

In polite English society, the two subjects never to be discussed at the dinner table are Religion and Politics. Commenting in 2005, Rabbi Sir Jonathon Sacks wrote in *The Times* “Religion becomes political at *its* peril, and ours.”¹ Similarly, Pope John Paul II “untiringly [stated] that Priests should steer clear of politics”.²

However, the relationship between these spheres is, for Christians, too important to merely be sidelined or ignored for the sake of avoiding controversy. Tom Wright suggests that for many Christians the subject is treated as “a footnote to more important things, an aside, almost an irrelevance in a modern democracy where Christians are quite happy with things as they are and are free to preach the gospel and save souls.”³ Likewise, James Skillen writes of “a large number of Christians who simply ignore or remain apathetic about government and politics, treating that realm as inconsequential for their Christian witness.”⁴ This simply will not do. We must have a clear and Biblical understanding of the ways in which Christianity and Christians relate to Politics.

The word ‘politics’ in contemporary English is used in a variety of ways; at times it is used so broadly as to mean merely ‘*involvement in society*’, for instance J Philip Wogaman defines Politics as “the civil community ordering its life together on the basis of the public good.”⁵ Politics is therefore equated to the struggle for justice, care for the poor and similar issues. While most Evangelicals would accept that to be Christian is to be involved in what is termed ‘social action’ in some form or other, it is perhaps unhelpful to understand the term ‘politics’ quite so broadly. Perhaps at the other extreme the word is used to describe particular activities within a small community, especially the pursuit of power, for example in the phrase ‘office politics’.

For the purposes of this paper I am taking the term to mean ‘governing authorities’ and asking how Christians should relate to state and local government. Should we withdraw as did the Essenes? Should we protest with violence like the Zealots? Should we collaborate and compromise as the Sadducees? What is our duty (and the limits of this duty) towards government and how are we to play our part in society while remaining centred on God and his kingdom?

Space does not permit a review of historical answers to this question, suffice to say that answers are both many and diverse. The focus will therefore be on the relevant biblical material and reflections on how this might relate to the current political situation in the UK.

The Call of Abraham

Our survey of the ‘church-state’ relationship begins with the call of Abraham which should not be understood merely as the election of an individual but as the bringing into being of a *people* for God. Evidently, God did not adopt an existing nation state and simply modify its future, but promised to form a new nation state from Abraham and his descendents. God’s intention was to bless the nations (Gen 12:3 18:18 et al) through the establishing of the nation-state of Israel which, in its time, would be *the* model of the righteousness and justice of Yahweh.

¹ *Credo* in *The Times* 10/12/05 Also, Christopher Reeve in a debate on stem cell research: “When matters of public policy are debated, no religions should have a seat at the table.” Pearcey 22

² Berryman, Philip, *Liberation Theology* 127

³ Wright, NT *The New Testament and the State* 1

⁴ Skillen, James “Government” in *EDT* 478

⁵ Wogaman, Philip J, *Christian Perspectives on Politics* 12-13 See also John Stott *Issues Facing Christians Today* 11 “Politics is the art of living together as a community.”

So, by means of an introduction, what can be said about this people? Firstly, they were *called out* of the surrounding socio-economic and political environment in order to be set apart for God. Abraham's call immediately follows the account of the tower of Babel and the promise he receives actually forms part of the writer's comment on the story by means of a contrast. The people of the earth determine to "make a *name* for [themselves] lest [they] be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (11:4), so God brings judgement and the resulting *name* their city receives is 'Babel', 'Confused', before the people *are* dispersed "over the face of all the earth" (11:9). Then in Gen 12 it is God who promises that *He* will make [Abraham] a great nation and make [*his*] name great and that ... in [him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed." From the beginning this chosen people are not founded on the pursuit of personal reputation and gain but faith in Yahweh and obedience to Him. According to Eric Voeglin, the call of Abraham was "the first Exodus by which the imperial civilisations of the Near East in general receive their stigma as environments of lesser meaning."⁶ Abraham's call to "Go from your country" is to be seen as an indictment against Babel and its indifference to God.

Similarly in 18:19, in the context of impending judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah, God recalls his promise to Abraham, saying "I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice..." Again, God's call to Abraham and his descendants is a call to be separate from their current socio-political setting. However, we must note that God's election is *in order to* establish them as his people with a new and unique social, ethical and cultic framework based on righteousness and justice, not merely a call to 'be separate'.

This then leads us to the second point about the founding of a people through Abraham, namely that God would establish them with their own identity, their own land and their own socio-political structures. Initially of course God's instruction to Abraham to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1), emphasises the separation of God's people from their previous social setting, and their calling to be pilgrims and sojourners. However, it was not always to be this way. God called Abraham out saying "I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you ... and I will give to you all the land of Canaan" (17:6-8). The people of God would not remain nomadic but would be established in their own land with their own governing authorities, their own civil, religious and economic structures. In Abraham, God called a people *out of* a social and political setting, *in order to* establish a new nation state dedicated to himself.⁷

Therefore, we must take care not to draw wrong conclusions from the testimony to Abraham's faith in Heb 11:8f. While Abraham "was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (11:10), this did not result in isolation from the surrounding world. God's covenant with Abraham was, initially at least, fulfilled by the state of Israel who was called to influence the world around it while at the same time being separate from it. Nevertheless, our confidence is misplaced if our hope is in 'earthly cities'. As Chris Wright notes, "... the very existence of the people of God in the midst of [ungodly] states is a sign of God's wider and final purpose of [the] redemption of humanity, and the transformation of the kingdoms of the earth into the

⁶ Voeglin, Eric *Israel and Revelation* (Quoted in Chris Wright *The People of God and the State in the OT*)

⁷ As Chris Wright, "The people of God in the patriarchal context is primarily a community called out of the socio-political environment and given a new identity and future by the promise of God." *The People of God and the State in the OT*

kingdom of God... our involvement with society for the purpose of earthing the love-justice of God is to be undertaken as a people called out, looking for the fulfilment of his promise of redemption, but not expecting our hope of salvation to be found in the state itself.”⁸ More of this later.

Israel - The ‘Nation-State’ of God

Moving through Biblical history we come to the Exodus, where Israel finds itself in slavery to the imperial state of Egypt. It is worth noting at this point that Israel’s being in Egypt was as a result of Joseph’s extraordinary journey from Canaan, culminating in him being “set over all the land of Egypt” (Gen 41:43). Evidently God is not against his people holding positions of power in state government. He even works, albeit sometimes mysteriously, to bring them to such positions. However, with the authority goes the responsibility to influence and organise for the good of society, in the way that Joseph, in faith, stored up grain to provide for the region during the years of famine.

Before commenting on the Exodus itself, and in the context of one’s relationship to government, we should not overlook the brief reference to two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, who “feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (Ex 1:17).⁹ As Phyllis Trible notes, these “two female slaves are the first to oppose the Pharaoh... as they thwart the will of the oppressor.”¹⁰ Here is perhaps the earliest biblical example of an occasion where it is right to disobey human authorities when they blatantly contravene the will of God. Not only are these midwives named in the text (where Pharaoh is not), but we are explicitly told of God’s commendation; “So, God dealt well with the midwives ... [and] because [they] feared God he gave them families” (1:20-21). These two women are honoured for their faith and obedience, yet, despite the broader oppression of Israel, God did not command or even encourage a *general* protest and revolt by his people but chose to intervene himself to deliver them.

The Exodus account of Egypt’s responsibilities towards Israel serves as a paradigm for governments towards all of God’s people. The demand is to “let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me ... [and] serve me ... [and] offer sacrifices to me” (5:1 7:16 8:8 et al). So, as Chris Wright points out, “A state which denies freedom to those who wish to worship Yahweh, finds itself Yahweh’s enemy.”¹¹ But this is not merely freedom of worship, for God’s covenant with Abraham was that he would form a *people* for himself, a promise recalled as Israel cry out in their slavery. Thus, as previously noted, God again calls his people out of their current socio-political setting in order to establish them as a *new nation state*. This then took place as Israel travelled towards the land God had given them, although it might be argued that they remained runaway slaves until they received the Law. This then set them apart as a people, with their own unique civil, economic and religious laws distinct from the nations around them.

Furthermore, we must recognise that, although it had its leaders (the judges), Israel was, above all, a monarchy, or more properly a *Theocracy*. The later request for a king, so that Israel was “like all the [other] nations” (1Sam 8:5, 20), was a great insult to God. Israel had a king. Yahweh was their king,

⁸ Wright, Chris *The People of God*

⁹ Similarly, Moses’ parents who hid him because “they did not fear the King’s edict” Heb 11:23

¹⁰ Trible, Phyllis, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* in TCTR 158

¹¹ Wright, Chris *The People of God*

which, according to Lind, excluded human kingship¹² and determined the kind of people Israel must be. Therefore, again Chris Wright, “Israel was not just the people of God (many nations would claim that in one form or another), but specifically the people of Yahweh, and that in itself would mean a covenant commitment to a certain kind of society that reflected Yahweh’s character, values, priorities and goals.”¹³ We may therefore conclude that the duty of God’s people, if not all of humanity, towards any authority other than God is *penultimate*, never ultimate. For, as the Psalmist wrote “*God is the King of all the earth*” (Ps 47:7). (italics added)

This primary accountability extends even to governments themselves as we see throughout the Monarchy period how God holds rulers accountable for their leadership. Conditions were placed upon the monarch, “including the requirement that the king should know, read and obey the law. He was not to be a super-Israelite, but a model Israelite among his brothers and equals.”¹⁴ For instance, Dt 17:14-20 “[the King] shall read [the Law] all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law...”, and Jer 22:2-5 “Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah, ... do justice and righteousness ... but if you will not obey these words ... this house will become a desolation.” This is not to undermine the authority of governments to rule, only to say that they do so ‘under God’ as stewards of *his* world. Any ‘divine right of Kings’, if by that we mean ‘appointed by God’, remains subject to the requirements of justice and righteousness. Furthermore, we must note that this accountability extends beyond Israel to *all nations* as is evident from Amos’ proclamations of judgement on various nations in chapters 1-2 before he homes in on Judah and Israel.

Sadly, biblical history shows us that the Kings of Israel often neglected their duty to “know, read and obey the Law” and thus failed to lead the people in the worship and ways of Yahweh. Therefore, as promised in the law (Dt 4:27 28:25, 36) and proclaimed by the Prophets, Israel was defeated in battle and taken into exile. However, it is then in *this* context of idolatry, one not dissimilar to that under the Roman rule during New Testament times, that we are shown people of great courage and faith.

Defiance

Daniel, who was “of the royal family and nobility” of Israel (Dan 1:3), is a wonderful example of willing submission to human government, and at the same time faith-filled defiance of those same authorities when they demand something contrary to the command of God. For instance, he addresses king Nebuchadnezzar, with these remarkable words: “You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all ...” (Dan 2:38ff). These are extraordinary words to say of a pagan king! However, this is not merely flattery but should be seen as a statement of faith. Daniel honours the king, while at the same time declaring the sovereignty of God. (“God has given ...”) In fact, it is this confidence in the supremacy of God and Daniel’s humble dependence upon him that enables Daniel to be so bold before the King. For example, in his song of praise after receiving the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Daniel said “Blessed be the name of God

¹² See Millard C. Lind *The Concept of Political Power in Ancient Israel* in *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, 7 (1968-9) 4-24 in Wright *The People of God*

¹³ Wright, Chris *The People of God*

¹⁴ Wright, Chris *The People of God*

forever and ever, to whom belongs wisdom and might. *He* changes times and seasons; *he* removes kings and sets up kings..." Daniel is willing to honour and serve this human king because he knows who is ultimately in control.

As with Joseph, following the interpretation of the dream Daniel is promoted to be "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (3:48), and he appoints his fellow Jews Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as his deputies.¹⁵

There then follow two accounts of these leading men breaking the law of the land and defying the governing authorities (of which they are a part). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are commanded to "fall down and worship the image [Nebuchadnezzar has] made ... or be cast into a burning fiery furnace" (3:15). Worth noting is that they make no effort to protest or defend themselves against this injustice, claiming to the king "we have no need to answer you in this matter" (3:18). They continue with one of the most profound statements of faith in the Bible: "our God ... *is able* to deliver us ... and *he will* deliver us... But [*even if he does not*], be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." This, not surprisingly perhaps, provokes the king, who has them thrown into the fire, but God vindicates their faith and miraculously delivers them from the flames, and again they are promoted to positions of power (3:30).

The well known story of Daniel and the lion's den follows a similar pattern to that of the fiery furnace. King Darius is tricked into signing a law forbidding worship of any but himself and inevitably Daniel falls foul of this law by continuing to worship the Lord. Again, there is no protest from Daniel, the text says simply "knowing that the document had been signed ... [Daniel] got down on his knees ... and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he had done previously" (5:10). Then, having been thrown into the pit with the lions, Daniel is delivered, vindicated and his enemies destroyed.

As we move into the New Testament, a first glance at Jesus may suggest that he was *apolitical*, seeking simply to establish a religious community, to teach morality and revive interest in spiritual matters. As he himself said, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Such a view, however, would be rather naive, overlooking the religious and political context into which Jesus came and with which he came into conflict. Given the Jewish expectation that the "kingdom" would be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6 also Lk 2:25, 38), and that the Roman occupying forces would be defeated as had the Greeks under Judas Maccabeus, Jesus' declaration that "the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15) cannot be seen as anything but politically provocative. Tom Wright goes so far as to suggest that "The proclamation and invitation of Jesus must have looked uncommonly like the founding of a political movement."¹⁶ Similarly Jesus' actions and teachings 'against' the Temple, the centre of religious, social and political life, would inevitably have caused great offence. Not only the explicit claims to destroy and rebuild the temple (John 2:19) but also the healing and forgiveness he offered apart from the temple rituals which rendered them obsolete. While Jesus' intention was not to establish a political system or party, his declarations carried double meanings which were deliberately provocative to the religious and political leaders. It is then not surprising that he "died the death of the *Istaitai*, the political insurrectionists."¹⁷ Although we understand, with the gifts of

¹⁵ See also 3:30 and 5:29 for the 're-promotion' of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel

¹⁶ Wright, NT "The NT and the State"

¹⁷ Wright, NT "The NT and the State"

both revelation and hindsight, the primary purpose of Jesus' death was to pay the penalty for sins, it would have appeared at the time to be, at least in part, the penalty for confronting the authorities.

As we move into the Apostolic period we again see overt acts of defiance, for instance where Peter and John are commanded "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus". Despite being "uneducated, common men" they courageously respond: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:13-18). Again, they understand that they, and we, are *firstly* answerable to God and only secondly to others and therefore Peter and John defy the Jewish authorities. As CS Lewis once wrote "He who surrenders himself without reservation to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party, or a class is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, most emphatically belongs to God: himself."¹⁸ So, in all of these accounts (the midwives in Egypt, Daniel and the Lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace, Peter and John before the Council, we see God's people disobeying the state law in order to obey God and do what is right.

However, it is worth noting that all of these examples of defiance are in order to keep explicit *commands* of God (namely, "do not murder", "do not have any gods but me", "go & make disciples..."). The primary question for us is therefore not over the *principle* of compliance/defiance but over the *application*. It is not whether Christians are *permitted* to defy authorities, for evidently they are, but over which issues should they defy. Questions must be asked: 'Is there a clear command on *this issue*?' Is this practice *essential* to Christianity or merely *incidental*? While I am sure the motivation for many of the protests by Christians is sincere, we should perhaps choose our 'battlegrounds' rather more carefully than has often been the case, asking ourselves: Is *this* particular issue really worth fighting for? The recent disagreement between British Airways and one of its employees over the wearing of a crucifix illustrates this.¹⁹ Similarly, it would seem that the church in the UK is often quick to take a stand against such things as *The Da Vinci Code* and yet is generally less vocal on issues like abortion and poverty.²⁰ Some issues, like the wearing of jewellery, are merely matters of style whereas others are more *essential*. For instance, organisations like Student Christian Unions may be fundamentally compromised if they are required to open their membership to those of other faiths or those who, according to Christian teaching, are engaged in immoral practices.²¹ If we are to be Biblical in our defiance of those in authority (*and probably if we are to be taken seriously*) we must learn to distinguish between essential and non-essential issues. Rather than 'essential', one might even say 'life and death' issues – those matters of principle for which we would be prepared to fight and possibly die. It must be recognised that the cost of defiance may be high and, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the German *Confessing Church* of the 1930's proved, as others have throughout history, dying for the faith at the hands of the authorities is by no means limited to Biblical times or the patristic period. Distinguishing between matters, of course, requires divine wisdom – not least for those working closely with a Political Party that inevitably they will not see eye-to-eye with on every issue.

¹⁸ Lewis *Weight of Glory* 53 Also Avis "... there is a fundamental recognition that the claims of God, of the reign or Kingdom of God, have unquestioned priority over the claims of civil government." *Church, State & Establishment* 39

¹⁹ See 15 October 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6051486.stm

²⁰ Cf Protests against *Section 28* ... ? Also, this is not to say we shouldn't protest against *Da Vinci Code* etc ...

²¹ See 5 January 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6232869.stm> for disagreement at Exeter University

Be subject ...

Having said all this, although there are many instances of defiance, both Biblical and historical, we must also uphold the Biblical teaching of willing submission to governing authorities. Despite contravening the law, Daniel and his companions speak respectfully to the King. Similarly Peter and John are respectful before the ruling Council; and Paul before both the Jewish and Roman authorities (Acts 23:5 24:10 et al); (although Paul *does* claim “neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense” (25:8)). The Lucan presentation of Paul as an obedient Roman citizen is, of course, in line with the suggestion that he wrote Acts in Paul’s defence to be used in court. However, this does not permit us to make light of the submissiveness that we see in the book, not least because it is substantiated by other explicit didactic material.

Perhaps the clearest teaching on how to relate to government comes from Paul himself and the passage is worth quoting at length:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed” Romans 13:1-7²².

It is worth noting that the authorities to whom Paul is referring are not godly leaders maintaining a social structure based on Christian principles. Quite the opposite! The ἐξουσία ὑπερεχούσας (*superior authorities*) are the *pagan* Roman rulers responsible for the death of Jesus and many of his followers. Alongside Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, these authorities often stood in opposition to God’s people, yet Paul instructs submission. Not because they are perfect, for surely he is overstating the case when he says “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad”, for this is clearly not always true, hence his own appeal to Caesar. As Stott says: “in depicting rulers in such a good light ... he is stating the divine ideal, not the human reality.”²³ We are to submit, not because they are perfect but because they are “instituted by God” and therefore to resist the authorities is to “resist what God has appointed” thus incurring judgement. Submission is not to the person but to the position. The verb ὑποτάσσω and its cognates denote “Submission, subjection and obedience”²⁴, and the passive form could be taken to indicate the middle voice reminding us that this action is reflexive; ie that true submission is not forced but is *willing*. So, an alternative rendering might be ‘let every person subject *themselves* to the authorities’. We are to willingly place ourselves under the authority of those in government as part of our obedience to God.

²² Similarly Titus 3:1

²³ Stott, John *Romans* BST 341

²⁴ Verbrugge, Verlyn *NIDNTT* 583

Paul goes on to say that they are δῖάκωνός θεοῦ, a ‘*servant of God*’, reminding us that they come with authority as His delegates, and yet are also accountable for their actions. Pilate, in his dialogue with Jesus, said “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” (Jn 19:10-11). God gives authority to govern, and yet, as we have seen, He holds those in government responsible for their actions which should be just and right.

We must therefore be cautious in how we understand Paul’s teaching in Rom 13. In fact, the French Professor Oscar Cullman wrote “Few sayings in the New Testament have suffered as much misuse as this one. As soon as Christians, out of loyalty to the gospel of Jesus, offer resistance to a state’s totalitarian claim, the representatives of that State, or their collaborationist theological advisors, are accustomed to appeal to this saying of Paul, as if Christians are here commanded to endorse and thus to abet all the crimes of a totalitarian state.”²⁵ Submission to those ‘over us’ is never blind but is graciously critical – even to the point of ‘subjecting ourselves’ to the consequences of withstanding the authorities. So, as John Stott rightly concludes “We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the State in order to obey God.”²⁶

But does this go far enough? Having agreed with Stott that we should obey God and defy the State over a particular command, surely there are issues where we might disagree with an aspect of government policy which don’t break a *command* of God? For example, we may disagree with an aspect of economic policy and yet not defy the government by refusing to pay taxes. What is the place then of disagreement and protest for the Christian?

Get Engaged ...

As we noted earlier, it would seem that there are various examples of unjust treatment in the Bible and yet few, if any, indications of any protest from the sufferers. Even when Daniel and his companions were faced with death they simply stood firm, refusing to worship any but Yahweh, yet seemingly did *not* protest against the evident injustice or corruption. Jesus did not protest when he was falsely accused and mistreated, but “when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate said to him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed” (Mt 27:12-13). As Isaiah had prophesied, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Is 53:7). Is this our example for relating to government? Would our silence cause governments to be “greatly amazed”? Is it enough to say that “the exemplary behaviour of Christians will confound the opposition”²⁷ or is there a place for protest?

Firstly, we should observe that the examples above are of *individuals* who defied government in order to obey God. The focus of these texts is therefore not on how God’s people more broadly

²⁵ Cullman, Oscar *The State in the New Testament* 55-57

²⁶ Stott, John *Romans* BST 342

²⁷ Avis, Paul *Church, State & Establishment* 39

should handle national policy but on personal obedience to God. Secondly, we must note the difference between the monarchic/autocratic forms of government in Biblical times and the democracies of much of today's world, since the way we relate to government may depend in part on the *form* of government given the difference in individual responsibility.

Democracy is 'rule by the populous' (at least etymologically) and therefore despite generally poor turnout at both General and Local elections in the UK²⁸, all citizens have a responsibility to participate in the process of government, not least Christians²⁹. Indeed, Bonhoeffer goes so far as to suggest that engagement with the authorities is not merely the duty of good citizens but part of the Church's mission: "The church has the task of summoning the whole world to submit to the dominion of Jesus Christ. She testifies before government to their common master [and] knows that it is in obedience to Jesus Christ that the commission of government is properly executed."³⁰

So, if we are, as Isaiah commanded Israel, to "loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke [and] to let the oppressed go free" (Isa 58:6f), and if we are to be the "salt of the earth... [and] the light of the world..." (Mt 5:13-14), then surely we are obliged to lobby the authorities and to advocate justice and righteousness in government policy.³¹ The following quote, often attributed to Edmund Burke,³² is appropriate in this regard: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing". This statement rightly points out that, not only do we carry a responsibility to promote righteousness but conversely we are to oppose evil. This should happen both by *individuals* holding positions of influence and the church *corporately* speaking out on particular issues. As Senator Roy Herron writes, "If people of faith refuse to participate in politics, then others will make the crucial decisions. In a democracy, the people get the government they choose - and work for. You could say we get the government we deserve. Government can be awful or it can be good; often it is some of both. It is our duty, both as citizens and as Christians, to make it better. The question, then, is not, how can a Christian be in politics? The question is, how can a Christian *not* be in politics?"³³

Of course, in the UK this involvement for the most part takes place through the appointment of a representative whose wisdom and judgement we can trust. It is worth noting that, at least in principle, Members of Parliament are not *delegates* voting according to the opinions of the majority of their constituents, but *representatives* who are to be in dialogue with their constituents but are entrusted to make their own judgements according to conscience, even faith-informed conscience. (A pertinent point given the recent backing down by the Labour party giving a (limited) free vote to its members on the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Bill. Conservative MP's have a completely free vote.) Thus, Jackie Ashley of *The Guardian* has naïvely misunderstood the British political system when she says "... what is dangerous is the demand that Catholic MPs must vote for their religion first and constituents' views second ..." ³⁴ As Edmund Burke did say "[your] representative owes you,

²⁸ 77% in 1992; 71% in 1997; 59% in 2001; 61% in 2005 (Compared to 64% in US 2004 and 95% in Australia & Malta)

²⁹ "All is not well with democracy ... more people vote for BigBrother than in a General Election" Tom Wright *Simply Christian* 28

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, D *Ethics* 350

³¹ For a broader basis for Christian social engagement see John Stott "Issues Facing Christians Today" esp. pp 14-24 – *The Doctrine of God; The Doctrine of Human Beings; The Doctrine of Salvation; The Doctrine of the Church*

³² Quote unknown in Burke's written or recorded works.

³³ Herron, Roy *How can a Christian be in Politics?* 14

³⁴ Ashley, Jackie *Cardinals, back off from this war with women and state* in *The Guardian* June 4 2007

not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion..."³⁵ This principle is of course confused by *party* politics and we therefore have a responsibility when voting to bear in mind the principles of both the party and the candidate.

However, it is essential that the Church is not aligned nor seen to be aligned to a particular political party but stands by certain values and on certain issues. Although *conversely*, the church more widely may have to stand *against* a particular political party and, of course, individuals may ally with a political party but this should not be seen as a Church-wide 'party line'. At least until fairly recently this *has* been the case in the US and broadly speaking to be a white Christian is to vote *Republican*.³⁶ The two aren't quite synonymous but there is considerable overlap! According to Jim Wallis this view has been fuelled by *Democrats* who "stumble over themselves to assure voters that while they may be people of faith, they won't allow their religious beliefs to affect their political views."³⁷ Nearer to home, Alistair Campbell advised Tony Blair to play down his faith saying "my worry is that the Tories will pick this up and say, this is you saying, to be a Christian you've gotta be Labour. And that's just a bad political position to be in."³⁸ I believe Campbell to be right, for different reasons since his concern is primarily the Labour Party and mine is primarily the Church, but for the church to be closely aligned to a supposedly more 'Christian' political Party is unhelpful in at least two ways: Firstly, it could infer that Christians necessarily make better rulers which is far from conclusive, and anyway, the goal is not to get Christians into power but to have righteous and effective government. And secondly, the church, or possibly a group of churches, being identified with a single party makes it more difficult to oppose that party. Herron is right when he says "God is not on the side of any political party but on the side of justice, compassion, truth, mercy, freedom and life."³⁹ The Church must stand apart from Party politics and promote what is right, regardless of which party, if any, is in agreement. It is then, at this point, worth making an important distinction. To speak of the 'church and state' is not the same as saying 'faith and politics'. The church must be separate from the *state* in order to be free to engage in *politics*.

Perhaps in a similar vein, the church needs to avoid being linked, not only to a particular party, but to a small number of issues rather than the broad spread of social life. In the US, the church is usually identified with the two issues of abortion and homosexuality. While these are certainly important issues which need to be addressed by society there are many other issues with which we need to engage. Again speaking about the US, Wallis says "The 'Religious issues' in an election get reduced to the Ten Commandments in public courthouses; gay-marriage amendments, prayer in schools, and, of course, abortion. These issues are important. But faith informs policy in other areas as well. What about the biblical imperatives regarding social justice, [peacemaking and war, and the use of wealth]."⁴⁰ We must not be lazy, simply saying the same things about the same issues, but, not neglecting these issues, must also expand our influence and tackle other social concerns.⁴¹

³⁵ *Speech to the Electors of Bristol 1774*

³⁶ Worth noting that a significant proportion of black American Christians vote Democrat

³⁷ Wallis, Jim *God's Politics* 57

³⁸ *The Blair Years* - http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/11_november/25/blair.shtml

³⁹ Herron 113 Also Jim Wallis xx

⁴⁰ Wallis, Jim *God's Politics* 58

⁴¹ This is not to deny the validity of focussing on single issues for a season, or of individuals focussing on single issues Eg Slavery, Segregation/Apartied

In the Old Testament the role of the Prophet was not primarily in foretelling the future but in declaring the truth of God. In the same way, the Church is to be prophetic in speaking out for the sake of righteousness and justice and in opposing evil, for the good of society as a whole. This is where government requires people of *principle* and *vision* rather than followers of popular opinion. Godly ethics regarding justice and care for the poor may or may not be popular but need to be pursued regardless. To be *opinion* rather than *principle* driven is most dangerous. Jim Wallis speaks of those politicians who “walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them... to see which way the wind is blowing.” He continues, “... you don’t change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by *changing the wind*.”⁴² But how *are* we, as the church, to change ‘the wind’ of society?

A Subversive People

Time and again after a general election there is a rise in optimism; Surely *this* will be the government that brings about significant change? – education and health will improve, crime will go down, the economy will thrive, poverty, homelessness and drug abuse will be reduced and everyone will live in peace and happiness. Then, within a short time we become aware of the government’s shortcomings and hopes are dashed. Perhaps in part this disappointment is because of a misplaced (or utopian) hope, expecting something from a government it is simply unable to give.

Interestingly, John Adams, the second President of the US, said “Our constitution was designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other. Free government rests upon public and private morality.”⁴³ What he is suggesting is that a government cannot *produce* morality but can only safeguard those principles which are widely accepted. The authorities can control and punish lawbreakers and can administrate and bring order to society but only on the basis of widely held ethics.⁴⁴ When this ethical foundation changes, the government alone cannot be expected to re-establish it. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, said “Government seems to me to be a part of religion itself. Let man be good and the government cannot be bad.” To which Andrew Wommack adds “This could also perhaps be turned around; ‘let man be bad and the government cannot be good’.”⁴⁵ Modern secular authorities, certainly democracies, are dependent upon widely held values, one might even add ‘Christian values’⁴⁶, for effective government. While much can be achieved by education and support, both emotional and financial, we must remind ourselves that our confidence is not in politicians but in the gospel which alone can transform the heart, both of individuals and of a whole society.

Just to be clear, this is not to say that we don’t work for change. As exemplified by Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and others, much can be achieved through political means, although it is perhaps worth noting in this regard the need for patient perseverance. While we may or may not engage in short-term scuffles over minor issues – the *changing of a society* is not usually in the short-term public

⁴² Wallis, *Jum God’s Politics* 21

⁴³ Wommack, *Andrew Christians & Politics*

⁴⁴ Also, Nancy Pearcey “Politics tend to reflect culture, not the other way round.” *Total Truth* 18

⁴⁵ Wommack, *Andrew Christians & Politics* – See also Calvin Coolidge “*The foundations of our society and our government rests so much upon the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.*”

⁴⁶ Ravi Zacharias notes in his book *Can Man Live Without God?* that even Athiesm requires Christian foundations. Similarly, Edmund Burke *Reflections on the Revolution in France* “Religion is the basis of civil society.” 87

protest but in the gradual shift in mindset and values which is often only achieved by dogged perseverance out of the public arena.

However, for the Christian, our hope is not ultimately in political means but in the gospel and through the Church. It is in the gospel that people are cleansed, that hearts of stone are replaced by hearts of flesh and by the indwelling of the Spirit we are enabled to walk in righteousness (Ezek 36:26ff). Governments may maintain a *framework* of justice and care but they are impotent to *produce* just and caring people, as Paul wrote “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2Co 3:6). A Spirit-changed and Spirit-motivated heart is the essence of the New Covenant and contrasts with the framework of Law of the Old Covenant. The Law demanded change but was unable to bring it about – thus Israel repeatedly slipped into honouring God with their lips while their hearts were far from him (Is 29:13). But under the new covenant we are not to be “conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewal of our minds” (Rom 12:2) and only when this takes place on a wide scale can a nation be truly changed. In the same way, it is through being united with Christ and participating in the “one new man” (Eph 2:15) that families, tribes and possibly even nations may be reconciled and see lasting peace. Our *greatest* hope for conflicts such as those in the Middle East, in Kenya or even within our own communities is not then in finding a political resolution (though this may be a good start) but in seeking a revival of Christian faith and of the church. Bill Hybels sums it up when he says:

“... what governments do is very important. Writing legislation for the good of society is a noble, worthy task. Public service is an honourable vocation. But politicians, no matter how sincere their motivation, can only do so much. ... They can’t change a human heart. They can’t heal a wounded soul. They can’t turn hatred into love. They can’t bring about repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace. They can’t get to the core problem [of humanity]... I believe that only one power exists on this sorry planet that can do that. It’s the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life at a time. And what grips my heart every day is the knowledge that the radical message of that transforming love has been given to the church.”⁴⁷

Well said! This highlights how our theology, and in particular our eschatology, impacts our view of social engagement and how we are to relate to the authorities. If our eschatology results in a negative view of the church, and/or of the world as a whole then we will do little to arrest any decline. Perhaps at the other extreme, if our hope is for the establishing of a sacred society, our efforts may be focussed on *this* world rather than preparing people for the *coming* Kingdom. However, holding a high view of the church and its role in society but not anticipating a *sacred* society, motivates us to engage with the world without expecting too much from it. It is exactly because this world is perishing that we are hoping for its redemption, and yet we, as the church, are not simply *waiting* for a new era but are ushering it in as we bring the gospel and its transforming power to our communities. It is then in *this* sense that we are a *subversive* people. While we are making every effort to make this society as good as it can be, the way that we actually do this is by establishing the values and power of *another* kingdom, the kingdom of God. We are not merely

⁴⁷ Hybels, Bill *Courageous Leadership* 21

affirming the value system of the world and working to eradicate its deficiencies, but are looking to an entirely other world for our values, power and finally our reward.

Eugene Peterson writes “Everybody treats us so nicely. No-one seems to think we mean what we say. When we say “kingdom of God,” no-one gets apprehensive, as if we have just announced (which we thought we had) that a powerful army is poised on the border, ready to invade.”⁴⁸

However, he continues, the way this subversion manifests itself is not in open rebellion against the government but in “common Christian acts. The acts of sacrificial love, justice, and hope.”⁴⁹ Through these acts the church is modelling the values and priorities of the kingdom of God and is even establishing the kingdom in the world. This is not merely an ‘alternative’ lifestyle; one way of living among many. This is the lifestyle of the *only* kingdom which will endure and will consume all other kingdoms. Therefore such acts are both subversive and often unpopular. As Tom Wright says “Those who follow Jesus are called to live by the rules of the new world rather than the old one, and the old one won’t like it. Although the life of heaven is designed to bring healing to the life of earth, the powers that presently run this world have carved it up to their own advantage, and resent any suggestion of a different way. That is why the powers – whether they are in politics or the media, in the professions or the business world – are angered when Christian leaders dare to say how things ought to be, even while sneering, often enough, at the church for not ‘speaking out’ on issues of the day.”⁵⁰

Again, Peterson writes “*Prayer* is a subversive activity. It involves a more or less open act of defiance against any claim by the current regime... As we pray, slowly but surely, not culture, not family, not government, not job, not even the tyrannous self can stand against the quiet power and creative influence of God’s sovereignty.”⁵¹ As we pray, the kingdom of God comes. We are, as Christians, instructed “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1Tim 2:1-2). However, this does not appear to be subversive – it is not *against* the authorities – but is simply *for* the kingdom of God. Nonetheless, as the kingdom comes and its values prevail, society is changed, almost as it were, ‘from within’. Thus, we may question whether it is right for “the Church to ... pray for a change of government [and] to mobilise its members in every parish to think and work and plan for a change of government” as suggested by *The Kairos Document*.⁵² Such prayers are notably absent from the Bible and the Church Fathers. In fact, the early church prayed, when oppressed, not for a change of those in authority who were clearly “set against the Lord”, but for *themselves* that they might “continue to speak [God’s] word with all boldness, while [He] stretched out [his] hand to heal, and signs and wonders [were] performed through the name of [his] holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30). Nonetheless, we must beware the danger of arguing from silence and must again remember the differing political contexts. The South African government presented a supposed *biblical* basis for apartheid, thus the church was obliged to engage in theological debate, arguing not only for a change in policy but a change in

⁴⁸ Peterson, Eugene *The Contemplative Pastor* 27-30

⁴⁹ Peterson, Eugene *The Contemplative Pastor* 11

⁵⁰ Wright, Tom *Simply Christian* 116-117

⁵¹ Peterson, Eugene *The Contemplative Pastor* 10

⁵² *The Kairos Document* formulated by the Christian Churches against Apartheid Eerdmans 1986 25-30 in McLellan

the form of government. Furthermore, we may argue that prayer for change is a valid expression of practical Christian engagement as it is effective in bringing about real change.

As the Church prays and preaches, and brings healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, and plants more churches which do the same, even in the face of opposition, society benefits. Moreover, as the church is effective in teaching and demonstrating the joys of Christian morality and thereby sees many lives transformed, we gain the right to promote our moral and ethical framework more widely. This promotion may, in part, take place through individuals holding positions of influence, as well as churches engaging with the authorities, but as Christians we must remind ourselves that, as Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). Here then is *our* hope: that the Christian faith and the Church may be revived, and that through this society will be changed and government may be enabled to uphold righteousness and justice. Our ultimate hope, then, is not that good politics shall prevail but that “The kingdoms of the world [shall] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

Final Thoughts

So, what may we conclude?

Firstly, since governing authorities are instituted by God, we are to be subject to them as to the Lord. In fact, this willing submission is part of our witness as those who trust ultimately in God who is sovereign over all and who ‘appoints and removes kings’. As far as is possible, we are to respect, honour and obey those set over us, praying for them regularly that “we may live peaceful and quiet lives”. However, if the authorities command us to act in a way which would constitute disobedience to God we must be clear that our primary allegiance is to the Lord and we are then permitted to defy the government. Such a decision should not be taken lightly, not merely because of possible legal consequences, but because to wrongly disobey the authorities incurs God’s wrath.

Secondly, that although the separation of *church* and *state* may possibly be desirable⁵³, the faith of the Christian must necessarily result in their engagement with society. Again to quote Wallis, “One thing is clear: True faith cannot be kept inside the narrow boundaries of the ‘sacred’ as some would suggest, but is intended to be ‘salt and light’ in the midst of what is often called the secular world.”⁵⁴ Peoples’ values inevitably impact their actions so why should people of faith be any different? Perhaps the challenge that religion and politics should not mix, is better understood as a challenge to a particular set of values that is being rejected by an increasingly godless society. As the people of God, we are called to be separate, in that we belong to another kingdom with its own priorities and values. This separation, at least at a corporate level, is to be from any particular political party thus releasing the church from the compulsion to toe a party line and allowing it to stand freely on specific issues. Both as citizens and Christians, we are to engage with our society making every effort to introduce and maintain righteous and just legislation. We as Church leaders, and those in our churches, must make every effort to overcome the apathy towards politics in modern Britain. We should take our duty seriously, thinking and praying through the issues surrounding both local and general elections and voting accordingly. While we are looking to another kingdom, we are also

⁵³ However, O’Donovan points out that “the Christendom idea has to be located correctly as an aspect of the church’s understanding of mission” and that, under Christendom, “the service rendered by the state to the church is to facilitate its mission.” *The Desire of the Nations* quoted in Avis 41

⁵⁴ Wallis, *Jim God’s Politics* 80

working to see its values established upon the earth. As NT Wright says “When I pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, I cannot simply be thinking of a condition which will begin to exist for the first time after all human beings have died or been transformed à la 1Corinthians 15:51. If I am to be true to the giver of the prayer, and to those in the first Christian generation who prayed it and lived it, I must be envisaging, and working and praying for, a state of affairs in which the world of the ‘state’, of society and politics, no less than the world of my private ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ life, is brought under the Lordship of the King.”⁵⁵

Finally, we must remind ourselves that our ultimate hope lies beyond this world. There is therefore a sense in which we do not expect too much from government. This is not to be fatalistic for much can be achieved through politics. However, we appreciate that political systems and politicians have their limitations. In the final analysis, our hope is not in political power and structures but in the gospel which alone can transform individuals, communities, even nations. So, as we play our part in our local communities, our confidence is not in the promises of politicians but in the promise of God who said “... the government shall be upon his shoulder ... and of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (Is 9:6-7), and it is to this goal we work and pray.

⁵⁵ Wright, NT *The NT and the State* 12-13

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For discussion:

- How is your church engaged in politics? (how widely to understand this? Social action? School Gov't?)
- What do you do/could you do as a church leader to help your people become engaged? In contacting local government; protesting; local/national elections ...
- How do you, as a church leader, serve those from your church who are involved in politics?
- What do you see as life/death issues? And how are you engaging with them?
- What are the main local issues in your town/city? (eg in Brighton – homosexuality, in Newcastle – immigration/asylum)
- How effective are we at teaching the people in our churches on issues such as abortion, marriage, sexuality, war ...
- How often do you pray for those in authority?
- What are the barriers to becoming involved in politics?
-