

The Bible and Public Authority

The Bible tells the story of God's redeeming power, but it's a story embedded in an account of empires and kingdoms, culminating in the New Jerusalem, a city state, coming down out of heaven to earth, and the throne of God, and the putting of all things right. All of which is profoundly political.

But if the Bible's sweeping vision tells us how things *will* be, it also helps us understand the way things are.

So I'd like to give you a number of principles from the way the Bible sees things, to guide our approach to politics and involvement in the public square.

Principle 1: All authority derives from God.

The Bible opens with, 'In the beginning, *God...*' (Gen 1:1).

And so it's a Biblical given that God is the supreme authority and everyone else, including those with political power, are subjects under him.

It's why God says to a Pharaoh, "For this purpose *I* have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Ex 9:16).

It's why David, a king, says, 'Kingship belongs to the LORD, and *he* rules over the nations.' (Psalm 22:28).

It's why Daniel, faced with a pagan, over-reaching king, says, "Blessed be the name of God... He removes kings and sets up kings" (Dan 2:21).

It's why Jesus says to Pilate: "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:11). An authority Jesus recognises, but one for which Pilate will be held accountable.

And it's why Paul writes, 'There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God' (Rom 13:1).

But if as individuals, or societies and cultures, we forget that God is the ultimate, then something else will take that place - like political power, and then everything becomes political and contested.

Likewise, if those with political power forget that all authority comes from and is exercised under God, then political authority will overreach itself and take godlike status to itself. As Psalm 2 describes kings taking their stand against God.

And so while we should care about good government, we should never mistake the good for God. Instead, the proper purpose and limit of authority will only be recognised when it is seen as accountable to God's authority.

Principle 2: All are created in God's image, influencing our treatment of all

Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that all of humanity is made in God's image and therefore of equal dignity and worth and deserving of treatment that honours that image.

But if a government or society denies God as our Creator, or his image in his creatures, political power will inevitably be used for harm against his image bearers.

Principle 3: The creation mandate is a call to govern

Genesis 1:28 says, 'God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."'

And to fill the earth and have dominion means people living and working alongside each other - which requires cooperation and organisation - in other words, government.

And so good government exists, Paul says in Romans 13, 'for [our] good' (Rom 13:4) - to enable us to fulfil the creation mandate. It's one reason why we should seriously consider our own involvement in the public square.

Principle 4: Humanity's fundamental problem is sin

The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 tells us that the world's fundamental problem is not the economy, or education, or the elite. It's sin.

And at the heart of the first sin was a turning away from God. And it's that that Jeremiah gives as the reason why his own nation was collapsing in his day: "Has a nation changed its gods... but my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit... They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer 2:11, 13).

And the biblical account of the Fall tells us, first with Adam and Eve, and then Cain and Abel, that sin undermines marriage and family, the building blocks of society and community; and it corrupts the way we *use* power and the way we respond to those *with* power.

However, the Fall also tells us there is a profound dislocation in creation: the ground produces thorns and thistles and work is hard. And so post-Fall, government is exercised in the context of sin and scarcity and the *hebel* of Ecclesiastes, in which things just don't work as they should. A situation that should temper any idealism we might have about what political solutions can achieve.

Principle 5: Government is for our good: providing protection and punishment

In Genesis 9, God authorises the use of coercive force: 'God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth... For your lifeblood I will require a reckoning... from his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it" (Gen 9:1, 5-7).

And because that charge was given to all humanity, not just Israel, it applies to all humanity, reaffirming the value of all human life, in God's image, and thus establishing a right to life.

It authorises the use of force to prosecute murder and, by extension, authorises governments to protect life by preventing the taking of life - whether by raising taxes to pay for police forces, or by imposing speed limits and safety codes, or outlawing abortion and euthanasia. As Paul writes in Romans 13, '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' (Rom 13:4). So it is not just pastors, elders, and deacons who are God's servants, so too are pagan government officials. And one while one wields the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. The other wields the sword of justice.

But notice that it says '*whoever*' sheds blood. Which means governments are also subject to law.

And because it is life for life, it establishes the concept of parity and the right to a fair trial and due process. The punishment must fit the crime: life for life, not life for theft. And that *lex talionis* was not to maximise revenge but limit it.

But the concept of parity also implies that the enforcing of justice, along with other acts of government, requires a just standard against which it can be measured. As Proverbs says, 'A just balance and scales are the LORD's; all the weights in the bag are his work. It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness' (Prov 16:11-12). In other words, just standards apply just as much to government and kings, as they do to buying and selling in the market place.

So how much governments tax and spend should be justly measured against their role to protect life. As Proverbs 29 says, 'By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down.'

In addition, because this law regarding justice is sandwiched by two restatements of the creation mandate - 'be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth' - governments should do all they can to protect and facilitate marriage and family and avoid anything that undermines them, whether through tax policies, or controlling inflation, or by redefining marriage or ease of divorce.

But notice too that while the law is based on God, it limits itself to harm to man, not harm to God. It aims at the prosecution of external acts, not internal attitudes - at crimes against man, not crimes against God. So outside of ancient Israel, it established the right to worship free from coercion.

Principle 6: Government is for our good, but can also be bad

The book of Judges graphically reminds us that when people are left without a king, to do whatever is right in their own eyes, sin, crime and depravity multiply.

But straight after, 1 Samuel reminds us that if we reject God as our king, and instead look to man, that man will be tempted to take ever more power to himself. As Samuel warns, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you..." (1 Samuel 8:11). And he describes an ever-expanding and intrusive rule.

And so while Peter states that the various arms of government are to ‘punish those who do evil and praise those who do good’ (1 Peter 2:14) those same powers can become tyrannical when instead they oppress the good and reward the wicked.

Which is why Israel’s prophets repeatedly called those with power back to defending the rights of the vulnerable. For example, Isaiah critiques those who write unjust laws: ‘Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right’ (Is 10:1-2). And he critiques those who ‘oppress all your workers’ and calls them instead to ‘share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house [and] when you see the naked, to cover him’ (Is 58, 3, 7).

But it’s not just Israel’s rulers who are called to account. Daniel tells the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, ‘Break off your sins by practising righteousness, and your iniquities *by showing mercy to the oppressed.*’ (Dan 4:27). And the mother of (the probably foreign) King Lemuel tells him that rather than pursuing a life of self-indulgence, he should ‘Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy’ (Prov 31:8-9).

Principle 7: Government and church have different roles

In response to a question as to whether it’s right to pay taxes to Caesar or not, Jesus replied, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). As a minimum that tells us that some things fall under the jurisdiction of government and some do not. That there’s a distinction between the temporal and spiritual, and taxation rightly belongs under the authority of Caesar.

In addition, Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). So while his kingdom is *for* this world, it is not a kingdom *of* this world.

Similarly, Paul says we should pray ‘for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim 2:2-4). In other words, we should pray for governments because they have the power to foster civic peace, and order things in such a way that the church can do its job of spreading the gospel. It’s not the job of government to save people but to clear the path so the church can do its job.

And that might include teaching literacy, building and maintaining roads and public transport, or developing the economy in ways that people can earn a living and give to churches and missions.

And while OT Israel was called to be a light to the nations and ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex 19:6), that task is now given not to one nation or governments, but to the Lord’s world-wide church. As Peter writes to the churches, ‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.’ (1 Pet 2:9).

And so for a government to enforce worship or laws that punish idolatry, is to return to the Old Covenant. It’s why Paul, prior to his conversion, supported the death penalty for those accused of blasphemy, but after his conversion argued not for their execution but their excommunication so they could be saved. (Acts 26:10-11; 1 Tim 1:20.)

Principle 8: Because government is for our good we should submit to it and pray for it

Paul writes to Christians in pagan Rome, ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities’ (Rom 13:1). He writes to Titus and tells him, ‘Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one’ - including - the context makes clear - those we have profound disagreements with (Titus 3:1-2).

Instead, Peter says our attitude towards those in authority, and our conduct in the public square, should be exemplary: ‘Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing so you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people... Fear God. Honour the emperor.’ (1 Peter 2:13-17).

And Paul’s charge to Timothy that ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made... for kings and all who are in high positions’ (1 Tim 2:1-2) echoes God’s call through Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, living under another pagan government: ‘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’ (Jer 29:7).

Lastly,

Principle 9: Politics and politicians are not our ultimate hope

As we’ve seen, Genesis 1 tells us that all of humanity, including those with power, are creatures made from the dust of the earth, not the Creator. And so Psalm 146 tells us we should not place our ultimate trust in them, ‘Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish’ (Ps 146:3-4).

And as Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the giant statue, representing the passing empires of this world, he explains the significance of the ‘stone cut out by no human hand’, that brings the statue crashing down. It is, he says, “a kingdom [set up by God] that will never be destroyed... and it shall stand forever” (Dan 2:44); The only kingdom that will last.

And so, in Revelation, John hears the angel say, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

And so, while governments are established by God for our good, and while we pray for them and submit to them, they’re not where we place our ultimate hope. Our ultimate hope is in Christ and his kingdom. And that should radically impact the way we see contemporary politics.