

# 66 POLITICS

## Touring through the Bible

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First published 2015 in *Those Who Show Up* by Andy Flannagan (Muddy Pearl).  
This edition published 2024 by The British and Foreign Bible Society.

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Printed in Great Britain

# Introduction

This free booklet is designed as a taster for the longer, deeper journey that we hope you and those in your church may want to take this year with the Bible Society and Christians in Politics. That journey is the complex but rewarding exploration of what influence the Bible should or could have in our present public square. In the coming months, as we approach the General Election, we will be providing further resources to help you grapple with Scripture and the complexity of 2024. These will include a tour, videos, study guides and a podcast, hearing from expert theologians and activists. Let's explore together the relationship between Britain and the Bible!

# 66 POLITICS

There is a danger in engaging in politics (or anything for that matter) for purely functional reasons. This can limit the mental framework behind our involvement to a simple notion of ‘sorting out the world’. But the call goes much deeper than that. Our role in governance must be grounded in our relationship to God. It is a profound vocation and it has echoes all the way back to Genesis and all the way forward to Revelation and beyond. So at this point we stop to look in more detail at what the Bible has to say.

Many people (including myself) misuse Scripture to promote their own agenda by hijacking individual verses as ‘poster kids’ while happily ignoring others. Basing an argument on individual verses always risks faulty interpretation. A healthier method is to ask what the whole canon of Scripture has to say about a certain topic. That is obviously a task too large for this booklet, and so we will point you in the direction of some excellent political theologians at the end of it. However, what we will do is go right back to the very start and take a whistlestop tour through every book of the Bible. It’s not hard to find material in every single book that screams of God’s desire for good governance. We could examine each of these in detail, but what is important is that you get a sense that this is not a side issue for God. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, God makes it clear that he is passionate about not just the concept of governance, but the practicalities of how we govern ourselves. Of course this shouldn’t surprise us, bearing in mind that he invented the whole concept. We have developed this ‘Route 66’ tour over the course of the last decade and it seems to be especially well received in our Christians in Politics presentations to theological college students.

There is much more that could be said, but hopefully this will whet your appetite to dig a little deeper. Here we go. Take a deep breath ...

# Old Testament

## **GENESIS 1.26–28**

*Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’*

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’*

## **GENESIS 2.15**

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

In short, if we are made in his image, we govern because he governs.

Theologians call this the creation mandate – we are made in the image of God, and we are called to faithfully manifest that image in our day-to-day work of stewarding his creation. We rule because we are like our Father. We can take this role seriously or we can do it badly, or we can abdicate our responsibility, passing it to others who may lack a biblical worldview. It’s worth noting that stewarding creation well goes beyond material things such as plants and animals, to concepts such as freedoms and institutions (for example, family). There is a cultural mandate to develop institutions for the common good.

These verses in chapter 1 of Genesis also make it clear that in this task our relational priorities are governed by the fact that we are all endowed with equal worth and dignity. In other words, there are no premier league people. Under God's authority, this essential equality is the starting point for all human government.

When we use the phrase 'relational priorities' this refers to the patterns for human-to-human and human-to-God communion laid out in the Bible (and modelled in the Trinity). These patterns can be things like giving rather than taking; loving rather than hating; accepting the responsibility to be 'my brother's keeper' instead of acting from selfishness; seeking peace; putting others above ourselves; stewarding our time and resources for the common good; protecting and promoting the structural and cultural integrity of marriage, parenthood, family life, community and possibly even nation. This includes understanding the co-dependency between freedom and responsibility - and between justice and mercy. The Sermon on the Mount provides a good overview.

In light of the fall, politics and government have often been seen as a 'necessary evil' to restrain evil, but this is verging on the functional instrumentalism we mentioned above. Responsibility for the earth was given to humans even before the fall. Organisation is still needed in the context of perfection. As we will see from later sections of Scripture, God has always been intending to share his reign with us, and we will share that reign even when evil is no more.

Further into **Genesis**, in the story of Joseph we see how God uses his anointed to govern in an alien land for the protection and prosperity of his people and everyone else. Genesis also shows that emancipation from oppression is on God's agenda through the story of the people of Israel.

Throughout the rest of the Bible, God keeps calling people back to this task of reflecting his image through governance.

In **Exodus** we see that Moses was a deeply political figure, again ruling in an alien culture, and we begin to receive the laws that express God's heart for good government. These commandments still form the bedrock of our law. It is important to note that the people of Israel would not have understood our separation between religious leaders and political leaders. In the Hebrew mindset, God is one, and we are one. Physical, spiritual and mental aspects of our person all combine. In the exodus itself we see how God cares about all of the person. It does not simply render the Israelites 'spiritually' free. They are also freed economically, politically, and geographically. Their freedom to worship their God is connected to all these other freedoms.

With a strong emphasis upon personal and corporate morality, and caring for the poor, **Leviticus** shows us how the law is designed to cover all the dimensions of Israel's relations with God, with one another and with the earth. God doesn't just care about the state of our hearts.

**Numbers** proposes a democratic process under God with the selection of representative leaders.

**Deuteronomy** affirms the idea of equality under the law for kings and subjects alike. In other words, no one is above the law. This was fleshed out in the UK through the Magna Carta in 1215. Through the Jubilee and Sabbath principles (amongst many others) we see how God cares passionately about how society is ordered.

**Joshua** shows the need for integrity in leadership, and a strong national identity in which morality is required as a distinctive for God's people.

**Judges** shows how the Lord raises up and empowers people to lead the nation out of sin, error and judgement. It also shows the need for women to assume national leadership responsibilities.

**Ruth** shows how social and familial responsibility transcends mere legal contract. Our responsibilities in leadership go beyond the functional letter of the law.

**1 & 2 Samuel** reaffirm equality under the law for kings and subjects.

The books of **1 & 2 Kings** chart the good, the bad and the ugly of how to govern. These books show how leaders are subject to greater accountability for their actions.

### **1 KINGS 3.7–13**

*‘Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?’*

*The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, ‘Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both wealth and honour – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.’*



Verse 10 stands out as exposing God's pleasure that Solomon asked for wisdom to govern. It is obviously an issue close to his heart.

The books of **1 & 2 Chronicles** also show the Lord's heart for government through his reply to Solomon's request for wisdom to govern, and they place the responsibility for national renewal with God's people.

**Ezra** demonstrates the power of God's word to restore identity and direction to a nation.

**Nehemiah** teaches about how the restoration of our authority and identity in God brings blessing. It is worth noting here that it is rarely stories of pastors that make it into Scripture. Rather, it's the stories of architects, builders, politicians, and kings. God seems to care as much about the 'practical' as the 'spiritual'.

**Esther** and Mordecai were raised up to politically lobby the authorities to save their people.

**Job** teaches us about trusting a sovereign God in trials. He is the ultimate authority above any earthly authorities.

#### **JOB 39.4**

*'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?*

*Tell me, if you understand.*

*Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!*

*Who stretched a measuring line across it?*

The **Psalms** confirm that God is the ultimate authority, but one who is ready to listen to the cries of his people through praise and petitions. He is

a responsive God, caring about the practicalities of victory and defeat, plenty and famine.

**Proverbs** includes instructions and moral guidance that will help rulers to govern wisely.

**Ecclesiastes** talks about the wisdom needed to rule.

**Song of Songs** makes clear our relational priorities in light of God's authority.

**Isaiah** describes the coming saviour and his kingdom – the increase of whose government shall be endless. The prophet paints many vivid pictures of a world whose structures have been utterly restored and redeemed (not left to rot while its inhabitants float off).

**ISAIAH 59.12 (NRSV)**

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

**Jeremiah** illustrates the need to speak truth to power.

There is also the clear call in Jeremiah 29.7 (ESV): 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

If ever there was a clear mandate for engagement in all the structures and systems of our locality, here it is.

**Lamentations** shows how God used one nation to punish another.

**Ezekiel** describes how the river of true life from the temple is what heals the nations.

**Daniel** demonstrates that God's people can be called to rule in alien, pagan cultures. There is an implicit recognition that, when engaging in politics, there is a time to defy and a time to comply for the people of God. This was particularly true for Daniel and his three friends. The need for both civic training and a non-negotiable devotional life is apparent. With Daniel we see how integrity is tied to identity, and how the role of the prophetic is important when dealing with governmental power. Importantly, the book also shows that God's dominion covers all kingdoms, all empires and the whole earth – and that ultimately, all kingdoms will pass into God's own kingdom of love and righteousness.

**Hosea** attacks hedonism and the abuse of wealth.

**Joel** promotes truth in the public square.

**Amos** exposes hypocritical rulers and power elites.

**Obadiah** affirms that justice cannot be escaped.

**Jonah** speaks of responsibility beyond the borders of our own race and ethnicity.

**Micah** emphasises the importance of morality and integrity. Governance must be infused with justice, mercy and humility combined.

**Nahum** explains how freedom can bring both curses and blessings to a nation.

**Habakkuk** talks of God's care for the poor.

**Zephaniah** binds belief to action, and demands clear identity.

**Haggai** reorders our social priorities in light of God's holiness.

**Zechariah** reaffirms the absolute authority of God.

**Malachi** warns against complacency and idolatry in national life.

And that's just the Old Testament! Take another deep breath ...

# *New Testament*

**Matthew, Mark, Luke and John:** The Gospels cite the governing supremacy of Christ, particularly through his statement that ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ (Matthew 28.18); and to Pilate that ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above’ (John 19.11). He confirms God’s sovereignty over all secular, unbelieving and pagan governments.

The Gospels show why it is important to speak truth to power despite the cost (John the Baptist); why it is important to speak up for the marginalised and disenfranchised (many passages); why it is vital to proclaim righteousness (‘lamp on a stand’ discourse); how God is angry with unrighteousness (clearing of the Temple); why God hates those who develop vested interests and oppress and exclude the poor; how wealth can corrupt leaders; why taxes must be set fairly and collected with honesty; why peace and reconciliation are priorities (‘love your enemies’ discourse); how authority is rightly delegated; why vengeance has no place in justice (‘eye for an eye’ discourse); why interpreting the times is vital for good decision making; why covenant is more important than contract, both personally and socially; why mercy is vital for impartiality (‘don’t judge others’ discourse); how regard for others cannot be avoided (‘love your neighbour’ discourse); how God owns the concept of government (‘render unto Caesar’ discourse); why leadership must be characterised by faithfulness (‘shepherd and the flock’ discourse); why mob rule is to be avoided; why manipulating public opinion to subvert justice is wrong; why human rights and civil liberties are important (false charges and trial for crucifixion); why executive transparency and accountability are important; why torture is wrong; why state violence requires restraint by a moral framework; why sacrifice, service and suffering for others are noble; why corruption requires restitution; why forgiveness is essential for governing human relationships (the crucifixion story); how matter itself will be transformed akin to Jesus’

resurrection body in the final resurrection, conveying innate dignity on the ‘stuff of now’ – the nuts and bolts of the world (the resurrection narrative).

**Acts** demonstrates a unified and equal community that is governed by council, consensus and majority; illustrates the need to speak truth to power; and proposes new forms of citizenship. It also shows the need for religious freedom.

**Romans** shows the value of secular government and critiques the human effects of state-sanctioned idolatry. Crucially, in stating that the political authority ‘is God’s servant for your good’ (13.1–4), Paul affirms that political authority comes from God for our benefit, but that our allegiance cannot be unthinking. God is still the ultimate authority.

#### **ROMANS 13.1–7**

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.*

*This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: if you owe*

*taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.*

The following verses from Romans 8 also serve as a reminder of God's concern for all aspects of life on earth, not just the state of hearts. Here innate worth is conveyed to non-human creation in the promise that it will enjoy the same transformation as we do.

#### **ROMANS 8.18–21**

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*

**1 & 2 Corinthians**, in identifying the flawed wisdom of hollow philosophies, establish the need for moral reference beyond human ideologies; call believers to model new, subversive forms of community; outline the ministry of reconciliation; and value suffering for what is right.

**Galatians** explains the radical, totalising freedom given by Christ and that the gospel necessitates, requires and sustains freedom.

**Ephesians** describes human responsibility in the spiritual battle that informs earthly authority, and states how the Church is to communicate 'the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms'. Demonstrating the good governance of the kingdom is proposed.

**Philippians** encourages humility and hope in the face of suffering, and challenges abuses related to social status.

**Colossians** affirms the supremacy of Christ in human affairs by stating that ‘thrones or dominions or authorities – all things were created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together’ (1.16–17). ‘All things’ here actually means all things – every sphere of human existence, including politics. It also calls for intellectual rigour to challenge hollow philosophies and human traditions.

**1 & 2 Thessalonians** confirm the value and dignity of labour, and assert the necessity for the rule of law.

**1 & 2 Timothy** compel believers to pray for government ‘first of all’ – as a priority for the gospel; value the counsel of elderly people and encourage young people to lead; explain the role of charity; warn against the corruption that wealth can bring; describe a godless society.

#### **1 TIMOTHY 2.1–4**

*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

These particular verses show that God cares about order, because it reflects the fact that he is a God of order. He brought order from chaos, and continues to do so. Order in human relationships leaves people free to love, free to worship, free to work, and free to explore the depths of God. The gospel often thrives in times of persecution, yes, but not in times of anarchy. Order is required for the communication of God’s values, which can lead to the building of just structures, which can lead to good governance. Otherwise, salvation is confined to a personal transaction between individuals and God. Personal revival cannot lead to national renewal without order. The freedom



to build according to the principles of the kingdom is necessary. Otherwise, gains may be fleeting and private.

## 2 TIMOTHY 2.11–12

*Here is a trustworthy saying:*

*If we died with him,  
we will also live with him;  
if we endure,  
we will also reign with him.*

Here our eternal role as priests and kings in the new created order is underlined. These are the roles that we are also called to both exercise and rehearse in the here and now.

**Titus** discusses authority amongst diverse social groups.

**Philemon** deals with slavery and labour.

**Hebrews** confirms the authority structure of heaven, the equality of all people before God, and how justice is indivisible from mercy.

**James** explains how deeds must accompany words; that favouritism is forbidden in leadership; that a focus upon developing good language and communication is essential for leadership; and how the wisdom that comes from God differs in substance and impact from earthly wisdom.

**1 Peter** calls for believers to ‘Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be the emperor ... or to governors’ (2.13), confirming that all authority is ordained by God, and that submission can be required even during persecution. It also shows that the gospel itself has its place in

political power by revealing that Jesus ‘has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him’ (3.22).

**2 Peter** asserts the value of a clear conscience and good teaching for leadership, and the need to respond to evil with good.

**1, 2 & 3 John** describe the institutional nature of sin and the need to provide good role models for leadership.

**Jude** attacks bad role models for leadership, and shows how, when abused, authority can be abdicated.

**Revelation** affirms the dominion of the kingdom of God above earthly empires; calls Christians to lead as well as serve; condemns those who have put their faith in money and power; and promises a conclusion in which justice is inescapable. It shows how redemption in Jesus Christ is not limited to any one area of the creation. Not only persons, but nations, kingdoms and the entire creation will be reconciled.

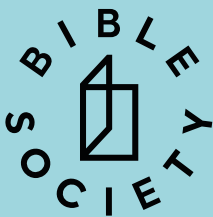
## **REVELATION 21.5**

*He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’*

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