

Should Christians Seek to Be Magistrates?

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It is not often questioned now whether a Christian should be a magistrate, hold a political office, or work for the government in some capacity. In fact, in recent years, the question in the United States has rather been whether it is right to vote for someone who is *not* a Christian. But this was not always the case. In past centuries, the question of whether Christians should be magistrates was one that many took seriously. In this article, I want to show how I came to this question, give a little historical background to the question, and point out some Scriptures that I believe answer it very clearly.

How I Came to this Question

I have often found a pattern repeated in my life that God will keep bringing a subject to my attention until I study into it in the Bible and come to a conclusion. Some time ago, while doing research on other topics, I began coming across information about how many believers from ancient times opposed Constantine's union of church and state and through the centuries continued to oppose state churches and Christian participation in the state. They always stressed the connection between believer's baptism and the separation of church and state. The two things went hand-in-hand. In many ways, these people could be called the spiritual ancestors of today's Baptists, yet most Baptists have now forgotten part of the mark that distinguished them from the worldly, Constantinian Christians: the need for the Christian's separation from the state and that idea's biblical and logical connection to the doctrine of believer's baptism.

During the time of the Reformation, those who took this stand were called Radical Reformers and Anabaptists. Among the information I came across was a movie called *The Radicals*. It is about the Anabaptists of the 16th century. It sounded interesting so I bought it. The movie stressed that the Anabaptists stood for two things: believer's baptism and the separation of church and state.

Soon after this, I had the opportunity to read a thesis written by a Christian brother about Anabaptist opposition to infant baptism during the Reformation. Again, this paper showed that Anabaptists stood for and were persecuted for and sometimes died for their advocacy of believer's baptism and the separation of church and state. They saw the church as the assembly, a peculiar people, and a holy nation into which God placed those whom He called

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out of the world. They saw the state as an institution of this world that God established to keep law and order. I also came across and read three books by Leonard Verduin (*The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, and *That First Amendment and the Remnant*). They are about the history of church-state relations, and again they document the connection between opposition to infant baptism and the stand for the separation of church and state.

And so, having come across these things, I had these things in my mind but had not come to any definite conclusions.

Then, more than three years ago, in a Sunday School, the question was raised, "Is it lawful (acceptable or right) for a Christian to be a civil officer or magistrate?" Everyone in the class, with the exception of Mary (my wife) and I, took the position that it is. Because of the things we had come across earlier, Mary and I questioned the majority opinion. After all, even the title of the lesson being studied was "Put Not Your Trust in Princes." This is taken from Psalm 146:3: "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man [meaning humans in general, not Jesus Christ as the Son of man], in whom there is no help." The Scripture is not saying to make sure we get our man in office so we can go to him for help. It is saying to put our trust in God, not human rulers.

During the week that followed, Mary and I studied the Scriptures on the subject. We tried to be as objective and neutral as possible. Nevertheless, we found two Scriptures that might be used to support the idea that Christians can run for public office, two that are probably neutral (obey the magistrate), and fourteen that seem to be against Christians serving as government officials. I can now think of five more on the "for" side and one more on the "against" side. So that makes it seven "for" and fifteen "against." Of those on the "for" side, four are examples of godly people whom God called to serve in Old Testament non-Israelitish governments (Joseph, Daniel, Daniel's friends, and Esther), and three are mentions of Christians in the New Testament who seemed to be serving the government in some way (Cornelius, Erastus the chamberlain of Corinth, and the eunuch who served Candace queen of the Ethiopians). We did not consider that the godly rulers of Israel count in the "for" category because Israel was something unique—a theocracy ruled by God. No nation today, including the United States, is a theocracy ruled by God under the Old Covenant. But, as I explain in many articles on this website, the Old Covenant has now ended, and with it ended the theocracy. Christians are under the New Covenant. Israel was a type and shadow of the New Covenant *ekklēsia* or called-out assembly. Therefore, God's blessing of Israel when godly rulers rose to power is a type of God's blessing His New Covenant people under the rule of Christ.

Scriptures "For"

The Old Testament examples of people other than the rulers of the nation of Israel serving in government are accounts of God calling people who were not seeking office to serve in times of unusual circumstances. Two were specifically used to save God's Old Covenant people (Joseph and Esther). The others—Daniel and Daniel's friends—were used to witness God's power to Gentile rulers (of course, Joseph and Esther also did this). This also would seem to be typical of what today is done by the church, not the state. God calls people who are not seeking Him to witness to the Gentiles and spread a message of salvation to His people.

There are no New Testament examples of Christians seeking a public office or service in the government. There are three examples only of people who were employed by the government at the time they became Christians. They were Cornelius, Erastus, and the Ethiopian eunuch. Cornelius was a centurion (a military captain over 100 men), but we do not know exactly what he did or whether he stayed in the military after becoming a Christian. Certainly, he might have faced some tough choices between serving God and serving the Roman rulers: would he have followed orders to arrest Christians? Would he have participated in the sacking of Jerusalem? It seems likely that remaining a centurion would eventually have put him at odds with his Christians beliefs. Tradition (of course, not necessarily reliable) says that he became a bishop in either Caesarea or Scepsis in Mysia.

The King James Version calls Erastus "the chamberlain of the city." The Greek word translated "chamberlain" is *oikonomos*, the word from which we get the English word economist. This means Erastus was a city manager or treasurer (it is not clear exactly what his job entailed) before he became a Christian. 1 Corinthians 7:20-21 indicates a person should remain in the calling wherein he was called, whether free or slave or whatever. The principle can apply to occupations. God called Erastus while he was the city manager/treasurer. The principle is that he should stay in that occupation unless there arose a conflict of interest. Apparently, no conflict had arisen in Erastus's case, at least up until the time Paul wrote. This does not mean that someone who is already a Christian should seek such a position, however. We do not know whether Erastus's duties included making official decisions, but history may answer what happened to him as it says he was killed shortly after Paul (Ada R. Habershon, *The Bible and the British Museum*, p. 4).

As far as the Ethiopian eunuch is concerned, he also was already serving his queen before he became a Christian. We do not know what happened to him after he was baptized in Acts 8 and returned to Ethiopia.

Later, I will give some of the Scriptures against Christians becoming magistrates.

Baptist Confessions

In examining this question, I looked at Baptist confessions. I found as many Baptist and Anabaptist confessions of faith as I could to see what they might say. The first confession of faith that scholars readily admit as being Baptist or Anabaptist is the Schleithem Confession of Faith of 1527. This is what it says concerning whether Christians should hold the office of magistrate:

Shall one be a magistrate if one should be chosen as such? The answer is as follows: They wished to make Christ king, but He fled and did not view it as the arrangement of His Father. Thus shall we do as He did, and follow Him, and so shall we not walk in darkness. For He Himself says, He who wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. Also, He Himself forbids the (employment of) the force of the sword saying, The worldly princes lord it over them, etc., but not so shall it be with you. Further, Paul says, Whom God did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, etc. Also Peter says, Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow His steps.

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as in the mind of God toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed. For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed. Now since Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same, that His body may remain complete and united to its own advancement and upbuilding.

Starting with that confession, of those that mention the subject at all, every Baptist confession I could find (five) from 1527 to 1614, state that Christians should not hold worldly authority or the office of magistrate. The 1644 London Baptist Confession of Faith says nothing about it. But the 1646 revision of that confession adds an article that states that it is lawful for a Christian to be a magistrate or civil officer. So, a change occurs at this point in time. I think it is not a coincidence that in 1645 the Royalist army of King Charles I was crushed by the Parliamentary New Model Army at the Battle of Naseby. And in 1646, King Charles I surrendered to the Scots who turned him over to Parliament. Charles's surrender effectively ended the First English Civil War. Many Parliamentarians, including Oliver Cromwell, were very tolerant—even encouraging—towards various independents, including Baptists.

Could it be that the Baptists, seeing now which way the wind was blowing and that the country was now to be run by the Puritan-dominated Parliament (many of whom, as I have said, were tolerant of Baptists), were now tempted to join in with the Parliamentarians and get a piece of the pie? In other words, did the Baptists lose sight of the fact that it was the Bible that they had said prevented them as Christians from seeking worldly power? Did they come to think that now that the repressive monarchy was gone, they were now free to seek worldly power? Additionally, did they deem that to not participate in politics would place them so far on the fringe that they would be inviting Puritan persecution? (After all, in the American colonies, the Puritans did persecute Baptists.) I personally believe that this could very well have been the case. But whatever the case, it is at this point that the belief that Christians must not become magistrates that was held for centuries by Baptists, Anabaptists, and other believers-only-church Christians (as documented in the publications I have mentioned, and many others) was overturned by the English Baptists.

The next Baptist confession to speak on the subject is the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith. Again, it states that it is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate. The 1689 Confession has come under much criticism, with many Baptists calling it a dipped Presbyterian confession, and I agree. Again, history may shed some light on this confession. The monarchy had been restored in 1660 under Charles II. This led to renewed persecution. The English Baptists then drew up a confession that was nearly identical to the Westminster Confession of Faith that was used by the Anglican Puritans and Presbyterians and, modified as the Savoy Declaration, by the English Congregationalists. In this time of persecution, the Baptists may have wanted to be part of a larger group with more political clout. But it was because of persecution that the Baptist confession that was drawn up in 1677 was not officially signed until 1689, thus coming to be called the 1689 Baptist

Confession of Faith. What change occurred that enabled them to sign the confession? It was in 1688 that James II abdicated the throne and fled to France. In 1689, William and Mary became joint monarchs. They extended toleration to all dissenters who believed in the Trinity, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and who rejected the authority of Rome. This included the Baptists, who, by now, seemed to have forgotten their historical stand against being magistrates. Once again, it seems that the Baptists may have signed a confession that was nearly identical to the popular Westminster Confession so they would be freed from persecution and allowed to share power in the state with people from the other churches.

With the exception of the Philadelphia Confession of 1742, which is really just a repeat of the 1689 Confession, after the 1689 Confession, the subject is not again mentioned in any of the major Baptist confessions I could find. It might be mentioned in some local church confessions, but, of course, I could not look at all of these. So, of seven Baptist confessions that mention the subject, five are "against" and two (I am not counting the Philadelphia Confession as a separate confession) are "for." Those that are against are the older ones.

Scriptures "Against"

As I said, my wife and I found fifteen Scriptures that teach principles that run contrary to Christians serving as government officials.

1. Luke 12:13-14: "And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?" These were civil offices, and Jesus' obvious implication is that He does not desire this civil power. The *Apostolic Bible Polyglot* renders verse 14: "And he said to him, Man, who ordained me magistrate or apportioner for you?"

2. John 6:15: "When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone." Jesus specifically avoided being made a king of this world.

3. John 18:36: "Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence."

4. John 17:6, 9, 11, 14-18: "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word.... I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.... And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father,

keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.... I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world."

These verses, and others we will see, speak of two mutually exclusive groups—a dichotomy. Jesus and His people are one group. The world is the other group. Jesus prays for His people; He does not pray for the world. (Did you think that Jesus was watching over your nation? Think again.) As Jesus was in the world, so are His people in the world. But remember that Jesus was meek and humble and held no worldly power. This is how we are to be in the world. As Jesus was not of the world, so His people are not to be of the world. To be of the world would include having worldly power. As God sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sent His people into the world. Jesus explains what this entails in Mark 16:15: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Our commission is to preach the Gospel, not to hold worldly power.

5. Luke 20:25: "And he said unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's." Again, we see dichotomy. Jesus makes a clear division between earthly and godly power. It must not be supposed that this verse means we can serve both powers, only that we are to render each his due. At another time, Jesus stated, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

6. Romans 13:1-8: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law."

Far from teaching that it is proper for Christians to be magistrates, as some take it, this passage again points out the dichotomy. The ruler is "he" and the Christians are "thee." He bears the sword; therefore, Christians must be subject. He asks for tribute; the Christians are to pay it. The word "minister" is *diakonos*. It merely means "servant." Whether conscious of it or not, the ruler serves God by bearing the sword and keeping law and order. That is his function in the worldly realm. It does not mean he is or should be a Christian.

7. 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Ambassadors represent another kingdom, not the one in which they live. They do not hold any sort of position in, run for office in, or even vote in the kingdom to which they are sent.

8. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." Again we see dichotomy between God's people and the world. We cannot be separate if we are a part of the world's system of government.

9. Philippians 3:20: "For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." Notice in the previous verse that Paul wrote this to warn his readers not to become like those "who mind earthly things." The word "conversation" is from the Greek *politeuma*, a word from which we get our word "politics." But our real political arena, our citizenship, is in heaven, not on the earth.

10. Colossians 1:13: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son."

11. 1 Timothy 2:1-2: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Paul does not say that Christians are to get into a

position of authority to make sure that Christians can lead a quiet and peaceable life. He also does not say we are to criticize those who are in authority. He says to pray for those who are already in authority. This is trusting in God to take care of the matter as He sees fit. This is faith in God rather than thinking we need to take matters into our own hands.

12. 2 Timothy 2:4: "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier." Paul is giving a principle: If a soldier is going to please those over him, he will not become distracted from his duty. We are to be like this. We have already seen that we are to preach the Gospel. To become involved in politics is to become distracted from our duty and entangled with the affairs of this world.

13. Titus 3:1: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work." Again, there is a dichotomy between "them"—the Christians—and principalities, powers, and magistrates.

14. Hebrews 11:13-16: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city." The Old Testament patriarchs were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. They looked for a heavenly country.

15. 1 Peter 2:9-17: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy. Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the

king." We are to submit to and honor the earthly rulers, but we—all Christians living in all worldly nations—are a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Something else that must be mentioned is the evidence of silence. I have already referred to Mark 16:15: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Jesus said this after His resurrection. It was a commission to his disciples. We read more of this Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Jesus has all power or authority in heaven and in earth. But He did not tell us to try to wield earthly authority by holding civil or governmental positions. He did not tell us to try to establish His kingdom through any political process. He did not tell us to try to make any nation a Christian nation. He did not tell us to politicize Christianity to "get the vote." He told us to preach (or herald, as the Greek can be translated), to teach, and to baptize.

Divided Loyalty

I have already touched on the fact that Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. When one works for a government, that government expects undivided loyalty. In the United States, federal government employees, and many state employees as well, must swear an allegiance to the Constitution. What many may not realize is that this means they are swearing to place the Constitution above all other allegiances, even their allegiance to God. In 1931, in *U.S. v. Macintosh* (<http://supreme.justia.com/us/283/605/case.html>), the United States Supreme Court ruled that Macintosh, "When he speaks of putting his allegiance to the will of God above his allegiance to the government, it is evident in the light of his entire statement, that he means to make his own interpretation of the will of God the decisive test.... But, also, we are a nation with the duty to survive; a nation whose...government must go forward upon the assumption, and safely can proceed upon no other, that unqualified allegiance to the nation and submission and obedience to the laws of the land...are not inconsistent with the will of God." In other words, to swear allegiance to the Constitution is to make the Constitution take precedence over one's understanding of one's duty to God. This, of course, is a rejection of the biblical principle found in Acts 5:29, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Answers to Some Arguments

In response to my presenting of these facts, I have received the following arguments:

What about 2 Peter 2:10, which says not to despise government?

I certainly agree that we are not to despise government. I have already explained Romans 13:1-8, which tells us to "be subject unto the higher powers." Simply because we are not to hold a governmental office does not mean we are to despise government.

Isaiah 9:6-7 prophesies of the increase of Jesus Christ's government. How can we be an active participant if we are hiding from the world and not actively participating?

This question shows no comprehension of what I have presented. Jesus Christ's government is not the government of any nation. These same verses speak of Jesus ruling "upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom." David ruling over national Israel was an Old Testament type of Jesus ruling over the true Israel of God under the New Covenant; that is, the authority of Jesus Christ over all believers in all nations. Far from hiding and not actively participating, we believers are to be heralding the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ alone and baptizing and teaching those who believe.

Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). There is no neutrality. If the state is not actively promoting the Christian faith, then it is actively destroying it. And if you are not part of the solution, then you are a part of the problem.

This begs the question of what being for Jesus means. I believe that the evidence I have presented clearly implies that to be for Jesus is to do what He says, which is to believe on Him, love one another, and participate in some way in the Great Commission. To become diverted from this to become involved in politics is to be diverted from being on Jesus' side to being against Him. It is true that there is no neutrality. The nations of this world, whether they profess to be Christian, neutral (such as the United States), or otherwise are not holy. Why else are they depicted in prophecy as being beasts and as warring against Christ? No nation is excepted from that picture. No nation is shown as standing up for Christ. Should Christians become part of such an unholy alliance? Or should we be a light on a hill that distinctly stands apart from the rest of the world as a clear contrast with all around it (Matthew 5:14-16)?

It is poor Christian stewardship to permit the nation to plunge toward destruction.

Whether or not a nation is plunging toward destruction is debatable. It is God who sets nations up and God who topples them. The Bible tells us to be "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1) and "stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). It never tells us to be stewards of a worldly nation. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians who had a problem with sin within their assembly, "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without [the non-Christians]? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person [who was a member of the Christian assembly]" (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). God does not tell Christians to judge the behavior of those outside the *ekklēsia* or to try to impose morals on them through civil law. He tells us to preach the Gospel, and if anything has a chance of saving a nation (by saving its individuals), it is the Gospel, "for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

Conclusion

I have presented this article in the format that I have to try to help you to see how I have come to the conclusion that I have. My conclusion is that Christians should not seek to be magistrates or to hold any civil or political office. To do so involves us with the world in a way that makes us of the world rather than just in the world, and this is contrary to the way Jesus prayed His followers would be. Even merely working as a civil servant puts us in a position where we have two masters who demand our full loyalty and allow no higher authority. And political involvement distracts our time, attention, and resources from carrying out the Great Commission.

We are living in a time when a new "Christian" religion is being molded on the image of the political state. This new religion touting morality is being raised up by secular politicians to try to unite all who have the same moral interests under one banner, and under that banner and encouraged by religious leaders to give their time and attention to political action. Thus, they are creating an improvised false Christianity, a new state religion. But it is not the religion of Jesus Christ. It is the religion of man. Remember that what we give our time and attention to is what we worship.

You might also like to read "Christians, Voting, and Politics" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/voting.htm>).