we try to hijack Jesus to have him join our political agenda, he will disappoint you, too!

### **2. The Example of Paul:**

Paul was both a Jew and a Roman citizen and knew how to walk skillfully in both worlds, but I take great comfort in his words to the Philippian believers. *“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Philippians 3:20 (NIV)

The Philippian believers were Roman citizens who enjoyed all the favor of Rome, but Paul reminded them that they were no longer to consider themselves as citizens of Rome. Their citizenship in Rome was overshadowed by their newfound citizenship in Heaven. As believers, they should be yearning for a different homeland. They were to now see themselves as a colony of believers on the earth who were citizens of another kingdom, a heavenly kingdom. They were to think of themselves as *“resident aliens”* living temporarily in a foreign country with their home elsewhere.

Their hope was no longer in an Emperor but in Jesus. Their capital was no longer Rome but heaven. Citizens of a Roman colony were expected to promote the interests of Rome and maintain the dignity of the city. In the same way, citizens of heaven ought to promote heaven’s interests on earth and lead lives worthy of heavenly citizenship. My license plate says Oregon, and My passport says USA, but even though I live and drive here, I will fail to make an impact for Jesus Christ on this earth if I don’t see myself first and foremost as a citizen of Heaven.

### **3. The Example of the writer of Hebrews:**

*“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they*

*were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*” Hebrews 11:13-16 (NIV)

#### **4. The Example of Peter:**

Peter uses the same terminology, “aliens and strangers,” when he writes, “*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*” 1 Peter 2:11-12 (NIV)

Peter is saying that we’re not to be like the people in the culture who live all around us. We’re not to be fooled into thinking that this world is our home. We are **resident aliens**.

Suetonius was an early Roman historian who observed the behavior of early Christians and concluded they were actually another species! He said this because Christians did not just keep their Christianity private—it shaped the way in which they lived *culturally*. How?

- 1) They didn’t go to the bloodthirsty gladiatorial games.
- 2) They did not serve in the military to support Caesar’s wars of conquest.
- 3) They were against abortion and infanticide. They went out of their way to adopt and care for these discarded babies.
- 4) They empowered women. Women were valued and participated in leadership in ways that differed greatly from the rest of society.
- 5) They were against sex outside marriage.
- 6) They were against same-sex practice.
- 7) They were for the poor. They gave to the poor and needy.
- 8) They valued *all* lives. Not just for those above them in the social “food chain”.
- 9) They welcomed strangers and immigrants. There was no longer a separation between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, or male and female—all were one.
- 10) Last of all, they believed only Jesus Christ was the way to salvation.

The Greeks and Romans were pagans who believed everyone had their own god and religion. They were *polytheists*. They were *pluralistic*. They weren’t like the Greeks, Romans, or Jews. They were *aliens and strangers*. But they didn’t withdraw and isolate themselves. No, they impacted all of society with their newfound faith in Jesus.

Think about it with me: what if there was a group of people now who were following that same set of biblical values? Guess what? We’re still aliens. We’re still strangers. Followers of Jesus were never supposed to fit into a traditional culture. When you and I live out ALL aspects of Jesus’ life, we live between cultures. We’re different. We’re aliens and strangers.