

The Bible and Politics.

1. Why Be Concerned About Politics?

It was a winter afternoon in Canterbury. Just after Christmas - the 29th December. Four senior men from the government of the day arrive to talk to the independent minded archbishop. He had been making inflammatory statements and taking a stand against the secular authorities.

But this wasn't the twenty-first century, or even the twentieth. It was the year 1170. The government officials were not men in grey suits – they were knights. The head of government was Henry II. And the archbishop was not a self-styled “bearded lefty” he was the Thomas Becket. Better known as Thomas a Becket.

The knights left the cathedral where they had been remonstrating with Thomas, retrieved their swords from under a sycamore tree and ran back in. Thomas was just joining the service of vespers, but they seized the him and struck him on the head. Another knight struck him so that he fell to the floor, and then a third sword blow cut off the top of his head, shattering the sword in the process. A member of the party placed his foot on the neck of the dead man, and, scattering the brains and blood, said “let us away knights, this fellow will arise no more.”

In reality the dispute was hardly a conflict between a saint and a tyrant. It was much more a rather sordid power struggle. But the murder of Thomas a Becket became one of the defining stories of the English nation.

Henry was forced to do penance for having incited the knights to murder. Later tradition tells us he had cried out in exasperation “who will rid me of this turbulent priest?” And crucially Henry's attempt to gain power over the church was thwarted. Thomas the martyr became the iconic saint who limited the power of government in England. It was not surprising that Henry VIII had Thomas' shrine demolished in his bid for supremacy over the English church. And even in the early twentieth century T.S. Eliot turned to the story of Thomas a Becket in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* as he wrestled with the worrying rise of Fascism in Europe.

The dynamic and sometimes hostile relationship between church and state has perhaps been the most significant and recurring factor in British history for the last thousand years at least.

By the beginning of the twentieth century many people thought the conflict had settled down. Evangelicals in particular had become increasingly suspicious of political involvement, insisting that their role was simply to preach the gospel. And the state, still largely influenced

by Christian principles set down in the Victorian era, began to take on roles particularly of social care and education which had hitherto been largely the province of churches.

But in the 1960s a profound revolution began. According to the historian Callum Brown in his book *The Death of Christian Britain* the watershed was 1962 – the year that the Beatles released their first record, and also the year that I was born. Before that time, even those who would never darken the door of a church tended to use basically Christian categories when they considered moral and political questions. Quite suddenly, however, everything changed. From reflex sympathy to Christianity, Britain switched to reflex suspicion.

Fifty years ago in the corridors of power there was a quiet confidence among many, that what remained of religious influence would gradually die out. But it didn't.

Rather the revolution of the sixties seemed to spark a counter-revolution. Since the 1970s there has been a great upsurge in social and political concern amongst evangelicals. And that in turn has been met by increasingly vehement opposition from secularists. The biologist Richard Dawkins, the philosopher Anthony Grayling and journalists such as Christopher Hitchens are all campaigning to finally remove religion from the public sphere. Nearly nine centuries after the death of Thomas Becket the battle between religious and secular power is still alive.

A number of months ago I rather recklessly proposed to the elders that I should do a series on "The Bible and Politics." I had several reasons. In a few months time we will have a general election – I want to help you to think biblically about how you might vote.

I also want to encourage you to be involved in different ways in the public life of our community and our nation. We consciously state in our vision statement that we are called to reach out by "word service and community." People must hear the gospel – the word. They will be impacted by the quality of our community – by our love. But we are also called to serve in the name of Christ – "live good lives among the pagans" says Peter, "as we have opportunity let us do good to all people" says Paul.

But I think more than anything else I am concerned at the way that some evangelicals do politics at the moment. It seems to me that we live at a delicate moment in British politics, and if we do not get it right we could bring the gospel into significant disrepute in this country – more of that next week.

New Issues facing Christians Today - £10.00 website
Fuller handouts for sermons

Today I want to persuade you, if you need persuading, that Christians have a mandate to be involved in the public life of the nation. A truly Christian life is not privatised, nor is it just “spiritual” – it is a public, engaged, loving, incarnational life which speaks and acts and loves in the name of Christ. I want to show you how the whole bible calls us to that kind of life.

1. A mandate for involvement

Creation: The mandate given: managing people and resources

Gen 1:28

“increase in number” – become a great society

“fill the earth and subdue it”

The world not created bad, but created needing to be managed.

Gen 2:15

“to work it and take care of it”

We are stewards of God’s creation

Vice-regents – in charge for God

Fall - the mandate continues: managing sin and degradation

Man and woman sin

The curses

The mandate is not withdrawn, only marred

Gen 3:16

“with pain you will give birth to children” – multiplying and filling the earth will now be dangerous and painful – but it will still happen

“I will put enmity between you and your husband” – managing people is now about managing hostility!

Gen 3:17-18

Work becomes toil

Thistles and thorns but “you will eat”

- All the questions of modern politics are here in germinal form
 - How do you manage relationships which tend towards hostility?
 - Family breakdown
 - War
 - Criminal justice
 - How do you manage resources on a hostile planet
 - Global warming
 - Poverty and malnutrition in the developing world
 - Inequalities between rich and poor
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Mandate continues to Israel in the OT

Israel not just a centre of worship

Laws – about land, about relationships

Prophets – highlighted social issues, degradation of the environment, inequalities between rich and poor – much else.

Israel to model to the world how to live – as much politically as religiously – indeed for them no such division.

Redemption

Jesus - two kingdoms

When speaking to Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor

John 18:36 “My kingdom is not of this world”

A clear statement that the kingdom of God is not a conventional earthly kingdom

A clear prohibition on using force to advance the kingdom of God

- More on this next week but this week
 - Christian priority is to proclaim the gospel
 - As such the top priority of the church is NOT POLITICS

But Matthew 22:18-21 "give to Caesar what is Caesar's"

Context – precisely “what should be the attitude to political authority?”

If he says “obey them” – then he is subordinating himself to Caesar

If he says “do not obey them” – he is simply a political rebel.

Jesus gives a perfectly balanced answer – whose image?

Pic of Denarius

At one level – the image of Caesar – we owe him appropriate allegiance

At another level – Caesar is a man – as a man he is made in the image of God – we owe ultimate allegiance to God.

- We belong to two kingdoms
 - The kingdom of man-Caesar, & the kingdom of God
 - We owe our ultimate allegiance TO GOD
 - But we also owe allegiance to earthly government – “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”

The church: witness and incarnation

To proclaim the gospel

To be a distinct community

1 Peter 2:12 (NIV - Anglicised)

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

But also to be engaged in the public sphere in so far as it was possible

Government is affirm as a part of God’s government of his world.

Romans 13:1, 4-7

*True – only says submit to government – not be involved
but in context there was very limited opportunity for
involvement*

Affirms that government is good

*Affirms that we owe a range of duties to the state –
taxation, respect, honour*

- All Christians should vote – it is your duty to government

Evidence of involvement –

*Throughout early years of the church Christians
generally excluded and persecuted*

BUT Erastus in Corinth

Erastus, who is the city's director of public works – Rom 16:23

- A life in politics – a good and godly calling
 - A despised calling at present – who better qualified than those who were taught to accept derision from the master himself?
 - Full of corruption?? – what better time for people of integrity
 - A time when anti-Christian ideas and attitudes increasingly rule – when better to make a difference?
- Could be very local- very minor
- Could be writing letters etc – politicians listen

Consummation: the mandate fulfilled

Our future hope is resurrection hope

New heaven and new earth

Different but also continuous with our present world

Rev 21:26 – “The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.”

- All good work for God will have its echo in the new creation
 - All good work is “meaningful”
 - What role has God given you in this world?
 - Some – proclaim the gospel, service focused on church
 - All bear witness to Christ, and live God honouring lives
 - All be involved in the life of our nation at some level
 - Some – perhaps give a significant chunk of their life to serving in politics
 - Think biblically and carefully
 - We will always be a people who are “against the world for the world” – because Christ was.
 - We carry the reputation of Christ on our shoulders
- "On that day when we see Jesus Christ living out his life in you, on that day we Hindus will flock to your Christ, even as doves flock to their feeding ground." Rabindranath Tagore

Galatians 6:9 (NIV - Anglicised)

⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.