

POLITICS IS NOT A CRIME: A THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE WITHIN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS

Kolawole Ilesanmi BAMIGBELE

Federal College of Education, Ilawe – Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

ilasanmibamigbele@gmail.com

07031670518

Abstract

For centuries, the relationship between Christianity and politics has been a subject of tension, with many Christians viewing political involvement as a betrayal of faith. This hesitation often stems from the painful history of political abuse and from narrow interpretations of Scripture that appear to discourage participation in politics. Yet, in contemporary society, politics is not merely a realm of corruption or power struggles; it is also a vital space for shaping justice, protecting human dignity, and pursuing the common good. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that political participation is not only open to Christians but is integral to their calling to be salt and light in society. Using a qualitative theological approach, the study engages biblical interpretation, political theology, and public ethics to examine the intersection of faith and politics. The findings suggest that when guided by stewardship, justice, and love of neighbor, political engagement can function as a form of service rather than self-interest. By contrast, disengagement weakens Christian witness and leaves governance vulnerable to corruption. The paper therefore recommends that Christians approach politics as a ministry of service characterized by integrity, transparency, and prophetic truth-telling. Churches and theological institutions are also encouraged to prepare believers for civic responsibility through leadership training, moral education, and advocacy. In this way, Christian participation in politics can become a force for renewal, offering hope and moral direction in democratic societies.

Keywords: *Political Theology, Christian Participation, Governance, Democracy, Public Ethics*

Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and politics has been one of the most debated issues in theology, philosophy, and governance. For centuries, scholars and practitioners have questioned whether followers of Christ should engage in politics, or whether political participation inherently compromises religious integrity. In many contexts, politics is often equated with corruption, manipulation, and abuse of power, leading to the widespread perception that faithful Christians must keep their distance from political processes. This suspicion has been reinforced by historical abuses of political authority in which religion was manipulated to legitimize oppression (Cavanaugh, 2009; Juergensmeyer, 2003), as

well as by certain interpretations of biblical texts that appear to discourage entanglement with worldly political affairs (Hays, 1996; Yoder, 1972). Nevertheless, politics remains an inescapable aspect of human society, as human life is inevitably organized within political structures that shape moral and social realities (Aristotle, 1998; Wolterstorff, 2012). Every community requires governance, order, justice, and structures that promote the common good. In democratic systems, political participation is not limited to ruling elites but is a civic responsibility of all citizens. Christians, therefore, cannot remain indifferent to politics without neglecting their role as stewards of creation, defenders of justice, and advocates for human dignity. To withdraw from politics is to allow the forces of

corruption, injustice, and self-interest to dominate public life without resistance. Theologically, politics should not be perceived merely as a secular or profane activity. Rather, it can be understood as a vocation of service, a sphere where values of love, justice, and stewardship are practiced on a societal scale. From the biblical mandate to seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29:7) to Christ's call to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), Christian witness includes engagement with the structures that shape collective life. Far from being a crime, politics provides a legitimate avenue through which Christians can embody their faith in pursuit of the common good.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the pervasive influence of politics on social order and moral life, Christian participation in governance remains deeply contested within both theological discourse and ecclesial practice. Many Christians continue to perceive politics as inherently corrupt, morally compromising, or incompatible with authentic discipleship. This perception has contributed to widespread reluctance and withdrawal from political engagement, even in democratic contexts where civic participation is both a right and a responsibility. This pattern of disengagement is often sustained by narrow or selective interpretations of biblical texts such as Romans 13:1–7 and John 18:36, as well as by the misapplication of theological frameworks, particularly the two-kingdoms doctrine. Such interpretations frequently reinforce a false dichotomy between faith and public life, confining religious commitment to the private sphere while neglecting the ethical dimensions of governance. As a result, Christian influence in public life is weakened, leaving political spaces vulnerable to corruption, injustice, and the erosion of human dignity.

At the same time, Christians who seek to engage politically often encounter significant challenges, including ethical pressure, fear of moral compromise, politicization of the gospel, and disillusionment within flawed political systems. These realities generate uncertainty regarding the theological legitimacy, ethical boundaries, and practical responsibility of Christian political participation. The absence of a coherent theological framework to guide Christian engagement in governance thus constitutes a critical problem that warrants scholarly investigation.

Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this study is to examine the theological legitimacy and necessity of Christian participation in governance within contemporary democratic contexts. While politics is often perceived as a domain of corruption and moral compromise, this paper seeks to demonstrate that political engagement is neither inherently sinful nor contradictory to Christian faith. Instead, politics, when rightly understood, represents a field where Christian values such as justice, love, service, and stewardship can be practiced in ways that transform society for the better.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in political theology as its theoretical framework. Political theology is the systematic reflection on the relationship between theology and political life. Thinkers such as Moltmann (1999), Metz (1980), and Niebuhr (2008) have emphasized that theology cannot be detached from questions of justice, governance, and social order. Political theology asserts that Christian faith speaks not only to personal salvation but also to the structuring of society in ways that reflect God's justice and peace.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is rooted in qualitative theological research, which emphasizes interpretation, reflection, and critical engagement with texts, traditions, and lived experiences. Since the research seeks to explore Christian participation in governance from a theological perspective, the methodology employed is primarily hermeneutical, historical, and analytical. These approaches allow for a nuanced understanding of biblical texts, the historical relationship between Christianity and politics, and the implications for contemporary democratic society.

Historical Relationship between Christianity and Politics

The relationship between Christianity and politics has never been static. It has evolved across different historical contexts, shaped by theological interpretations, social conditions, and political structures. To understand contemporary Christian participation in governance, it is necessary to examine the historical trajectory that has alternately encouraged withdrawal, accommodation, and engagement with political authority.

i. The Early Church and Political Withdrawal

In the first three centuries of Christianity, the prevailing Christian attitude toward politics was largely characterized by withdrawal from imperial life (Wilken, 1984; González, 2010). The Roman Empire regarded Christians with suspicion because of their refusal to worship the emperor or participate in civic religious rituals, actions perceived as political disloyalty (Wilken, 1984). Christians often viewed the empire as morally corrupt and hostile, a perception reinforced by episodes of persecution under emperors such as Nero, Decius, and Diocletian (Frend, 1965; González, 2010). Consequently, many early Christians interpreted passages such

as John 18:36 (“My kingdom is not of this world”) as affirming disengagement from political power (Hays, 1996). Their priority was the survival of the church and the preservation of faith under hostile conditions. For this reason, Christians rarely sought political office and instead focused on spiritual practices, community support, and witness through martyrdom. Even during this period of withdrawal, there were seeds of political reflection. The writings of the Apostle Paul in Romans 13 acknowledged governing authorities as part of God’s order, provided they did not demand idolatry or injustice.

The Constantinian Shift

A dramatic transformation occurred in the fourth century with the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which granted legal toleration to Christianity (Eusebius, 1998; Drake, 2000). This development marked the beginning of what historians describe as the Constantinian shift, whereby Christianity moved from a persecuted minority to an imperially recognized and eventually dominant religion within the Roman Empire, fundamentally altering its relationship to political power (Yoder, 1972; Brown, 2012). Constantine’s embrace of Christianity opened new opportunities for Christian participation in politics. Following Constantine’s conversion, bishops increasingly assumed advisory roles in imperial governance, Christian moral principles influenced imperial legislation, and the church acquired unprecedented influence in shaping public life (Drake, 2000; Brown, 2012). However, this close alliance between church and state also generated significant theological concern. Critics such as John Howard Yoder (1972) argued that the Constantinian shift compromised the church’s radical prophetic witness by entangling it with imperial power.

The temptation to use political authority for religious purposes often led to coercion, corruption, and loss of the church's independence. Nevertheless, this period demonstrated that Christian engagement in politics could shape law, order, and governance in profound ways. It set the stage for ongoing debates about the appropriate relationship between church and state, a debate that continues in contemporary democracies.

iii. Medieval Christendom

During the medieval era, particularly in Western Europe, Christianity and politics became deeply intertwined under the framework of Christendom. The Catholic Church exercised significant influence over monarchs, often legitimizing their rule while also claiming authority over moral and spiritual matters. The medieval synthesis saw governance as a divinely ordained order in which the church and state worked together to maintain justice and social harmony. Thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo provided theological justification for political authority. In *The City of God*, Augustine argued that while earthly politics is tainted by sin, it remains necessary to restrain evil and promote relative peace. Politics, though imperfect, was understood as part of God's providence. Thomas Aquinas later developed a more systematic theology of natural law, affirming that rulers were obligated to govern in accordance with reason and divine justice. Despite these contributions, medieval Christendom was marked by tensions and abuses. The fusion of religious and political authority often led to corruption, suppression of dissent, and wars of conquest under religious banners. The lesson from this period is that while Christian involvement in governance is inevitable, it must be tempered by humility, accountability, and vigilance against the misuse of power.

iv. The Reformation and New Understandings of Authority

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century prompted significant re-evaluations of the relationship between Christianity and politics. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged the medieval synthesis by emphasizing a distinction between spiritual and temporal authority (McGrath, 2012). Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms distinguished between the spiritual realm, governed by the Word of God, and the temporal realm, governed by law and political authority (Luther, 1523/2003). While rejecting direct ecclesiastical control over political institutions, Luther nevertheless affirmed civil authority as God's instrument for maintaining order and justice. John Calvin developed a more structured vision of governance that stressed accountability and the rule of law. In Geneva, Calvin's reforms promoted moral discipline, education, and civic responsibility (Calvin, 1559/1960; González, 2010). Calvin's political theology exerted lasting influence on later Protestant political traditions, particularly ideas concerning shared governance, lawful resistance, and limits on political power. The Reformation thus reinvigorated Christian political thought by affirming both the necessity and the limits of political engagement, insisting that political authority must not be confused with the kingdom of God.

Theological Foundations for Christian Participation in Politics

The theological foundations for Christian political participation are deeply rooted in the biblical witness and the Christian tradition. While some strands of Christianity have emphasized separation from the world, a closer examination of Scripture reveals that political engagement is not merely permissible but constitutes a responsibility arising from core

commitments of Christian faith. Humanity is entrusted with stewardship over creation and social life (Gen. 1:26–28; Ps. 24:1), called to seek the welfare of the communities in which they live (Jer. 29:7), and to exercise public moral influence as “salt” and “light” in the world (Matt. 5:13–16). Three central theological themes—stewardship, justice, and love of neighbor provide a framework for understanding why Christians should not abandon governance in democratic societies. The first foundation is the doctrine of stewardship, which affirms that what God entrusts to humanity must be administered faithfully and responsibly (Luke 12:48; 1 Cor. 4:1–2). According to Genesis 1:26–28, humanity is created in the image of God and entrusted with dominion over creation. This dominion is not a license for exploitation but a mandate for responsible governance. To be a steward is to manage resources, relationships, and institutions in a way that reflects God’s justice and care. Political engagement is one dimension of stewardship. Just as Christians are called to manage their families, churches, and communities responsibly, they are also called to ensure that the structures of governance promote the common good. Abstaining from politics leaves governance in the hands of the corrupt, thus betraying the stewardship entrusted to believers. In this light, politics becomes a field where Christians fulfill their original calling as caretakers of creation and society.

Christian Participation in Contemporary Democratic Contexts: Challenges and Opportunities

The realities of contemporary democratic governance present both challenges and opportunities for Christians seeking to live out their faith in the political sphere. Unlike authoritarian regimes, democracies are grounded in principles of popular participation, political

representation, and accountability, thereby creating avenues through which citizens including Christians may responsibly engage in public life (Dahl, 1989; Held, 2006). However, persistent corruption, secular ideologies, and ethical compromises also make political engagement complex and contested.

1. Challenges Facing Christian Political Participation

a. **Widespread Corruption:** In many democracies, particularly in developing contexts such as Nigeria, corruption is widely described as systemic and pervasive, with political offices frequently perceived as avenues for personal enrichment rather than public service (Transparency International, 2022; Afrobarometer, 2021). This culture of corruption discourages Christians from entering politics, fearing compromise or loss of credibility. Yet, paradoxically, withdrawal perpetuates the very corruption they wish to avoid.

b. **Secularization and Marginalization of Religion:** In Western democracies, the dominance of secular ideologies poses another challenge. Religion is often relegated to the private sphere, with attempts to exclude faith-based perspectives from policy debates. Christians who advocate for biblically grounded ethics in public life are sometimes accused of imposing religion on secular society. This creates tension between respecting pluralism and maintaining faith-based convictions.

c. **Ethical Compromises and Political Pressure:** Christians in political office frequently face immense pressure to conform to party interests, political expediency, or the pursuit of power. This can lead to ethical compromises that undermine integrity and public witness. The fear of failure or hypocrisy deters many Christians from seeking political office.

d. Internal Divisions within the Church: The church itself is not immune to divisions along denominational, ethnic, or partisan lines. These divisions can weaken the collective voice of Christians in the public sphere and make political engagement more about power struggles than shared commitment to justice and the common good.

2. Opportunities for Christian Participation

a. Constitutional Freedom and Rights: In most democratic contexts, constitutional provisions guarantee freedom of religion, speech, and association. These freedoms provide Christians with the legal foundation to participate in politics without fear of persecution. Civic rights such as voting, campaigning, and running for office offer practical opportunities for believers to influence governance.

b. Platforms for Advocacy and Policy Influence: Democracies provide numerous platforms for advocacy through civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and parliamentary representation. Christians can use these platforms to influence policies on issues such as human rights, social justice, environmental stewardship, and the protection of vulnerable groups.

c. Building Ethical Leadership: Democratic institutions require leaders who embody integrity, accountability, and service. Christian values align with these requirements, positioning believers to model alternative forms of leadership. By demonstrating servant-leadership, Christians can challenge the culture of corruption and self-interest that dominates politics.

d. Global Networking and Ecumenical Movements: In an interconnected world, Christians in democratic contexts can network with global ecumenical and faith-based organizations that advocate for peace, justice,

and good governance. This strengthens their capacity to influence both local and international policies.

Recommendations

Politics Is Not a Crime: A Theological Inquiry into Christian Participation in Governance within Contemporary Democratic Contexts” has highlighted key insights regarding the relationship between Christianity, governance, and democratic engagement. This section presents the major findings and provides actionable recommendations for Christians, churches, and policymakers.

For Individual Christians

Christians are called to develop political literacy by acquiring a sound understanding of political systems, constitutional rights, and governance structures, enabling informed and meaningful participation in public life. Such engagement, however, must be guided by a commitment to servant leadership, particularly for those who seek or occupy political office. Christian political actors are therefore expected to model integrity, humility, and a spirit of service, consciously resisting the temptations of greed, tribalism, and corruption that often characterize political practice. Moreover, withdrawal from political engagement undermines Christian public witness. Rather than disengaging, Christians should regard responsible political involvement as an extension of discipleship and faithful stewardship of the social and political responsibilities entrusted to them.

For the Church

Churches have a critical role to play in shaping informed Christian engagement with politics by teaching political theology that is biblically grounded and theologically responsible. Such instruction can correct misinterpretations of Scripture that foster apathy or withdrawal from public life and instead cultivate a coherent

understanding of political responsibility within Christian discipleship. In addition, the church should actively encourage civic participation by urging its members to vote, seek public office, and engage constructively in democratic processes, framing these activities as expressions of responsible citizenship and faithful public witness.

For Policymakers

Policymakers should intentionally cultivate inclusive political spaces that recognize and encourage the constructive role of religious communities in promoting ethical governance. At the same time, the strengthening of democratic institutions through transparency, accountability, and justice is essential for creating environments in which faith-based participation can flourish. Moreover, the protection of religious freedom remains a foundational requirement for meaningful public engagement, as safeguarding this freedom enables Christians and other religious groups to contribute openly and responsibly to the public sphere.

For Theological Education

Seminaries and theological institutions should intentionally integrate political theology into their curricula in order to equip future ministers with a rigorous understanding of politics, democracy, and ethics. Such formation is essential for preparing both clergy and lay leaders to engage responsibly in the public sphere and to guide their congregations through complex political challenges with biblical wisdom and ethical discernment.

Conclusion

The study concludes that politics is not a crime but a theological responsibility. Christian participation in governance is an expression of discipleship, rooted in love of neighbor, justice, and stewardship. By engaging politics

prophetically, Christians demonstrate the transformative potential of faith in building just, humane, and peaceful societies. Disengagement fosters apathy and allows corruption to thrive, while responsible engagement reaffirms the public relevance of the gospel. Therefore, Christians, churches, and policymakers must work together to promote integrity, justice, and the common good in democratic governance.

References

- Afrobarometer. (2021). *Citizens' perceptions of corruption and government performance in Africa*. Afrobarometer.
- Aristotle. (1998). *Politics* (C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work written ca. 4th century BCE)
- Brown, P. (2012). *Through the eye of a needle: Wealth, the fall of Rome, and the making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*. Princeton University Press.
- Calvin, J. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (J. T. McNeill, Ed.; F. L. Battles, Trans.). Westminster Press. (Original work published 1559)
- Cavanaugh, W. T. (2009). *The myth of religious violence: Secular ideology and the roots of modern conflict*. Oxford University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.
- Drake, H. A. (2000). *Constantine and the bishops: The politics of intolerance*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eusebius of Caesarea. (1998). *Life of Constantine* (A. Cameron & S. G. Hall, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Frend, W. H. C. (1965). *Martyrdom and persecution in the early church*. Oxford University Press.
- González, J. L. (2010). *The story of Christianity: Volume 1: The early church to the dawn of the Reformation* (Revised ed.). HarperOne.
- Hays, R. B. (1996). *The moral vision of the New Testament: Community, cross, new creation*. HarperCollins.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy* (3rd ed.). Stanford University Press.

- Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence* (3rd ed.). University of California Press.
- Luther, M. (2003). *Temporal authority: To what extent it should be obeyed*. In J. J. Pelikan & H. T. Lehmann (Eds.), *Luther's works* (Vol. 45, pp. 75–129). Fortress Press. (Original work published 1523)
- McGrath, A. E. (2012). *Reformation thought: An introduction* (4th ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Metz, J. B. (1980). *Faith in history and society: Toward a practical fundamental theology*. Seabury Press.
- Moltmann, J. (1999). *God for a secular society: The public relevance of theology*. Fortress Press.
- Niebuhr, R. (2008). *Moral man and immoral society: A study in ethics and politics*. Westminster John Knox Press. (Original work published 1932)
- Norelli, E. (2018). *Early Christian attitudes toward political power*. Oxford University Press.
- Transparency International. (2022). *Corruption perceptions index 2022*. Transparency International.
- Wilken, R. L. (1984). *The Christians as the Romans saw them*. Yale University Press.
- Wolterstorff, N. (2012). *Justice: Rights and wrongs*. Princeton University Press.
- Yoder, J. H. (1972). *The politics of Jesus*. Eerdmans.