

?Jesus? never got involved in politics

Oh no? 45% of His teachings, in Matthew, were political!

45% of Jesus' teachings, in the book of Matthew, witnessed directly to Palestine's politicians. Out of 57 different physical settings, or scenes, in 26 He preached directly to officers of the Sanhedrin, "lobbying" them to change a wide variety of their laws; in 24 He verbally interacted only with others besides government officials; and in 7 He did not verbally interact with anyone but just preached. (If I hear about someone actually reading my analysis of Matthew, that will inspire me to analyze the other three gospels.)

It is popularly alleged that the Pharisees were not political leaders, but only "religious leaders"; their political leaders were the Romans. That is like saying Des Moines City Council members are not political leaders; Des Moines' political leaders are the Federal Government.

Political leaders are the guys who authorize the police to arrest and put in jail – who tell the judges what crimes to sentence people for. The Sanhedrin had all of that – just like Des Moines – and the Pharisees were its officers.

It is said that the Sanhedrin had no real political power, because it had no power to execute its prisoners. The Des Moines City Council can't execute speeders either but no one questions its political power! School board members can't even spank children, yet they hold considerable political power within their jurisdiction. In John 18:31b, Pilate acknowledges the Sanhedrin's jurisdiction to judge citizens by its own laws.

Under the procurators ([AD](#) 6-66) the powers of the Sanhedrin were extensive, the internal government of the country being in its hands ([Jos.](#), [Ant](#) 20.200), and it was recognized even among the *diaspora* (Acts 9:2; 22:5; 26:12) in some ways. From the days of Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, its direct powers were, however, limited to Judaea, since it had no power over Jesus while he was in Galilee. In Judaea there were, of course, the local authorities who tried cases locally but reported certain cases to the central authority. The councils (*synedria*) of Mt. 5:22; 10:17; Mk. 13:9, and the *boulai* of [Jos.](#), [Ant](#). 4.214, *etc.* were local courts of at least seven elders, and in large towns up to twenty-three elders [Wood, D. R. W.: *New Bible Dictionary*. InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962, S. 1060]

But in fact the Sanhedrin had the power of execution and exercised it frequently. John 11:53 indicates that the idea that they could not execute was news to them. John 18:31a must be a euphemism for death by crucifixion, since death by stoning was obviously available to the Pharisees any time. Several times the people, stirred by Palestine's politicians, would have killed Jesus had not He escaped miraculously: Luke 4:29, John 8:59, 10:31-39, 11:8. Saul didn't need Pilate's permission to stone Stephen.

Remember that most of the time when Jesus interacts with Palestine's rulers, he is on trial. He is often charged with crimes like working on the Sabbath, or blasphemy, which are capital offenses: had He not answered well, He would have been stoned on the spot. A couple of times, people nearly executed Him anyway. The courtroom in those days was where the crowds were. Our courts call it "the public square". Then it was "the city gate". The procedure was for Sanhedrin officials to make a charge, and for the crowds to function as jurors, and participate in any stoning.

**Was Jesus just a bold
witness in the political arena,
or was He also effective in actually**

reducing tyranny? Both in the short term and the long term, He was extremely effective.

In the short term, after He established the illegitimacy of a particular Sanhedrin law, and the crowds saw that the Pharisees could not answer Him, much less convict Him, the Pharisees found it just about impossible to continue enforcing that particular law.

In the long term, the principles of government, justice, mercy, and fairness which He taught, and the growth of that teaching in the womb of 2,000 years of political history, would be aptly characterized as a “stone...cut out of the mountain without hands”, a “kingdom which shall never be destroyed” that “shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms”, Daniel 2:44-45. Within 300 years the emperor worship of Rome, with its ruthless war against Christians, had fallen without a shot fired. In another thousand years the Magna Carta was born, the first constitutional restraint on the power of monarchs since Deut 17:18 and 1 Sam 10:25. In another 400 years America was birthed by Christians. In another century and a half, freedom of religious expression and freedom of speech became law, Rex Lex was reversed to Lex Rex (from “the King is the law” to “the Law is King”; see 1 Samuel 8 for God’s commentary on the distinction), and the tyrannies of the world caught a glimpse of their end. As World War I wound down, monarchies fell around the world. Tyrannies remained, but no longer with enough legitimacy to enable tyrants to pass their power down to their sons. Nor can tyrannies, any longer, be proud and honest about what they do and still survive. When they suppress Freedom of Religion and Speech, they must lie about it. They feel pressure to tell the world, and their own victims, that they don’t do it. And today, tyrannies have the weakest economies and armies, leaving the greatest threat to freedom internal forgetfulness of God who gave it, enabled by Noninvolvement Theologies which prohibit Christian activists from organizing together among their own church families.

The 7 scenes in Matthew in which Jesus did not verbally interact with anyone, but just preached, are Matthew 5:1-7:27, 10:5-42, 11:7-30, 13:3-9, 24-33, 28:10, 18-20.

The 24 scenes in which Jesus verbally interacted only with others besides government officials are: Mat- thew 3:15, 4:3-10, 8:8-13, 9:14-18, 11:2-6, 12:46-50, 13:10-23, 36-52, 54-57, 15:22-28, 16:5-12, 13-19, 21-28, 17:10-13, 14-21, 18:1-20, 21-35, 19:13-15, 16-30, 20:1-16, 20-28, 21:17-22, 26:7, 13.

For the 26 Matthew scenes in which Jesus preached/witnessed/confronted directly the officers of the Sanhedrin, **I not only list the cites but, in the spirit of Mat 9:14-17 and 1 Cor 9:3-14, I offer examples of what political issues today correspond to the issues that challenged Jesus, and that are addressed by the reasoning with which Jesus responded.**

Matthew 9:10-13 Government interference with charity is like fines for letting a homeless person stay in your home rent free without getting a rental certificate; it is like zoning barriers to homeless shelters. It is like laws against churches helping undocumented immigrants.

12:1-8 Not allowing people to eat except according to government regulations is like zoning laws that don’t let people start a business in their own home.

12:9-14 Legalistic restrictions on people helping each other are like not allowing schools, charities, prisons, and drug treatment centers to mention Jesus even when there are mountains of evidence that the government’s stated goals are most effectively met that way.

12:22-37 Accusations that a ministry’s excellent results could not possibly be because the ministry is Christian is like state lawmakers saying the reason Christian school students outperform public school students by 20% on standardized tests could not possibly be because they honor Jesus Christ.

12:38-46 Demanding a sign, or credentials, from Jesus before he can criticize government that much is like courts demanding a law degree before a paralegal can help a friend – with oral arguments and objections – who otherwise has no help.

15:1-20 Legalistic hygiene laws then are like legalistic hygiene laws today. Of all the laws which Jesus adamantly refused to obey, refusing to obey a hygiene law seems like the most trivial stand Jesus could take; therefore this opposition most thoroughly disposes of the argument that the way to resolve Romans 13:1 and Acts 5:29 is that we should obey every millimeter of red tape which every tyrannical lawmaker can think of imposing upon us, up until government tells us not to preach the Gospel. Obviously disobeying this law was not for Jesus' personal comfort; He disobeyed for us. He shows His concern for the tyranny of red tape. God's laws were written in 1,000 pages; man's laws fill entire buildings, which no man can read in a lifetime, even if they did not change every year.

The Jewish custom of washing was half of the legal requirement for surgeons today. After washing, they were supposed to hold their hands down until the rinse water drains off their fingertips. Today surgeons must do that, then wash again, and hold their hands up so the water drains from their elbows. That's why, on TV, you sometimes see surgeons enter operating rooms with their hands up. No, they aren't being robbed.

The KJV calls them "traditions" because they are the laws of men which were added to the laws of Moses. Their legal enforcement apparently varied according to whether you were surrounded by Pharisees or Sadducees, just like enforcement of seat belt laws today varies according to whether a holiday is approaching. In any case, they were unlike "traditions" today which are mere cultural or family habits which some do as memorials but which no one enforces.

The Pharisees regarded unwritten tradition as no less binding than the Law. Even Philo claimed piety for such tradition. The Sadducees rejected it ([Jos. Ant.](#), 13, 297).⁴ So did Jesus. He agreed with the Pharisees that the good demanded of man is obedience to God's commandment.⁵ As He saw it, however, men could not add to this commandment, since they were too seriously in conflict with God. Jesus did not argue for freedom in attacking tradition. His service of God, however, was not legalistic, and therefore He would not add to the commands of God. In Gl. 1:14 the πατρικαί μου παραδόσεις are Jewish tradition generally, both written and verbal. Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.) ; Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.) ; Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans, 1964-c1976, S. 2:172

16:1-4 The government wants another sign. Like demanding licenses before businesses can serve customers. Reasonable for brain surgery; but for cutting hair? Teaching? Jesus answered that the proof is in the performance: not in jumping through some artificial bureaucratic hoop.

17:24-27 A church taxing God, then, was as dumb as a government taxing churches today. God's people perform many of the legitimate functions of government, with far greater effectiveness and less waste: national security, hospitals, schools, charity.

19:3-12 The Sanhedrin challenging Jesus about His position on divorce law was like, today, government baiting churches about their sermons on sodomy. It's not that the government wants to learn. The government wants to dictate morality, and wants an excuse to shut down any competitor.

20:17-19 Jesus explains political strategy; that is, His strategy for dealing with hostile politicians. We need to strategize with each other so human nature does not take us by such surprise.

21:13 Jesus' use of force to stop bureaucrats from fleecing citizens was cited by 100,000 Christians who, between 1980 and 1994, were arrested while blocking the doors through which mothers carried their babies to their deaths. Before that, it was cited as precedent for the civil disobedience of the Civil Rights movement. Before that, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement cited it as they stormed through saloons, smashing liquor bottles. Before that, John Brown followed its precedent in his armed resistance against slavers. Before that, America's founders followed Jesus' example in rebelling against English monarchy to establish Biblical freedom.

21:15-16 Bureaucrats complaining to Jesus because of his momentary popularity is like politicians today trying to silence their critics for being “offensive”, not caring whether the criticism is true.

In the trial of John Peter Zenger, New York (1735) 35, 38, 39), when the governor of New York, appointed by the king, arrested a political cartoonist, the prosecution argued that it didn't matter whether the criticism was true; it was libel. The defense said it did matter, since truth ought to be a defense against libel, and the political cartoons must be true, because “suppression of the evidence ought always to be taken as the strongest evidence”.

Today Americans do not usually decide whether to allow publication on the basis of whether a book is true, but on the basis of whether we still want freedom of speech. Today we have too little national discussion of whether politicians' claims are true. Today people say “I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”, a promise which seems more of a verbal habit than a commitment we can still trust to save us.

Jesus said something more powerful: the truth is not merely the proper defense against libel, but it will defeat all government efforts to suppress it. If you care only about free speech, you will get a lot of noise, and will lose your ability to distinguish between truth and lies. But if you care about whether claims are true, you will find the truth, and the truth will set you free.

21:23-45 Palestine's rulers had twice previously demanded that Jesus show his spiritual credentials through some miracle above and beyond the ones He did all the time. Now they want Him to orally allege, on the court record, his spiritual credentials. “Who gave thee this authority?”

Had He answered frankly, stating the obvious, they were ready to stone Him. But He bounced the ball back in their court by hinging His answer to their answer about the authority of John, whom they hated but whom the people honored. When they danced around the question, Jesus hit them hard for ignoring John. He warned of God's judgment for their persecution of the righteous, talking the talk but not walking the walk.

We see the same psychology at work today when politicians adopt a position in defiance of God, and then dare Christians to proclaim to the nation that it is the Bible, not mere human opinions, which inspires their opposition. If we admit it is the Bible, we are labeled “controversial”. “Extremists”, etc.

**Perhaps today we should respond,
“God, whom both presidential candidates
invoked to bless America, wrote in the Bible that...”
or “God, whom the Supreme Court invokes
daily to save it, says in His Word that...”**

I thought about Jesus' way of handling this kind of Pharisaical attack all during 1995. In Virginia, a Grand Jury met for an entire year, subpoenaing prolife leaders from all over America, trying to build a case for conspiracy to prevent abortion by illegal violence. One question they often asked was “do you ever lie?” Now follow me on this: this was lawyers asking this question. But you see, no matter how they answered, their goose was cooked. If they said they didn't, any human being would be skeptical; but if they said they did, the jury would become inclined to conclude they had a case. I wrote an article about it at the time, in which I fantasized how I would have answered, had I been subpoenaed. I would have replied as Jesus, “Let me begin my answer by putting it in context. As a lawyer, do you ever plead a client innocent when you know he is guilty? Do you ever bluff when you know you have no evidence?” Then I would have given a short Bible study about lying, beginning with Abraham lying to Pharaoh, the midwives lying to Pharaoh, Rahab betraying her government, etc., showing that it is a sin to tell the truth to brutal thugs who will use it to kill and destroy.

22:1-15 Jesus plainly warned the Sanhedrin of God's judgment for its persecution of God's

people. The application was not lost on the Sanhedrin, v. 15. This is like street preachers today, and a few radio preachers, prophesying God's judgment on our government (which includes voters, the ultimate decision makers) for sins like abortion and sodomy.

22:16-22 "Render unto Caesar". Why are Christians persecuted by governments in proportion to the government's degree of tyranny? What's it to Communists, Moslems, or Hindus if a few politically inert Christians want to play church a little bit, that these governments expend huge resources to shut Christians down? This passage shows that the loyalty of Christians to their government is a perpetual question. Tyrants are legitimately confused how their subjects can be 100% submissive to their laws, while proclaiming 100% submission to "higher laws" dictated by God – laws often in conflict with human laws? Jesus conceded limited submission to tyrants: all that is "due" them. But is that enough to satisfy tyrants? What if they want greater submission than is "due" them? What if they choose to usurp submission due God? Romans 13:7 amplifies Jesus' statement by saying not only taxes, but honor, must be given to whom it is due. But obviously the honor Jesus gave the Sanhedrin was less than was due the Sanhedrin, in the opinion of the Sanhedrin.

Today we characterize the line as submission to every law of man up till that point where government tells us not to preach the Gospel. We further appease Caesar by telling laymen not to even preach the Gospel, in those political forums where our government decides whether to follow God or Satan's laws. But Jesus boldly and publicly disobeyed all kinds of laws He thought were oppressive. He ignored the Sanhedrin's hygiene laws, chapter 15. He gleaned corn on the Sabbath, 12:1-8. And when He preached the Gospel, His strongest sermons targeted Palestine's politicians, which they considered worthy of death.

Romans 13:1 tells us to obey the "higher authorities". We overlook the plural, and imagine this means slavish, mindless submission to every inch of red tape a bureaucrat can unroll. But when a lower law conflicts with a higher law, which do we obey? "We ought to obey God rather than man", Peter trumpets in answer. Acts 5:29. But where human and divine laws agree, which is much of the time, Christians are taught to be deeply ashamed of violating the laws of both God and man. 1 Peter 4:15-16. This is what makes us fundamentally "law abiding" more than believers in any other religion: Christians are restrained from real crime by far stronger disincentives than mere jail or even torture.

In 1 Peter 2:13, Peter had not repented of what he said in Acts 5:29. It means, in the Greek, that we ought to arrange our lives under the human authority relationships instituted/created by God: government/citizens, 2:13-14; employers/employees, 2:18; husband/wife, 3:1; shepherd/flock, 5:1; elder/younger, 5:5; everyone/evryone, 5:5. That does not mean slavish, mindless obedience to every whim of an authority who usurps greater authority than God approves. It means the opposite. It means getting involved in restoring the relationship to God's vision. This does not mean the child starts ordering around the parent, for example, but something costlier: the child continues obeying every legitimate order, and remains vulnerable to punishment, while trying to inspire his wayward parent to God's vision; a procedure very likely to incur further punishment, since most authorities don't like being corrected by those under them!

Although 1 Peter 2:13 is not often understood this way, and indeed the KJV translation was formerly used to support the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, the interpretation I offer characterizes the whole history of the interaction of Christianity with government down through the centuries. The Divine Right of Kings teaches is the doctrine that whatever wicked tyrant ruled the land was placed there by God, so therefore we have the same duty to obey him as we have to obey God. I interpret these same verses the opposite: that God calls us to prophesy to wicked kings, restraining them, and restoring their rule to the protection of individual liberty which God desires for us.

22:23-33 The Sadducees challenging Jesus' theology of marriage in Heaven is like today government and its apologists challenging "creationist" Christians to explain why each of the "days" of Genesis 1 couldn't simply be periods of millions of years. (For one, plants, created on day 3, could not live for millions of years without the sun, created on day 4.) Jesus answered His questioners with

theological precision, unlike Christian activists today who are afraid to quote the Bible, offering instead their own weak, unpersuasive logic.

22:34-46 These kinds of deeply theological confrontations are more like the Bible discussions in the first Congress than anything we hear today among Christian activists who won't quote their Bibles. When politicians used to quote the Bible, they were able to discern God's political vision with enough precision to stand the test of over two centuries.

23:1-39 This entire chapter is full of scathing confrontation against the politicians of Palestine. V. 2-3 acknowledges their authority but renounces their legitimacy. V. 4 calls them lawless; they exempt themselves from the laws they impose on others. Over the centuries this has been the modus operandi of tyrants and kings; our Founders created a "Republic", implementing the principle of v. 4 with lawmakers who are subject to their own laws.

Vs. 8-12, call no man father; exactly what these teachings mean has divided churches, but at the least it means that the honor to which men are actually due is often less than men believe they are due. Equality of all men, yet without anarchy, is the plain spirit of these teachings. Mutual accountability is indicated. These verses are reminiscent of 1 Samuel 8:7, where God equates the previous representative government, where leaders were selected by the led, Deut 1:13, as a government in which God rules over men.

If the political impact of these theologies is not clear enough for you, consider this manifesto which nails the difference between the Republic in which we live and the monarchies which it replaced:

**Lu 22:25-26 ... Kings...exercise [tyranny] and
[we call them philanthropists.]
But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest
among you, let him be as the younger; and he
that is chief, as he that doth serve.**

It is profound to contemplate equality without anarchy – leaders accountable to followers. But that is exactly what we have in the structure of our U.S. government. We owe our freedom today, in which God rules over men, 1 Sam 8:7, to Founders who weren't shy about pulling out their Bibles during political debates, as if God's "opinions" were somehow relevant to a nation's decision whether to follow Heaven or Hell.

23:13 hits our Supreme Court between the eyes for censoring Freedom of Religious Expression across America.

23:14 is about Eminent Domain. Our Bible-based laws require government to compensate citizens for property they seize for government projects, but the fairness of the compensation, and the legitimacy of the projects, is a perpetual issue. The Supreme Court recently ruled that a city can seize property, not just for a city project, but for private development, if the city thinks the private development will generate more tax revenue!

23:16-22 applies to our banking system which accepts a church's tithing base as collateral, but not a church's relationship with God.

23:23-28 applies to the greatest temptation of any government: to get so caught up in legalism/red tape/the letter of the law that they lose sight of, and harm, the noble, merciful benefits which are the only legitimate purpose of any law.

23:34-39 describes the process of correcting governments reflected in 1 Peter (see notes on 22:16-22 above) and followed by centuries of Christian martyrs.

24:1-25:46 Jesus laid out political strategy (His strategy for dealing with hostile governments) for the next 2,000 years. He did this in the hearing of Palestine's politicians, as indicated by the fact

that after he finished, the politicians plotted to kill Him, 26:3. Not all end times prophecies directly address governments, but very important parts of them do. Books and videos about these prophecies would not hold together without the prophesied role of governments.

26:51-56 is an important teaching on the use of force as part of civil disobedience. Jesus did not rule out self defense since the presence of Peter's sword had been commissioned in Luke 22:36-38. Nor did he rule out physical defense of others, as given in Proverbs 24:10-12. But Jesus had already made clear that this was not a battle he wanted to fight physically. Nor should we, today, take up the physical sword in defense of our faith. Why? Because we should let Satan roll over us? No; because the physical sword is such a clumsy way to battle for souls. Eph 6:17.

26:63-64 Jesus proclaimed His divinity. So should we, today, proclaim Jesus' divinity, even in Courts where furious judges are likely to rule against us for it. I don't mean to quote verses that are irrelevant, that is, which have nothing to do with the issues before the court. (Or before the legislature.) But when men are about to rule upon, or vote on, an issue about which God has expressed strong feelings, what right do Christian activists have, to self-censor the very passages which have brought them to confront government?