A POLITICALLY COMPROMISED CHURCH

Church leaders became increasingly involved in national politics during the Roman emperor Constantine’s reign (A.D. 306–337). Bishops enjoyed luxurious banquets in the imperial palaces, where they lavished praise and flattery upon Constantine for the favors he granted them. Constantine passed laws that favored the church, exempted clergy from taxes, appointed Christians to powerful positions in the empire, and used state revenue to pay for new church buildings. The church's ambitions for wealth and worldly power only exposed its own moral bankruptcy and lack of spiritual power. Compromises with pagan culture resulted in a church that hid many forms of paganism under the flag of Christianity.

The bishops led public prayers for Constantine’s military and political success, speaking of him as the church’s savior and of his rival, Licinius, as their archenemy. They feared that Licinius might revive old persecutions against the church, and in their hostility against him, their devotion to Constantine became fanatical. One historian described it this way: “It was the aim of Constantine to make theology a branch of politics; it was the hope of every bishop in the empire to make politics a branch of theology” (John William Draper, History of the Intellectual Development of Europe [1863], 311). A new version of Christianity resulted from this strange marriage between theology and politics—one that eventually grew into religious tyranny. This week’s lesson will explore scriptural principles that should have stopped the church from ever combining theology and politics. We must continue to heed these warnings today.
Write out Luke 5:27–39 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 27–32. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
GLOBALIST + NATIONALIST = TROUBLE!

Jesus lived on earth in a politically charged time and set the perfect example of how to reach others amid political tensions and national strife. He began by choosing a rugged and diverse group of men to be His disciples. It was quite surprising that His team stayed together given that they came from different backgrounds, interests, ideologies, and ambitions. The improbable unity of the group became the evidence to the world that God was indeed behind their mission. It was Jesus’ earnest prayer that what divides people in the world would be powerless to divide His disciples (John 17:21).

One of the biggest challenges for this discipleship team was overcoming their starkly opposed political stances. Jesus was asking a fiery nationalist zealot like Simon (Luke 6:15) to work shoulder-to-shoulder with a globalist collaborator with the Roman empire, a despised tax-collector, Levi Matthew (Luke 5:27–29). This issue was readily apparent to all who saw them, and the Pharisees lost no time in pointing it out (v. 30). In asking Jesus why He was eating with tax collectors, the Pharisees were really asking why He was eating with one of His own disciples! When Jesus called His team to the same table, He shattered the barriers of caste, offering equal access and honor to all.

Tax collectors, who were often Jews themselves, were despised for collaborating with a corrupt pagan government that curtailed state rights and robbed Israel of national sovereignty. Adding a tax collector to the group of disciples put a real damper on conversation within the group. The other disciples loved to talk about Israel’s future political glories, but Jesus had invited a traitor of the Jewish nation to join the team—talk about awkward! From that point forward, the only way for the disciples to keep peace within their group would be to avoid some of their favorite topics of discussion.

Jesus wanted to show the world how to have a spirit of selflessness and equality. He started with the basics when He shared a meal with people who belong to opposing factions. For some, the most difficult setting to overcome political hostilities might be gatherings with the family. We know how fast the political tension can rise when catching up with family and friends. Jesus’ example demonstrates the necessity of setting aside economic differences, national loyalties, and political divisions to share a simple meal and strengthen relationships.

If Jesus had allowed His disciples to nominate candidates for His discipleship team, a tax collector never would have made the list. If He had invited any feedback on who He chose to be disciples, we can only imagine the instant shock and concern it would have caused. Jesus selected this unique blend of disciples to illustrate the gospel’s power over politics and national pride. Nearly every war in human history has demonstrated the motivating and uniting power of national loyalty, but something much deeper than nationalism must unite Jesus’ followers. Calling a politically divided team of disciples highlighted that something bigger and better was keeping the group together. By calling a tax collector to join His team, Jesus broke down His disciples’ cultural prejudices, scandalized their national pride, and required them to rise above their opinions.
Politically Devastated

Most of the disciples wanted nothing more than to be free from Rome’s authoritarian rule. They viewed the Roman Empire as the greatest threat to their religious liberty, and rightly so, for Ellen White comments that “the Romans claimed the right of appointing and removing the high priest” in Jerusalem (The Desire of Ages [1898], 30). Most of us today would consider it an egregious violation of our religious liberty for our government to choose our church pastor or conference president for us! It’s no wonder that most of the disciples were eager for Jesus to stand up for their rights and free them from the intolerable government overreach they were enduring.

The disciples clung to the hope that Jesus would deliver them from Roman oppression more fiercely than anything else. They knew the promises in the Old Testament regarding a new kingdom, and they assumed Jesus had come to finally establish that kingdom. The disciples argued repeatedly about who would be first in this new government administration (Luke 9:46; 22:24). James’ and John’s mother even asked Jesus to give her boys top positions in this highly anticipated kingdom (Matt. 20:20–23). Toward the end of Jesus’ life, His disciples’ passion was focused on building this new kingdom on earth.

Large crowds went so far as to try to force Jesus to become king (John 6:15). However, as Jesus’ ministry continued, they began to realize that He would never accept an earthly throne. Many walked away when they came to this realization, never to follow Him again (v. 66). Their devotion to Christ was wrapped up in political ambitions, and when He required them to separate themselves from those ambitions, they separated from Him instead.

The disciples’ hopes were not easily put aside. Their last conversation with Jesus, which took place forty days after His resurrection, was once again about their political dreams (Acts 1:6). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus wondered in devastation why Jesus failed to redeem Israel from foreign domination (Luke 24:21). Nothing made sense in their political framework; they needed to adopt a new worldview to understand the gospel (vv. 25–27).

Jesus’ ultimate answer was explained in one sentence: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Instead of ascending a throne, He ascended a cross. He carried a rugged tree rather than a scepter. He wore a crown of thorns instead of a crown of gold. Though the people expected Him to break them out of the shackles of religious oppression, Jesus had a much grander goal in mind. He does not work according to our ambitions and principles and timelines, and for that we ought to be grateful, for His are far beyond our own.
What relationship do the following verses have with Luke 5:27–39?

Matthew 6:33
Matthew 20:20–23
John 18:36, 37
Galatians 3:26–29
Philippians 3:20
Hebrews 11:13–16

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

OFFENDED BY JESUS

Jesus wasn’t merely introducing a few new ideas to His disciples’ old system of thought; He was establishing an entirely new worldview within them. Jesus emphasized the importance of completely breaking from the old when He said, “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved” (Luke 5:36–38).

Unfortunately, one disciple was unwilling to allow Jesus to change his worldview. Judas never surrendered his political plans. When the crowds were devastated that Jesus wouldn’t make Himself king and bring freedom from Rome (John 6:15), Judas stood with them in spirit. At this critical turning point, many deserted Jesus as they realized He wasn’t going to fulfill their political dreams, Jesus asked the Twelve if they were going to leave Him as well (v. 67). Though Judas chose to continue walking with Jesus physically, his heart was elsewhere (v. 64). He thought he knew what the Messiah ought to do and ought to be: “Christ’s oft-repeated statement that His kingdom was not of this world offended Judas. He had marked out a line upon which he expected Christ to work.... Judas wanted more aggressive warfare. He thought that if Jesus would not prevent the disciples from carrying out their schemes, the work would be more successful” (Ellen White, The Desire of Ages [1898], 718).

As sad as it is, Judas’ story clearly shows that Jesus never forces anyone to follow Him. Jesus allows each person to choose their own destiny no matter how desperately He desires a better outcome. Jesus leads and persuades, but never forces. His will can be resisted, and His love can be rejected. Christ did not discipline Judas with a sword or a club. Jesus did not prevent Judas from exiting when he eventually went his own way.

It’s sobering to reflect on why Judas fell away. His apostasy was partly because his political beliefs were too precious to him; he was not willing to give up on the idea of Jesus becoming an earthly king and overthrowing the Romans. He would not relinquish his hopes for a political solution to his nation’s political issues. Judas also believed he was shrewder than the other disciples and wiser than Christ (John 12:4–8). When he betrayed Jesus, he was essentially performing a political stunt designed to force Jesus into asserting His political power. This disheartening story serves as a stark warning that following Jesus must come first. If Jesus is number one in our hearts, we will be ready for a complete overhaul of our thinking. If anything else is number one, we will someday stumble the way Judas stumbled.

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Meditate on the primary passage again and look for where Jesus is.

What is Jesus saying to you through the text of the week?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Why does Jesus require us to do more than just incorporate a few good ideas into our old thinking?

Prayer Response:
NATIONAL PRIDE

“Of the Roman officials in Palestine, none were more hated than the publicans. The fact that the taxes were imposed by a foreign power was a continual irritation to the Jews, being a reminder that their independence had departed. And the taxgatherers were not merely the instruments of Roman oppression; they were extortioners on their own account, enriching themselves at the expense of the people. A Jew who accepted this office at the hands of the Romans was looked upon as betraying the honor of his nation. He was despised as an apostate, and was classed with the vilest of society.” (Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* [1898], 272.)

“The calling of Matthew to be one of Christ’s disciples excited great indignation. For a religious teacher to choose a publican as one of his immediate attendants was an offense against the religious, social, and national customs. By appealing to the prejudices of the people the Pharisees hoped to turn the current of popular feeling against Jesus.” (Ibid., 273.)

“But although the Pharisees thought so highly of themselves, they were really in a worse condition than the ones they despised. The publicans were less bigoted and self-sufficient, and thus were more open to the influence of truth.” (Ibid., 275.)

“In the days of Christ, selfishness and pride and prejudice had built strong and high the wall of partition between the appointed guardians of the sacred oracles and every other nation on the globe. But the Saviour had come to change all this. The words which the people were hearing from His lips were unlike anything to which they had ever listened from priest or rabbi. Christ tears away the wall of partition, the self-love, the dividing prejudice of nationality, and teaches a love for all the human family. He lifts men from the narrow circle that their selfishness prescribes; He abolishes all territorial lines and artificial distinctions of society. He makes no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. He teaches us to look upon every needy soul as our neighbor and the world as our field.” (Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* [1896], 42.)

“The Jewish nation rejected and crucified the Lord of glory, because in their worldliness, pride, and bigotry, they failed to understand the scriptures which foretold his coming. They were too much absorbed in their petty strife for place and power, to study the word of God with a prayerful heart. And for the same reason, many in this time will fail of a preparation for Christ’s second appearing.” (Ellen White, October 23, 1888, *The Review and Herald*, para. 9.)

“The scribes and Pharisees had separated themselves from God by their national pride. There were in Judea schools of learning, and the leaders of these schools were filled with self-exaltation. They thought that they had all the light that had ever been given to the world. They looked for the Messiah to come as a temporal prince, to exalt the Jewish nation above all other nations on the earth. As their self-confidence increased, their dependence on God decreased. They walked in their own ways, and were filled with self-sufficiency and self-righteousness.” (Ellen White, April 2, 1901, *The Review and Herald*, para. 4.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How can the church stay united despite the many political differences amongst its members?

Why do you think Jesus didn’t stand up for the Jews’ religious liberty and deal with Rome’s flagrant overreach of power?

In what ways might the church today be in danger of having misaligned political hopes?

How can we make sure we prioritize the right things?

Do you think national pride and bigotry are significant temptations for believers today? Why or why not?

How can the church do a better job of reaching people from all political backgrounds the way Jesus did?

What are some ways you can start to overcome political strife at family gatherings and with friends?