

What does the Bible say about politics?

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by Paul Woolley

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BIBLE VERSES

The Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away." (Matthew 15:15-22)

Key points

- * It is often said that faith and politics are incompatible;
- * God created human beings to rule over planet Earth and exercise good governance;
- * Love of God and neighbour should compel us to take political action;
- * Democracy confers responsibilities as well as opportunities upon us;
- * In today's world there are numerous opportunities to make a difference.

We don't do God

It takes a brave man to disagree with Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's former Communications Chief, but since when has that stopped us? In 2003 Blair was being interviewed about his relationship with President Bush. Campbell, who was listening in, asked Blair: "Is he on God?" Mr Blair confirmed that he was. Campbell responded "We don't do God. I'm sorry, we don't do God." Thankfully, God is more interested in Mr Campbell than he appears to be in God. The interviewer then asked Mr Blair whether he had ever talked about religion with Mr Bush. The Prime Minister replied "I can't say it's something we've discussed, but it's something we share."

Mr Campbell is not alone in being nervous about talking about God in political discourse. Concern isn't confined to militant secularists either. It has been argued by some Christians that since there are no distinct biblical instructions to vote, or to join a political Party, or to stand for office, or to take any part in the common institutions of a democratic society, it is wrong to do any of these things. In addition, it has been said that the New Testament picture - of believers uninvolved in the government of Imperial Rome - implies for us a corresponding lack of involvement and, indeed, a lack of interest in the affairs of the state.

This reluctance to bring faith into politics is understandable. Certainly it is important to resist the temptation to co-opt God into a particular political agenda - whether the Socialism of the 1960s or the American Religious Right. God is not Conservative, New Labour or Liberal Democrat. God transcends time and space and cannot be limited to a political ideology. Despite this caution, it is vital to avoid the enlightenment trap of complete separation between God and the world.

So what, if anything, does the Bible say about politics?

Stewardship

The importance of political activism is clear right at the start of the biblical narrative. In the beginning God created human beings in his image and commanded them to "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1:26, 28) The 'image of God' status enjoyed by human beings confers on them some special privileges and responsibilities. One of these is look after Planet Earth and its resources on God's behalf. God's human creatures, all of them,

are his stewards. Man must give an account of how this stewardship is exercised, since his status as the lord of God's world is ultimately subordinate to God himself.

God created the world 'good' and his intention is that human beings should rule it accordingly. In the Old Testament law the Israelites are commanded not to rule "ruthlessly" but to "fear God." (Leviticus 25:43) Proverbs 1:7 states that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." Only to the extent that God's image-bearers rule the earth under his absolute authority and wise counsel do they fulfil their human task.

So government is not a 'necessary evil', a consequence of the fall, required only to restrain evil (although it must do this). Government of sorts has always existed and it was God's original intention that it should do so. Thomas Aquinas argued that there would have been government before the fall because, as social beings, even the residents of paradise would have needed a way to care for the common good.

Love of God and neighbour

In the Old Testament the importance of doing good to all is set out in the law. The Israelites were required to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:5) They were also told "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

Unfortunately the Israelites singularly failed to obey the law and suffered both the rebuke of the prophets and the crisis of exile as a consequence. The prophet Isaiah said "Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them... Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:14-17) Isaiah warned Judah of impending judgment because of her covenant disloyalty, her rebellion against God. The people's commitment to cultic worship at the Temple was empty ritual. The wealthy were happy to stand by and exploit or ignore the weakest members of society. They had come to see their faith in strictly 'personal' and 'private' terms, to be kept in a box. They did not let it impact their public lives and certainly not their politics.

In the New Testament, the requirements of the Old Testament law are 'intensified' by Jesus. In his Gospel, Matthew writes that on one occasion "an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22: 33-28) In essence, says Jesus, true spirituality is all about love. Intimacy with God leads to involvement in his world. In the parable of the Samaritan Jesus dramatically illustrates to the crowd that there is no limit to their neighbourhood or the requirements of neighbourliness. Even enemies are to be counted as neighbours.

If we are serious about loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves, it makes sense to get involved in the institutions that have the greatest impact on the lives of our neighbours - especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Responsibility and opportunity

Globally, democracy is a relatively new and unusual phenomenon. The majority of the human race have lived and do live - and perhaps always will - under non-democratic systems of government. Similarly, in biblical times the opportunities for ordinary people to influence the governance of nations were very limited. This helps to explain the absence of injunctions to get involved. Daniel and Esther represent two exceptional examples, of people who had the opportunity to engage with the political rulers and structures of their day and change the course of history in the process. They did so relevantly but without personal compromise. They succeeded in 'singing the Lord's song in a strange land'. (Psalm 137:4)

In democratic societies it is not possible to disclaim either the opportunities or responsibilities

conferred by democracy. Choosing not to vote, for example, affects the outcome of an election and the policies implemented in society. Democracy distributes power together with responsibility. Democracy confers responsibility, and responsibility obligation.

So, assuming we are clear about the biblical basis for political involvement, how can we practically make a difference?

5 ways to make a difference!

1. Pray. The apostle Paul instructs his readers to pray for all people in positions of authority (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Prayer is an important aspect of political activism. William Wilberforce and his friends (later known as the Clapham Set) were as committed to praying for social change as they were to engaging with government.
2. Get informed. Effective prayer should be informed prayer. In order to keep abreast with the issues in your local community, society and the world, read the newspapers, watch the TV news, and go online. Consider joining the mailing list of organisations involved in public affairs research and lobbying. Knowledge is power!
3. Vote. President Josiah Bartlet, the fictional President from TV's *The West Wing*, said "Decisions are made by those who show up." Democracy gives people a stake in power, responsibility. So use your vote and use it wisely.
4. Join a political Party and the Christian group affiliated to it. The democratic opportunities within each of the major political parties are enormous. Party membership is on the decline, so the opportunities are greater than ever.
5. Stand for election. The next step after joining a Party is to stand for a position within it. There are always vacancies.

Further reading:

From The Bible

- > Matthew 5
- > Matthew 22:15-22
- > Romans 13:1-7

Other resources

Rev Dr Nigel M De S Cameron, *The Logic of Christian Political Responsibility*.

Nick Spencer, *Votewise, Helping Christians engage with the issues*, SPCK, London, 2004.