



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
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Dual Citizens: A Church Guide to Politics and Political Engagement

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In summary

Political polarisation is intensifying in Australian society and within churches and church leaders are inclined to avoid politics altogether. This paper presents a biblical case for Christian political engagement and suggests how churches can do this well.

The Bible is inherently political, addressing rulers, kingdoms, and civic life throughout; its central claim that "Jesus is Lord" was and remains a political assertion. Christians cannot take Scripture seriously and remain apolitical. Democratic participation is part of loving our neighbours and applying Scripture to all of life. The paper traces a biblical account of politics through creation, sin, and redemption, then draws out key principles: the goodness, limits, and corruption of government; the church's social witness; representative government; church and state; the common good; common grace; and justice. Christian freedom is essential to preserving church unity on contested policy questions.

The paper recommends four modes of engagement. Prayer is the primary political act through which we bless our society and show our allegiance to God's kingdom. Thoughtful biblical teaching equips Christians to navigate political issues wisely. Churches can also host political discussion. Finally, there is a place for action on issues with a clear biblical basis, while respecting Christian freedom on others.

1. Polarised politics and the church

Dealing with politics in the church is tricky and seems to only be getting trickier. Across the world, social and political views are more and more polarised (O'Donnell 2024; United Nations 2022). People gather around distinctive views defined in opposition to others which they suspect of being dangerous and false. The positions are more entrenched and non-negotiable. People invest in the contest and conflict between them, holding their own view with growing passion. All of this is amplified by social media.

That pattern of polarised political views is reflected in churches. Some of the recent divisive issues in many of our churches include immigration and asylum seekers; environment and climate change; COVID lockdowns; vaccination policies and exclusions; the Voice referendum; Israel and Gaza (Pugh, 2003)

There are also issues on which reformed evangelical churches are relatively united but are explosive in the wider society and culture and can be hot issues in church: same-sex marriage, affirming transgender people, voluntary assisted dying (VAD) and freedom of religion.

These “political issues” are immediately personal for some people. When we talk about political issues at church there will be a woman who has had an abortion, a migrant family or parents whose gay child is getting married. The personal dimension adds to the pastoral risks.

Church leaders deal with political issues cautiously and often reluctantly. Politics in the pulpit can easily turn off the outsider and create division in the church. It often seems easier to avoid the issue and to make church a politics-free zone than address it. Traditionally in Australia, ministers and churches do not endorse parties or individual politicians. It is tempting to extend these principles to say we just don't go near any political issues, especially when they are divisive.

We want to avoid our church losing its way by becoming heavily political (left or right, conservative or progressive). So, it is common to assume that gospel preaching and political engagement are two totally different lanes and that committed gospel preachers and churches should be apolitical.

Yet there are good reasons for us to engage with politics.



The first and great reason is because God cares about political issues and his word speaks to them. The Bible tells us God appoints rulers, they are accountable to him and citizens are called to submit to them and obey. It also sets limits to the authorities of political powers. The Bible's announcement that "Jesus is Lord" was a potent political statement in the Roman Empire and continues to be that today. Beyond addressing the big picture of government, the Bible also speaks to specific issues from creation care to family life to employment practices. God does not tell us who to vote for but his word is relevant to so many issues which politics deals with. As we apply God's word to life, we have a responsibility to deal with the political dimension of these topics. The Bible addresses Christian discipleship in all areas of life. If we do not show how it connects to politics, we are selling short the sufficiency of Scripture.

In a democracy, who we vote for and how we express our views on issues are part of how we love our neighbours. We have the opportunity to influence government policy in ways which are good for our society. That is part of Christian discipleship which should be addressed in church life.

Many Christians want churches to address political

issues. With growing political debate, believers want preaching and teaching which speaks to the debates. Some members have clear views which they hope and expect will be endorsed. Others are confused and uncertain and would like direction and clarity. Church members are looking for guidance on politics. They want churches to address issues that matter to them - which the Bible does. Addressing politics faithfully in preaching will not meet all these expectations but Christians are right to think preaching should engage these areas.



Church members will be shaped politically one way or another. Good biblical teaching and healthy church life will shape people to view politics in a godly and wise way. However, addressing the issue generally and on specific topics, will contribute to that.

Moreover, not addressing politics will not remove it from church life. It has the potential to simmer on the backburner of church life, until it suddenly explodes in conflict. Addressing political issues might seem risky, not addressing them may have more risk! This should help Christians understand how to approach politics and political differences, as well as giving a Christian perspective on specific issues.

Political decisions also have direct impact on Christian ministry. Since 1880, New South Wales has allowed churches to teach “scripture” in public schools and this has been a wonderful ministry opportunity. For at least the last fifteen years,

churches have had to advocate to keep that opportunity. That has required a constant “lobbying” effort. That is one simple example of a political issue on which we want Christians to advocate. It is also important that Christians understand the value of freedom of religion and how they can help to keep that for everyone in our society.

2.The gospel and politics

The Bible provides a framework which helps us understand politics, sees its value and keeps it in its place. The Bible is a political book. Many of the key figures are involved in political life. Obviously, Moses, the judges and kings lead Israel. Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Pilate also have important roles in governments. The Bible has plenty to say and about rulers, kingdoms and nations. It uses political terms to speak about its central themes, one of the most obvious being the “kingdom of God”. It also speaks directly about the place of pagan rulers appointed by God and the Christian responsibility to submit (Rom 13:1; Tit 3:1; 1 Pe 2:13,14). We can't take the Bible seriously and be apolitical.

This section sets out, briefly, some of the key biblical perspectives on politics and their implications for how we think about politics now.

2.1. Creation

God is king (Pss 47; 93, 95-99; 145) because he is the Creator. He exercises immediate sovereignty over all aspects of his creation. His rule brings life and blessing; he sustains a good world and enables it to flourish. In this, God provides a model for all human government.

God's authority shows that authority can be good. The saying “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely” is not true of God. Psalm 145 describes the perfect rule of “my God the King”. He is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love ... good to all ... [and] has compassion on all he has made”. He “is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does”, and upholds those who fall. He provides for all his creation and meets the desires of those who fear him; he listens to their cry and answers their prayers. He watches over those who love him and destroys the wicked.

People were created to govern the world for God (Gen 1:26). They were appointed as his representatives to exercise power he granted. They were made “a little lower than the angels ... crowned ... with glory and honour” and he “put everything under their feet” (Ps 8:5-6). The natural authority of parents over children is the initial element of human government, which was to extend into wider expressions. Like God’s authority, human authority is not, in itself wrong (though it goes very wrong).

We were also created as political beings — that is, we live in society and as part of nations. So, not only do we rule but we have to organise our life together. Political arrangements are the way which human societies do this.

God’s absolute authority qualifies all other claims to authority. No one else can claim absolute power, every other ruler is appointed by him (Jer 27:5-7; Dan 4:17; Rom 13:1) and is answerable to him (Ps 75:6). They are to exercise their rule within the limits he has set and should reflect the just and life-giving pattern of his rule. Some human rulers try to use

divine authority as a basis for their absolute rule but the true God never allows that. He calls human rulers to account.

2.2. Sin

The presence of sin changed the role of government. Apart from sin, government seems to have a role to co-ordinate human effort. Now it has the wider task to execute justice, defend the weak and promote good (Ps 82:2-4; Prov 18:5; 29:4,14; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14). Anarchy allows evil and chaos to increase (e.g. Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). God uses government to bless people (Gen 41:37-57; Act 18:12-17; 22:27-29) by protecting them from the worst effects of evil.

At the same time, human government is distorted and corrupted by sin. Tim Farron, former leader of the Liberal Democrats in the UK, opens his podcast on Christians and politics, A Mucky Business, with these words: “You might think that politics is tainted by compromise and sin, and you’d be right, but then again so is everything else.”

Because government is a reflection of divine



power and has the capacity to bring great good, its corruption is particularly tragic and dangerous. The Bible often shows this corruption. The kings of Israel exploited their people (1 Sam 8:10-17; 1 Kg 12:4, 10-15; 21:7,15). The history of Israel shows how a corrupt government corrupts the people (e.g. 2 Kings 16:29ff). Evil kings led Israel and Judah away from the worship of the Lord to idols and under them, corruption and injustice flourished.

According to Jesus “the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them” (Matt 20:25). Gentile rulers are arrogant and use their power for their own interests, while leadership in the kingdom is modelled on his service. Rulers and regimes often turn against God’s people and oppress and persecute them (1Ki 19:2; Ne 6:1,9; Est 3:6; Ps 119:161; Jer 38:6; Da 3:13-17; Mt 10:17; Mk 13:9; Ac 12:1-3). Nebuchadnezzar illustrates that rulers and regimes seek to rival God and to claim religious devotion (Ps 2:2-3; Isa 14:13; Ezek 28:2; Da 5:23; 8:10; Ob 1:4; 2 Th 2:4). They can become so evil that they are Satanic (Dan 7:3-6; 1 Cor 2:8; Rev 13:1-8, 11-17).

2.3. Redemption

Although human rulers are often corrupted, God appointed kings to rule his people. Israel wanted to have a king like the other nations which was a rejection of God as king (1 Sam 8). However, God had promised a ruler from Judah (Gen 49:9-10) and set out the ideal of kingship for Israel—the king was to know and keep God’s law and serve the people (Dt 17:18-20).

David was God’s specially chosen king who was adopted as God’s son with the promise that his house would rule forever (2 Sam 7:5-16; Pss 2:1-12; 72:1; 89:1-37). At its best, David’s rule brought peace and security for Israel (2 Sam 7:9-11; Ps 78:70-72) and Solomon’s rule provided even greater prosperity (1 Kg 4:20; Ps 72). God provided wisdom to Solomon (1 Kg 3:9-14) and the book of Proverbs is written, at least in part, to train future kings and other officials in wisdom. As in other parts of the

ancient world, the kings were described as “shepherds” (2 Sam 7:7; Jer 12:10). There were kings who led Judah with integrity and sought to restore true worship (1 Kg 15:9-15; 22:41-44; 2 Kg 12:1-17; 18:1-7; 22-23).

As noted above, the kings of Israel and Judah often led their people away from the Lord and their disobedience led to the national apostasy which resulted in destruction for Israel and the exile for Judah. The kings were, largely, bad shepherds (1Ki 22:17; Jer 10:21; 22:21-22; 23:1-2; Eze 34:1-10). Partly because of this, the prophets stood over against the kings and presented the Word of the Lord to the kings in direction, warning and condemnation. Through the period of the kings, each king is matched by a prophet or prophets (Saul to Samuel, 1 Sam 8-31; David to Samuel & Nathan; Rehoboam to Shemaiah, 1 Kings 12; Ahab to Elijah 1 Kgs 17 & 18; Jehu to Elisha 1 Kgs 17- 2 Kg 9).



After the failure of the kings of Israel and Judah, the prophets promised a new righteous and victorious king from David’s throne (Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 16:5; Jer 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 33:15; Eze 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Am 9:11; Mic 5:2-5; Hag 2:20-23). The prophets also promised that God would establish his kingdom and rule over all nations and even replace every other kingdom (Ob 21; Dan. 2:44-45; Hag. 2:21-22; Mic 4:7 c.f. Ps 22:26-31). Israel, or the remnant in Israel, would share in that rule (Isa 14:2; Mic 4:13; 26:15; 43:14; 49:7, 23; 54:3).

The Old Testament political hopes are fulfilled by Jesus, “the Christ” (Matt 1:1; 16:6; Mk 1:1; 8:29; Lk 2:11; 9:20; Jn 1:17; 20:31), the Son of God (Ps 2:7; Matt 3:17; Mk 1:1;

Lk 22:70). He is also the Son of Man, the one who, in Daniel 7, receives the “authority, glory and sovereign power”, is worshipped by “all nations and peoples of every language” and whose kingdom and dominion” last forever (Dan 7:14). Jesus, the true king of Israel (Mt 21:5; 27: 11, 37; Mk 15: 2, 26 Lk 23:3, 38 Jn 1:49; 18:36-37; Ac 17:7; 1Co 15:25; Heb 1:8; Rev 17:14; 19:16), cared for the lost sheep (Matt 9:36; Lk 15:3-7; Jn 10:9) and laid down his life for them (Matt 26:31; Jn 10:11-18). He came not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45).

Christ is the true king, not only of Israel but of the whole world, (Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4) — “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Rev. 17:14; 19:16). His kingdom is of a different order to the kingdoms of this world (Jn 18:36). It has political implications but it is a kingdom which comes from and is secured in heaven. He came into his full appointment as God’s king in his resurrection and ascension (Lk 24:26; Ac 2:33; Rom 1:4; Eph 1:20-21; 1Pe 3:22; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 12:2). He rules now from the heavenly throne, fulfilling Adam’s task (Heb 2:5-9).



With Jesus as Lord, reigning from the heavenly throne, believers are citizens of his heavenly kingdom (Phil 3:20). Our identity is established in him, our true home is in his presence and he receives our first and highest loyalty. The church is now the witness to and anticipatory presence of the kingdom of God, spread through the nations, in anticipation of the full revelation and realisation of the Kingdom. As a witness to the kingdom of

Christ, the church has a prophetic calling to speak to the society on political issues. In the first place, this is evangelistic — the church proclaims that Christ is Lord and calls people to find their salvation in him and to become disciples (Matt 28:20). Along with this, the church also has a place to speak to the society (including governments), as it can, about the life of the society. This is clearly part of the ministry of the Old Testament prophets (2Ki 17:13; Jer 3:12-13; 35:15; 44:4; Zec 1:3-6), John the Baptist (Luke 3:11-14; Mk 6:17-18) and Jesus (Matt 23:1-37). It is less evident in the rest of the New Testament, since the church had no position from which to speak to Gentile society. James reflects some of this message (James 4:4-10), perhaps because he is in a Jewish milieu. The life of the church, showing justice and mercy, is always part of this prophetic ministry.

Believers belong, through faith, to the kingdom of God and the new age, yet still live in the old age, submitting to human rulers, even when those authorities oppose God and his people. Jesus instructed his disciples to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (Matt 22:21; Mk 12:17; Lk 20:25). He recognised the jurisdiction of human government but also its limitations. Caesar can claim taxes but God claims all people and their full loyalty, since they are all made in his image. Thus, Christians are to obey rulers (Rom 13:1; 1 Pet 2:13; Tit 3:1) and pray for them (1 Tim 2:1-2). Yet there are limits to Christian obedience to government (Acts 4:19 ff).

The kingdom of God will be fully established when Christ returns (Mt 6:10; 25:31,34; 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 11:2; 22:16, 18; 1Co 15:24; 2Ti 4:18; Rev 11:15; 12:10). Then human kingdoms will be taken into Christ’s kingdom (Rev 11:15; 21:24) and God’s people will rule with Christ (Matt 19:28; 1 Cor 6:2-3; Rev 3:21; 20: 4; 22:5).

3. Implications and some key principles

This biblical theology has implications for a Christian approach to politics. There are also some other important biblical principles which inform a Christian approach.

3.1. The good of government

Human government is good. It is not merely an institution of the fall. It can promote the good and protect people and it can serve God's purposes and support his mission. We should be thankful for all who rule and honour them, submit to them and pray for them (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17). These are ways we contribute to the good of our society. At times, Christians participate more directly in government. Calvin thought this was a particularly high calling: "Civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men".^[1]

3.2. The evil of government

Human government often turns bad. It becomes authoritarian and exploitative, it is captured by human ideologies, instead of establishing justice it acts unjustly. As it is corrupted, it often aims to co-opt the church for its own ends or turns against it. History is full of governments which have done one or the other — or even both, controlling some form of the church while persecuting another. In an extreme situation, Christians cannot obey the government when it commands evil or prohibits obedience to God (Ex 1:17; Dan. 3:16-18; 6:10; Acts 4:19; 5:29).

3.3. The limitation of politics

The sovereignty of God and Christ as his king is a political claim which relativises all human rulers. Human governments are appointed by God and are answerable to him.

Humanity needs rulers. However, we will never find the kingdom we need through fallen human efforts. Human government in this age is never ultimate. It is, at best, a faint reflection of the rule of God shared with his people which is found in the kingdom of God. In fact, governments can often be an intense expression of opposition to God and his kingdom.

Those in government and their citizens are often tempted to think of government as messianic. This is most obvious in autocratic states in which the ruler is nation. However, almost every election campaign and victory celebration has something of this flavour to it.

Christians and the church should be a challenge to absolutist governments because we will not give loyalty to any ruler or authority. "Christ is Lord" is always a challenge to governments which go beyond their mandate.

3.4. A social witness

At different times of history, the church has more or less capacity to speak effectively to society and government on issues of justice and mercy. When it can speak, it should, though it will need to make a judgement about which issues to speak on most clearly and how. The early church taught against infanticide and against the violence of gladiatorial games. Initially, this was teaching for church members but, as the church became more public, these critiques were well-known and ultimately shaped the life and law of the late Roman Empire. The witness of Christians against slavery in Britain and America also had a significant role in bringing the slave trade to an end.



There have also been times when the church has failed to speak and Christians have been complicit in terrible social injustices. The point is that this is part of the ministry of the church.

3.5. Representative government

There is a great deal of discussion in political theory about the basis of government and the Bible does not give an explicit discussion. It does suggest that human government should be chosen and accepted rather than imposed. The more that a government is authoritarian or tyrannical, the more its legitimacy can be questioned.

The Christian worldview provides a basis for representative government. The fact that all humans are made in God's image implies that the task of ruling is a shared one for all of humanity, it is not committed merely to a king or a ruling class. Whatever form of government exists in a nation, it should have some basis in the agreement of the people and some form of "social contract" or covenant.

The reality of sin means the institutions of human government should have limited power and be answerable to other institutions. We see something of this in Israel in which the prophets are not controlled by the kings.

3.6. Church and State

The state is God's institution and so, as far as the church can determine this, the relationship of church and state should not be merely antithetical. As citizens of a nation, Christians should recognise, pray for and submit to their rulers. The church should recognise the government and acknowledge it in the areas in which it has proper power.

Yet, the church is not an arm of government — it must maintain its identity as the embassy of the kingdom of Christ. When church is a significant social structure, the state will often want to co-opt and control the church. The church should not allow itself to be taken over or to have its doctrine, worship or ministry determined by the state.

3.7. Common good

The idea of the common good is an important one to frame politics. Societies have resources, institutions and culture in common. These are aspects of life which are shared by all and for the good of all. Those should be a particular concern of us as citizens. That is, Christian citizens should be interested in policies which serve the whole of society well and not focus on their own private or sectional interests.

Christians have deep reasons to be concerned for the common good. God's pattern in creation and in redemption is social. He has made us people who belong together and who are meant to work together. His kingdom brings people together and it is together that we live for him. The idea of the common good is profoundly Christian.

The body metaphor of the New Testament underlines how connected we are to Christ, as head and to each other in the church. 1 Corinthians 12 develops the body metaphor of each member as a necessary part of the body. It also addresses the common good. We have different gifts from the same Spirit. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor 12.7). That is, spiritual giftings are not for private indulgence but to be used for the good of all in the church. The pattern in the church is a reflection of God's purpose for humanity, we thrive together as each contributes to all and all share in the blessings.



One author puts it this way:

Because God's kingdom entails a redeemed social order in which humans achieve their purpose, faithful Christian witness cannot be limited to explaining initiation into God's kingdom. It must also include witness to the fullness of the kingdom, in which humans achieve full flourishing. This functions in at least two ways. One is for Christians to picture the kingdom in the church, functioning as a foretaste of God's new society. The other is to work outside the walls of the church for the common good. (Campbell, 2015).

3.8. Common grace

Common grace is another idea which is important for Christians to appreciate as they consider politics. Common grace is doctrine that God continues to provide for and bless the non-human and human creation (Ps 65:5–13; 104:10–23; Job 25:3; Matt 4:45; John 1:4; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3) and he particularly cares for and provides for people (Gen. 39:5; Acts 14:16, 17). Common grace consists of “every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God” (Murray, 1942). When we see God's common grace at work in government, we can be thankful to him and see that he does this work through unbelievers as well as believers. Christian involvement in politics is work in common grace — as is most of our employment.



3.9. Justice

Justice and social justice, is also an important concept for politics. God is committed to justice and is the source of justice (Ex. 23:6; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:19–20; 24:17; 1 Kings 3:28; Psa. 9:16; 11:7; 33:5). Justice requires that people should be treated fairly and not with “partiality” (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17; 10:17; 16:19; 2 Chr. 19:7). Scripture condemns the oppression when one group hoards wealth and denies the needs of life to others. The Bible gives a positive picture of what it means to live well as people made in God's image. A human life is to be lived enjoying proper relationships with God, each other and the created world. Justice requires that it is available to all people in a society.

3.10. Christian Freedom

We are bound by what Scripture teaches (including its proper implications) but not bound where Scripture does not bind. This can be described as a distinction between Christian essentials, clearly presented in the Bible and secondary issues which are not prescribed. On secondary issues we need to allow freedom for one another and not quarrel over disputable matters (Rom 14:1). Differences between Christians on essential matters will lead to some level of disunity — the extent will depend on the issue and the scale of the difference. We have to work to ensure that differences on secondary matters should not create disunity.

In terms of politics, we should give honour to rulers and pray for them — that is not negotiable. We can differ on who we vote for and which policy options we prefer.

A commitment to Christian freedom is a foundation for preserving Christian unity. It helps me recognise that the cause about which I feel passionately is not so pressing for brothers and sisters and that some of them take a different view. I am free to hold my view and might have good reasons for it but I cannot demand everyone else at church agree. Acting on the principle of Christian freedom can be difficult when the issue really matters to us.

4. How to address politics

Approach with care

There are good reasons to engage with politics and the rest of the paper will suggest some ways to do that. It's important to add a caveat: given that political issues can be divisive and that politics is not ultimate, churches should not feel bound to deal with political issues in detail or to engage with every issue which matters to our society or to church members. A church which is dominated by the political issues of the day is in danger of losing perspective. One of the challenges for church leaders is to think about what feeds discipleship and service and what is a distraction. Keeping Christians in unity in Christ is more important than resolving every political issue. There is often more wisdom in not engaging with an issue than there is in churches proposing a detailed response.

4.1. Do not ignore

Nevertheless, we should still engage. Government deals with issues that matter for the good of our society and which God's word addresses. God uses government for good. So, it must have some place in church teaching and life.

4.2. Prayer

Prayer is the primary way in which Christians engage political life. Prayer may seem an apolitical activity — simply private and religious. Scripture tells us to pray and give thanks for all people, especially kings and all in authority (1 Tim 2:1-2).

We are to pray widely — the text says 'everyone', not just rulers. Amongst that, we should pray for our leaders.

We serve our society by praying for political leaders. The church has a priestly ministry of prayer asking for blessing for culture, society and world, including leaders. Paul says we should ask God for a society in which we can live godly lives in peace and the reason he gives is that God, who has saved us, wants peaceful societies and wants people to be saved. So we pray for a society in which we are free to live faithfully and to share the good news of Jesus.

Prayer is radically counter-cultural because we acknowledge our dependence on God. Unlike the society around us, we don't assume that people and governments have the answers. We are utterly dependent. We even pray for 'daily bread', we look to the Lord for our most basic needs. We pray to the Lord who rules every kingdom and so the least saint, the smallest, unrecognised gathering of believers is involved in changing the world.

Prayer is subversive because it recognises a higher loyalty and a greater hope than any politics can demand or offer. We pray for God's kingdom and we ask for the day when the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah (Revelation 11:15).

Prayer is also the key to caring for our society. When we pray for God's kingdom, we do not pray against our neighbours but for them. We pray for their good and



their salvation. Prayer might seem unassuming and insignificant but it is a deeply political activity.

4.3. Teaching

Churches need to teach and preach on political issues. This aims to develop disciples — preaching is not the public square; we are not campaigning. We preach so that God's people are informed and have a biblical worldview shaped by his word. At the same time, remember that the pulpit is next door to the public square and can be overheard, especially when sermons are recorded and shared. Aim to preach in a way that shows non-Christians, as well as church members, that the gospel shapes a Christian approach to politics. Churches need to be taught the truths we have just reviewed. When there is so much confusion and controversy around politics, Christians need the clarifying biblical perspective to help them to navigate their way through that. There are many biblical passages which provide the opportunity to set out a biblical view of government and politics.

Preaching should focus on the big biblical truths which frame political engagements: God's sovereignty, Christ's lordship and hope of Christ's return and kingdom. Show how that puts politics into perspective.

The biblical perspective should be applied to Christians wisely and carefully. As Christians are tempted to despise and mock their rulers, they need to be called to honour and obey. As they are tempted to invest too much in their leaders, they need to remember that Christ is Lord. They should be reminded that government is a high calling and be encouraged to pray for those who are involved and even to consider serving themselves.

There is a place for dealing with a controversial issue directly. This will usually mean that it is an issue which can be clearly addressed from the Bible and matters for Christian discipleship. As you preach or teach on political issues remember that politics is downstream from culture and theology. A sermon should not simply focus on the

immediate issue or the media controversy but show what lies behind the issue and why it has gained attention. That will usually suggest ways in which the gospel casts light on the issue.

When preaching on a political issue, make sure to fact-check your claims and illustrations especially when they fit with your political inclinations. Avoid using controversial political issues as incidental illustrations or applications.

It is important then, to respect the difference between principles and policy. Robert Benne talks about this in terms of straight-line issues and jagged-line issues. A straight-line issue is one in which a biblical and theological principle has a clear application in political policy.



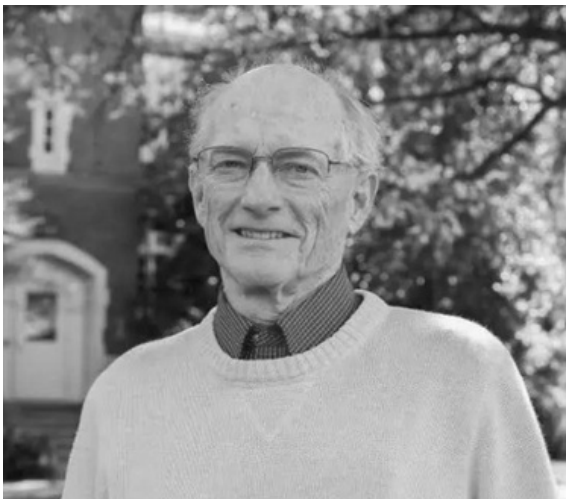
A jagged-line one requires a multi-step process from a biblical and theological principle to a political position. (Benne 2010) Christian freedom is especially relevant on jagged-line political issues and most policy questions are “jagged line”. We can agree on the principle — care for the environment or the evil of abortion but often still disagree on the best policy to achieve an outcome. Of course, the reality of Christian discussion is that we will at points disagree on what is a “straight-line” or “jagged line” issue.

In preaching and teaching, treat people and their

positions with respect. Remember that people in your congregation might hold quite different views to you. Even if they largely agree with you, model respect and gentleness. Respect does not rule out vigorous disagreement. You can offer that, while also recognising sincere convictions and concerns with which you disagree.

4.4. Political discussion

Often political issues are not best addressed in preaching or teaching. It is worth considering providing other ways in which political issues can be addressed in church life. A seminar can allow people to consider a range of views and to have some dialogue or discussion. It can provide a setting in which church members can be given wider information and fuller context to understand a hot button issue.



Consider inviting a Christian who is involved in political life to share about their faith and their work. Perhaps you can find two Christians who come from different political perspectives, who can talk about the importance and challenges of politics. This might provide a setting in which to demonstrate Christian freedom and the value of respect.

When church members disagree strongly on an issue, a discussion may help to ease the tension, though it will need to be approached carefully and wisely. Simply repeating the debates of the wider society in a church forum achieves little. Church leaders should provide a framework for the discussion and model generosity and patience.

Participants will have to take responsibility to listen to other views and to show humility and forbearance. With the right setting, such a discussion may help to foster unity.

4.5. Action

Perhaps the most difficult area for churches and politics is to think about how to take political action. Which groups or events should be promoted?

Beyond prayer and teaching, political action is always a secondary element of the calling of the church. It is not worth compromising a clear gospel outreach for the sake of a political position, nor threatening the unity of the church over a matter of policy which the church cannot determine.

We should encourage Christians in political involvement in all levels, according to their own convictions. This might simply be praying for elections and asking the Lord to direct us to vote wisely and generously. If there are people in your church involved in politics, you can pray for them without endorsing their cause or party.

One simple step for church political engagement is to build a relationship with local MPs and councillors. This should be a non-partisan relationship, engaging with them, whatever party or position they represent. In the first instance, offer to pray for them and think about ways to extend personal support for them in their role. Invite them to appropriate church events. The church can connect with politicians and show that you are interested and value their work without committing to their party. This relationship may allow church leaders to raise policy issues as well but that should not be the primary goal.

The tradition of churches not taking supporting or endorsing political parties is very wise. In Australian politics most parties go to an election with a platform of policies across a wide range of areas. Christians will vary in how they assess those policies and where they put the emphasis, and so come to different conclusions about how they will vote. It may be helpful at times for churches to provide information about

where parties and candidates stand on a range of issues.

The church will need to decide how broadly it advocates on moral and justice issues in the society. It can be effective for national or state church leaders to make public statements, especially if they can co-ordinate with other churches and leaders from other faith groups. Nevertheless, there needs to be a judgement about what areas should be addressed. There are any number of issues that churches have made statements about — Lord's Day observance, alcohol sales and licencing, prostitution, labour reform, conscription, Indigenous reconciliation, refugee policy, modern slavery, same-sex marriage, abortion, pornography, divorce, gambling, nuclear weapons and climate change. Which of those deserve attention? The answer will usually be based on a mix of conviction about which make the most important contribution to the common good and seems the most likely to be achievable. Koyzis warns about the danger of churches speaking too often on political matters.

It is good to bear in mind, however, that if the institutional church speaks out too frequently and at the least provocation, its persuasive power will diminish with each utterance, especially if such statements form a predictable pattern indicative of a different sort of ideological captivity. (Koyzis 2019).

By and large, local churches do not need to make such public statements. It is unlikely that a

statement from a local church will receive attention from government and make a real political difference.

There are often opportunities for churches to take practical action on concerns which have a political dimension. These can provide ways to express love of neighbours and to respond to issues without getting caught in some of conflicted debates about policy. A church can support a women's refuge, a pregnancy crisis centre, refugee hospitality or land care initiatives and model truth, justice and righteousness.

Churches are often invited to promote and endorse a particular political campaign — often a petition, email campaign or a protest. Church leaders need to think this through carefully. They need to consider who is behind any campaign, what its goals are and how it will be executed. They will need to consider how closely it is related to a "straight-line issue" and if it is likely to be divisive. If a campaign is promoted, it should be as an opportunity, never with the assumption that everyone should support it.

Some issues are closely related to Christian ministry — such as retaining SRE in schools or opposing legislation which could open churches to complaints over teaching on sexuality. These are usually appropriate to promote in churches, though they still need to be thought through. A concern for the common good means that we should consider campaigns on wider issues as well, even if they are more difficult to decide on.

Rarely will a congregation need to take a detailed position on a political issue. If that is considered, it needs to be done with great care. It is important to



carefully examine the biblical basis of holding a position, and to stay within the limits of what can be said from Scripture. If a church position goes beyond biblical principle to advocate a policy, it should be clear that the policy implications are not binding for Christians in the way that the principles are. Those in the congregation who would take the 'minority' view should have a chance to contribute to the decision.

5. Keeping Christ central

Christ's Church is a political entity — it is an embassy of his kingdom which is already among us, but not yet fully revealed. This dual reality shapes how we approach politics.

There are two dangers to avoid. The first is an apolitical retreat in which churches avoid addressing politics altogether, treating it as a contaminating influence to be kept at arm's length from the gospel. The second is an over-politicised captivity in which the church becomes defined by contemporary political alignments, losing its distinctive identity and prophetic voice.

A biblical approach will recognise that government is God's good gift and that it is profoundly corrupted by sin. We can honour and pray for our rulers while refusing to give them ultimate allegiance. We can engage seriously with political questions while maintaining that politics is not ultimate and will not deliver salvation. We can speak prophetically to our culture while avoiding the presumption that we have all the answers or that our political preferences carry divine authority.

In practice, this means prayer is the primary form of Christian political engagement — through that we bless our society and honour rulers as we depend on God and our hope for his kingdom. The church should then also teach to equip God's people to think biblically about politics and to maintain proper priorities. Within this framework, there is scope for political discussion in the church which respects Christian freedom and mutual respect on secondary matters. Wise political action

can demonstrate that the gospel has implications for all of life, including public life, while avoiding the church being defined by political campaigns.

In practice, this means prayer is the primary form of Christian political engagement — through that we bless our society and honour rulers as we depend on God and our hope for his kingdom. The church should then also teach to equip God's people to think biblically about politics and to maintain proper priorities. Within this framework, there is scope for political discussion in the church which respects Christian freedom and mutual respect on secondary matters. Wise political action can demonstrate that the gospel has implications for all of life, including public life, while avoiding the church being defined by political campaigns.



The principle of Christian freedom is essential. Where Scripture speaks clearly, we are bound. Where it does not, we must grant one another liberty. This means that while churches can and should teach biblical principles that bear on political questions, they must exercise great care before advocating specific policy positions. The distance from principle to policy is often greater

than we imagine, and sincere Christians will reach different conclusions. Maintaining unity in Christ matters far more than achieving political consensus.



The temptation in our polarised age is to assume that political engagement requires taking clear positions on every contentious issue. But wisdom often lies in restraint. Churches do not need to have a formal view on every policy debate. What we must do is faithfully proclaim Christ as Lord, teach God's word comprehensively, model what it means to seek the common good and maintain the kind of community that witnesses to the kingdom — one marked by truth, justice, mercy, and unity across political differences.

This is demanding work. It requires discernment to know when to speak and when to remain silent, courage to address difficult issues when necessary, humility to acknowledge the limits of our political wisdom and love to maintain fellowship with those who disagree. It means resisting both the comfortable temptation to avoid all controversy and the self-righteous temptation to assume our political views are simply "what the Bible says."

The church's political witness is ultimately inseparable from its existence as a community. When the church embodies justice and mercy, when it shows concern for the vulnerable, when it displays unity across social and political divides, when it refuses to absolutise worldly power — this is itself a profound political statement. The church's most important political contribution may not be in pronouncements or campaigns but in being faithfully the church, the visible presence of Christ's kingdom.

As we navigate these issues, our confidence is in Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He liberates us from political anxiety and from the false hope that the right election results or policy changes will bring the kingdom we seek. He calls us to faithful witness, speaking truth about him and his purposes in every sphere of life, including the political.

We live in the overlap of two ages. The old age, marked by rebellion and corruption, continues. The new age, inaugurated by Christ, is breaking in. Government belongs to the old age, yet God uses it for good and calls us to honour it. The church belongs to the new age, yet we remain in the world, called to serve our neighbours and seek the common good. We pray "your kingdom come" knowing that its full arrival awaits Christ's return, yet we also work for the good of our society, recognising that God's common grace continues to bless it.

The challenge for churches in Australia is to maintain a biblical balance in a fractured and polarising political environment. Christ must remain central — in our teaching, in our fellowship and in our engagement with the world. Then our political involvement, whatever form it takes, will be marked not by worldly power-seeking but by the pattern of his rule: service, sacrifice, and the patient confidence that the kingdom belongs to him.

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Endnotes:

[1] J. Calvin, Inst IV.xx.4 p 1490

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This resource paper was primarily prepared by Dr John McClean.

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