

# Why Jesus Wasn't Afraid to Make Political Statements

Christianity focuses on Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and a wise, loving leader beyond politics. But throughout His years on earth, Jesus and His apostles encountered political situations and interacted with Roman politicians.

Earthly politics involving the apostles did not end with Jesus's ascension.

In a short online article titled "Jesus and Politics," Marcus J. Borg states that politics played a very important role in Jesus's life. His entry into Jerusalem by donkey illustrated a peaceful kingdom devoid of weapons of war; His public designation of the temple as a cave of thieves clearly reflected His concern about temple activists cooperating with Roman rulers and tax collectors.

Jesus' message emphasized the establishment of God's kingdom, a possibility viewed as a threat to the Roman Empire. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus's story involves conflict and His crucifixion represented a political act intended to show what might happen to individuals who regularly fought against political authority.

Jesus didn't avoid making what might be considered political statements. When asked if He would pay taxes to Caesar, He asked for a coin, scrutinized the surface of the coin and discovered Caesar's image. He then answered the question posed to Him concerning His willingness to pay taxes to Caesar. He said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."

His response to the question showed His respect for earthly organizations and established processes without taking a particular political stance. John King points out in his

online piece titled “Did Jesus Get Involved in the Contemporary Politics in Israel?” that Jesus did not speak out about any specific political issue, forbade His disciples to declare publicly that he was the Messiah and refused to lead any movement among the populace intended to result in a kingship for Him.

Jesus’ selection and organization of His apostles even proved to be a political exercise, and it irritated the local politicians and the conquering Roman Empire. The selection process resulted in political diversity. Matthew, for example, worked for the existing government as a tax collector and held liberal political views. Peter belonged to a conservative group and believed the government should keep out of citizens’ affairs. At times, he worked against the existing government. Simon the Zealot held membership in a group referred to as zealots, who strongly opposed the Roman occupation of Israel and even assassinated Roman soldiers to express their dislike of the Romans and their despotism.

In Chapter 13 of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul declares that every individual should be subject to “the governing authorities.” Verse seven of the chapter reads as follows: “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” Paul remained pro-government even after his conversion to Jesus’s teachings.

In an opinion piece titled “The Politics Among the Disciples of Jesus Christ,” Joseph B. Freeman points out that Jesus engaged in a “delicate political exercise” when He formed the group of apostles; the Roman conquerors and their local agents began to fear Him. They thought He might initiate an insurrection against them.

Among the apostles themselves competition emerged. James and John, for example, asked Jesus if He could reserve posts for them on His left and right sides; their parents viewed both

posts as places of distinction and wanted their children to enjoy the prestige a close, noticeable association with Jesus might bring. Jesus rebuked the whole family.

Despite their political diversity and personal competition, the apostles came together and cooperated in relation to Jesus's work here on earth. God's unconditional love shown them through Jesus united them in their commitment to Him and His purpose.

After Jesus's death and Resurrection, He physically ascended into heaven in the presence of eleven of His apostles according to the Bible, but His message did not die. Energetic apostles like Paul worked diligently to carry the message to various parts of the Roman Empire. Roman officials did not at first accept Christianity as a legitimate religion; relations between converts to Christianity and Roman officials showed considerable interpersonal and intergroup tension. The Romans often persecuted and formally punished Christians.

Negative relations and sometimes scary politics between Christians and the Romans persisted for some 300 years, but Christianity gained prominence and acceptance during the reign of Constantine the Great (A.D. 306-337). Constantine converted to Christianity and began to promote the Christian tenets of faith.

In A.D. 380, the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius signed a decree in the presence of the Western Roman Emperor that Christianity would from that point in time be accepted as the religion of the state and non-believers could be persecuted. Christianity began to transition to a dominant religion of the Roman Empire. {eoa}

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