

THE GOVERNMENT SPHERE

Faithful Presence Under the Sovereignty of God

Government touches nearly every aspect of our daily lives. At the federal level, we have the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, surrounded by an enormous administrative bureaucracy. Added to these are lobbyists, special-interest groups, military institutions, international organizations, foreign governments, and ambassadors—all seeking, in one way or another, to influence policy and direction.

State governments generally reflect a similar structure, with governors, legislatures, courts, agencies, bureaucracies, lobbyists, and interest groups. At the local level, we encounter mayors, councils, commissions, courts, school boards, law enforcement, and numerous other public institutions.

It can become overwhelming very quickly. So how does the Ecclesia make sense of it all while maintaining a sound mind? Rather than beginning with politics, political parties, elections, or personalities, let us begin with Scripture.

Our First Responsibility: Pray

Paul gives us an extraordinary starting point in 1 Timothy 2:1–6. He exhorts believers to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving for all people—and specifically for kings and all who are in authority—so that we may live quiet and peaceable lives in godliness and reverence. He then connects this prayer with God's desire that people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

That is quite an assignment.

For us today, “all who are in authority” reaches far beyond a president or governor. It can include local, state, and federal officials; judges; administrators; school boards; community leaders; and others whose decisions affect the lives of those they serve.

We should pray that God gives them wisdom beyond their own understanding, that their decisions allow people to live peaceful and productive lives, and above all, that they come to the knowledge of truth and recognize Jesus Christ.

But prayer raises another question: What if God intends our prayers not only to change those for whom we pray, but also to prepare us to serve them? That question became very real to me many years ago.

When Prayer Opened the Door to Service

Many years ago, I challenged a group of pastors concerning the power of serving. Jesus said that He came not to be served, but to serve. If that was the heart of our King, then service should characterize those who represent His Kingdom.

Later, while reading and praying in my office, I returned several times to Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2. I sensed the Lord leading me to begin praying specifically for the mayor and city council members of

Scottsdale. Each day, I prayed that God would bless them, give them wisdom beyond their own understanding, and guide their decisions on behalf of the residents they had been entrusted to serve.

I prayed for them every day for ninety days.

Then I sensed the Lord directing me to contact them. I sent an email explaining that I had been praying for them and asked a simple question: “Is there any other way I can serve you?”

Within forty-eight hours, I received a telephone call from the mayor. She thanked me for praying and invited me to pray before a city council meeting.

That invitation led to additional meetings, relationships, conversations, and opportunities to provide insight as city leaders considered decisions affecting their community. I discovered something important: they genuinely wanted a relationship with the faith community. They simply did not know how to establish one.

Eventually, I was invited to participate in a task force examining some of Scottsdale's greatest needs. After the city invested more than \$1.5 million in the study, leaders asked me to invite pastors and ministry leaders to discuss how the city and faith community might work together to meet the needs of our city.

I invited more than twenty pastors and ministry leaders. At the end of the day, two Catholic priests, operating soup kitchens, attended.

I was deeply disappointed. Yet the experience revealed something important. The government was asking the faith community to help serve people, and much of the faith community failed to come to the table.

That experience showed me that we can influence and impact the government sphere—but we must recognize and make the most of the opportunities God places before us. As Paul instructs us: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” — Ephesians 5:15–16

The opportunity to serve was there. The door had been opened. The question was whether the Ecclesia would walk through it.

And perhaps the more personal question: Do I believe God can use me to do it? To answer those questions, we first need to understand our biblical relationship with governing authority.

Our Relationship with Governing Authority

Scripture establishes several truths that must be held together:

- God is sovereign over all nations.
- Governing authorities possess legitimate authority.
- The Ecclesia is instructed to respect and submit to governing authority.
- Our ultimate allegiance belongs to God.

There is no contradiction between these principles when we understand the order of authority.

God Is Sovereign Over All Nations

Psalm 24:1 establishes the foundation: “The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell therein.”

Government does not own the earth. Nations do not own the earth. Political leaders do not possess ultimate authority over it.

The earth belongs to God.

Daniel 2:21 declares that God changes times and seasons, removes kings, and establishes them. Jeremiah 18:7–10 reveals His authority to judge nations or relent when they repent. Isaiah 45 demonstrates that God could even raise up Cyrus, a pagan king, to accomplish His purposes.

Acts 17:26–27 goes even further. God has determined the appointed times and boundaries of nations so that mankind might seek Him.

And Revelation 11:15 ultimately declares: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever.”

Political systems change. Governments rise and fall. Christ remains King.

The Ecclesia and Governing Authority

If God is sovereign, how should His people relate to those exercising governmental authority?

Romans 13:1 instructs believers to be subject to governing authorities. Peter similarly tells believers to submit, for the Lord's sake, to human institutions. Titus reminds believers to be subject to rulers and authorities, obedient and ready to do what is good.

The Ecclesia is therefore not called to live in perpetual hostility toward government.

- We pray.
- We honor legitimate authority.
- We obey lawful authority.
- We do good.
- We serve.

But Scripture also establishes a boundary.

We Must Obey God Rather Than Man

God's authority stands above every human authority.

When the commands of men conflict with the Word of God, our allegiance must remain with Him. Obedience may be costly, but we are called to stand firm, refuse compromise, and trust God regardless of the pressure around us.

Peter and the apostles stated it plainly: “We must obey God rather than men.” — Acts 5:29

Paul asks in Galatians 1:10 whether he is seeking the approval of people or of God, concluding that if his goal were simply to please people, he would not be a servant of Christ. John 12:43 similarly warns about loving human praise more than the praise of God.

Government possesses legitimate authority. It does not possess ultimate authority. That belongs to God alone.

Making Sense of It All

Our ultimate mission remains unchanged: Make disciples of all nations.

Every nation has a different political structure. Some governments provide considerable freedom; others provide very little. Yet our King and our mission remain the same.

Perhaps we can picture our relationship with government this way: God remains sovereign above human government while His people faithfully serve within and beneath its legitimate authority.

God works sovereignly from above. His Ecclesia serves faithfully from within. We do not need to control government in order to influence it. Neither should we expect government to accomplish the mission Christ entrusted to His people.

We pray for those in authority. We serve wherever God opens doors. We bring wisdom. We demonstrate integrity. We speak truth when necessary. And we seek the welfare of the communities in which God has placed us.

Our confidence therefore cannot rest in a political leader. No political leader is the savior of the Ecclesia. Jesus Christ is Savior and King.

The Problem of Abdication

A growing concern of mine is that the Ecclesia increasingly looks toward political leaders and government institutions to solve problems God's people themselves may have been called to address. In the United States, our system begins with the principle of "We the People." Yet citizenship requires more than voting every few years and returning home.

When citizens disengage, accountability diminishes. When responsibility is surrendered, institutions accumulate greater power.

The same principle can operate within the Ecclesia. When believers surrender ministry to religious professionals, the body becomes spectators. When citizens surrender civic responsibility entirely to political professionals, they become spectators as well.

Abdication creates a vacuum—and vacuums rarely remain empty. The answer is not simply louder political rhetoric. It is engagement.

Pray. Serve. Build relationships. Bring wisdom. Become trustworthy.

Not because government is our salvation, but because serving our communities is part of loving our neighbors.

And this brings me to another experience in Scottsdale.

Prayer That Could Have Opened Another Door

On another occasion, approximately fifteen to twenty pastors gathered to pray for the approaching school year. Collectively, our congregations represented upwards of 20,000 adults. We prayed for superintendents, school boards, principals, teachers, students, and others involved in educating the children of our community.

One morning, I sensed the Lord impressing something more upon me. What if we moved beyond simply praying about the schools and allowed prayer to position the Ecclesia to serve them?

I proposed something simple.

What if thousands of believers prayed daily for ninety days for their local schools and those who serve in them? We could ask God to strengthen their leaders, give them wisdom beyond their own understanding, grant them favor with their students, parents, and God, and help them provide a successful year of education and development for the children entrusted to them.

But why stop with prayer?

Imagine representatives from those congregations visiting school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers and saying:

“Thousands of people in our churches have been praying for you. How can we serve you more effectively?”

I had seen this need firsthand. For several years, I worked with K–12 schools throughout New Mexico, helping them implement technology. During that time, I came to know a number of superintendents and technology directors and witnessed the tremendous pressures they faced every day, often trying to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks with limited time and resources.

I once asked about the support they received from their communities. Their response was revealing: “People are so busy, no one has time to help.”

Think about that statement for a moment. What an opportunity for the Ecclesia.

Educators carry enormous responsibilities. Instead of approaching them first with demands, criticism, or a list of everything we believe they are doing wrong, what if we approached them first as servants?

Service creates relationships. Relationships build trust. Trust creates opportunities for influence.

Suddenly, the question of “church and state” begins to look very different. We are not attempting to control the schools. We are serving the people who serve our communities.

Unfortunately, that vision never developed as I had hoped. The pastors had their own priorities and ministries, and what might have become a coordinated expression of the Ecclesia remained largely a collection of individual efforts.

Yet the experience reinforced something the Lord had already been teaching me:

Prayer should never become a substitute for obedience. Prayer should prepare us for obedience.

We pray for those in authority. We ask God to open doors. And when He opens those doors, we walk through them ready to serve.

Perhaps the first question the Ecclesia should ask government is not simply: “What are you doing wrong?”

Perhaps we should begin by asking: “How can the people God has entrusted to us make a meaningful difference?”

What Authority Has God Given Civil Government?

Before we can determine when government has crossed a line, we first need to understand why God established governing authority and what He authorized it to do.

Scripture does not present civil government as man's savior, provider, moral compass, or ultimate authority. Nor does it portray government as inherently evil. Government has a legitimate, God-ordained purpose—but like every delegated authority, it operates beneath the authority of God and therefore has boundaries.

Paul gives us perhaps the clearest description in Romans 13:3–4: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad... For he is God's servant for your good... an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Peter gives us a similar description in 1 Peter 2:13–14: governors are sent “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”

Those passages suggest several basic responsibilities of civil government:

- Maintain order.
- Protect people from wrongdoing.
- Administer justice.
- Restrain evil.
- Defend what is good.

Government therefore possesses genuine authority—but it is delegated authority, not autonomous authority.

Government as God's Servant

Something easily overlooked in Romans 13 is Paul's repeated description of the governing authority as God's servant.

That changes the perspective considerably. Government does not grant God permission to operate within its jurisdiction. Government itself operates within God's jurisdiction. The ruler is accountable to the One from whom authority ultimately comes.

This principle appears throughout Scripture. Deuteronomy 17:18–20 required Israel's king to know God's law so that his heart would not be lifted above his fellow Israelites. Psalm 82 portrays God judging rulers for injustice and commanding them to defend the weak and needy. Proverbs repeatedly condemns rulers who pervert justice, accept bribes, or oppress the poor.

The biblical picture is therefore not simply: People are accountable to government. It is also: Government is accountable to God.

Authority Has Boundaries

That leads to a question worthy of serious consideration: Has government gradually assumed responsibilities that God never intended it to carry because the people and institutions entrusted with those responsibilities abdicated them? Or, perhaps more pointedly, has the Ecclesia surrendered responsibilities God originally entrusted to us and then complained when government stepped into the vacuum?

Consider a few examples.

Scripture repeatedly commands God's people to care for the poor. When God's people neglect that responsibility, someone will eventually respond to the need, and increasingly government has done so through public welfare programs.

Scripture instructs God's people to care for widows and orphans. When families, communities, and the Ecclesia fail to provide that care, government increasingly assumes responsibility through social services, foster-care systems, and public assistance.

Paul even instructed believers not to take disputes between brothers before unbelieving courts when those matters could be judged within the believing community (1 Corinthians 6:1–8). When the Ecclesia loses the ability or willingness to govern matters properly within its own God-given sphere, we increasingly place matters that should have been resolved among God's people under civil jurisdiction.

This raises an uncomfortable possibility: Perhaps government has not simply taken authority. In some areas, we have surrendered responsibility. And once responsibility is surrendered, we should not be surprised when another institution fills the void. If we fail to maintain the responsibilities and boundaries God has entrusted to the Ecclesia, we may invite government to occupy territory we abandoned.

That leads directly back to our earlier principle: Abdication creates a vacuum—and vacuums rarely remain empty.

Rights—or Responsibilities?

Let's carry the question of abdication one step further. We frequently discuss what government owes its citizens. Perhaps the Ecclesia should also ask: What responsibilities has God entrusted to His people that we have gradually transferred to government—or simply stopped doing altogether?

We have already considered care for the poor, widows, and children. But the principle extends much further.

The Christian community once played a significant role in education, including the establishment of many institutions of higher learning. Hospitals and other ministries of care were likewise frequently established and operated by Christian organizations. Over time, many of these responsibilities became increasingly institutionalized, governmental, or corporate.

That does not mean every government program, corporation, university, hospital, or insurance company is inherently wrong. The deeper question is what happens when God's people cease doing what God entrusted His people to do.

And perhaps our greatest failure cannot be blamed on government at all.

Jesus said His disciples would be known by their love for one another. Yet too often the Ecclesia has modeled something very different. Instead of caring for one another, bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another, and building one another up, we can find ourselves gossiping about one another, slandering one another, competing with one another, and endlessly dividing over doctrine.

Paul warned the Galatians: “If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” — Galatians 5:15

How can we effectively disciple nations in the ways of Christ if we fail to model those ways among ourselves?

So the question deserves serious consideration: When government increasingly assumes responsibility for things families, communities, and the Ecclesia once performed, what happens to those institutions? They can become weaker, increasingly dependent, and eventually lose the capacity to perform responsibilities they once carried.

But there is another side to the question: What happens to government?

It grows.

As government assumes greater responsibility for providing what individuals, families, communities, and other institutions once provided, its bureaucracy, expenditures, regulations, and influence naturally expand. Eventually, the relationship between government and citizen can begin to change; government moves from serving its citizens toward managing them, while citizens increasingly become dependent upon the government they created to serve them.

And that brings us directly back to the principle:

Abdication creates a vacuum—and vacuums rarely remain empty.

When Service and Influence Are Not Enough

Throughout this discussion I have emphasized prayer, service, relationship, influence, and respectful engagement with governing authorities. I believe deeply in all of them, and I have personally witnessed what God can accomplish when His people faithfully engage those who govern.

But we must not be naïve.

Not every governmental problem can be solved by building a relationship or getting a seat at the table.

Governments, like every human institution, can become corrupt. Bureaucracies can become self-preserving. Political influence can be purchased. Regulations can become oppressive. Taxation can become burdensome. Debt can become unsustainable. Government can sanction practices the Scriptures identify as evil. And institutions created to serve the people can gradually acquire power over the very people they were established to serve.

The combination of the abdication of the Ecclesia and the wickedness within the human heart has left us in a fragile position.

So what do we do?

Do we sit back, pray, and simply hope God intervenes? Or does prayer prepare us to become people of action?

Faithful engagement does not always mean cooperation. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. This is not a call to anger, violence, or reckless resistance. Neither is it a time to do nothing. It is a time for the Ecclesia to seek the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit and then faithfully obey.

Sometimes we serve.

Sometimes we influence.

Sometimes we appeal.

Sometimes we challenge.

Sometimes we refuse.

And sometimes we prepare.

The wisdom is discerning which response faithfulness requires.

The Necessity of Unity

Many years ago, while pondering these things before the Lord, I sensed Him impress something upon my heart:

“My Body will come together in the unity of My Spirit willingly, or they will come together out of necessity and survival.”

I have never forgotten it.

For generations we have watched churches, denominations, ministries, and leaders build largely within their own spheres. Too often competition, doctrinal divisions, institutional loyalties, and personal kingdoms have prevented the Ecclesia from functioning together as one people.

I fear that the opportunity to pursue unity simply because it is God's desire may be rapidly giving way to something much more sobering: Circumstances may require us to discover how much we actually need one another.

Jesus warned: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand." — Matthew 12:25

Paul pleaded with the Corinthians that there be no divisions among them, but that they be united in the same mind and judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10). He similarly urged the Philippians to be of the same mind, having the same love and being "in full accord and of one mind" (Philippians 2:1–2).

Psalm 133 celebrates how good and pleasant it is when God's people dwell together in unity.

Unity, therefore, is not merely a nice Christian ideal. It may become essential to our ability to stand.

A Lesson From Babel

Even the Tower of Babel demonstrates the extraordinary power of people united around a common purpose.

Their purpose was wrong, but God's observation is striking: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." — Genesis 11:6

Babel is certainly not our model—their unity was directed toward man's ambition rather than obedience to God. But it demonstrates a principle:

Agreement produces enormous collective power. The question is what that unity is serving.

Imagine, then, an Ecclesia united not around human ambition, denomination, personality, or political party, but around Jesus Christ, His Kingdom, His Word, and His mission.

What might become possible?

Our strength would not come merely from numbers. It would come from a people seeking the mind of Christ together, exercising different gifts, sharing resources, caring for one another, and moving together in obedience to the Holy Spirit.

The Dilemma Before Us

Two necessities are coming together:

We must recover the unity of the Body.

We must understand the times and know what to do.

Both require prayer. Both require discernment. And both ultimately require obedience to what the Spirit is saying to the Ecclesia.

Hosea 4:6 warns: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

Ignorance has consequences. Therefore, understanding what is happening around us is not merely an intellectual exercise. We must learn to recognize the times, seek God's wisdom, and determine how He would have us respond.

There may be circumstances in which the Ecclesia must challenge governmental actions through lawful and peaceful means—public testimony, appeals, elections, courts, petitions, legislative advocacy, journalism, community organization, or simply refusing to participate in something that requires disobedience to God.

We must never confuse being peaceful with being passive.

But there is another problem. If we attempt these things only as scattered individuals and isolated congregations rather than as a people—a holy nation united in Christ—we unnecessarily weaken ourselves.

We need one another.

And that brings us to three responses that I believe deserve particular attention in this Eleventh Hour:

ENGAGE • CHALLENGE • PREPARE

ENGAGE wherever God provides opportunities to pray, serve, build relationships, bring wisdom, and influence.

CHALLENGE when authorities exceed legitimate boundaries, injustice needs to be confronted, or obedience to government would require disobedience to God.

PREPARE when circumstances may not be within our ability to change.

Preparation is not fear.

Preparation is not retreat.

Preparation does not mean abandoning our mission because the hour has become difficult.

Preparation enables us to continue the mission when circumstances become difficult.

Noah prepared.

Joseph prepared Egypt for famine.

Nehemiah built while others stood guard.

Jesus repeatedly instructed His disciples to watch and be ready.

The wise virgins carried oil; the foolish did not.

Preparation becomes especially important if we believe we are living in an Eleventh Hour marked by increasing deception, instability, economic pressure, and hostility toward biblical faithfulness.

But we must comprehend why we prepare.

We are not preparing merely to survive. We are preparing so that we can remain faithful, care for our families, help others, and continue the King's business regardless of what happens around us.

Preparation is not retreat. Preparation preserves our ability to advance.

Perhaps Nehemiah gives us one of the clearest pictures. The opposition was real. The threats were real. Yet the mission did not stop.

They watched.

They guarded.

They prepared.

And they kept building.

That must remain our posture as well.

The Great Commission has not been suspended because the days have become difficult. We remain His ambassadors. We remain His Ecclesia. And our King has not changed our assignment: Make disciples of all nations.

So what do we do?

PRAY before we move.

SERVE where there is need.

INFLUENCE where God gives access.

APPEAL when something needs correction.

CHALLENGE when authority exceeds its proper boundaries.

REFUSE when obedience to government requires disobedience to God.

PREPARE for circumstances we cannot change.

And through all of it:

OCCUPY UNTIL HE COMES.

Summary — Faithful in the Government Sphere

Government is neither our savior nor necessarily our enemy. It is a human institution operating under the sovereignty of God, entrusted with legitimate authority but never ultimate authority. Scripture calls us to pray for those who govern, honor legitimate authority, seek the good of our communities, and serve wherever God opens a door.

But biblical submission is not passivity. When government exceeds its proper boundaries, sanctions what God calls evil, or requires what would cause us to disobey God, the Ecclesia must have the wisdom to discern the moment and the courage to stand. Sometimes faithfulness means serving. Sometimes influencing. Sometimes appealing. Sometimes challenging. Sometimes refusing. And sometimes preparing.

At the same time, we must be willing to examine ourselves. Government has not simply accumulated responsibility; in many areas, families, communities, and the Ecclesia have surrendered responsibilities God entrusted to them. Abdication creates a vacuum—and vacuums rarely remain empty. If we want to see change, part of the answer must be God's people recovering the responsibilities we have neglected.

We must also recognize that we cannot accomplish this mission as isolated believers, competing congregations, or divided ministries. Jesus warned that a house divided against itself cannot stand. The challenges before us require an Ecclesia united around Christ, His Kingdom, His Word, and His mission—praying together, discerning together, serving together, preparing together, and standing together when necessary.

The question before us, then, is not simply, “What is government doing?”

The greater question is:

“Lord, what would You have Your Ecclesia do?”

We are not called to retreat from the world, nor are we called merely to survive what may be coming. We prepare so that we can remain faithful, care for our families, serve others, stand for truth, and continue the mission regardless of the circumstances around us.

Like Nehemiah, we remain watchful while continuing to build.

PRAY. SERVE. INFLUENCE. APPEAL. CHALLENGE. REFUSE when necessary. PREPARE wisely.

And through it all:

Keep building. Keep serving. Keep making disciples. Keep about the King's business.

Occupy until He comes.

Questions to Consider

- Do I consistently pray for those in authority—including leaders with whom I disagree?
- Where has God already opened a door for me or my congregation to serve public leaders and institutions?
- Have I confused biblical submission with passivity, or political engagement with placing my hope in government?
- What responsibilities have families, communities, or the Ecclesia surrendered that God may be calling us to recover?
- When should faithfulness lead me to serve, influence, appeal, challenge, refuse, or prepare?

- What practical step could help believers in my community work together around Christ, His Word, and His mission?

Biblical Foundation

- **God's sovereignty over nations:** Psalm 24:1; Daniel 2:21; Isaiah 45:1–7; Acts 17:26–27; Revelation 11:15
- **Prayer for governing authorities:** 1 Timothy 2:1–6
- **Government's delegated authority:** Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17; Titus 3:1–2
- **Government's accountability to God:** Deuteronomy 17:18–20; Psalm 82; Proverbs 29:2, 4
- **Obedience to God above human commands:** Daniel 3:16–18; Daniel 6:10; Acts 4:18–20; Acts 5:29
- **Service, good works, and public witness:** Matthew 5:13–16; Mark 10:42–45; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 3:8
- **Unity, watchfulness, and preparation:** Psalm 133; Nehemiah 4:9, 16–18; Matthew 12:25; Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Peter 5:8