

What Evangelical View of Public Policy Seems Right to You?

There are two historical schools of Evangelical thought regarding public policy: (A) Integrated Authority and (B) Competing Kingdom. The former school views the state as at least a potential ally of the family and church in establishing or advancing God's kingdom in the world. The state's role may be as small as simply restraining what God thinks is evil or as large as actively clearing the way for the establishment of true religion in a nation. Some adherents believe that a strong nexus between church and state is necessary to have a godly society, where the church preaches to the state regarding what it should enforce and the state upholds the biblical standard it receives via the power of the sword.

The latter school views the state, encompassed in the biblical terminology as "the kingdoms of this world", running a course that is antithetical to God's. Whether driven by its own cultural norms or Satan himself, the state competes against God. Nevertheless, God holds the ultimate reigns on the state and uses it to accomplish certain ends in this world, such as bringing terrestrial judgment upon sinners or sanctifying His church through state persecution. Perhaps ironically, some competing kingdom adherents also view the state as restraining civil evil at times.

Both of these schools have two branches (or sub-classifications) which make up a total of four Christian perspectives of public policy. The two branches of the integrated authority school are (1) the theonomy view or Christian Reconstructionism and (2) a revitalized or reshaped divine right of kings view. These views may be abbreviated simply as theonomy and divine right. The two branches of the competing kingdom school are (1) the Anabaptist (strict separational) or pacifist view and (2) the liberty of conscience view. By thoughtfully answering the fifteen questions in the quiz below, you may find out where you stand, or at least what your tendency is, in terms of the Christian perspective on public policy that you adhere to.

First, the following five questions will indicate which *school* of public policy appeals most to you (i.e., integrated authority or competing kingdom).

1. Do you view the state as a special sphere of authority, under God, like the family and the church?

Yes No

2. Do you view the state as a transformable institution under the "dominion mandate" (per Gen. 1:26-28 where God creates man to "have dominion" over everything on the earth and to "subdue" the earth)?

Yes No

3. Other than the possible exception of policies that serve as a deterrent to delinquency or as a means of crime control (as might appear in some societies), would you favor using public policy to promote righteous living according to biblical standards?

Yes No

4. Do you view the *primary* role of the state is promoting or upholding the kingdom of God in the world?

Yes No

5. Do you NOT view the *primary* role of the state as bringing terrestrial judgment upon sinners and/or harassing the church (in order to sanctify it) under God's permissive decree?

Yes No

If you answered “yes” to all five questions, that fact would indicate your affinity with the integrated authority school. Conversely, consistent “no” answers would indicate affinity with the competing kingdom school. Answering three or four questions one way other the other would indicated your tendency or strong tendency to identify with one school or the other, although it might also indicate some inconsistency in your logical reasoning regarding policy matters.

Next, the following ten questions will indicate which particular public policy *perspective or view* appeals most to you (i.e., theonomy, divine right, pacifist, liberty of conscience).

6. Which of the following statements best describes your view of the *source* or foundation of the state’s rules?

- A. *God’s law (in both the older and newer testaments) when the state is a covenant-keeper; men or Satan otherwise.*
- B. *Providence; the state speaks God’s will to the church/its subjects as God’s servant (or, perhaps, His “oracle”).*
- C. *Generally ungodly men under Providence: God is doing His will in the competing realm through the acts of ungodly men, and Satan might be directly involved at times.*
- D. *Satan primarily (as implied in Rev. 13:2b, 4a; cf. 12:9a where the “beast” that represents the state is said to be empowered by Satan) or at least the state’s own cultural or moral standard worked out in the actions of the men of this world.*

7. Which of the following statements best describes your view of the nature of the state?

- A. *The state is evil when it is dominated by covenant-breakers, and good if dominated by covenant-keepers.*
- B. *The state is benign; it is good when good men run it and bad when bad men run it (i.e., like a television set which is benign in and of itself but becomes a good or bad thing depending on what is run through it).*
- C. *The state is a realm that competes with God’s Kingdom (and might even be regarded as evil in some cases).*
- D. *The state is evil; it is the greatest source of oppression and affliction (with the likely exception of false religion) in both biblical theology and in history.*

8. Which of the following statements best describes your view of military service and the draft?

- A. *Both would be morally permissible under the right circumstances, e.g., for just wars, to expel an unrighteous ruler in our land or secede from a wicked government, especially if enacted by a covenant-keeping state.*
- B. *Both are morally permissible under Providence, and believers should generally support the policy of the government under which God has placed them.*
- C. *I am a pacifist and oppose both military service and the draft, because Jesus and the Apostles were men of peace and encouraged us to turn the other cheek.*
- D. *Military service is often morally permissible, especially for just wars or secession movements, since the profession of arms was condemned by neither Christ nor John the Baptist, but the draft is usually tantamount to slavery and bad whenever it is the product of proactive public policy; each believer should decide for himself whether or not to be involved in a military conflict.*

9. Complete the sentence: “The state is *ordained* by God (Rom. 13:1) just as _____ is/are ordained by God.”

- A. *the family and church (conforming to the teaching of the Westminster Larger Catechism)*
- B. *the family and local church*
- C. *any other thing that God ordains, benign or malignant, which has no integral effect on the establishing of His kingdom*
- D. *Satan, the “god of this age” (II Cor. 4:4a),*

10. Which of the following statements best describes your view of the church's role in political life?

- A. *The church preaches to the state and the state enforces God's Law; thus the church and Christians transform the state (per the dominion mandate) into a righteous and useful institution.*
- B. *The church should be supportive of the state that God has placed over it and active in promoting good public policy by endeavoring to promote "better" legislation with more God-honoring rules, to get "good" judges, and a godly executive.*
- C. *The church should have nothing to do with the state or politics; in fact, Christians sin by participating in the political process.*
- D. *The church should not provoke the state, and must not hope that the state will help it achieve its godly ends; nevertheless, individual Christian involvement, especially in areas like local politics, justice and national defense, is left as a matter of conscience.*

11. Which of the following statements best describes your view of open rebellion, revolution, or resistance against the state by Christians?

- A. *Revolution is laudable and right when it is against a covenant-breaking state and led by a lower magistrate; likewise, in general, resistance is morally right when resisting a covenant-breaking state or any unbiblical rules (otherwise resistance is wrong).*
- B. *Revolution is generally sinful, although passive (and maybe even active) resistance is acceptable against a few decrees such as "laws" that prohibit preaching the gospel or that mandate aborting one's children.*
- C. *Armed revolution is wrong but passive rebellion and resistance is unavoidable whenever the state intrudes into the life of the believer; however, resistance is not to be sought after (i.e., the state must make the initial step that results in resistance).*
- D. *Revolution is morally permissible so long as no other sin is committed by doing so, and it can be led by anyone; resisting any tyrant or objectionable decree is morally right whenever such action can be done without bringing public shame on Christ or wrath on the church, and when no other sin is being committed by doing so.*

12. Which of the following statements best describes your view of what the godly goal of revolution would be?

- A. *The godly goal of revolution would be to bring down a covenant-breaking ruler, but there can not be a godly goal in revolution if there is a covenant-keeping state in power.*
- B. *There is not likely to ever be a godly reason for having a revolution, since the Christian is called to be supportive of the civil government under which it finds itself.*
- C. *A "godly" goal in revolution is unattainable since not permissible for believers, who are called to be peacemakers by Christ, to undertake any sort of armed conflict.*
- D. *The godly goal of revolution is attainable, only if and when the conflict can be prosecuted wisely, and only when the overarching purpose of the revolution is to bring glory to God and to benefit His church and the proclamation of the Gospel.*

13. Which of the following statements best describes your view of Christians lying to state agents (e.g., by hiding Jews from Hitler, by not reporting all income on a tax return, etc.)?

- A. *Lying to state agents is morally right when resisting a covenant breaking state.*
- B. *Lying to state agents is generally sinful.*
- C. *It is not completely clear to me, but given the proper circumstances (especially in extreme cases as with Hitler and the Jews), lying to state agents is often acceptable when it promotes God's glory; in particular, lying to state agents in order to avoid paying taxes for used to support warfare (or even social insurance) is morally justified.*
- D. *Lying to state agents is morally right whenever such action can truly be used to promote life, better stewardship, and God's glory.*

14. Would you *consider* reporting “tax protesters”, people who hire illegal aliens, or other rule breakers to the state authorities (especially when it is unlawful to not report a known “offender”)?

- A. *No, unless a covenant-keeping state were in power, in which case I would be compelled to obey the state.*
- B. *Yes.*
- C. *No, I do not involve myself with matters of state.*
- D. *No, because the Bible says that love does no harm to a neighbor (Rom. 12:10), and my legitimate political and national interests must never supersede my commitment to other believers.*

15. Complete the sentence: “Christian obedience to state decrees is generally _____”

- A. *pragmatic and expedient in the case of a covenant-breaking state and delightful and morally-binding otherwise.*
- B. *mandatory and thus morally required by God, since, with few exceptions, to disobey is to sin.*
- C. *optional, depending on whether or not a decree requires a believer to disobey a tenet of Christian practice; but if there is no such conflict, the state’s rule, when imposed and known, should be obeyed pragmatically.*
- D. *pragmatic and expedient (rather than generally moral), since Christians are charged to obey the state mainly to avoid its “wrath” (Rom. 13:4b) and thus to have the freest course possible in advancing the church and the Gospel.*

If you answered “A” to all ten questions multiple choice questions, that fact would indicate your affinity with the theonomy view; all “B” answers correspond with the divine right view, all “C” answers with the pacifist view, and all “D” answers with the liberty of conscience view. If your results are mixed, seven or more of a single letter indicates a strong (and well-defined for eight or nine of a kind) affinity for a particular view: where “A” = theonomy view; “B” = divine right view, “C” = pacifist view, and “D” = liberty of conscience view. If you have no more than three of a kind in any letter category, your public policy view is presently incoherent or inconsistent and in need of better formulation. Four, five or six of a kind indicate a tendency toward one view but also shows a need for better development of consistent ideas respecting public policy.

Note: Please email Dr. Cobin jcobin@policyofliberty.net with your quiz results (plus any comments) so that he can tally (anonymously) tendencies and trends in Christian public policy perspectives.

Explanatory glossary of ideas

The integrated authority school views the state as a special sphere of authority along with the family and the church. The state has a useful purpose in directly advancing the kingdom of God in the world. As John Calvin saw it, in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (book 4, chapter 20), the Christian finds himself under two governments: one secular and the other ecclesiastical. The secular or civil government has the obligation to be godly and promote the Christian religion. The ecclesiastical government provides spiritual discipline and administers the sacraments. Since the civil government punishes those who are condemned as evildoers by God’s word, they must know God’s rules. Thus, in order for the state to know what it should promote and condemn, the church has a responsibility to preach the word of God to civil rulers.

Theonomy (or Christian Reconstructionism) forms the first, and most sophisticated, branch within the integrated authority school. Although its doctrine is far more refined than Calvin’s, theonomy (which is almost exclusively Reformed) has consistently carried Calvin’s ideas. Theonomy embellishes Calvin by including all of the Old Testament laws that are not explicitly repudiated in the New Testament (although there is some disagreement between theonomists about what has been repudiated, e.g., dietary rules). Revolution is a proper and useful function, so long as an alternative authority structure is preserved, in order to maintain a godly quality in civil government. Some of the major Evangelical proponents of theonomy include Greg Bahnsen, Gary North,

Rousas John Rushdooney, Pastor John Weaver (an outspoken modern American “patriot”), and John Calvin. Theonomy holds a transformational, active or involved theology of public policy, and is characteristically post-millennial.

Theonomists like Greg Bahnsen, in his work *Theonomy and Christian Ethics* (chapter 19), hold that passages like Romans 13:1-7 apply to an idealized state. For instance, Paul was stepping out of a very practical section of his treatise of the Romans to describe what a good government *should* be like either now or in some future golden age. Paul was not telling Christians in Rome what their actual experience was like, or how Nero was serving the Lord to uphold His law, but about how civil government should be in the world (and what it will be like during a postmillennial golden age). Thus, theonomists avoid the problem of reconciling the plain meaning of the text with the fact that Nero was in power.

The second branch within the integrated authority school is what could be termed the **revitalized (or reshaped) divine right of Kings** view. Evangelical proponents of this view include, Samuel E. Waldron (a leading, modern Reformed Baptist), John Eidsome (a modern theologian and author of public policy motifs), Pastor John MacArthur, English Baptist John Gill, Charles H. Spurgeon (most likely), and probably Martin Luther (who would otherwise be a theonomist). This view sees the state as a special sphere of authority along with the family and the church. The state has a useful purpose in directly advancing the kingdom of God in the world, but the parameters under which the state must operate or decree public policy have not been very well delineated theologically. Unlike theonomy, where the state and church are more closely linked, the state serves God directly without necessary intervention from the church, restraining chaos and sin in society. Believers owe allegiance to the state and nation in a way that is tantamount to their allegiance to their local church. The American flag is proudly displayed in church sanctuaries, and pastors fondly commemorate national holidays.

The state becomes a sort of oracle of God, although not in an inspired sense. Christians must obey virtually any command of public policy as if the decree had come from God Himself. To break either the “letter of the law” or the “spirit of the law” is sin. For instance, speeding, hiring an illegal alien, or not coming to a full and complete stop before the limit line before the stop sign would be morally wrong (in nations where such activities are illegal).

For this view, the state is benign or even innocuous. Like a television set, if good things (men) are put into it then it will prove to be good, but if evil things (men) are in charge then it will be evil. A few favored biblical rules are declared to be within the proper range of civil government function. However, these rules are often selected somewhat arbitrarily (e.g., (1) enforcing the Ten Commandments, or (2) just the 5th through the 9th Commandments, or perhaps (3) enforcing any rule in the New Testament as well as a few Old Testament ones regarding sodomy, bestiality, homosexuality, etc.). Revolution and civil disobedience are frowned upon, including the American Revolution and the Civil War. The instigation of either war is widely considered to have been sinful. Hence, divine right holds a passive or non-confrontational view in terms of public policy theology. divine righters seem to have the most difficulty of any of four views to avoid the problem of reconciling the plain meaning of the text with the fact that Nero was in power. As incredible as it might seem, some argue that Nero *was* (albeit imperfectly) punishing those who did evil in the sight of the Lord and rewarding those who did well in God’s sight. Others seem to have never really thought about the implications of what the words good and evil might mean in the cultural context of Nero’s Rome.

The competing kingdom school views the state as an entity entirely distinct from the church and family insofar as promotion of the Kingdom of God is concerned. Some proponents of this school would see the state as benign, although it often rears up its ugly side to assail the church of God. Others would view it as aligned significantly with Satan’s kingdom and efforts in the world. Either way, the state is *not* a special sphere of authority along with the family and the local church.

The first branch of this school is the **Anabaptist** (or pacifist) view. Leading Evangelical theologians of this perspective include Menno Simmons, Mark Roth, Harold Bender, and Heinrich Bullinger. Submission is pas-

sive for the Anabaptist, and even though rebellion is unavoidable in most lifetimes when Christians come into contact with public policy, armed revolt is never the role of a Christian. Hence, the Anabaptist view holds a passive or non-confrontational public policy theology. However, like the divine righters, the Anabaptists do not make a very compelling or consistent case for reconciling the plain meaning of the text with the fact that Nero was in power.

The Anabaptist view is the least sophisticated branch of the school, and at some points is (like divine right) attenuated by some apparent logical contradictions in its structure. For instance, the Anabaptist preacher tells believers that it is sinful to be involved with the state's "social security" plan, running for office, jury participation, military service, or voting because the state is effectively evil. The state is also exposed as the frequent afflicter of the church, persecuting God's people. Yet many of this persuasion hold, paradoxically, that the malevolent state is in some way doing God's will by restraining evil in the world by punishing criminals. While Anabaptists view the state as a separate, competing kingdom (some even see it as having a satanic nexus), they also see the state (even in Nero's Rome presumably) as an instrument of God to punish criminals or those who do evil in God's sight. This fact is rather odd given that Anabaptists, who are presumably the good guys in general, have suffered more at the hands of state persecution than any other Christian group.

The second branch of the competing kingdom school may be aptly termed **liberty of conscience**. Although this term has not been commonly used historically to describe theological views of public policy, many theologians and pastors have held it. Proponents include Baptists at the time of the American War for Independence such as Isaac Backus, John Leland, and John Wallers, as well as Roger Williams and probably John Bunyan (who at least held the seeds of the liberty of conscience view). Any Christian who holds to a dispensational or "new covenant" Calvinistic perspective of biblical interpretation will tend to embrace this view, along with Baptists in general. Such Christians prize volunteerism and freedom of thought among believers and in society, shunning the notion of using Old Testament law or public policy to coerce people into behaving in a proper manner. For instance, few of them would want to force people to abstain from working on Sunday and attend church services instead. Few of them would want to enlist the tools of the state for better Evangelism. However, somewhat paradoxically, most of these Christians today seem to hold to the divine right view by default.

The liberty of conscience view is developed and applied in a practical way in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*. In the same way that theonomy is the logical outcome of a Presbyterian and postmillenarian theology, liberty of conscience is the logical outcome of a Baptist theology (whether premillenarian or amillenarian). More resolutely than its Anabaptist counterpart, liberty of conscience views the state as evil, having a strong link with Satan and his kingdom. Yet Christians are left to their liberty with regard to where and when to resist the state, work within the state, or participate in revolution. Like theonomy, liberty of conscience holds a transformational, active or involved view of public policy theology. It is morally wrong at times to rebel against the state, but not always. Yet the state is never viewed as something to be transformed or that can ever become anything other than evil. It is not the benign state of the divine righters.

Moreover, those who hold a liberty of conscience view have a well worked out and cogent view of the words good and evil used in Romans 13:3-4 and I Peter 2:13-14. Unlike the divine righters, they do not try to make Nero into an overall bad ruler that nonetheless did imperfectly bring law and order to society. And unlike the Anabaptists, they do not try to impose a godly role on the state as an occasional punisher of criminals. They do not share the theonomic quest to idealize the passages and push them off into a theoretical exercise with little practical significance for the Roman Christians. Instead, they reconcile the plain meaning of the text with the fact that Nero was in power by interpreting the words good and evil to mean good and evil as defined by the state (or Nero) rather than as defined by God. So a state may consider Christians to be evil and punish them with the sword (as Nero did), while rewarding adulterers and murderers.

The liberty of conscience view permits Christians to disobey public policy at times. Even though the general rule is for them to submit to rulers and public policies, Christian submission to civil government must be *passive* rather than active. The Greek verb ὑποτασσεσθω, translated "be subject" in Romans 13:1, is in the pre-

sent tense, passive voice in the original language. Likewise, Paul uses the passive voice in Titus 3:1 (‘υποτασσεσθαι), as does Peter in I Peter 2:13 (‘υποταγητε). In other words, Christians are to obey whenever directly called upon to do so, so long as God is not defrauded or any sin committed, but it is not their duty to *actively* pursue a course wherein they scour the “law of the land.” They do not need to make sure that they are in compliance with every point of public policy if the state does not directly pressure them to do so. Accordingly, Christians do not sin by violating government rules *per se*. They sin if their actions sidetrack them from their primary mission, cause harm to a neighbor, or detract from the glory of God. Being unduly harassed by the state for things of miniscule importance (from an eternal perspective) must not be the primary focus of a kingdom-minded saint.

Postscript

No Bible-believing Christian considers the commands in Romans 13:1-7, I Peter 2:13-17, and Titus 3:1 to be *absolute*. Indeed, considering the “whole counsel of God”, it is clear that God’s people have *not* and should *not* submit themselves to “every ordinance of man” (I Peter 2:13). The Egyptian midwives defied Pharaoh’s decree to murder infants (Exodus 1:15-21). Ehud acted against public policy by deceiving the king’s ministers and then slew the king (Judges 3:15-26). Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refused to comply with public policies that mandated things contrary to proper worship (Daniel 3:8-18; 6:6-10). The wise men from the East disobeyed Herod’s direct order to disclose Jesus’ whereabouts (Matthew 2:7-12). Peter and John forthrightly disobeyed the “ordinance of man” that mandated that they desist from preaching (Acts 5:28-29). So then, the foremost doctrinal issue revolves around when Christians may or must disobey, rather than if Christians may disobey at all.

Nevertheless, Evangelicals disagree about the extent to which a Christian may disobey. For example, not every Christian view would permit disobedience to public policies that provide for preferential hiring of homosexuals, prohibition of spanking, mandatory attendance in public schools, mandatory working on Sunday, poaching, hiring of illegal aliens (even if Christians), speeding (e.g., doing 67 mph in a posted 65 mph zone), minimum drinking ages for wine in one’s own home, and mandatory purchase of automobile insurance. It is not certain how many Christians would deal with many actual policies, such as the prohibition of throwing stones at birds in Dublin, Georgia, the prohibition of playing pinball for those under 18 in South Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee, or the prohibition of spitting on the street in Dunn, North Carolina. Again, the reason why Christians must obey, or may disobey, is important. And one’s point of view will largely stem from his presuppositions about the nature and role of the state and public policy that have been delineated: theonomy, divine right, Anabaptist, or liberty of conscience.

Public policy theology has far-reaching and important practical applications in daily life. One useful extrapolation is to consider the theoretical and theological motivations of Christians for supporting or rejecting the American Revolution. Professor Mark Noll’s work *Christians and the American Revolution* (1977) is especially helpful in forming a historical perspective on this point. Not surprisingly, the instigators of the Revolution were largely theonomic Presbyterians and Congregationalists, along with liberty of conscience Baptists. These groups took an active role in transforming their world, albeit for very distinct reasons. The theonomists wanted to overthrow the evil government in order to replace it with a godly one. The Baptists wanted freedom in order to be able to serve God better. They often cited Galatians 5:1 in their cry for being free from the bondage to the state, pursuing freedom as the opportunity arose (cf. I Corinthians 7:21). Unlike the theonomists, their comrades in arms, they did not primarily want to install a better government. That is why they became ardent supporters of a Bill of Rights to ensure that their civil rights were protected against government intrusion, despite the fact that the Constitution was based on a Presbyterian framework. It should also come as little surprise that the Anglicans and most Methodists of the day turned out to be Tories, critical of other Christians who did not “submit” as they should. Many passive and non-confrontational divine righters returned to England or went to Canada. Similarly, the Anabaptists, being pacifists, did not participate in the American Revolution, although they did tend to revolt against paying any taxes that would go to finance the conflict. Obviously, one’s

public policy theology makes a difference indeed, as evidenced by the American Revolution. The ensuing section further highlights the importance of one's public policy theology.

In conclusion, Christians ought to think about public policy more seriously and develop their view in a manner that coincides with sound biblical principles that take cultural context seriously. If common, popular views are found wanting, then they should be replaced by better ones. At this point, at least so far as thinking Christians are concerned, there are only two serious contenders for a proper public policy theology: theonomy and liberty of conscience. The other views (divine right and Anabaptism), as they stand today at least, lack both Scriptural thoroughness and logical coherency. Moreover, the liberty of conscience view arguably provides the most believable interpretation of the apostolic doctrine set forth in Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1, and I Peter 2:3-17, especially with regard to the words "good" and "evil". It also has the strongest biblical and historical support for defining the nature and purpose of the state.