Britain and the Bible

Introduction

This outline suggests a framework for how the Bible guides Christian engagement in politics.

It is written with church leaders in mind, who may have these kinds of questions:

- Why should Christians engage in politics?
- How should Christians engage in politics?
- Should Christians be seeking to impose Christian morality by law?
- What should Christians expect to achieve in politics?
- How do you preach about politics?
- How do you guide the person who wants to be an MP or local councillor?

It summarises four of the most common Christian approaches to politics (the first two emphasise *distinction from* politics, while the second two emphasise *engagement in* politics).

A blended alternative to these four approaches and what that looks like in practice will be described.

1. Separatist

Summary of this perspective:

This world is coming to an end. Only the eternal matters. Christians should evangelise and disciple, and not waste time in politics.

Positive:

- Acknowledges the biblical doctrine of sin and the flawed nature of human beings, and reminds us that we shouldn't be over-optimistic about what can be achieved in politics
- Emphasises that what all people need, more than anything else, is the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ

Negative:

Insufficient consideration that:

- Despite our sinfulness after the Fall, the creation mandate to steward the earth continues and this *has* to include politics
- In response to our redemption, God calls us to good works in the Church and beyond, e.g.:
  - *looking after orphans and widows (James 1.27)*
  - *doing good to the family of God and ALL people (Galatians 6.10)*
- Culture and politics disciple people too. Laws affect what people believe
- Politics gives Christians a platform to speak of the present and eternal good of the gospel and to secure religious freedom
- It's not an either/or choice between evangelism and political engagement according to the Bible

DISCUSS

What are some examples of this?

2. Two kingdoms

Summary of this perspective:

- God rules over all things but he does so in two distinct kingdoms:

  - The Common kingdom – *which includes all humans, based on the covenant with Noah and Romans chapters 1 and 2 – where all are subject to a shared natural moral law. On that basis, Christians should work alongside non-Christians in politics for the common good*

  - The Redemptive kingdom *is about eternal salvation. It is governed by the special revelation of the Bible and doesn't relate to the Christian's life in society outside of the Church*

Positive:

- Recognises that we do not build God's Kingdom through politics. The Kingdom of God in the Bible is built as people submit to the rule of Christ through word and sacrament (although the effects of kingdom rule in a Christian's life should then flow out into society)

- Emphasises that evangelism and discipleship should be central to the life of the Church

Negative:

- Too optimistic about general revelation that all humans can use to build healthy societies. Romans 1.18–32 does indeed say that we have knowledge of God through general revelation, but then it states that we *suppress* that knowledge

- Seems to buy into the myth of secular neutrality. The public square is not a neutral place. It is informed by basic assumptions about what it is to be human and those assumptions are formed by all sorts of different philosophies, many of which are very different from the Bible's teachings

- Polly Toynbee: 'Every day in Parliament, fundamentally different worldviews do battle. Politics is all about the clash of moral universes' (*The Guardian,* 25 March 2008)

- Ignores that so much of the good we now enjoy in Western society has come from the special revelation of the Bible, e.g. human rights, freedom, justice

- The danger of the Church becoming apathetic in the face of injustice and suffering in society

- The two kingdoms approach is right to say that the Bible isn't a comprehensive textbook for how to be a politician, but the Bible does give us foundational truths about how human beings flourish

DISCUSS

What are some examples of this?

3. Accommodation

Summary of this perspective:

- The Church accommodates its message to the politics of the time in order to have some influence

- Informed by a theology of God, speaking equally through the Bible and through human experience and culture

Positive:

- The Church is involved in culture and politics and has the *potential* to influence

Negative:

- This influence is tolerated only so far as the political status quo is not challenged

- If the Church is accommodated to the culture, it loses its power to commend the distinctive wisdom of the Bible

DISCUSS

What are some examples of this?

4. Transformationism

Summary of this perspective:

- Christian engagement in politics is a way of transforming a culture into a Christian one
- As more laws are passed according to biblical principles, 'God's Kingdom is built' and the culture becomes more Christian

Positive:

- When Christians come to faith in Christ, they don't just live transformed lives in the Church – the gospel sends them out into all areas of society, including politics, to live out the politics of the Kingdom of Jesus
- Politics shapes our culture – it can pass laws that are more or less friendly to Christian proclamation and Christian values for human life
- There is an evangelistic and prophetic value to being involved in politics (1 Peter 2.12)

Negative:

- The Bible does not describe God's people 'building' the Kingdom of God. When Jesus talks of the Kingdom of God, he's referring to the rule of God. He describes the rule of God as something that comes upon people; they enter into the kingdom and submit to God's rule as they put their faith in him
- Overly optimistic about human nature and what can be achieved through politics. The Bible is clear on the corruption of sin until all is made perfect in the future new creation. CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity:* 'You cannot make men good by law.'

DISCUSS

What are some examples of this?

Summary of the four models

- Each captures an important biblical emphasis, but they don't capture the whole Bible story
- A more biblical blend of all these models can be summarised as DISTINCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The Christian should be ENGAGED in politics:

- In obedience to the creation mandate to steward the earth
- Because of the call throughout the Bible to love your neighbour and look after the needy in the Church and beyond
- Because there is an evangelistic value in being involved in politics, both in word and deed
- Because politics influences culture and people's openness to the Bible's message

The Christian should be DISTINCTIVE in their engagement:

- Because creation is fallen, it needs more than just *common grace;* it needs the *special revelation* of the Bible about the good human life
- Because 2 Timothy 3.14–17 tells us that the Bible is authoritative to equip us for all righteousness and every good work in our lives, which must include our politics
- Because society needs the special grace of Christ's inaugurated kingdom being lived out
- Because God is sovereign over Caesar
- Because the Kingdom of God is 'now' but also 'not yet'. The Kingdom of God impacts on this world, but it should never be equated with the politics of this world

ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE:

- Christians should be involved on the political 'pitch', not just shouting from the 'sidelines', e.g.:
  - *Local councils, parish councils, school governors*
  - *Running for Parliament*
  - *Getting involved in campaigns*
  - *Becoming a member of a party*
  - *Informed voting*

- Christians will be looking to co-operate in politics with those of all worldviews because of the Bible's teaching on common grace in Romans chapters 1 and 2, and the creation mandate of Genesis 1, e.g. William Wilberforce built broad coalitions in his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery

- Christians will be **humble and gracious** in how they go about their politics

  – *because they recognise that they themselves are flawed and need to be challenged by others with different political opinions*

  – *because all people, regardless of their politics, are created in the image of God and are therefore worthy of dignity and respect*

- Christians should also be **realistic** about the difficulties and challenges that come with serving in politics. The Christian involved in politics will need a strong fellowship of prayer, accountability and rootedness in God's word

- Christians must be prepared to be **patient**, e.g. after Wilberforce secured the abolition of the slave trade he campaigned for the abolition of slavery itself for the rest of his life

- Church leaders: build a relationship with your MP through prayer, local partnership and evangelism. Invite them to attend the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast with you

BEING DISTINCTIVE IN PRACTICE:

- **Be prayerful**

- Share the *special revelation* of the Bible with confidence, because although *general revelation* of natural law allows us to make common cause with participants of all worldviews in politics, without bringing in the *special revelation* of the Bible we will be failing to offer the full wealth of God's wisdom for his creatures

- Apply the wisdom of the Bible to **all** of politics, not just isolated causes. Helpful summary principles for *distinctive* Christian engagement in politics can be found in Catholic Social Teaching and the work of the Jubilee Centre, to name just two examples

- **Wisdom** is required, e.g. not everything that is immoral should be illegal and biblical wisdom can be used without quoting the Bible (although Christians should not hide that they are applying a biblical worldview, just as everyone else in the public square brings their distinctive worldview)

- Church leaders: teach your congregations a rich biblical anthropology and see your church gathered together as an embassy of the Kingdom of God:

  – *as an ambassador you are a citizen of another country, representing it by being fully embedded in the society in which you live*

  – *You are restored and equipped for your work in the embassy and then sent out to live out the values of that country in the world around you*

- The primary task for the gathered Church in the New Testament is to be nurtured with the word and sacrament and prepared to go out into the world:

  – *making disciples of all nations*

  – *AND living out the reality of this 'now but not yet Kingdom' because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28.18–20)*

Conclusion

- The Bible leads Christians to be involved in politics, not because this will lead to a 'redeemed' and Christian culture as a whole ...

- ... but because it teaches that loving our neighbour and serving others is what Christians are called to do AND that this involvement can bring some change for the good in this life, even while we wait for God's perfect kingdom to come in the future new creation

'Sometimes a disease can be knocked out; sometimes sex traffic can be considerably reduced; sometimes slavery can be abolished in a region; sometimes more equitable laws can foster justice and reduce corruption ... of course, none of these good things is guaranteed to be enduring; none brings in the consummated Kingdom. Yet in these and countless other ways cultural change is possible. More importantly, doing good to the City, doing good to all people ... is part of our responsibility as God's redeemed people in this time of tension between the "already" and the "not yet"'.

(DA CARSON IN *CHRIST AND CULTURE REVISITED*)

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Registered charity 232759