

THE THREE L's OF PUBLIC POLICY

THE LAW OF GOD AND PUBLIC POLICY: PART 2



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Three L's of Public Policy

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The Law of God and Public Policy: Part 2
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Welcome to *The Three L's of Public Policy*

Probably most of us consider that public policy is pretty much beyond our reach. In fact, we are very much involved in influencing and shaping public policy.

Or at least, we could be.

Public policy is not a mystery religion, accessible only to the initiates. If we know the foundations of public policy, where it is formed, and how we can contribute, we can play a consistent and effective role in shaping the practices, protocols, and policies by which we live and love our neighbors.

Three L's in particular define the parameters of public policy: logic, loci, and language. In this part of our study on "The Law of God and Public Policy" we'll learn about each of these and how we can make good use of them for shaping public policy in our country.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Logic of Public Policy (1)

“But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, You shall not return that way again.” Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.” Deuteronomy 17.16, 17

A servant of God for good

The work of public policy involves decisions and actions which governments take in fulfilling their role as a servant of the people. All governments want to do what is “good”. Obviously, much is at stake in the way we define that concept. For some governments, “good” means “good for government” or even “good for me”. For other governments “good” may have a more utilitarian focus: good for most of the people, most of the time.

Since there are obviously many ways of defining that idea of “good”, it will be important that any people who are to be governed have a clear sense of what *they* mean by that term. Those within any society who hold to a clear and compelling sense of what is good will work hard to promote and implement their views.

The Christian understands that government is a servant of *God for good*, and that God, therefore, must define the terms of goodness by which a government fulfills its appointed task. As Paul reminds us, the Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). It is important, therefore, that Christians understand the Law of God and consider the best ways of bringing its influence to bear in the arena of public policy.

But it is also important that we understand the workings of government and public policy—what is involved in bringing the good teaching of God’s Law to bear for good public policy decisions. This entails the proper use of what we may refer to as the “three Ls” of public policy: the *logic* of public policy, those fundamental principles which guide governments as they work out the details of public policy; the *loci* of public policy, or, the arenas in which public policies are made; and the *language* to be employed in making public policy, both in terms of how we speak to God, and how we speak with others about the policies we hope to achieve.

Here I want to address the first of two considerations relative to the *logic* of public policy.

The first law: the needs of the governed

Our text represents perhaps the first acknowledgement in human history that governments must be restrained in their activities. Those who served as kings in ancient Israel were not to covet power, pleasure, prestige, or pecuniary reward in their service to the nation. The policies they pursued were not to be designed to satisfy their desires or enhance their power or status. The fundamental Biblical principle undergirding the actions of government insists that they must concentrate on serving the public, not themselves, for good.

The logic of public policy begins, therefore, in understanding that public policy is for the wellbeing of the public, and not for those who make public policy. No policy should be adopted—whether by law or courts—that does not intend good for the people served.

To secure that end, the Law of God imposes prohibitions on civil government to help it serve the people for good.

Three prohibitions

The prohibitions mentioned in our text are relevant to our day. The first prohibition is against *unnecessary aggrandizement of power*, in particular, in the form of military build-ups, influence, or adventurism.

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Many horses were the backbone of ancient armies, especially those with designs on the property of neighboring nations. Once settled in the land of promise, Israel would not require much cavalry or many chariots since it was not a nation seeking to conquer its neighbors by military force. While a certain mounted contingent would be necessary, it was not essential for the public interest for the king to acquire and have at his disposal many horses merely for the sake of having many horses.

The second prohibition was not simply against the *pleasures of the flesh*, though it certainly included those. A king of Israel should respect the divine design for marriage—between a man and woman, under God—and be content to live within the framework and privileges of that arrangement. Thus the king would model for all the people the basic building-block of social stability, the divinely-ordained family.

In ancient times Kings took many wives to make political treaties with neighboring nations. In our day it's not to many wives that politicians turn for political prestige, but to cronies, donors, and people of influence. The more of these politicians must please, the less able they will be to serve the public for good.

The final prohibition, against *pecuniary self-interest*, speaks to a temptation confronting politicians from every age. Public office attracts money, not infrequently in ways that are connected to favors or power or both. This frequently leads to corruption and a loss of focus on the public weal. No public servant should be motivated by financial gain or become entangled in schemes to promote personal wealth. Doing so will surely cloud their minds concerning what is good for the public.

The first law of the logic of public policy is that those who are called to public service must keep the good of those served first and foremost, and must guard against all tendencies—whether of power, pleasure, prestige, or personal profit—designed to further self-interest. Politicians driven by any of these cannot be relied upon to forge public policies that adhere to God's standards for what is good.

Public policy is not about what governments *can* do, but what they *should* do, that is, if they are to fulfill their callings as God's servants for good. When it comes to applying the Law of God to public policy, Christians must make this first principle foundational in the logic with which they approach the work of influencing and shaping public policy.

For reflection

1. Why must such prohibitions be a necessary part of public policy?
2. Why do we insist that "good" must be defined in terms of God and His Law?
3. Public policy must work for the overall good of the public. What happens when public policy becomes hijacked by power brokers, special interests, or monied investors?

Next steps—Preparation: How does government in our society define the term "good" in our day? What can you point to as an illustration of this view of "good"?

2 The Logic of Public Policy (2)

“Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes...” Deuteronomy 17.18, 19

God is God

The first law of the logic of public policy is that *governments serve God for the good of the people they serve*. Those who hold public office must beware of the opportunities for self-aggrandizement such positions entail, and they must resist every temptation to use their office for personal gain.

The second law of the logic of public policy underscores the point that *the people are not God*. The *vox populi* must not be regarded as the final bar of appeal in matters of public policy. Yet this is what very often happens. Public officials are prone to follow public opinion polls in crafting laws and statutes. But the people are not God; their desires must not be the determining voice in public policy decision-making.

God is God, and rulers must look to Him for unchanging standards of goodness and justice. The second law of the logic of public policy is thus that *those public policies will be good which conform to God's standards*.

In ancient Israel this meant that rulers had to be students of the Law of God, reading and meditating in it daily. Not only the kings of Israel but also the local elders and judges were expected to be conversant with the teaching of God's Law and skilled in applying it to the needs of the community.

God's Word is good

God's Word teaches us what is holy and righteous and good. The people may clamor for this, that, or something else; but government does not serve the clamoring of the people. Government is *God's* servant for *good*, not the people's servant for whatever the public desires.

The Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). Since it is also part of Scripture—indeed, the very cornerstone of divine special revelation—we should also look to the Law to equip us for *every* good work, including the good work of public policy-making (2 Tim. 3.15-17). We have seen that God intended His Law as a standard of goodness and wisdom for all nations, and that our own nation still recognizes the value of God's Law in a variety of ways.

The alternative to the fixed, unchanging standard of the Law of God, rightly understood, is whatever moral and ethical standards the spirit of the age may abide. But this can easily become a means by which public officials may advance their own interests, or special interest groups their individual agendas, without adding anything of lasting good to the common weal.

Believers in Jesus Christ must not allow the unchanging standards of goodness, revealed in God's Law, to be obscured by the self-interest of public officials or the clamoring of special interest groups and the electorate in general. We insist that the *spiritus mundi* is not a reliable standard for policy-making; at the same time, we will work to *persuade* officials and the electorate alike of the goodness, justice, and peace to be discovered in following the teaching of God's Law, rightly understood.

The danger of democracy

Democracy can be a particularly dangerous form of government, especially, as in our day, when what Christopher Lasch described as a “culture of narcissism” has become the dominant culture and mindset. “All through the day—I, me, mine; I, me, mine; I, me, mine...” The Beatles, back in the early 70s, observed this trend and celebrated (lamented?) it in song. People want what people want, and democratic governments

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know that the way to stay in power is either to give the people what they want or convince them that you are doing so.

Not only does this represent an inversion of the proper leadership roles of a nation—governments are supposed to lead, not follow—but it is also a perversion of the divine standard for *good* public policy. Unless God has the last word on what government implements in the way of laws, regulations, and so forth, all laws become subject to whim and the shifting foci of power politics. Governments govern well when they enact policies which promote what is good—what is in line with God’s view of how the world should be.

This is why familiarity with God’s Law and Word is so important, beginning among the members of the Christian community. How shall we weigh the demands of the people and decide what are the true needs of the day? Not, as we have seen, in a way that merely benefits those who hold public office. And not in a way that panders to the whims and fancies of the populace. Christians will insist that all matters of public policy are to be guided, shaped, and conformed to the teaching of God’s standards of goodness. Government cannot fulfill the requirements of its *good* purpose apart from familiarity with and input from the *good* Law of God. It is thus the *duty* of those who have been entrusted with the Law of God (Ps. 147.19, 20) to make its good teaching and blessings known to those who are called as His servants for good.

Doubtless this position will seem untenable to many and will likely elicit cries of “Theocracy!” from those who prefer to make public policy according to the temper of the times. But if the Law of God were removed from the Western legal tradition, including the legal foundations and policies of our own nation, much that is stable and good about law and public policy in the present would cease to exist.

Christians must demonstrate the value of God’s Law in our own lives and communities. And we must patiently work to persuade our neighbors of the benefits God’s Law can bring to the nation. Then we must take up the difficult work of helping to shape public policy according to the teachings of God’s Law, concerning which we shall have more to say in subsequent installments in this series.

The second law of the *logic* of public policy can thus be simply phrased: Those policies are good which conform to the teaching of God’s Law and Word.

For reflection

1. Why is the voice of the people not a reliable standard for public policy?
2. Why are the best ideas of politicians not a reliable standard for public policy?
3. What can you do to become more familiar with God’s holy and righteous and good Law?

Next steps—Preparation: Think of some issues today that challenge the authority of God’s Law. Add these issues to your prayers for our country.

3 The Loci of Public Policy (1)

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” Deuteronomy 6.6, 7

The logic of public policy reviewed

The *logic* of public policy defines the first of the “Three Ls” of public policy-making and consists of two parts.

First, government is not God; instead, government is *God's servant* for the good of those served. And second, the people are not God, and therefore must not be allowed the last word on what defines the terms of “good” public policy. *Only God can define what is good* for people, for He alone is good (Mk. 10.18; Ps. 119.68). From the perspective of a Christian worldview, all matters of public policy-making must be guided by these two fundamental principles.

Public policies, then, should express the good purposes of God for people living together in society; and it is the purpose of government, as God's servant on behalf of the governed, to establish and enforce such policies.

From the *logic* of public policy we turn to consider the second “L”—the *loci* of public policy, or, the places in our society where public policies begin to be forged and put in place.

It would be a mistake to believe that public policy is made by government *in the first instance*. The *loci* of public policy-making are three: conversation, publication, and participation. What comes to law as public policy is shaped in each of these arenas, and of these three, the first—conversation—is by far the most important.

We the people

In this county, “we the people” represent the bottom-line of government. Public policy-making begins with us. This has been the experience of Americans from the very beginning. The policies by which a free people are governed are incubated among the people, beginning in homes, workplaces, social gatherings, and neighborhoods across the country. This is why politicians spend so much time and energy on two efforts: trying to influence the way their constituents think about policy matters and polling to determine the present state of their thinking.

Conversation, therefore, remains the most important locus for public policy-making today. What folks talk about, discuss with their friends and neighbors, and teach their children will have long-term implications for and effects on the policies government enacts. Believers in Jesus Christ must make good and consistent use of every opportunity to talk with others about moral, social, and cultural issues in a manner consistent with God's good and perfect will. But for us to do this, we must be assisted and encouraged by local church leaders, as well as by Christian leaders in all facets of society. We must be taught how to think with the mind of Christ about the Law of God and public policy.

The “spiral of silence”

At present, the voices of believers on matters of public policy are scarcely being heard. As German sociologist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann has shown, those who are the most active and outspoken regarding their views and demands are likely to carry the day in democratic societies such as ours. The more people talk about their issues, the bolder they become. The bolder and more outspoken they become, the more persuasive they may be, and the more a “spiral of silence” begins to engulf those who think otherwise.

Christians cannot allow the outspoken voices of an age in flight from God to dominate conversations about

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matters of public policy. Whether in the workplace, among friends or neighbors, or in any of various social settings, Christians must be prepared to discuss the issues of the day in a way that points to the goodness and wisdom of God. We must be ready to explain our views on all manner of public policy issues and to refute those views which serve only the interests of government or the people. If we do not feel ready for such conversations, the proper response is not to withdraw, but to prepare. We need to become like the sons of Issachar, those mighty men of King David's army, who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12.32).

If we will not engage in conversations concerning matters of public policy, then it is all but certain that policies will be articulated and pushed up toward decision-makers without representation or input from the perspective of a Christian worldview.

Making the most of conversation

So it is very important that believers in Jesus Christ make the best use of every opportunity to talk about what is good and pleasing to God, and to resist the pressure of the "spiral of silence" to keep us from airing our views. We must especially learn to think about the Law of God, and all His Word, with respect to matters of public policy. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and it is certain that Jesus' thoughts track always with the teaching of His Law. We must not fear to bring the Law into conversations about contemporary issues—though not in a "preachy" manner (more about this later)—and, when we do so, we should be prepared to show the wisdom of the Law and to explain the promise of blessing it contains.

The Christian population of our nation numbers in the scores of millions. Public policy over the past generation, however, has not reflected considered and consistent input from the Christian worldview perspective. It's not that Christians have not augured for their views in one or another of the public policy arenas, those *loci* where policies are forged. It is rather that, at this most fundamental level of conversation, we have been neither consistent, nor unified, nor vigorous, nor convincing in arguing the case for the goodness and wisdom of the Biblical perspective on a wide range of public policy issues. We have been more likely to remain silent, to go-along-to-get-along on issues rather than to risk being seen as either judgmental or weird.

But imagine a nation of scores of millions of people, deeply conversant with God's holy and righteous and good Law, eager to discuss and able to defend the kinds of public policies it suggests. There is more power in conversation than in either or both of the other *loci* of public policy-making. Believers in Christ must learn to make the most of this opportunity.

For reflection

1. When was the last time you talked with a friend about some matter of public policy?
2. How well prepared are you to discuss public policy? To explain a Biblical perspective on such matters?
3. What can you do to make yourself more conversant about such matters?

Next steps—Transformation: How can you prepare each day to make the most of your opportunities for conversations in making known the goodness of God?

4 The Loci of Public Policy (2)

Then the LORD answered me and said:

“Write the vision

And make it plain on tablets,

That he may run who reads it.” Habakkuk 2.2

Where public policy begins

God intends that the unbelieving world should benefit from the wisdom and understanding encoded in His Law and all His Word. For the Christian, the *logic* of public policymaking begins here. Government is not God, and neither are the people. God is God; God is good; and God has established civil governments to serve Him for His good purposes on behalf of the governed. For this to happen, God commands that His Word—beginning with His Law—should guide the nations in establishing policies that promote justice, righteousness, and peace.

And He has entrusted that Word to us, that we should wield it like a two-edged sword (Pss. 147.19, 20; 149.5-6).

As God’s people live out the righteousness and wisdom of His Law, we may expect to have abundant opportunities to talk with our neighbors about why we live the way we do (1 Pet. 3.15). Talking with our neighbors about the wisdom of God is the first locus where public policy begins to be formed. Such *conversations*, backed-up by credible lives, can wield significant influence with our unbelieving neighbors.

Knowing that God intends His Law to influence the public policies of the nations must move us to make His Law and its benefits known by every means and in every season. Matters of public policy present timely and unique opportunities for God’s people to publish the wisdom and understanding of His Law, and this—*publication*—constitutes the second locus of public policymaking.

How can believers in Jesus use publication as a way of shaping public policy for good?

Opportunities for publishing

Publishing the Law of God for the nations to see its wisdom and understanding presupposes, of course, both that God’s Kingdom people know His Law and that we are walking in obedience to it (Matt. 5.17-19). The *knowledge* of God’s Law will bring forth *divine wisdom* in our daily lives; and the ways we live out the hope of glory to which the Law leads us will certainly be evident to the people around us.

Prior to the last couple of decades, finding a platform from which to publish one’s views on public issues was not an easy proposition. In our day, however, there is no shortage of media through which we might do so. Local newspapers still receive occasional op/ed pieces as well as letters to the editor. Even national journals of opinion will publish letters that are concise, considerate, and well-written.

But by far the greatest medium through which believers can publish the wisdom of God is the Internet. Websites and social media abound where Kingdom citizens can comment, discuss, and share on matters of public policy. Policy websites and blogs also provide opportunities for Christians to weigh in from their Christian worldview perspective. Many very fine public policy newsletters are available for free, and these can be widely shared.

In addition, many websites exist in which questions of public policy are given thoughtful consideration by believing thinkers. Articles from these websites relating to public policy matters can be downloaded and copied for study or distribution, or simply emailed to friends. We should always make sure to follow-up on

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any emailed articles, or articles copied and distributed, with a view to engaging in conversation over the issue examined.

Believers should not be reluctant to post our own views on public policy—on our websites or social media sites, through email, or for discussion in small groups—and thus to encourage conversation that can affect policymaking.

We should also think about ways of influencing and encouraging fellow believers to use their platforms to address matters of public policy for the common good. Whether the platform is a pulpit, a Bible study group, a website or newsletter, or casual discussion groups, all these arenas can be powerful venues for promoting public policies in line with the teaching of God's Law.

Join efforts

Christians should also think about meeting together to discuss matters of public policy, creating specific strategies for using available media to express shared views. This was an approach to public policymaking which colonial Americans used to great effect by organizing Committees of Correspondence up and down the Eastern seaboard prior to the Declaration of Independence. These Committees were local groups who gathered for study, conversation, and local action to preserve American liberties against what the colonists regarded as increasing British tyranny. They made good use of available publications to shape the thinking of their neighbors about independence.

I once moderated a writer's group which included, as part of its regular meeting, a session in which members shared their writing goals for the next month. We also discussed matters of public policy and considered ways to address our concerns through local media. When people pray for one another, we discovered, they are more likely to achieve their writing goals. This group was meeting at a time when websites were just beginning to be used; nevertheless, our writers managed to publish several columns and letters to the editor in the local newspaper of a major market.

No one is going to publish the wisdom and knowledge of God's Law for us. We must be wise as serpents and harmless as doves as we seek to persuade others of the benefits to be realized from policies based on God's good and righteous Word. If we hope to make a long-term contribution to the shape of public policy in this nation, we must explore every available outlet for putting the wisdom and understanding of God's Law before the eyes of those who are engaged in making public policy, beginning with "we the people."

For reflection

1. What are some public policy issues that you are concerned about? How do you try to learn more about these issues? Do you talk about these with others?
2. What opportunities for publishing or using publications to influence policy matters are available to you?
3. Are you part of a study group or discussion group where matters of public policy could be researched according to the Word of God?

Next steps—Transformation: What can you begin to do in your own [Personal Mission Field](#) to help people think about public policy according to the teaching of God's Word?

5 The Loci of Public Policy (3)

Then Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Exodus 4.10

Conversation, publication, and public policy

We must not underestimate the power of conversation and publication in shaping public policy. The absence of a Christian voice in any area of public policy can create a "spiral of silence", squelching what is true and good and allowing those policies backed by the most vocal proponents to gain the day. If we will work hard to be well-prepared, and if we make the most of every opportunity to engage and persuade, rather than just argue about topics, we might be surprised at how the Lord can use us to affect the way others think about the big issues of the day.

We may not consider ourselves articulate or persuasive, but if we know and abide by God's Word, even our stumbling speech can have a powerful effect on how others think about issues of the day.

Remember, as the Lord Himself said in Deuteronomy 4.6-8, there is wisdom in His Law which even unbelievers can observe and which they will find appealing. And it is our task and calling to bring that to light and spread it around among the people we know, so that the Lord can then draw them to Himself and His ways (Mic. 4.1-8).

These two loci of public policy are open to every believer. We must make the most of them as we are able.

The political arena

But public policy is ultimately decided and crafted in the arena of formal politics, amid the machinery of political parties and campaigns and in the halls, chambers, and back rooms of government. If we are to make a consistent and convincing case for the Law of God in American public policy, at least some members of the Christian community will need to follow the Lord's calling to serve here.

Most of us will be reluctant to take up such a calling. That's certainly understandable. Moses was reluctant to involve himself with political power, but he was made to see that God's will for His people could not be accomplished without such involvement. Joseph understood this, as did Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, David, and many of the great saints of Scripture and Church history. In every generation believers have known that helping government fulfill its God-given calling requires the presence of at least some believers in the mix.

The same is true today. Christians do not look to the State for anything other than that it should fulfill its calling as God's servant for good (Rom 13.1-7). But for government to craft and enact good laws, laws that line up with the Law of God, will require the presence of people who have a well-defined sense of what is good and who are able to think clearly about how such notions of good apply in the area of public policy.

The Christian understands that the Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). He or she knows that God intends this Law to be a means for bringing His goodness to the nations, as has been the case with our own nation since its founding. The Christian knows that God intends government to serve His good purposes, and this requires, in part, that government maintain a peaceable and orderly society where righteousness can flourish, human dignity is respected, and people are free to proclaim, hear, and heed the Gospel as the Lord leads (1 Tim. 2.1-8).

"We the people" have a certain debt which we owe to Caesar, and we must render it as unto God. Unless Christians are present throughout the formal political process, it's not likely that government will be inclined to serve these good purposes or to make resort to God's good Law when it comes to public policy.

That governments frequently stray from such a framework of goodness will surprise no one. It certainly did not surprise Moses. Christians must be prepared to enter the arena of politics and government, as the Lord leads and calls, to work for policies consistent with divine goodness. Moses did not feel qualified for such work; doubtless, most of us feel the same way. But as God aided and prepared Moses, so He provides the qualifications His people need when He calls them to any task (1 Thess. 5.24).

So if God leads you, like He did Moses, to become active in the political arena, it will do no good trying to debate with Him. Let His Spirit guide you, step by step, to determine precisely where He intends for you to serve, even as you continue preparing yourself to deal with the issues of the day from the perspective of a Christian worldview.

Getting involved in politics

Involvement in the political arena begins with prayer and is sustained by prayer, for all participants in the process (1 Tim. 2.1-8; cf. 1 Sam. 12.23). Here, every believer can and should be active.

Beyond prayer, however, believers should not scorn opportunities to serve in voluntary ways for those candidates and parties whose platforms reflect or are agreeable to Biblical teaching. Here again abundant opportunities exist for all believers to assist those whose views and policies most tend in the direction of the goodness of God. Visit the website or contact the local office of your chosen party or official, and offer to help in any way you can. At the very least, this will open opportunities for conversation, and you may be able to play a role in helping to expedite or even shape the views of the official you serve.

Further, some believers will hear a call to stand for public office or to serve on the staff of a public official, and they must look to the Lord and one another for help in preparing for and taking up such a responsibility. Running for office or finding a position on the staff of a public official can take time, so it's probably best to hold on to your day job for a while.

Still other believers will be led to opportunities that can affect the decisions of political leaders through other forms of direct involvement in the political arena—in the media, for example, or with think-tanks, lobbying groups, social movements, and the like. It is essential that the Christian worldview have representatives working in each of these sectors of the public policy arena.

It will be good for those who engage in seeking to shape public policy to understand the language of public policy, both how we must talk with God, and how we must talk with men. We turn to this subject next.

For reflection

1. In what ways have you been involved in the political process? Were you conscious then of seeking God's good?
2. Do you pray for public officials? Read their communications? Seek to communicate with them? Should you?
3. How would you counsel a new believer to approach the public policy task of voting in a general election?

Next steps—Preparation: In which of the loci of public policymaking are you currently involved? How might you improve your contribution in these?

6 The Language of Public Policy (1)

“For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?” Deuteronomy 4.7, 8

For whatever reason

We have considered two of the “Three Ls” of public policy—the *logic* of public policy (neither government nor the people are absolute, but only God) and the *loci* in which public policy is made (conversations, publications, and participation in public service). Before turning to the Law of God to begin discerning public policy outcomes and particular applications, we need to say a few words about the *language* of public policy, which we will do in this and the next installment in this series.

The language of public policy must first be the language of prayer. God has made it so that we may call upon Him “for whatever reason” and expect that He will hear and answer and show us great and mighty things (Jer. 33.3). Without prayer—speaking with God about public policy—we cannot hope to have any power but our own wits and wiles assisting us in the policy-making process. With prayer, however, much, much more is possible, as we shall see.

Let us then consider the role of prayer in shaping and making public policy.

Praying for policymakers

It is good, and according to God’s Word, that Christians should pray for those who are in positions of public policymaking. The language by which Christians may expect to affect public policy and to bring the wisdom and understanding of God’s Law to bear on social and political issues is first, the language of prayer.

Samuel, even in “retirement,” understood that he must continue to pray for Israel and her leaders (1 Sam. 12.23). He certainly had his differences with Saul and the drift of things in Israel, but Samuel would not allow himself to fall into sin by failing to pray for those in power.

David prayed that the kingdom under his son, Solomon, would flourish in righteousness, justice, and material blessings, and that God would be honored and glorified throughout the earth as a result (Ps. 72).

Daniel also knew the importance of praying about matters of public policy and government. He turned to prayer and rallied his friends to pray when an opportunity for affecting Babylonian policy was suddenly thrust upon him (Dan. 2.17-23). Prayer opened the door for Daniel to participate in policymaking in significant ways during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius.

It’s clear that the effective, fervent prayer of people committed to knowing and living the Law of God can be very powerful (Jms. 5.16), even, as we have seen, to affect the kinds of policies governments enact in ruling their people. The language of public policymaking, in whatever locus we address it, must begin in prayer. And that when we pray, for “whatever reason”, our prayers should seek God’s wisdom, justice, righteousness, peace, and joy.

Let’s look more closely at one specific instruction concerning prayer that is clearly focused on matters of public policy. Paul’s exhortation to the men of Ephesus can help us in thinking about how we should use the language of prayer to lead the way in public policymaking.

Praying for policymakers and policy

Paul instructed the men of Ephesus and everywhere to pray for public officials and, by association, for the

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policies such men might make. We remember that government is the servant of God and that He expects governments to do what is good. Governments these days are comprised of Christian and non-Christian officials, and we will need to make our prayers specific for each. Prayer as the first word of the language of public policy begins with God's people holding up specific officials, by name or office, before the Lord, pleading with Him to shape and direct them—or to restrain or defeat them—according to His good purposes for civil government.

We also note that Paul urged the men of Ephesus to avail themselves of all kinds of prayer in all kinds of situations. The combining here of various words for prayer—supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings—is intended to “cover the gamut” of all possible kinds of prayer—private and personal, public and formal, spontaneous or in response to specific situations or needs. No place or time is “out of bounds” or “off limits” when it comes to the work of prayer, including praying for public officials. We should be always at the ready to seek mercy from God for policies and laws that will allow the Church to continue to increase in God's *shalom* and for people to experience their full measure of dignity as the image-bearers of God.

Pray, Paul urged the men of Ephesus, that God's people may live free and peaceable lives, without harassment or persecution. Pray that godliness and dignity may increase, and that the Gospel may reach to the lost (v. 4). In these terms a wealth of public policy guidelines and provisions suggest themselves. We have begun to see in our day how public policies can subtly encroach on our precious religious freedoms. We might want to strike back at public officials when such policies are promulgated, with words of protest, warning, and even defiance. But we must begin to address all such matters by speaking first to the Lord of the heart. He alone can change the minds of those He has appointed to serve in public office.

If we will not take our public policy concerns to the Lord in prayer, we should not expect to know much success in realizing the policies we seek.

Our prayers for policymakers can have powerful effects. But we must believe this and be diligent in practicing prayer for public officials. Paul's exhortation is not reserved for seasons of political campaigning or when some great issue is coming up for a vote. We must make such prayer a constant and continuous part of our own language of public policy, for unless we bring our requests to the throne of grace first, we may not expect to know the blessing of God on our endeavors.

For reflection

1. What can you do to be more consistent in praying for matters of public policy?
2. Why is prayer the necessary place to begin working for changes in public policy?
3. What can we expect if we refuse or fail to pray earnestly and diligently concerning all matters of public policy?

Next steps—Preparation: Do you have a list of specific policymakers to pray for each day? How might you secure or create one?

7 The Language of Public Policy (2)

“Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”
Deuteronomy 4.5, 6

Begin here

For the Christian, the language we use in contributing to public policy begins in conversation with God. If we do not first talk with God about the work of government, we run the risk, like Joshua in the first assault on Ai, of charging ahead in our own efforts, doing whatever we think is best without respect for God’s purposes or concerns.

We talk with God about public policy, then we enter the arena of public policy and talk with those who engage with us in this important work. Here Christians need to be reminded about a couple of obvious, but easily-overlooked, guidelines to help us in bringing the teaching of God’s Law to bear on the work of public policy.

Two guidelines

First, making public policy is not a work of evangelization. Of course, Christians must be always ready to give a reason for our hope to anyone who asks (1 Pet. 3.15). But in making public policy we are seeking to shape government not for the salvation of souls but for the kind of society where such salvation can be freely proclaimed and lived (1 Tim. 2.1-8).

Thus the language of public policymaking must not be the language of preaching; indeed, it will probably not even be the language of God’s Law, at least, not obviously or directly. Nothing shuts down conversation in the public policy arena in contemporary America quite as fast as someone who feels obligated to preface all his opinions with, “Thus saith the Lord” or to punctuate his every comment with “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” Such language is appropriate in its place, of course, but it is not likely to enable us to achieve a persuasive voice in the arena of public policymaking.

But just because we do not use the *words* of God’s Law does not mean that we are not seeking to achieve in public policy the *spirit* of what it encodes. Biblical exposition makes sense to us, and we would not think of engaging the arena of public policy—or any other arena of life—without adequate Biblical preparation and instruction.

However, we need to present God’s good and perfect will to people in language that *makes sense to them*. We must seek to persuade policymakers that what we propose in any area of public policy embodies true wisdom and understanding and will contribute to a peaceable, quiet, safe, just, and good society. The burden is on us to understand the times in which we live—the views and worldview of our contemporaries, and their hopes and aspirations—and to propose our agendas in ways that resonate with those worldviews and hopes.

As Jesus became incarnate in a form men could recognize, doing works they could admire and speaking words they could readily understand, so we who are seeking to affect public policy according to God’s good Law must couch our proposals in arguments and forms, the wisdom and goodness of which can be properly debated, evaluated, and implemented within the public square by people who may have no regard whatsoever for Biblical teaching.

This is a large challenge, obviously. But by God’s grace, we can rise to it.

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How we speak

Here it is important that we understand and practice everything the Scriptures teach about how we must use our speech. We must seek to edify others, show them reverence and respect, propose scenarios that appeal to the most basic human needs and concerns, speak the truth in love, and do our very best to explain, persuade, and justify our views, *without feeling the compunction, at every turn, to cite chapters and verses from the Bible*. We must use the tools of reason and sound judgment to make our case, because unless our recommendations and suggestions make sense to others, we cannot possibly hope to achieve any progress in bringing the holy and righteous and good Law of God to bear on matters of public policy.

All we do and all we propose will derive from our understanding of God's Law and of all His Word. And, if asked, we must be ready to explain our Biblical perspective. But if we lead with Scripture, or if we give the impression that only by believing Scripture can our proposals be agreed to, then we will lose the argument before it even starts. This is why Jesus spent so much time telling stories and so little time quoting the Old Testament. He taught the Law of God without having to name or quote it, and the wisdom contained in those parables has stood the test of time.

We must be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves in helping policymakers see the wisdom, understanding, and good that can come from public policies based on the teaching of God's Word, without requiring them to embrace that Word or even to acknowledge it as the source of our recommendations.

The language of public policy begins in the words of prayer, but its vernacular must be that of the best, the most thoughtful, and the most winsome vernacular and persuasion of the age in which we live. Our goal must be to persuade. Only God can change hearts, and He holds the hearts of every person in government in his own hand, to shape and move as He will (Prov. 21.1).

There is a time and a place for evangelizing the lost and for arguing Biblical cases for this or that moral or cultural perspective. And such opportunities may certainly arise as we engage in the work of public policy. But the work of making public policy is not best served by confusing evangelism or apologetics with public service. We can make progress in bringing the blessings of God's Law into policies designed to promote the common weal, but we must do so in a way that keeps in mind the purpose of public policy and the protocols of sound reason, good judgment, and lively discussion and debate.

Public policy does not save anyone. However, it can preserve and nurture a social and cultural environment in which those who are saved can practice their faith freely, and those who are not saved can experience, observe, and inquire about the hope that is within us.

For reflection

1. The goal of policymaking is to bring good to the people, not to save policymakers. Why is it important to keep this in mind as we work on public policy matters?
2. But we must always be ready to explain our views and give a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3.15). Can we hope to do so without a firm grounding in the Law of God and all His Word? Explain.
3. Are there any current matters of public policy that you would like to be more engaged in?

Next steps—Preparation: Pick an issue of public policy. Outline a perspective on this issue that is based in God's Law and all His Word. What good would come to the society as a whole if this policy were widely adopted?

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For reflection or discussion

1. Summarize the *logic* for making public policy.
2. What do we mean by the three *loci* for policymaking? In which of these are you involved?
3. Why is it so important that talking about public policy matters should begin in prayer?
4. For the Christian, what's the difference between policymaking and evangelism?
5. What is the most important lesson you've learned from this installment in our series "The Law of God and Public Policy"?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.