

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

Summer 2026 VOL. 46, NO. 3

Christians and Politics

IF YOU LIVE in the United States and aren't under a rock somewhere, you are probably only too aware that we have midterm elections coming up in November. News outlets and social media are awash in reports on the latest primary election, candidates who are either too far to the left or to the right, and so on. Political pundits talk endlessly about how it's all going to play out, who's up in the polls and who's down, and what that might or might not mean. Certain issues seem to dominate—the economy and rising prices, immigration policy, gender identity, the social safety net, abortion, the wars and conflicts in Iran, Gaza, Ukraine, and other places. What's a Christian to do in the midst of all this, especially if you're part of a tradition like the Brethren in Christ that has historically been highly skeptical of any kind of involvement in politics and has preached for almost 250 years that our first loyalties are to the Kingdom of God and not to any earthly kingdom?

Over the forty-five years of *Shalom!*, we have explored the subject of Christians and politics five times, plus three additional issues on the related topics of protest and activism. Of course, many of the other *Shalom!* topics (immigration, peacemaking, abortion, criminal justice, etc.) have had political implications as well. We've also addressed how we talk with people with whom we disagree—highly relevant in the current extremely polarized landscape where families and friends sometimes find themselves on opposite sides of the political spectrum and unable to talk to each other without getting into fruitless arguments.

Into this environment, we venture again because we continue to need to think seriously about how we navigate in an atmosphere of partisan politics, hatred toward the other, division, and conflict. Unlike our Brethren in Christ forebears, many if not the majority of us vote in national and local elections. Even if we do vote, however, some of us wonder sometimes whether we should and how we might be compromising our faith and our Kingdom citizenship. Some run for elected office; some actively protest against policies that seem antithetical to Kingdom values and the clear teachings of Jesus.

Contributors to this edition span the spectrum from not voting, to probably not voting, to holding elected office, to getting arrested for protesting at the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. One writer describes a "third way," and another summarizes the historic Brethren in Christ position and how it has changed.

Romans 12 ends with the command to live peaceably with all (if it is possible) and to overcome evil with good rather than seek vengeance. Romans 13 begins with the command to "be subject to the governing authorities" and a description of the role of government. Immediately following that description with its accompanying commands, Paul returns to his previous theme: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." However difficult it is to parse out exactly what this all means in the twenty-first century, we should keep trying.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Our Third Way Witness: From the Pews to the Polls

By David Flowers

I START WITH this basic conviction: No political party contains or represents all the Kingdom concerns of Jesus. Jesus is Lord and he demands total allegiance. Therefore, we should have a healthy skepticism toward every political party, especially when they claim Jesus is on their side or that they fully or “mostly” represent his Kingdom concerns. You’re already well on your way to political idolatry if you’re thinking this way. Therefore, beware of the partisan mind.

I propose that we follow the Third Way of Jesus. What is the Third Way? The Third Way means we are purposely pursuing a loving way to address injustice in our world and work for more of the Kingdom without mixing the gospel with partisan politics in the

process. The Third Way of Jesus is an attitudinal posture and approach that is centered in the two-part agape commandment: to love God and love our neighbor. As followers of Jesus, we’re called to obey the agape (love) commandment of Jesus (Matt.23:36-40), get our identity from our baptism and the communion table (not the voting booth, our political party, or our favorite media outlet), and be captured by the Kingdom vision of our Messiah (John 18:36; 2 Cor.10:3-4).

Therefore, the center is NOT our political parties, our positions, or our favored policies. The center is Christ as his call to love God and our neighbor. This Third Way of Jesus moves us from the WHAT of policies and ideology to the HOW of spiritual values and relationships, which helps to deescalate and curb injustice and division. It helps us to humanize each other. Part of that work looks like asking better questions as we seek to listen, love, and empathize with others in pursuit of the healing and reconciliation that Jesus desires.

When Jesus was asked to weigh in on a politically controversial and polarizing issue or debate in his day, he revealed the following pattern:

1. He refused to bite the bait and “take a side” between the two by not accepting the way his opponents framed the issues.
2. He reframed the issue and/or question to reveal the underlying problems with both options, which were often extremes.
3. He called his followers back to the agape commandment (love God and neighbor) and to imagine another (i.e., “third”) way. Notice, Jesus charted a course on each issue that honored God and ascribed dignity and worth to everyone involved.

For example, we see this in Jesus’s response to the Roman occupation debate, paying taxes debate, the inheritance debate, the capital punishment debate, and the divorce debate (see Matt. 5:38-48; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 12:13-15; John 8:1-8; Matt. 19:1-12). Did Jesus side with the oppressed and marginalized? Yes. Did Jesus “take sides” and align himself with a religious or political

party, tribal group, or faction in his day? No, he did not. And neither should we.

According to Curtis Chang and Nancy French in *The After Party: Toward Better Christian Politics*, “Group polarization occurs when people reinforce each other’s opinions, which can become more extreme as they’re discussed. This can happen when people only associate with like-minded people or when people use discursive or rambling arguments to promote an agenda.” The only healthy way out of this dynamic is to disentangle ourselves from party loyalties, engage in active listening to those who are different from us, and seek to understand and truly empathize with those with whom we disagree.

This helps us to humanize and connect with each other, particularly on an emotional and heart level. In his book, *The Righteous Mind*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says that extensive studies reveal that our emotions and passions are what really drive us. He suggests imagining a rider on an elephant (not the Republican elephant, just an elephant). The rider is your logic, reasoning, and rational thinking. The elephant (which is much larger and more powerful) is your emotions, passions, and gut-reactions. Haidt says, based on research and studies, that essentially the elephant goes where it wants, even though the rider imagines he or she is calling the shots. In other words, we are all driven primarily by our emotions. And then we seek to rationalize and put arguments to those things we feel instinctively. This is a sobering truth.

And it explains why our logical arguments don’t work. Add to that the messiness of American politics, which are often complicated, sometimes ambiguous, and clearly require humility, compassion, and some level of compromise to get anything done. If democracy is going to work, then humility about these things is necessary. And more importantly, if we’re going to be disciples of Jesus and follow his Third Way, then we must see humility as a Kingdom virtue reflecting the mind of Christ.



Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation is a quarterly publication of the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. Its mission is to educate and stimulate Christ-like responses to the needs of society by providing biblical, theological, sociological, denominational and personal perspectives on a variety of contemporary issues.

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How then do we apply all this to how we vote? I know that some people think it's not all that hard to know for whom to vote. But I also know that some folks feel that no candidate is worthy of your vote. Some may choose not to vote, or some may choose to write in the person they'd like. And for many, we wish we had another option: a candidate who doesn't feed off fear, reward greed, encourage immorality, corruption and division, and isn't persuaded by extreme ideologies. I wish that things were different, but this is, unfortunately, where we are.

Brothers and sisters, if you're going to vote, and walk with Jesus into the voting booth, let it be with the understanding that Jesus is the true King and his Kingdom will come despite the powers that rival his rule, despite the ways the world rebels against him, and despite how bad things may seem right now. Therefore, live like you know where the future is going. Fear has no place in the life of the Christian. We should be hopeful realists. Yes, the world is broken, and the country is in a mess, but Jesus sits in the Oval Office of heaven, and he is coming again to establish his Kingdom on the earth. So be of good cheer!

Also, if you're going to vote, may it be to help those who need it most, for the common good, not merely to benefit a few (the rich, powerful, and privileged) and further empire. Let the voiceless, the hurting, the oppressed, and the marginalized vote through you.

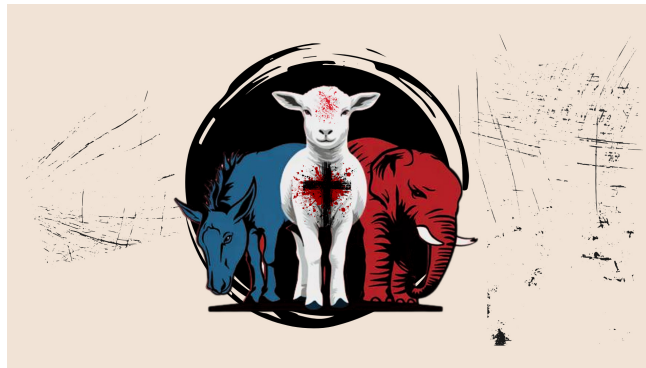
While it may sound a bit cynical (it does reflect the true reality of worldly politics), vote for the person who will do the least amount of damage to this country and the countries of the world, so that we might live peacefully with all people as we seek to further the Kingdom of God on the earth. And remember this: the distinctly Kingdom question is not, "How should we vote?" Rather, the real Kingdom question is, "How should we live?" May we live from the pews to the polls in such a way that when people see us, they see the God who looks like Jesus.

In what is known as his "high priestly prayer," Jesus prayed the following:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me

through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me (John 17:22-23)..

Our Lord Jesus called his disciples to be one and to remember who we are in him, what he's done for us on the cross, and promised that someday he will return to renew and resurrect this world. When we come to the communion table, we remember that it originally included disciples with various



opinions about how the kingdoms of the world should operate. There were rural, largely uneducated fishermen, a tax collector who exploited his own people and was despised by the Jews, a Zealot who wanted to kill tax collectors, and a dishonest accountant named Judas. Jesus also called men and women who were despised, considered unclean, had been exploited, abused, and cast out. He called all who would come, confess and repent of their sins, and join him at his table.

At the communion table, we remember that Jesus calls disciples from diverse backgrounds who hold differing opinions about various theological and political issues to express their unity in him. We remember that Jesus is forming a new nation, a royal priesthood, set apart from all kingdoms of the world and the politics of idolatrous empire (1 Pet. 2:9). We remember that real power in this world—the power to save, to transform, to change—ultimately comes from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son,

and in our willingness to embody his Messianic agenda (Luke 4:14-21; Mark 2:17; John 12:46; 1 John 3:8).

We remember our sin and our need to repent of all that dehumanizes us, so that we can love God, our neighbor, and our enemies as ministers of reconciliation. We remember that we are not to conform to the pattern of this world, but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:1-2). We remember that at the communion table we identify ourselves as children of the one true King—citizens of heaven and exiles on the earth—until he returns in glory and fully establishes his Kingdom on the earth.

We remember who we are, what it looks like to embrace the Third Way of Jesus, and where our ultimate hope and help comes from—not in horses and chariots, not in parties and presidents, not in donkeys or elephants, but in the Lamb of God who has called us to subvert the powers of evil and empire by orienting our lives to the Kingdom that is coming.

Finally, we do not begin with the question, "What is the most politically effective thing to do?" Instead, we ask, "What is most faithful to Jesus?" Let us adopt a Third Way posture and approach that relates to others (Christians and non-Christians alike) in humble, Christ-honoring, non-polarizing ways that serve to create space for mutual respect, listening and learning, as well as repentance and unity so that the world will know that Jesus was sent by the Father.

David Flowers is the senior pastor of the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. He also serves as president of the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. This article is condensed and adapted from the fifth sermon in a series on "Jesus, Justice, and the Third Way: Following the Lamb in an Age of Idolatry and Division" in November 2024. You can listen to the full sermon at granthamchurch.org/episode/our-third-way-witness.

Nonconformity Among the Early Brethren in Christ

by John Yeatts

EARLY BRETHREN IN Christ opposition to participation in government and politics was rooted in their two-kingdom theology:

Government and politics, they believed, belonged to the kingdom of the world; their call as the people of God was to demonstrate on earth the meaning of the kingdom of heaven. . . . Political involvement, they thought, would cause them to become “unequally yoked” with unbelievers. One of them stated this concern forcefully when he deplored “joining the unbelieving crowd of boisterous politicians on election day to vote with a party composed of all shades of society—unbelievers, swearers, and drunkards.”¹

Another basis for non-participation in politics was the Brethren in Christ doctrine of nonconformity, or separation from the world. In that context, Bishop O. B. Ulery contended that Christians are to “support their respective governments’ unless doing so would violate the gospel.”²

There were early exceptions to the Brethren’s non-involvement in politics. Although General Conference “condemned electioneering and attendance at political elections generally,” that did not include issues that were not considered “political,” for example, election of a school board director or an issue like prohibition where they “forbade any encouragement of the liquor traffic.”³ General Conference even decided that “members might vote at the polls against the liquor traffic.”⁴ On other issues, the Brethren “criticized President Theodore Roosevelt when he reviewed the troops on the Lord’s Day and . . . commended him for speaking out against lax divorce laws.”⁵

In 1894, General Conference considered the question: “Is it allowable for Brethren to hold public offices?” Although the decision was that “It is allowable,” Conference added, “Brethren should not allow themselves to be used in public offices for fear of becoming involved in political strife, which is contrary to the faith of the church. . . .” Although some Brethren held local political offices in public

education and town government, the Dayton (Ohio) district required confession from members who attended public or general elections, and the Kansas Brethren insisted on confession of “wrongdoing” from a member who sought political office.⁶ Moreover, Conference ruled that any member who served in a “legislative assembly suspended himself from full fellowship and communion privileges.”⁷

Early church statements explicitly prohibited members from voting. Nevertheless, in the mid-twentieth century, a questionnaire distributed to all pastors by the Board of Administration found that about a third of the Brethren in Christ were voting. That convinced the board to declare voting a matter of individual conscience. In a 1975 survey, 75 percent of respondents voted in national elections, but only 3 percent would consider running for public office, and very few actually held political office.⁸

During World War II, the Brethren in Christ became more active politically in relation to non-participation in war. In 1942, the denomination joined the Mennonite Central Committee, which facilitated both primary devotion to the kingdom of God and active engagement in work of social and political value.⁹ During the Korean War, C. N. Hostetter Jr. and other MCC officials appeared before Congress and met with Selective Service representatives. In the end, Congress “granted . . . the peace churches nearly everything they’d asked for.”¹⁰

With victory in the area of non-participation in war, Wilmer Heisey helped the Brethren in Christ to characterize “nonresistance as both nonparticipation in war and active, compassionate, and sacrificial service to society. . . . Instead of the two-kingdom theology, Heisey grounded nonresistance-as-service in the theological notion of the ‘lordship of Christ’ over all things. . . .”¹¹

According to Devin Manzullo-Thomas, John Zercher expanded the lordship of Christ to explain why Christians ought to prioritize the clear teachings of the Bible over the persuasive claims of political leaders and

pundits: If “Christ alone is Lord . . . our response to national and international affairs ought to be guided by ‘this supreme loyalty. . . .’” For Zercher, Christ’s lordship . . . included our political convictions, and he urged Brethren in Christ to let their view of national security be guided not by partisan platforms but by Christ’s call to love enemies. Zercher summarized this thinking by affirming: “[There are] very real issues of our time [that] will not go away if protest is silenced.”¹²

During the Vietnam conflict, according to Manzullo-Thomas, commitment to the doctrine of nonresistance served as a basis for active political involvement, advocacy, and even protest.:

Some felt pressed by their faith to protest the war and its destructive impact, to name military violence as sin, to critique Christian complicity in the systems that propped up the military-industrial complex, and to demand a cessation of fighting and a de-escalation of military involvement in Southeast Asia. . . . This activist turn represented a dramatic new direction for the Brethren in Christ.¹³

This more aggressive, activist stance against the conflict in Vietnam led a small but vocal group to advocate for a similar stance in regard to racism and other issues of social justice that might include protests, marches, and voting for and petitioning government officials.

Mainstream Brethren in Christ rejected this activist approach to race. Manzullo-Thomas documents:

While they expressed sympathy for the plight of African Americans, they looked with disfavor upon the use of marches, sit-in protests, and other ‘disruptions’ to challenge racial segregation. . . . Yet there were signs that . . . [passive approaches] were not going to satisfy all members of the church—especially those who believed that a more aggressive, action-oriented approach was needed.¹⁴

An *Evangelical Visitor* article in August 1964 encouraged readers to write to govern-

ment representatives in support of “legislation designed to ensure equal opportunity for all people;” another urged support for community organizations to fight to “alleviate racial injustices.”¹⁵ The tension between passive and activist political approaches continued in the decades to follow.

From its early years of separation from the kingdoms of this world, in the twenty-first century, political nonconformity among the Brethren in Christ has almost vanished. In a 2014 survey, 97 percent agreed that “It is okay for Christians to vote in government elections;” 84 percent affirmed that “Christian should participate in politics;” 88 percent acknowledged that “It is okay for Christians to run for political office;” and 78

percent even conceded that “It is okay for Christians to participate in public protest movements.”¹⁶ Yet, the Brethren in Christ still evidence a tension between commitment to nonconformity with the kingdoms of this world and accommodation with the political realities of worldly kingdoms.

Notes:

¹Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience* (Evangel Press, 1978), 107.

²Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas, *Open to the Spirit: The Brethren in Christ Church in the Twentieth Century* (forthcoming), chapter 3.

³Wittlinger, 107.

⁴Wittlinger, 222.

⁵Wittlinger, 405.

⁶Wittlinger, 109.

⁷Wittlinger, 406.

⁸Wittlinger, 531-532.

⁹Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 3.

¹⁰Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 7.

¹¹Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 7.

¹²Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 7.

¹³Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 7.

¹⁴Manzullo-Thomas, chapter 6.

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Why I Protested in Washington, DC

by Gretta Owen

On Capitol Hill

Walking down the street
planning to get arrested;
holding on to hope.

\$50 and an ID

Security line:
All the pockets hold the same,
except mine holds leaves.

I WROTE THESE two haiku poems after taking direct action/civil disobedience with Mennonite Action in Washington, DC in September 2025. This was the third action I had participated in with Mennonite Action, and the second time I was planning to get arrested. As I walked toward the Senate Hart building on a sunny, clear, September day, I picked up a couple of leaves from the sidewalk to hold in my pocket through the day.

We had clear instructions and plans about how the day was to unfold, but uncertainty had followed me from Mechanicsburg. I was less convinced that this was a meaningful and faithful Christian response than I had been the first two times I'd participated in actions.

Our action was to request a meeting with Senator Mark Warner of Virginia. Many in our group from Virginia had been part of an organized phone campaign to call him reg-

ularly for the past month, advocating for three things: an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, an opening of the borders to allow full access to humanitarian aid, and an end to US sending weapons to Israel while Israel continues to violate international humanitarian law. As we expected, the senator was not able to meet with us, so we sat down in the hallway, blocking the entrance to the office and refusing to leave until he would meet with us. We would then spend the rest of the time singing until Capitol police were notified when we would be given the required three warnings, and then we would all be under arrest.

My misgivings were more about whether this was effective action than what may happen if I accrued another incommensurate arrest on my record. Was this really making a difference for Palestinians, or was it just another social media post?

My answer came in many ways throughout the day, but the most moving moment for our group came when we sat down outside the office and began to sing, as another advocacy group exited. A group of Palestinian Americans looked at our blockade first in wary surprise, then in recognition as they saw our banners and heard us begin to sing, “Freedom, freedom, freedom is coming. . . .” With tears in their eyes, they thanked us: “Future generations will look back at you

and thank you for standing up for human rights.”

In that moment, they knew they were not alone. Not only were they not alone, but they knew that there were American Christians sharing the message that Jesus stands in solidarity with them, sees their pain and longs for peace, freedom, and justice for all humanity. Was the protest effective? Not immediately, but it was disruptive. And as one of our leaders said, “When business as usual includes continuing to fund a genocide, then we have a responsibility as followers of Jesus, to disrupt that business.”

Gretta Owen, Mechanicsburg, PA, is a home health care worker at Messiah Lifeways and attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church with her family. This article originally appeared in “Peace Matters,” the periodic newsletter of the Grantham Church’s Peace and Social Justice Commission.

Changing the World Without Voting

By Chad Frey

OVER THE YEARS, my peace position has raised the eyebrows of more than one sincere canvasser when they learn that I don't vote. The conversation usually goes like this: *Canvasser*: "Excuse me, are you registered to vote?"

Me: "No."

Canvasser: "Would you like to register? It just takes a few minutes."

Me: "No thanks."

Canvasser: "Do you mind if I ask why?"

Me: "Well...in a nutshell, I believe that war is evil so I can't in good conscious vote for the Commander in Chief regardless of the candidates or their political party."

Canvasser: "But registering to vote isn't just about electing the President. Does that mean that you don't vote for any political office?"

Me: "If you really want to know, I choose not to participate on Election Day because I'm trying to rely more on God in my life. I think Jesus wants me to imagine a different kind of political system on earth that looks more like the Kingdom of God. I want to see change in this world, but I believe that happens through Christ so today my work is faithfully try to work out my politics in a different way."

At this point, most canvassers simply smile and quickly turn their attention to the next passerby, not knowing that I've spent much of my professional career actively working alongside government leaders. In Northern Ireland, I've been involved in conflict transformation with political leaders and paramilitary groups outside Belfast. Closer to home, I was invited by the Obama administration to work on a national White House initiative that partnered faith-based institutions across the country with at-risk public schools to improve student achievement. In the capital of Pennsylvania, where I've lived for over twenty years, I routinely interact with state and local leaders to create mutually beneficial and reciprocal community partnerships that have included setting up community classrooms during the pandemic, revitalizing local parks, addressing homelessness, and tearing down blighted

buildings.

So when I choose not to vote, it doesn't mean that I'm advocating anarchy, civic disengagement, or apathy. I just know that Election Day is a time for me to step back from the ballot box and contemplate how I can faithfully rely more on God and less on government to change this world. Regardless of who is elected, I know that our greatest geopolitical and socio-economic problems will require peacemakers who actively engage government leaders and policy makers without regard for who they are or the parties they represent. When the polls close, I still need to roll up my sleeves, trust God, and work for peace with them even if we may disagree on the kind of change we are seeking, where it comes from, and how to go about it.

I'm not surprised if canvassers find my beliefs to be ridiculous. I guess I don't expect them to have a theological framework for understanding an historic peace position. When the dismissive smile comes, I'm ready for it. However, what I do find remarkable is how much the Brethren in Christ Church has shifted its position on voting over the last 250 years.

To view voting as a personal choice is somewhat predictable given our Western context. However, it is startling to see how quickly voting has become status quo, to the point where it doesn't seem to be theologically questioned. When many of my Brethren in Christ brothers and sisters discover that I don't vote, they are authentically shocked. When they ask me why, I find a curious audience almost always willing to respectfully listen. I confess that the number of my brothers and sisters who find my nonparticipation at the ballot box to be so novel and peculiar alarms me when they themselves identify with a historic peace church tradition.

Regardless of whether or not one votes, the entrenched war and violence within our partisan politics must be interrogated for compatibility with Christ's teachings. When so few even ask if responsible Christians should vote in elections, I can't help wonder-

ing if it's time to test our prophetic imagination and counter-cultural witness. To do that, we need to connect our core values to concrete practices that follow Christ even if they are novel and peculiar.

For me, Election Day is a time to pray for heaping amounts of love and grace to be able to believe the Bible and follow the hard teachings of Jesus to, "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). If this isn't challenging to do in a toxic political world, then I don't know what is. I actually think it's impossible to love my enemy if I see them as enemy. To take any sincere steps toward putting this teaching into practice requires that I transform the way I understand others—not as my enemy, but as my neighbor. I believe this pivot lies at the very crux of the Great Commandment to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds and love our neighbor as ourselves.

When candidates and parties try to convince us that we have enemies, we need to start asking theological questions. When we feel the political angst boiling, we need to take a deep breath, read Matthew 22:15-22, and ask ourselves, "What isn't God's?" There are great resources within our historic peace tradition to help us imagine ways to reframe political arguments, resist distractions, and focus on the important things like relying more on God to be able to love our neighbor.

I'll be the first to admit that my views on voting might be inconsistent and not very "realistic" or "practical" in a violent world filled with enemies. But I'm okay doing some things that don't "make sense" if they open up new ways to rely on God to love my neighbors and faithfully work beside government leaders for peace and justice.

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Democracy and the Kingdom of God

By Zach Spidel

I HAVE STRUGGLED in almost every election since 2008 with the question of whether I ought to vote. I have mostly opted against voting in presidential elections and have often opted against voting in all national elections. Usually, I've made exceptions for certain local positions. I continue to feel unsettled in all these decisions. My ongoing struggle with the question of how Christians ought to relate to democratically elected governments illustrates and emerges from a conviction I hold more firmly: the question is more fraught than is often assumed. I'd like to think out loud about why it is not immediately apparent to me that we Christians can regard voting and other forms of democratic participation as straightforwardly compatible with our faith.

First, it seems to me that our citizenship in heaven, along with our discipleship to Jesus, rules out any sort of ultimate loyalty to (including any blanket commitment to participation in) earthly forms of government.

Second, I take Romans 12-13 as a key text showing how Christians are to relate, as disciples of Jesus and citizens of heaven, to earthly governments. We love enemies and leave to the state the correction of evil by coercive means. The state restrains evil with the sword, we Christians truly conquer it by using the power of the cross.

Third, I recognize that American Christians dwell in a state that awards each of us a say in how that state is run, complicating Paul's thought in ways that cannot be summarized here.

Fourth, I believe the above complications, while real, leave unaltered certain key truths that lead me toward non-participation. A democratic government is still defined—like all other forms of earthly government—by its use of violence. A nation state is the social apparatus that is recognized (by a certain community within certain boundaries) as having a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and, by virtue of that monopoly, issues rules that must be followed on pain of punishments ranging from fines to death. Such governments also, by the same

monopoly, go to war, killing the enemies of the people they rule. The fact that a majority of voting persons set the rules for the use of state violence doesn't change the fact that rule by the sword is fundamentally different in character from rule by the cross. We Brethren in Christ believe Christians should not go to war. Should we then seek to select this or that commander in chief of the armed forces? We believe we are summoned to invite evil doers to become transformed by the renewing of their minds, sacrificially loving them, even turning the other cheek when assaulted by them as a witness to them concerning Jesus's offer of redemption. Should we then seek to use the coercive power of the state to imprison them or worse?

The questions above are genuine, even if you can tell I incline to answer negatively. On the one hand, I recognize with Paul in Romans 13 that the state's sword is used by God (when states are functioning well) to restrain worse sorts of evil. (I have called the police in the face of violence here—sometimes, and sometimes I have refrained. This is complicated and hard!) On the other hand, it also seems apparent to me that Paul's separation of roles between the church and the state still holds despite the democratic character of the nation in which I live. As a Christian, I believe I am called to leave to the state the violent restraint of violence and to busy myself embodying and deploying together with other Christians Jesus's cruciform, agapic love.

This was the conviction of the early church, which told catechumens they could not be baptized if they carried a sword or wore the purple (served in the military or occupied a magistracy that oversaw and dispensed violence). This was also the conviction of the early Anabaptists who shared both judgements. I am largely inclined to continue following this precedent and to extend it to voting for magistracies—especially one like the American presidency—that wield the sword.

One reason I continue to feel unsettled in this conviction, however, is my respect for



a certain kind of holy activism—from William Wilberforce to Fannie Lou Hamer and others today. I have seen Christians motivated by a desire to do good for their neighbors, especially their needy, abused, or oppressed neighbors, engage in earthly politics in ways that I think do credit to Christ and have led to developments I can only see as gifts from God. (Thank the Lord for all those Black brothers and sisters and their friends who marched, sat in, did voter-drives, etc. and helped dismantle Jim Crow in America.)

This good witness, however, seems in my judgment to represent a minority of those Christians who, however well intentioned, participate deeply in earthly politics. So often we who so participate become captive to earthly logics (left and right) and begin to think in sub-Christian, consequentialist terms. So often we begin to see the world in terms of coalitions, positions, and identities—friends to be aided and enemies to be overcome. So often our preoccupation becomes the earthly nation within which we happened to be born, while the reality of heaven's government becomes more and more remote in our thinking and speaking. Our passions become inflamed, our hearts get captured, our rhetoric becomes cruel, our lives impatient, and our hopes dashed when our preferred outcomes fail to materialize. Perhaps it is better not to get involved, as Paul says elsewhere, in "civilian affairs" and to practice a different sort of politics in service of our true home country?

Such practice can take surprising and messy shape in our lives and need not mean mere quietism. Dorothy Day—that radical Catholic and fellow pacifist committed to living the Sermon on the Mount—refused to vote even while marching in favor of the voting rights of others. She wrote about this strange line she walked from time to time.

Strange it was but, I think, faithful and perhaps worthy of imitation.

I'll wrestle again this fall with whether I ought to vote. I am deeply alienated from the politics of both major parties and if I vote, I will have to do so tactically, holding my nose. Whether I vote or not, however, I identify

with Abraham, that wandering stranger, who was longing for a better country. Whether I vote or not, I want to focus my energies on serving as an ambassador for that heavenly country, inviting people to become citizens alongside me, and serving my country's King as he greets me in the face of every hungry,

naked, poor, tired, sick, oppressed, or imprisoned person I see.

Zack Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

School Board Service as Pastoral Ministry

By Layne Lebo

NEAR THE START of my pastoral ministry in the early 1990s, God began to burden my heart with a desire to see people in my sphere of influence experience Jesus's salvation and healing in their lives. For several years my wife and I prayed, asking God to open doors for us to be his salt and light in our community, but we saw few opportunities.

When our three children reached school age, we recognized that the school they attended and the youth sports they played were our mission field. We volunteered at our children's school regularly, and I began coaching the soccer, basketball, and baseball teams on which they played. Over thirteen years, I coached more than forty different youth sports teams.

As my children reached middle school and high school, and I realized my coaching was coming to an end, I wondered how I would stay engaged in our community. A friend of mine was transitioning off our local school board and asked about my interest in running for his seat. My initial response was, "Why would I do that? I don't really like boards." However, after attending a school board meeting, I sensed that serving on school board might be a good way for me to invest in our community.

During my first term as a school board member, from 2016 through 2019, I occasionally encountered situations where my roles as a pastor and a local school board director conflicted, but those situations were rare. When the COVID pandemic hit in March 2020, conflicts of interest between my job as a pastor and my involvement on our local school board became an ongoing reality. The tension was strong enough that I explained my dilemma to our church board

and offered to resign from the school board if they sensed it would benefit our church. A board member asked if I was saying or doing anything differently at school board than I did at church. When I said I believed I was able to be the same person in both spaces, they encouraged me to continue serving on the school board. The tension I felt didn't go away, but I knew our church board fully supported my service on the school board.

Prior to COVID, few people seemed to pay much attention to school boards, but with the newly charged political environment, even school board elections became politicized. My first two times running for school board in 2015 and 2019 I ran unopposed, but when I ran for my third term in 2023, my seat was contested. My opponents campaigned with yard signs and door to door contacts, and I was advised by fellow board members that I'd need to campaign if I wanted to be reelected. As I prayed about what to do, I sensed the Holy Spirit saying, "When you began serving on the board, you had no idea what a great missional opportunity this would be. If it's my desire for you to continue serving, you'll be elected without campaigning." In God's sovereignty, I was reelected for another term and am now midway through my eleventh year on the board.

While the scrutiny around school boards has changed, I don't view my role as political. I see being a school board member as part of God's mission for me. However, I am acutely aware of the tension between serving in a political position while faithfully living as a follower of Jesus. I've wrestled with questions like, "Can I in good conscience pledge my allegiance to our flag as we begin each meeting? If so, what does pledging allegiance to the American flag say about my ultimate de-

votion to God?" "How do I run for a seat on our school board without getting sucked into the partisan vortex that is now so much a part of any political race?" "Is declaring a party affiliation in running for school board hurtful to congregants in our church who affiliate with a different party? Could it be a potential obstacle to people in our community coming into a relationship with Jesus because they have different political perspectives than I do?" "How do I maintain a healthy balance between seeking God's kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven through the work I do while prayerfully submitting difficult situations I encounter to God's will?" Wrestling with questions like these as I serve on our school board enables me to hold my position openhanded before God while seeking his guidance regarding my continued service.

As a teen and into my twenties, I was somewhat dismissive of the Brethren in Christ's historical stance. This motivated them to steer clear of any political involvement, including voting in elections. I viewed my spiritual ancestors as sheltered and out of touch with Jesus's heart for evangelizing the world. As I've aged (and hopefully matured), I find myself more sympathetic to our forefathers' and mothers' commitment to prioritize citizenship in Jesus's kingdom above earthly citizenship by steering clear of politics. I may land in a different place than they did, but I have a new respect for the ways in which they sought to live out their commitment to be "in the world, but not of the world."

As a follower of Jesus, committed to bringing out the God-flavors and God-colors in our world (Matt. 5:13-14, The Message), serving on our local school board has been a

rewarding experience for me. God has used my service as a school board director to positively impact my local community by supporting, encouraging and praying for our school leaders. He has attuned my heart to the needs of our community, so I can carry those needs to him in prayer. He has given me a platform to build bridges between Jesus

and the people God loves in our community by demonstrating God's heart of love and concern for them in their everyday lives.

Layne Lebo is senior pastor of the Mechanicsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church (McBIC) and a member of the board of the Mechanicsburg Area School District.

I Got Into Politics Because I Lost a Fight With God

By Patty Kim

HAVE YOU EVER had a moment when, deep in your gut, you knew you were supposed to do something? Maybe it was reaching out to someone with whom you had lost touch. Maybe it was taking a new direction you had never considered. That happened to me in 2003.

I was entering a new season of life. After spending a decade in television news, I left the newsroom to stay home and raise my beautiful daughter. Every day, I thanked God for the gift of being with her. After years of deadlines and constant noise, the quiet felt spiritually restorative. I also discovered something unexpected: God seems to speak most clearly when we're still enough to listen.

Around that time, a family friend who served on Harrisburg City Council asked me to run for a seat alongside him. Although he was completely serious, I laughed. Politics had never crossed my mind.

My mother's story, however, kept coming back to me.

As a child during the Korean War, she survived by dodging bombs in South Korea. When she immigrated to America in the 1960s, she never took this country for granted. She was deeply grateful for the freedoms and opportunities she found here. Throughout my teenage years, she reminded me again and again that I had been blessed with health, education, and faith—and that I should use those gifts to serve God.

Suddenly, the idea of serving on City Council didn't seem so strange but it still terrified me.

Not knowing what to do, I took it up with God.

One afternoon, while my daughter was napping, I prayed—and argued. I tried to

convince God that this was a terrible idea.

I don't want to be publicly criticized.

I don't want to ask people for money.

I don't know enough about politics.

And I'm shy.

Looking back, it probably resembled a toddler's temper tantrum more than a prayer. Then, in the middle of all my complaining, a Bible verse I had memorized decades earlier in youth group came flooding back:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. . . . Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:27, 31).

There wasn't much left to say.

I couldn't argue anymore.

I wasn't excited about it, but I was certain I had to move forward with this.

Looking back now, I can see how God made a way at every step. My husband got on board and became my campaign manager. Influential members of the community encouraged and supported me. And in a crowded race, I received the most votes.

How could I "boast" about something that wasn't even my idea? Twenty-three years and nine elections later, I have been able to serve as a council member, a state representative for twelve years, and now as a first term state senator.

As you might have guessed, politics isn't always enjoyable. Serving as a public official comes with pressures. I represent many families living in poverty and a large immigrant community, and I carry their concerns with me every day. I also know that one misspoken sentence can quickly go viral, bringing public criticism that can overshadow the work we're

trying to do.

The part of this job that motivates me is serving constituents. I've mentioned before that I'm naturally shy, but I've come to see that as a strength. It has taught me to listen carefully. When I truly listen, I can better understand both the problem and the path toward a solution. Early on, I made a commitment to meet with every constituent who wants to see me. It's part of my job, but it's also how I stay grounded in the realities of our district. Abraham Lincoln called it his "public opinion bath."

One of my first meetings at the State Capitol has stayed with me ever since. An older African American gentleman came into my office carrying a binder. He carefully flipped through page after page of certificates and letters of recommendation, each preserved in a plastic sleeve. As I watched, it slowly dawned on me that he was trying to prove his worth to me.

My heart broke.

I gently asked him to close the binder so we could simply talk. We spent the rest of our meeting getting to know one another and discussing the issue that had brought him to my office. I hope he left feeling seen and valued—not because of the accomplishments in that binder, but because he mattered. And I wanted him to know that I would do everything I could to help.

I would be lying if I said I prayed and read the Bible before every vote I've cast. But I have tried to keep one verse at the center of my public service: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

Years later, when I considered running for higher office, I asked my former pastor—who leads a Brethren in Christ church in Harrisburg—for advice. I expected strategy or encouragement. Instead, he surprised me: “Patty, God doesn’t care what job you take.”

It was exactly the humbling reminder I needed.

What I took from it was this: whatever role we hold, involve God. The job title matters far less than seeking his wisdom, following his direction, and serving faithfully

where we are.

Patty Kim is a Pennsylvania state senator, representing the 15th senatorial district. She and her family attend the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Not My Will But God’s

By Tracie M. Hunter

SEVERAL SCRIPTURES HAVE guided my life as a Christian: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13); “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8); “nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42); and “let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24). They enabled me to finish college after a near fatal accident altered my life and redirected my career. I engraved the Scripture from Micah on my first business card as a lawyer. I always prayed God’s will for my life according to Luke. The passage in Amos led me as a journalist, lawyer, pastor, and judge.

Raised Catholic, I considered becoming a nun, a girl’s only path to a life in service to God. As one of a few black children in school and church through most of high school, this wasn’t encouraged. But I learned that I could devote my life to his service in any profession, including political office. Apart from my parents, as a child I was primarily exposed to white teachers, career counselors, professors, and spiritual authority figures. My views were in large part shaped by the white people who surrounded me and openly excluded me. I noticed subtle differences in how I was treated compared to my white peers. Those differences weighed heavily on me and led me to begin challenging exclusion of people like me from critical spaces.

The media reported negative images of black people and excluded positive stories. The skewed reporting bothered me. It led me to feature positive stories of black people as a journalist and media owner. As a lawyer, I saw black people mistreated by the justice (“just us”) system, police, and judges. White people were protected by their family names,

communities, and cultures. Black people were overcharged, over-incarcerated and condemned. Prosecutors were ruthless towards black children and families. They became ruthless towards me as I defended and advocated for people of color and the poor to receive justice and equality. System gatekeepers resisted reform. It would take the power of God and his righteousness to stand against wickedness in high places and overcome evil with good.

Committed to God and faith, I could choose the path of least resistance or blaze a new path marked by hardship, controversy, persecution, and prosecution, led by the Holy Spirit. I chose God. I wrote a column about faith and justice for a newspaper. When I wrote about the Juvenile Court, and the racism and disparity in treatment I witnessed, white judges sent a messenger to threaten my life and legal career (see note at the end*).

While serving as a minister in my non-denominational church, God was preparing me for life as Brethren in Christ pastor and a judge. He positioned me to challenge the status quo and lead reforms that would ensure justice and rehabilitation for the least of these as an elected official who advocated for equality and justice for all.

God came to collect on the prayer I had prayed most of my life: “not my will, but thy will be done.” Did I mean it? When God called me to pastor, a call I resisted for years, I didn’t know about the Brethren in Christ. But God brought us together and I was invited to serve the Western Hills congregation, then a predominantly white congregation. The church is in a community that had historically been unfriendly to black people. I wrestled with God. It took me weeks to pray and accept. I would be the first

black and the first woman. But I prayed, “not my will, thy will be done.” Surprisingly, Brethren in Christ history, core values, and beliefs aligned with mine. The denomination’s strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit sealed it for me. I accepted the assignment and the meager pay. It was an opportunity to serve out my faith and say yes to God even if it wasn’t ideal.

After accepting the pastorate, God came to collect on another vow I made—to go back to the Juvenile Court only when I could make a difference as a judge. I had no desire to go back or be judge. I told God no. Then Paul McGhee, now my associate pastor, called me and said God told him to help me become judge. Since I hadn’t told him or anyone else about my conversation with God, I knew it was God speaking through him. I immediately declared my candidacy, shaking up the political landscape in Cincinnati. The Democrats had endorsed a white man and wanted me to stand down, but like my pastoral calling, God called me. I only needed God’s endorsement. No black or Democrat had ever been elected judge of the Juvenile Court. The judiciary was controlled by Republicans and white people. With less than 30 percent “minority” population, the odds of my winning were statistically impossible. But not with God.

When God gives me the green light, there is no turning back. If I could have been a judge and not run for political office, I would have done it. But judges are an elected office. I didn’t want the political trauma, drama, racism, pressure, scrutiny, and public attacks that I would endure. I understand why the Brethren in Christ have historically discouraged political involvement. Politics are messy, demoralizing, dehumanizing, and dirty. I experienced it all.

Yet God told Christians to be light in darkness and the salt of the earth. The religious systems of Jesus's time were not so different from the political system of our time. The spiritual hierarchy and infighting among the Sadducees, Pharisees, and disciples was also political. Jesus had to teach his disciples to navigate through political discord, cultural unrest, racial divisions, and religious systems. We forget that Jesus and the disciples got their hands dirty when they spoke truth to power to usher in the Kingdom of God. There are nearly two billion Christians in the world today, despite the dirty politics of their day. Just like they had to do it then, someone must do it today. God sent me.

I believe that Christians must venture into arenas where we are not welcome and that make us uncomfortable. Jesus condemned oppression against women when he allowed a Samaritan woman to share the Gospel. Samaritans were saved because she led them to Christ. The Apostle Paul was a political figure who used his power and former position as a prosecutor of early Christians to save Gentiles, all the while being persecuted. God called me to be a judge, like he called Deborah in the Bible, equipped with Ephesians 6 armor and empowered by the Holy Spirit to challenge the unjust systems of this world and represent Jesus in the political arena today. Like prophet Jonah, I didn't want to deliver the message, but God called me to expose and dismantle oppression, racism, and injustice, and bring his righteousness. Like Queen Esther, I made a

choice to follow God, even if I perished.

My political involvement and election changed multiple laws. The election lawsuit I filed proved that I won the election after my white opponent was wrongfully declared the winner. As a result, provisional ballots must now be counted in Ohio ensuring more diversity in every political office. People who were formerly incarcerated who have served their time may vote in Ohio because I filed another lawsuit after felons were wrongfully removed from the voter polls. As a result of my rulings as judge, juveniles may not be shackled in court in the state of Ohio, and evidence formerly excluded by prosecutors must now be provided to juvenile and adult defendants that may prove their innocence. The entire judiciary and elected offices changed in Cincinnati after I broke the glass ceiling for all.*

Now as a Brethren in Christ pastor for seventeen years, I remain devoted to God and committed to serve the Western Hills congregation, now predominantly black, in the year America celebrates 250 years. The Declaration of Independence did not apply to nor protect black people in 1776, nor did the United States Constitution signed in 1787. The year 2026 does not represent 250 years of freedom or independence to me as a black woman in America, so I can't in honesty celebrate it. My people were neither free nor independent when America was colonized. But along the way, Christian abolitionists and those who opposed slavery, including the Brethren in Christ, invited me

to practice my faith alongside them. I was empowered to also share my faith in my secular profession, including as judge of the Juvenile Court, wading into a hostile political arena that desperately needs God. I believe that being a political figure and a pastor can coexist as part of God's will and with his help.

*Tracie wrote about her years-long effort to prove her election and achieve justice for herself and the system in the Winter 2021 edition of *Shalom!*

Tracie M. Hunter is pastor of the Western Hills Brethren in Christ Church, Cincinnati, OH, and a former elected judge.

Editor's Notes

Upcoming topic:

- *Fall 2026*: "Practical Stories of Peacemaking"—when enemies have been reconciled, forgiveness has been offered, relationships healed, and justice and mercy have met. If you have a story to tell or something else to say on the topic, contact the editor (info on page 2).
- *Looking ahead to 2027*: potential topics include being Christian in a pluralist society, addiction, and healing families that are broken. Contact the editor if you have other ideas for topics.

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Wright and Bird explore Christian relationships to the governing powers in Christendom and movements from Anabaptism to Christian Nationalism. They explore the totalitarianism of both communism and fascism and defend liberal democracies as the viable alternative. Such democracies allow for a peaceful society and the best opportunity to pursue a witness for the gospel. However, they recognize and chronicle the flaws and dangers of democracies also. They suggest that a "confident pluralism" should be added to liberal democracies as one safeguard to their failures. Confident pluralism

is the premise "that people have the right to be different, to think differently, to live differently, to worship differently, without fear of reprisal." They write, "We can disagree with what other people say, but only if we are willing to defend their right to be disagreeable." This is perhaps a weaker cousin of, "I may not agree with what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it."

They conclude that Christian involvement in government from inside or outside the halls of power is warranted to pursue justice and peace, but not to pursue power. "Christian testimony must not shrink back

from its theo-political implications, even if it must be vigilant not to be seduced by the temptations of proximity to political power." Such temptation can be subtle and all too real, but the call to have dominion over the earth is not a call to power, but a call to serve, a call to create the harmony of shalom over all the earth.

Lois Saylor is a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and an editorial advisor for *Shalom!*

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BOOK REVIEW: Christians and Politics from Creation to this Age

By Lois Saylor

N. T. WRIGHT AND Michael F. Bird, in their book, *Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*, take both a theological and practical approach to the question of how Christians should relate to the earthly powers of governments and states. They meld biblical passages with Christian thought and action throughout ages and cultures, but they start at the very beginning—creation.

In the story of creation, God created humans to rule over the earth. This theological understanding can be considered a creation ordinance meaning it is baked into the substance of who we are and what God intended. Humans were to “have dominion over” the rest of creation. Of course, the fall corrupted our relationship with God, each other, and creation. For Christians in all ages, the question becomes, how does the church fulfill the divine directive to rule over the earth? How does the church work with or within the corrupted powers of earthly governments? To answer the question, the authors work through the biblical passages telling us to obey governing authorities and also the passages that declare we are to obey

God over human authorities. Many people accept this idea that obedience to earthly rulers is not a blind obedience. There are scriptural limitations.

The authors also interact with the passages stating that God has instituted governments. Does this mean that institutional governments are part of the creation ordinance and human dominion, or could it mean governments are a necessary adaptation as result of the fall? In a fallen world, even a questionable governmental system can be better for ordered living than no state at all, which seems to lead to the brutality of anarchy.

A further question would be, “Do the texts mean individual leaders are put in place by God or just the general system that needs leaders?” Israel, the authors point out, had bad and good kings. David was a good king who also did some bad things. Government, even God-ordained government, is not without its problems. Nathan, God’s prophet, had to correct David. John the Baptist spoke boldly to the sins of King Herod. Jesus harshly rebuked the hypocrisy of the politically entwined religious leaders. He honored the seat of Moses, but not those who misused

it. Wright and Bird contend that if God is the author of all government and their leaders, God also holds them accountable for how they lead. He is not pleased with sinful leaders. Nor does it mean everything they do is God ordained. They say any state authority is “derivative” (from God) and “not definitive” (not the final authority). Such authority belongs to God alone.

The question remains: “How do we exercise the creation ordinance to rule?” From outside governments, the prophets spoke truth to power. We can follow their example. But the authors warn that if the powers do listen and change, we must adjust our attitudes to the new circumstance. We should not be like Jonah sulking at the salvation of Nineveh. We also have biblical examples of direct disobedience like the Hebrew midwives disobeying Pharaoh. They affected God’s will by disobedience and saved Moses who also confronted Pharaoh directly and at God’s direction. Even Paul and Peter who told us to obey governments must have disobeyed the ruling authorities since those same powers decided to execute them.

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