

## The Christian and Politics

### ***“What is morally wrong can never be politically right – Anthony Ashley Cooper***

**Disclaimer:** *I am neither historian nor theologian! What follows is based on my personal research and is hopefully food for thought. If it has been shared with you from another source other than from me directly, then understand that the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those who shared it, but they nonetheless kindly thought it was worth reading (and I thank them).*

Do you believe the following statement: Jesus is King?

If so, then you have made a political declaration, one which got Jesus crucified.

As Christians, we simply cannot escape politics, simply because we pledge allegiance to the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

With elections in South Africa drawing very close, I've been witnessing a level of interplay between Christianity and politics at a level that I had not observed before since the birth of our new democracy in 1994. In a disturbing irony, we saw political leaders of parties that do not espouse Christian values attending Good Friday services, using what was meant to be a remembrance of what the price of our redemption cost to our King (whose kingdom is not of this world) as a means for garnering earthly support. Even the EFF released a statement wishing South Africans a 'revolutionary Easter.' We've also seen the rise of a Christian awareness to political realities, primarily from the Charismatic/Pentecostal sector it seems, to the extent that a movement was birthed declaring South Africa to be a Kingdom Nation (which, at the risk of being the fly in the ointment, can actually only be done in Parliament). I confess ambivalence to this movement: whilst on the one hand I am glad that Christians are finally becoming aware that there is such a thing as politics, and that we also have a voice and the right to engage in political processes (as well as realising that there are parties holding to Christian values in Parliament), I cannot help but think that there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far in blurring the lines between church and state. There's nothing stopping us from affirming ourselves as a kingdom people seeking to live out kingdom values, but to declare an earthly political republic a spiritual one without due process is actually undemocratic (if I have misunderstood I apologise, but the way this whole narrative has been framed leads me to this understanding). With all this going on, and personally believing in the separation of Church and State, I wanted to explore what has happened historically, and share some personal thoughts on the role of Christians and their engagement with politics, because I do believe there is a definite role we can play.

I consider myself incredibly blessed to be living in South Africa, where I still have opportunity to vote my values. I am not, for example, forced to choose between either the Muslim Brotherhood or the military. We have a multi-party democracy, and we have freedom of religion – this is such a privilege! We have a lot of challenges too, and yes, we have been let down by things that should not have taken place, but the reason I am choosing to have hope for South Africa is because when darkness is exposed, it means light is shining – and I know of only One source of light...

So, how have church and state fared with one another historically? I apologise for the length of what follows, but it was rather difficult to summarise, and I know I have not done it justice! As we go through this snapshot journey, remember that in each age the church found itself in particular political and cultural circumstances and each generation had to work out for itself its role within the context. As shall be seen, they didn't always get it right (but its easy to judge with the benefit of hindsight!).

The journey of church and state seems to have gone through the following stages: 1) Antagonism (from state), 2) Alignment; 3) Absolutism 4) Alliance 5) Apart

**Antagonism:** *n.* active opposition (*to, against, person or thing; between two*)<sup>i</sup>

The early church knew nothing of political power politics, other than being on the receiving end of it. In its very early stages, the church was regarded as simply being a part of Judaism (Rome allowed Jews the practice of their religion), and Rome regarded Jewish complaints against Christians as an internal problem (see Acts 18:12-17 as an example of this). This situation changed however, and even within the book of Acts we see developments change as the Jews were eager to make a distinction between themselves and the Christians. As Ferguson notes:

*But Christianity started with several legal liabilities. It took its name from and was founded on a man who had been executed by Roman authority on a charge that amounted to treason. This was sure to provoke suspicion if not hostility in official circles. And then everywhere the teaching went it seemed to provoke disturbances and riots, something neither Rome nor the local establishments could view kindly<sup>1</sup>*

The Jews succeeded in their goal in convincing Rome that the Christians were a distinct entity altogether, and it is under Nero's reign that official persecution began. Letters between Pliny (who was governor of Bythnia) and the emperor Trajan reveal the perceptions held of Christians and in what manner they were to be dealt with, with the question being raised of whether they should be punished for specific crimes or for just being part of Christianity ('bearing the name' – see 1 Peter 4:14). Pliny was instructed that if they were caught they were to be punished (unless they recanted), but they were not to be actively sought out. Trajan's successor Hadrian had much the same approach and issued a rescript to the proconsul of Asia in which he assumes that Christianity is unauthorized and punishable, but that due process must be followed and that Christians must not be punished as a result of mob mentality or slander (see 1 Peter 2:12-17). There was a lot of unfortunate superstition around the practices of Christians (from cannibalism because of the Lord's Supper through to incestuous feasts because of seeing one another as family; the primary charge was atheism because Christians would not bow down to the emperor!), and it was often local hostility that instigated early persecutions as opposed to imperial policy<sup>ii</sup>. Later on under Diocletian there was more intense persecution. One can imagine that Christians had a lot of fear to deal with as worship couldn't really be conducted too freely. This is not unlike the situation the house church movement finds itself in in China. In an interview with Pastor Samuel Lamb, he explained "we don't have a problem with the State – the State has a problem with us!" Nonetheless, the early church response to this situation is a lesson for us all, and can be seen in 1 Peter 4:12ff and Romans 13:1-7 – it was submission to suffering as the calling of the cross. Their struggle was not against Rome, but against Satan. As Walker describes:

*Rome, the imperial order, was perceived not as the real source of evil by which Christians were afflicted but rather as a power which, in God's providence, kept things from getting much worse – and this was a judgement which, no doubt in a very rough way, reflected the actual state of affairs<sup>iii</sup>*

Then in 313 an unexpected turn of events happened which changed the course of the history of both the church and the empire. On the eve of a battle against Maxentius at the Mulvian Bridge, Constantine had a dream in which he saw the initial letters of the name of Christ with the words "By this sign you will conquer". He took this as an omen, made it his emblem which got painted on the shields of the soldiers, and won the battle despite the opposition having superior numbers. An edict

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, E (2003) Backgrounds of Early Christianity p602

of toleration was issued allowing Christianity to be legal (Edict of Milan – this included restoration of property that had been seized during Diocletian persecution), and by 324 Constantine, after defeating Licinius, was sole ruler of the empire. According to early church historian Eusebius (and fan of Constantine) “the whole human race was freed from the oppression of the tyrants. We especially, who had fixed our hopes upon the Christ of God, had gladness unspeakable.”<sup>iv</sup> The church had now moved from underdog to top dog, from catacomb to palace. The cause of Rome and the cause of Christ had become one.<sup>v</sup> Antagonism had transitioned to alignment. God and politics had just gotten married.

**Alignment:** *v.t place or lay in a line; bring into line, (esp) bring three or more points into a straight line; (Polit.etc) place in relation of agreement or alliance with others; hence alignment*<sup>vi</sup>

Constantine saw his success in battle as the result of God’s help, and subsequently changed things for the church. There was undoubtedly a pragmatic element to this as he was seeking after the well-being of the empire. The clergy were exempted from civic affairs so that they could devote their time to full time service of God and through this “confer incalculable benefit on public affairs.”<sup>vii</sup> The church furthermore now received monetary gifts for charitable use, places of worship were built for them, Sunday was regarded as a holiday from work, and where both parties agreed, civil suits could be taken to the local bishop whose decision would have the effect of law.<sup>viii</sup> He also moved the capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium (modern day Istanbul) and it soon became known as Constantinople.

It didn’t take long for Constantine to discover a divided church, and his commitment to their cause now meant getting involved in church conflict resolution. He was the creator of Caesaropapism (the belief that the secular ruler has divine authority to settle religious belief),<sup>ix</sup> and, to quote historian J.M. Roberts “Ultimately, and unwittingly, he was founding Christian Europe and, therefore, the modern world.”<sup>x</sup> Constantine had his hands full dealing with quite a few issues, but perhaps his lasting legacy that he is best known for was the convening of the Council of Nicaea in May 325, in which the Arian position on the nature of Christ (that he was created) was rejected as heresy and decisions were made regarding church structure above local church level. It is from this Council that we have the Nicene Creed, which is regarded as a standard of Christian Orthodoxy in terms of doctrine. One wonders whether this Council would have taken place had it not been state-sponsored? Nonetheless Constantine set forward a precedent on how issues would be dealt with, and this is remembered as the age of the councils.

**Absolutism:** *n (Polit.) principle of absolute government; philosophy of the absolute*

The fall of Rome as a result of the invasion of Germanic tribes (410 AD) brought about a huge change in circumstance (in the East the Byzantine empire with the emperor as ruler of state and church continued until 1453 when it was invaded by Muslim Turks, and the new head of Eastern Orthodoxy shifted to Moscow), and it was the Roman church as an institution that stepped into the created political vacuum, and, relying largely upon old imperial law “in a period of legal and administrative chaos – was viewed as the only guarantor of order”<sup>xi</sup> Trying to make sense of this fall of Rome resulted in one of the greatest literary and theological works around: The City of God by Roman African philosopher and theologian St Augustine of Hippo. In this work he countered the claim by the pagans that Rome fell because Christian emperors had banned pagan worship. Augustine responded by saying that Christianity actually prevented Rome from complete destruction and that it was a result of internal moral decay that Rome fell. One of the things that came through in this book was his premise that people need government because they are sinful, and this served as a

model for church-state relations during medieval times (as well as influencing many later scholars including reformation scholar John Calvin).

Two words describe the relationship between church and state during the Middle Ages: *it's complicated*. It would be rather difficult to summarise this period of history (one thousand years: 500 -1500 AD – which, by the way, were not all that dark!). This is an era of complexity as we see the rise of dynasties and nations, and the church itself experienced highs and lows. What does become clear is that whilst there appears to be a recognition of the two entities of Church and State (the metaphor used was 'two swords'- a result of Pope Gelasius (492-496) who wrote a paper putting forth the notion of a dualistic power structure instituted by God in which the pope embodied spiritual power and the emperor or king the earthly temporal power: he was ahead of his time), the era was characterised by tensions over who was the supreme authority: church or state? Carolingian rulers (such as Charlemagne) believed that they had special rights and duties to protect the church, and Charlemagne claimed for himself the right to appoint bishops who were increasingly involved in political affairs.<sup>xii</sup>

The church saw things differently. The Roman Catholic church experienced an amazing increase in power, exemplified through the person of the pope. The groundwork for this increase in power can be attributed to St Gregory 1 (590-604) who began his professional life as a government official and even became prefect of Rome (highest civil office) by the time he was 30. He then transitioned to spiritual ministry by becoming a monk and rose through the ranks to ultimately become pope. His experience in politics gave him the ability to reorganise and strengthen the Roman Catholic Church, laying the foundation for the development of the later Papal States which emerged in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The nature of the tension between church and state was epitomised in what has become known as the Investiture Controversy, which was essentially a power duel between the two swords: Germany's Henry IV represented the State and Pope Gregory VII the Church. This controversy needs to be seen against the backdrop of the political system of Feudalism, in which it wasn't unusual for the church to be in a position of overlord or vassal to secular princes. The question at the root of the controversy was this: who should and had the power to install and invest with authority church officials? Was it the pope or the emperor?

The very brief nutshell version is this: Pope Gregory VII, who banned the practice of the lay investiture of bishops and challenged the traditions of sacral kingship<sup>xiii</sup>, had excommunicated Henry IV who didn't agree. His excommunication led Henry to travel to Canossa, in 1076, crossing the Alps in winter, to repent and seek forgiveness (historians debate whether this was his humiliation or stroke of genius...). He was left waiting outside barefoot in the snowy cold for three days in penitential garments while the pope decided what to do. This was a very far cry from the year 250 where the bishop of Rome (Pope Fabian) was imprisoned by the emperor and who died there (the Decian persecution)!<sup>xiv</sup> Henry was readmitted into the church, but the reconciliation was short-lived.

One attempt at resolution of the struggle is the Concordant of Worms (23 September 1122) between Pope Callixtus II and Henry V (Holy Roman Emperor), and was based on the solution to the investiture conflict as it happened in England. In England it was between Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (1093-1109) and King Henry 1 (1100-1135). The compromise reached by these two was that the "crown retained the right to invest a new bishop with his temporal authority, while the metropolitan archbishop invested him with ring and staff, the symbols of priestly authority"<sup>xv</sup>

The struggle didn't end there. Political changes across Europe ensured the debate and struggle for supremacy continued. The epitome and peak of papal power was under Pope Innocent III. He had a knack for humbling sovereigns, and arguably his greatest victory occurred in England when he managed to humble the cruel and unpopular King John (1199-1216). King John tried to secure his own candidate to be archbishop of Canterbury, and the dispute over this was appealed to Rome. The pope appointed his own preference and King John resisted. Walker describes what happened next as follows:

*"The pope excommunicated him, declared his throne forfeited, and proclaimed a crusade against him. The defeated king not merely made a humiliating submission to the pope, in 1213, but he also acknowledged his kingdom a fief of the papacy, agreeing to pay an annual feudal tax to the pope."*<sup>xvi</sup>

Succeeding popes sought the same type of power, but with less success. One pope in particular made it very clear on which power should be supreme. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull in response to King Philip of France who had the audacity, in the church's eyes, to try a bishop in a royal court. The pope made it very clear as to who was the superior authority: "Both swords, therefore, the spiritual and the temporal, are in the power of the Church." This did not fare well, but that's another story all together. He (the pope) was physically attacked and this episode represented the first clear rejection of papal authority by national monarchies (do a Wiki on him!).

The power growth of the Roman Catholic Church led to the inevitable result: corruption. Undoubtedly had the position of Gelasius been applied more rigorously the path may possibly have been quite different. What is clear is that reform was needed. This is the part Protestants love, but we shouldn't dismiss Medieval Christianity. Armstrong argues that central to Medieval Christianity was the truth that God became man, resulting in a more 'embodied, holistic, "earthy" Christianity that held together faith and reason, head and heart, physicality and spirituality, Word and sacrament, monastic meditation and scholastic speculation"<sup>xvii</sup>

The times were a-changing. The quarrels over supremacy between kings and popes ultimately weakened the Holy Roman Empire (as it was called), to the point where by the time the Reformation happened, it was 'more a group of feeble states than an effective single sovereignty.'<sup>xviii</sup> New forces were beginning to arise which would make the type of papal supremacy experienced under Pope Innocent III impossible. There was the rise of nationalism, taking pride in cultural identity which did not favour the input of foreigners – least of all the pope. There was also the increased education, wealth and political influence of the urban middle class, as well as the growth of lay lawyers who brought about a renewed interest in Roman law (and began displacing church officials as royal advisors).<sup>xix</sup>

There was also increasing recognition that the worldly aims of the papacy were not exactly what the church should be doing. A huge split had also occurred within the Roman Catholic Church (The Great Schism), and, within the world view of medievalism, it didn't seem that there was an answer to the question of to which power was the papacy accountable to? There were clearly problems and many voices had been recognising the need for reform for a long time, "in head and members," and the plan was not to start a new church, but to reform the existing. It didn't happen that way.

**Alliance:** *n.* union by marriage; kinship; (esp. of countries) *joining in pursuit of common interests*

The late Middle Ages saw a religious awakening of rising expectations. Walker comments that the institutional church "was not being threatened by secularism or indifference to religion, but by demands that it truly conform itself to the 'pure, apostolic church' pictured in the New Testament.

Thoughtful people wanted not less religion but 'better,' which for them usually meant 'more biblical.'<sup>xx</sup>

The atmosphere in society in which the Reformation took place was kind of a spiritual version of that which resulted in the Arab Spring: the keg was ready – it just needed a spark. Martin Luther was that spark. In the light of the abuses that were taking place in the Roman church, people were hungry for something more authentic with 'all the anger of disillusioned love.'<sup>xxi</sup>

To quote Roberts "*The Protestant Reformation still defies summary and simplification as a whole. Complex and deep-rooted in its origins, it was also rich and far reaching in its effects. Most obviously, it created in Europe and the Americas new ecclesiastical cultures founded on the study of the Bible and the elevation of preaching to an importance sometimes surpassing that of the sacraments.*"<sup>xxii</sup>

The three names that stand out of this period (1517-1648) are Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. They are known as the Magisterial Reformers because of their willingness to link the church to local political rulers of a region. Their view was that there was an interdependence between secular and church authority. Church and state were to work together. According to McGrath, "The magistrate had a right to authority within the church, just as the church could rely on the authority of the magistrate to enforce discipline, suppress heresy, or maintain order."<sup>xxiii</sup>

I cannot do justice to the stories of these three men, but of the three Calvin certainly had the most influence, being justly called the International Reformer because of the extent of his influence. Interestingly this is largely because of the support he had of refugees which enabled him to have influence in Geneva as well as spreading the Reformation abroad. He also had unique opportunity through his influence to set up a theocratic state in Geneva. Historians debate this point, but certainly the clergy had influence. Roberts describes Calvin's input as follows:

*"At Geneva, Calvin drew up the constitution of a theocratic state which provided the framework for a remarkable exercise in communal self-government. Geneva was not a place for the easy-going. The punishment imposed for heresy, blasphemy or witchcraft was death; of course, this would not have struck contemporaries as surprising. But though adultery was a crime in most European countries and one punished by ecclesiastical courts, Calvin's Geneva took this offence much more seriously in prescribing the death penalty for those guilty of it. A distinction of sex was respected: guilty women were drowned, men beheaded. (This appears to have been a reversal of the normal penal practice of a male-dominated European society; women, considered weaker vessels morally and intellectually, were usually indulged with milder punishments than men.) The most severe punishments, though, were reserved for those guilty of heresy."*<sup>xxiv</sup>

One particularly disturbing incident which will always be a blot on the Reformational landscape was the burning at the stake of a man by the name of Servetus for heresy (27 October 1553).

Over on the island, the English Reformation was taking place, and represented the first nation-state to reject papal authority. Henry VIII wanted to dissolve a marriage which the pope was not willing to do. The response of Henry was to get parliament to pass legislation in which he was declared Head of the Church in England and the the Church of England was birthed (which is another story!). The primary significance was that this was an Act of Parliament which raised the question as to the limits of legislative power. Furthermore, England was identifying itself as Protestant. The Puritans emerged during the English Reformation movement as a group seeking to reform and purify the Church of England.

On the continent, Christianity as a promoter of peace was not doing very well. Sixteenth century France saw itself being torn during the Wars of Religion between Catholic and Calvinist interests (1562-1598).

For some, the Reformation just wasn't enough. And it was at this point that we see a group emerging that gave practical expression to the separation of Church and State. I refer to the Anabaptists, also known as the radical reformers.

**Apart** (*adv.*) *aside, separately, independently*

The Magisterial Reformers above saw the church as being territorial, whereas these 'radical reformers' didn't. Two representative names are Thomas Muntzer (c1490-1525) who was a former follower of Luther and who led the Peasants Revolt (yet another story!), as well as Conrad Grebel (1498-1526) who was an original follower of Zwingli and led the Swiss Anabaptists.

This group wanted to return to New Testament patterns (sound familiar?). They did not view the church as territorial, but rather as a voluntary 'called out' body out of and separate to society. Church membership was through being born again and confirmed by going through the waters of baptism. The name 'anabaptist' was given to them as a derisive nickname, meaning 're-baptizers.' This really was a radical departure from the norm, because the Reformers saw baptism as a 'sign' of membership in Christian society, which is why infants could also be baptised. I'm quoting Walker at length here to describe their belief and perspective:

*"...they saw the test of Christian faith in a discipleship of Christ that, they maintained, must be experienced in a spiritual rebirth or awakening and exhibited in a life of saintliness. The true church of God, accordingly, is made up not of all professed Christians, who have entered upon church membership through baptism in infancy, but only of all convinced believers, who have received baptism as adults in full consciousness of faith and who now display in their lives the palpable fruits of faith. Hence, the Anabaptists refused to have any part in inclusive state-churches of the kind that Zwingli established in Zurich and that were developed in other centers of the Reformation. Their beliefs impelled them, rather, to set themselves apart in free communities and conventicles of their own. Thus, they were the first to practice the complete separation of church and state. Since authentic faith is voluntary, the use of coercion in all religious matters is insupportable – a position that entailed the abandonment of the age-old requirement of religious uniformity as the guarantee of public peace and order. It was chiefly on account of this nonconformism that they were subjected to persecution. Their sectarianism was seen as an expression of hostility to ordered society, not least because they refused, on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount, to swear oaths and to undertake any form of military service – thereby undermining two fundamentals of contemporary political life. In their own minds, however, they were simply carrying Zwingli's biblicism to its logical conclusion and were effecting nothing other than a restitution of primitive Christianity."<sup>xxv</sup>*

They were ordered by the Zurich council on 7 March 1526 to be drowned, as Walker puts it, in 'a cruel parody of their belief.' This sentence was imposed on four persons, and the first martyr was Felix Manz, who was drowned in the River Limmat on the 5 January 1527. The persecutions resulted in the movement spreading across the continent and indeed the world. The most famous community still exists today: the Amish of Pennsylvania (the origin of this group is a split off group of the Swiss Mennonites founded by Jacob Ammann in the early 1700's).

Given the history of the church, it's not surprising that the idea of separating church and state started to gain ground, and while we can justify such a distinction biblically (more on this shortly), it

really seems to have gained ground because of secular developments: primarily the Age of Enlightenment.

To quote James Emery White, to properly understand the Enlightenment requires seeing it more than an age – it was a spirit or mood.<sup>xxvi</sup> It represented the rise of reason, to the extent that reason overtook and was no longer subject to revelation (as in a Christian worldview) but judger of it. The result was that “*by the end of the seventeenth century the church had been marginalized, theology dethroned as the queen of the sciences and the Christian worldview reduced to a fading memory among the intelligentsia. For the first time since the fourth century, the church would once again face persecution.*”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Secular humanism was the new order of the day, and it has remained ever since. In the light of recent events, you may be interested to know that one place where this shift took place was in the Notre-Dame de Paris, where, on 10 November 1793 (during French Revolution), this church was formally declared and transformed into the Temple of Reason, with busts of Rousseau and Voltaire taking the place of the saints. There was even a hymn sung to “Liberty” which had the following words:

Descend, O Liberty, daughter of Nature  
The people have recaptured their immortal power  
Over the pompous remains of age-old imposture  
Their hands raise thine altar...  
Thou, holy Liberty, come dwell in this temple  
Be the goddess of the French

In the words of James Emery White, the second fall was complete – the first fall being God expelling man from the garden, and the second fall being man returning the favour.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **The situation today**

In the history of politics and doctrine, we see that the concept of Freedom of Religion is relatively recent (I don't think such an idea was conceivable during Middle Ages and Reformation), and certainly the legal and practical outworking of the separation of Church and State is quite recent too (American history is a good place to explore this outworking).

It is understandable, given both what Scripture teaches and what has been experienced in human history, that Baptists have it as part of their statement of faith distinctive the following two principles:

*The principle of RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, namely that no individual should be coerced either by State or by any secular, ecclesiastical or religious group in matters of faith. The right of private conscience is to be respected. For each believer this means the right to interpret the Scriptures responsibly and to act in the light of his conscience.*

*The principle of SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE in that, in the providence of God, the two differ in their respective natures and functions. The Church is not to be identified with the State nor is it, in its faith and practice, to be directed or controlled by the State. The State is responsible for administering justice, ensuring an orderly community, and promoting the welfare of its citizens. The Church is responsible for preaching the Gospel and for demonstrating and making known God's will and care for all mankind.*



What does that mean practically? It means that we have to consciously not blur the line between church and state: The goal of having a political party with Christian values in power (almost sounds like an oxymoron!) is not to make parliament a church, or to Christianize society, but to have a government that understands the weightiness of its civic responsibility by recognising its accountability to God and respecting the dignity of persons as image bearers of God. My prayer is that should Christian-aligned parties come to power, then they would have as their focus Christianity as the foundation from which they serve, not from which they wield power. Imposing Christianity as a religion has never done our cause of advancing God's kingdom any good. The role of Christian politicians is not easy, and I like the phrase of Jonathan Leeman who says Christians in government need to be *principled pragmatists*: they need to understand what their Christian convictions are and work out the best way that these can be implemented in policy. One example of this is how ACDP Cheryllyn Dudley did her best to find ways to reduce abortion in the context of current legislation. It was not an easy road and it didn't happen this time round. She did however manage to bring a proposal which got passed as law enabling paternity leave (the only person from an opposition party to accomplish this in our history!).

So, for all the mistakes and abuses of the past, along with all the potential pitfalls, wouldn't it just be better if Christians stayed out of politics all together? On the spectrum of political engagement ranging from liberation theology on one end to total disengagement at the other, is it possible to get some balance and perspective?

Of course. God has promised wisdom to those who ask for it (James 1:5-8). And wisdom is needed for justice. Don't we want this verse to be the description of our leaders too (this is after Solomon's first case)?:

*And all Israel heard of the judgement that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice (1 Kings 3:28)*

Christians belong in politics simply because this is God's world, and wherever there is darkness, Christians need to penetrate with light. It's another aspect of culture that needs redeeming.

One thing becomes clear however: you cannot establish the kingdom of God through political means, but you can practice its principles – primarily that of justice (go to your concordance and check out all the verses on justice!). To quote Psalm 37:28, *the Lord loves justice*. If you want to see justice, then you cannot escape the reality that politics is the primary vehicle for expressing and achieving that goal. At the heart of governance is ensuring that justice is served. Citizens need to know that the guilty will be punished. If one wants to see justice, then that is going to be framed by the worldview one has (which needs to be a moral one, and the source of that moral standard needs to be objective – i.e from God). If a political party has a fear of God as central to its worldview, then this is going to stand in good stead for the ensuring of an orderly and just society (we are incredibly blessed to have at the helm of the judiciary Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng – there was opposition to him precisely because of his Christian worldview, and yet he still got appointed by the then President Jacob Zuma).

An example from history to illustrate how powerfully the Christian worldview can impact politics is through one of my greatest heroes of faith who was a politician: William Wilberforce. His life is portrayed in the movie *Amazing Grace* and his book *Practical Christianity* needs to be read by all! The reason he is such a hero is that he brought about the abolition of slavery after a 20 year struggle in 1807.

His story reveals an important truth: you don't need to have the political power to have influence. Small is big when God is in it. I see this played out in Scripture numerous times, with the most notable example arguably being Daniel. Having said that, I would nonetheless personally love to see the voice of God-given common sense enhanced in parliament!

Obviously the most important question that needs to be asked is this: what do the Scriptures teach about the role of government and the role of the church and citizens?

There are three main passages of Scripture which highlight the role of government: Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-4 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 (actually, the whole of Scripture is saturated with wisdom for government – an excellent study is provided by Landa Cope in her book *God and Political Justice*).

The first thing that becomes blatantly clear in these passages is that government is indeed ordained by God (which goes against the notion of some that it is a fallen institution). The purpose of government is to restrain evil, but what is amazing to note in the Timothy passage is that without any clear break between v1-3 (describing good government) and v4, we seem to have a relationship established between good governance and the task of evangelism. We know from church history that even in political oppression the church has grown, but it seems that first prize is a properly governed nation providing the ideal context for a proper functioning church.<sup>xxix</sup> There is a kingdom purpose to good governance.

What about our role as the church and as citizens?

We play a prayerful, prudent and prophetic role. We play a prayerful role in praying for those in authority. We play a prudent role through being good citizens, and we play a prophetic role by speaking out against injustice and even engaging in civil disobedience if needed (when the laws of state clash with the laws of God).

#### **Some other personal questions:**

- 1) Given our history, how will we avoid aligning church and state?

Our constitution has enough checks and balances to help avoid this happening (and enough secular opposition parties!). I also came to understand that parties with Christian values need to be exactly that: parties with Christian values (i.e. at the risk of contradicting myself the party needs to be values based and not doctrinally based). Politics is about power and so if you want to be in Parliament exercising influence, you need a support base to put you there. For example, family is a value shared across all denominations, – both Protestant and Catholic, as well as Mormons and Jehovah witnesses (not that they will be voting...).

- 2) What does it mean to make Jesus Lord of my vote?

At the first level the answer would be to vote in accordance with values. I think the first answer God would give to the question of who to vote for would be “you choose.” I base this on something I never saw before: in Deuteronomy we actually see God encouraging an emerging democracy under Him (see Deut 1: 9-17 when people are instructed to choose leaders). However, here's a shocker: if God told you to vote for, let's say, the EFF – would you? It would ruin the country but it would probably enhance the church!

## Concluding thoughts

I do believe God is giving Christians in South Africa an opportunity to have godliness in Parliament through the provision of Christian aligned parties. It is His mercy that He has actually been at work in Parliament despite the limited numbers!

I want to encourage Christians to vote their faith values and not their fears. My reasons are not only because 'righteousness exalts a nation,' but also for enhancing the redemptive potential for politicians who do not yet know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. I want to enhance the fragrance of Christ in parliament – and who better to reach non-Christian politicians than Christian politicians? How poetic that our 'vote cross' can indeed be an instrument of redemption!

But I also want to encourage Christians to examine their motives. I want to say that I am voting in a Christian direction 'for the glory of God,' but I would be lying if personal safety and security didn't play a role too!

Having said that, I absolutely treasure the privilege of being able to worship and serve God freely. This is a privilege that does have the potential to be lost, and then we must understand that we are still free to worship God, but the cost, which we must be prepared to pay, will be greater.

If you have made it this far, thank you...

I want to conclude with a quote by Landa Cope which pretty much sums everything up!

*"As God's people we are called into civil governance for the glory of God and the good of the people. Our goal is not to perfect the world or nation but to offer God's perspective, a better way, and allow society a choice. We are not Jews in the promised land; we are God's people in Babylon, God's people surrounded by nations in darkness, offering salt and light.*

*We have influence, but we are not in control. We are not defending God's kingdom; his kingdom is already established. We are not here to "bring back the King;" the King is already coming. We are ambassadors of light, helping to dispel darkness. We are salt, preserving and changing the flavour of our communities choices. We are salt that can bring healing. We offer an alternative to the lies of the lawless one. And we are preparing to deliver God's justice beyond the borders of this world and time."*<sup>xxx</sup>

Rev Richard Baird

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## References

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<sup>ix</sup> Roberts, J.M (1980) The Pelican History of the World p278

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