

Social Issues Committee

Briefing Paper: God's people and politics

The issues at hand

The NSW State election is looming on March 25, 2023. It is a reminder that we live as God's people in a world where political authorities govern our lives. Politics – in the sense of authorities who make decisions about the resources, order and communities within which we live – operates in all aspects of our lives, from our local councils, to state governments, through to national governments.

How are God's people to think about, respond to, act towards, and participate in the political process?

In many ways, we come to this question, in the Anglican Diocese of Armidale, in NSW, in Australia, from a quite blessed and privileged context – we live in a democracy where we are actually given a voice and place in the political process! In this sense, we feel the burden not just of participating in the political process but also of making wise decisions within that process, decisions which honour God and promote his kingdom.

That said, we must also recognize that God's word speaks not just to the comfortable Westerner within a democratic society, but also to the refugee in our context, the person who knows Jesus under a totalitarian regime, and the child of God in a place where corruption is rife.

So, as we come to consider what God's word has to say on this matter, we must be aware that we conclude needs to be transferrable to circumstances less comfortable, less privileged, and less gentle than our context. In fact, this is an imperative given the way in which God's word speaks to all people, in all places, in all cultures, in all times.

What the Bible says...

This must be clear from the outset: in a briefing paper, the vast scope of the Bible, the immense richness of theological history, and the varied numbers of experiences and contexts will not be covered. In fact, some personal favourite Bible verses might not even be contemplated!

What we aim to do in this section is to establish a broad paddock that recognizes both the Biblical parameters, and the immense freedom and difference this allows for God's people to make godly political decisions.

There are some assumed key Biblical foundations that we will not explore; for example, the Bible is the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17); that all humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26ff); that salvation, forgiveness of sins, and the binding up of the broken is found in no-one else except Jesus Christ, and his life,

death and resurrection (1 Cor.15:1-7; Matthew 5:17-20, 11:28-29); that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise that God made in Abraham, to reverse the curse of sin and restore the blessing of right relationship with God (Genesis 12:1-3; Luke 24:40-44). We could go on, but this at least helps us be clear about what we do intend to achieve here, and from which perspective we are coming from.

We think that there are four 'fences' that help us have a godly 'paddock' within which to make godly decisions about politics.

Fence 1: Jesus is the unrivalled Lord of the universe

Matthew's good news biography of Jesus finishes in this way:

⁶ The 11 disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw Him, they worshiped, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20 CSB)

As Jesus speaks to his incomplete bunch of doubting worshippers, he commands them ('make disciples of all nations'), equips them ('going... baptizing... teaching...'), encourages them ('I am with you always'), and empowers them ('All authority has been given to me, in heaven and on earth').

This statement of identity from Jesus is striking – and enormous. There is no other ruler of the universe. There is no other human who has lived such a life that death could not hold them, and sin could not destroy them. Jesus is the Lord of the universe, heaven and earth, and this is why he is the Saviour of his people.

This power is the foundation for his command ('therefore', vs.19). But more than that, it is the public statement of Jesus' reach (he desires people from all nations to know him, and here is a powerful response to racism), and a public statement of his concern (he promises never to neglect his people, and he has the power to back up his promise).

In essence, then, God's people know the supreme authority in all the universe – his name is Jesus, and not even sin and death can beat him. Although this is good news, its proclamation is not greeted with universal joy (just look at the response in Psalm 2 as God appoints his Son as king of the universe; and just examine again the description of the violence of the rivals to God's king in the book of Revelation). This rebellion against Jesus, as Lord of all, is not successful; and so, God's people can navigate the broken rebellion of this world in restful confidence (after all, this king has already promised to give his people all they need to be his people in Matthew 6:32-34, the first great citizenship training session).

Fence 2: God has appointed all political authorities

As the apostle Paul writes to God's people in the centre of the known world – Rome – he describes for them the perspective that 'worshipping bodies' and 'renewed

minds' (cf. Rom.12:1-2) saved by the 'mercies of God' are to have when it comes to the political authorities of the day:

Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. ² So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do good and you will have its approval. ⁴ For government is God's servant to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. ⁵ Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience. ⁶ And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks. ⁷ Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. ⁸ Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:1-8 CSB)

This is an immense statement, even given the historical context (the totalitarian Roman Empire) and the command ('everyone must submit to the governing authorities'). In fact, given what Paul has already stated in Romans 12:1-2 – that our minds must be transformed and renewed so that we no longer conform to the patterns of this world, and that this is part of our reasonable worship in response to God's mercy! – this statement helps us think very differently about everything from our clamouring for 'rights', and our desire to be civilly disobedient, and our persuasion that we 'know better'.

That being said, Paul's command is very simple, and his reason is too: God has instituted all 'governing authorities'. This should not surprise us – after all, he enthroned his own Son, exercising his power to raise him from the dead (cf. Psalm 2; Ephesians 1; Colossians 1:15-19).

Here we understand the scope of the first 'fence': Jesus' authority might be challenged by worldly political authorities, his people might be persecuted (after all, the world will treat the disciple like the teacher; cf. Matt.10:25), and the wise men of the age might proclaim that 'God is dead'... but God placed these authorities where they are!

Moreover, if God has placed them, created them and instituted them, his people are commanded to obey them – that is a very clear command. In case we might want to play the 'God's word is a higher authority, so I can disobey...', we need to be careful of three things. First, don't play God's word off against itself. Second, please read Acts 4:5-22 carefully – Peter and John are dealing with the religious authorities here, not the Romans! Third, to obey the political authorities is to accept their punishment (as we will see below) when we disobey them, even in a matter of conscience.

Fence 3: Earthly political authorities have clearly defined roles

In case political authorities – and God's people – assume that earthly power is unlimited and without boundaries, God's word in Romans 13 reminds us of the very

clear limits that God has placed on political authorities. To summarise it succinctly, political authorities bring temporary order into a temporarily disordered world.

Political authorities have no eternal power or eternal significance or eternal legacy – please bear that in mind, you totalitarian dictators or prophets of doom and disaster! Political authorities are, to paraphrase 1 Timothy 2:1-6, to create such a society where God's people can proclaim and practice the good news of Jesus. Such an 'orderly society' might not be a democracy (have you ever wondered why the growth in God's people is so often NOT in Western liberal democratic capitalist nations?), but it will be the authority that God has instituted, temporarily.

Fence 4: God's people are to pray and participate

We have touched on the 'participation' part already in Romans 13... but Paul's example, in Acts 16, where he mentions his Roman citizenship is instructive:

³⁵ When daylight came, the chief magistrates sent the police to say, "Release those men!" ³⁶ The jailer reported these words to Paul: "The magistrates have sent orders for you to be released. So come out now and go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They beat us in public without a trial, although we are Roman citizens, and threw us in jail. And now are they going to smuggle us out secretly? Certainly not! On the contrary, let them come themselves and escort us out!" ³⁸ Then the police reported these words to the magistrates. And they were afraid when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them, and escorting them out, they urged them to leave town. (Acts 16:35-39 CSB)

Paul has no problem participating in the political process – not for his own benefit, but so that the good news about Jesus may continue to be proclaimed.

And this participation is matched by the command to pray:

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ² for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. ³ This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, a man, Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself-- a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2:1-6 CSB)

God's people are 'urged' to pray for political authorities, so that God's people might have access to life where they can point people to the one true Mediator, Jesus Christ.

What are the practical ways to apply this?

We are given four 'fences' in God's word, for a 'paddock' in which we can make godly decisions as God's people as we participate in the political process, wherever we are. What are the practical implications of these four 'fences'?

There are so many, but let me draw out some:

(i) God's people are about God's king, Jesus, in this broken world. His unrivalled power and authority, and his clear command about 'make disciples of all nations', means we have no reason to be anxious or alarmist about the political process; moreover, we have no reason to be distracted from our best purpose now, by getting caught in all sorts of good things (for example, a policy on this, a law on that) here. Moreover, the sovereignty of Jesus means that, even as we participate in the political process (see (iv) below), and our stance/lobbying fails, we know that Jesus is still king, and his purposes will not fail.

(ii) In this sense, God's people are publicly his people. Places like Exodus 19:1-8 and 1 Peter 2:9-10 remind us that we are the representatives of the character of God in this world. This is a public revelation, not a private matter. Whilst our lives are hidden with the Messiah in God (Col.3:1-4), we are not hidden as people who follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour. This means that, in any political process, we are public representatives of Jesus. The corollary is that there is no 'private' expression of our Christianity, just as Jesus' lordship and salvation is never private.

(iii) God has placed these 'governing authorities' where they are. Respond to them as God's instruments; moreover, recognize their limits, and remind them of them. There is already an eternal king, who deals with our temporal and eternal needs – that is not the role of political authorities. Conversely, God's people should not expect nor presume that the political authorities are placed for eternal purposes – to advance God's kingdom is not the role of the NSW State government!

(iv) We have freedom to participate in the political process, recognizing fences 1, 2, and 3. And there is scope for disagreement here, in love and truth, amongst God's people (remember Romans 13:8?). Participation in a democracy is clear – each voting member has a voice, a vote, and the opportunity to participate in the political process – and, as one of God's people, we can be confident that the eternal plans and designs of God will not fail.

(v) We must be prayers for our political authorities – for the way they govern, for who they govern, for their souls before Jesus.