

JESUS AND GOVERNMENT

By Andrew Errington

1. Government: Sublime or Ridiculous?

Government and political leadership have the potential to evoke very strong feelings in us. There is a story about a soldier in Napoleon's army who was badly wounded in battle, and as the doctor operated on his chest he apparently said, "if you go much further, doctor, you will come to the Emperor." Political leadership can cause great devotion, sacrifice, and love.

However, I suspect that the reality of politics for most of us is far more mundane than all this. The sight of Parliament House rarely evokes feelings of duty and glory in me. In Australia, politics often evokes feelings not of love, but intense boredom. Saying you're interested in politics is frequently met with a kind of demoralised silence.

Yet despite this, we know that how our society is governed is important; and when we look around the world and see countries and communities where government is bad – just think for the moment about the terrible famine in Zimbabwe, or the powerlessness of the government in the Sudan, or the horrors of dictatorship in North Korea – we're reminded that politics can really, really matter. And so for all our protestations of boredom, we know also that we need to take politics seriously, one way or another.

But how do we do this as Christians? How does believing in Jesus affect the way we think about government? Does it affect it at all? Whether due to ignorance, or conscientious anxiety about "the separation of church and state", this topic is discussed very infrequently in our churches. So in a series of posts, I want to look at the place of government, and the shape of Christian political action. This is a controversial and big topic; but I have come to some conclusions over the last few years, in large part guided by the work of Oliver O'Donovan, and now feel I have something useful to say.

2. What is government? Rulers who command and subjects who obey.

To begin, it's worth asking a deceptively simple question: what is government?

Some kind of political authority, or government, can be observed in pretty much every human society in history. It is, it seems, a fact of living together: if there are going to be a lot of us human beings living in the one place, be it a town or a valley or a whole country, and if we are going to be united in some sense, if we are going to be a "we", then we will need to be governed. Some one, like a king, or a number of people, like a committee or a party, will rule and the rest of us will be subjects. Typically, this will mean a number of things: this person or these people will have control over force, commanding the army or police; they will also be in charge of the judicial system, judging disputes that arise amongst the people; and the people will normally support the government by paying taxes.

We see all this very clearly in Israel's experience under the kings. David and Solomon and their descendants were the figureheads of Israel, holding her together as a people; they marched at the head of her armies, and they were Israel's judges – the king is "like the angel of God, discerning good and evil" (2 Sam. 14:17), and the classic example is the famous story of Solomon judging between the two women; and Israel responded by obeying and honouring the kings, and supporting them by paying taxes and fighting for them when they were called on.

This is the basic shape of politics: there is a government which commands and a people who obey. “But,” someone may protest, “aren’t things different now that we’re in a democracy? Isn’t all this talk of command and obedience just for old-fashioned societies with kings and slaves and whatever?” Of course, it’s true that the form government takes has varied enormously throughout history. Today we elect our governments at their different levels, and the powers of government in Australia are formally separated: the Prime Minister is not the High Court judge as well. And these are, certainly, fairly significant differences from old-fashioned monarchy. But the question we need to ask is whether they fundamentally alter the shape of politics, whether democracy means it’s no longer right to talk about a government that commands and a people who obey. My belief is that this has not fundamentally changed. Yes, any one of us can run for parliament. Yes, we can vote a government out if we get sick of them. But the basic shape of politics is still that we are governed by a government. There are people in authority over us, and we need to obey them. We are aware of this reality all the time: when a police officer pulls us over to breathalise us and we feel a sense of fear, even if we are innocent; or when special laws are made for special police at APEC, and we all know it’s a good idea to stay out of the way. Democracy is great in lots of ways; but it does not change the basic shape of government in authority over subjects.¹

3. What has Jesus done to government? The Gospel of Christ the King!

Well then, the next question to ask is: if this is the basic reality of politics, what difference does the Gospel make to it? What has Jesus done to government?

The first thing we need to notice is that the Gospel is profoundly political. When Jesus came, his message was, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”, and when the apostles realised that this Kingdom really had come through Jesus’ death and resurrection, they proclaimed, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” The Gospel is about God’s Kingdom, his rule, his government – it’s a profoundly political message. God has made Jesus King and Judge, and all people are called to come under his rule.

This has a big impact on how we think about political leaders. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar, or the King, or the President can’t be. They can no longer expect to be given first place in our loyalty. That place belongs to Jesus and no one else. Jesus has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross.” (Col. 2:15) Jesus is king; he is the ultimate authority. When Pontius Pilate confronts Jesus, his powerlessness is revealed: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above” (John 19:11).

Because Jesus is now the world’s true king, earthly rulers are destined to pass away. The Bible describes our future hope as a city built by God (Heb. 11:10), in which people from every nation (Rev. 7:9) will live under the rule of God alone. As the loud voices from heaven shout in Revelation 11:15: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever

¹ This last point is contested. Political theory since Hobbes has sought to derive the experience of being under political authority from hypothetical original, non-hierarchical relationships. So Hobbes argued that the people “confer all their power and strength upon one Man, or Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will...” (Leviathan 19) and in this way they erect a Common Power, a government, to which they are then subordinate. Rousseau, following in this tradition, claimed that political subjection was in truth owed not to the ruler but to the collective body. Perhaps the most important contribution of Oliver O’Donovan’s work is to argue that political authority derives not from contract – from authorisation by the people – but from the political act, the act of judgment, which generates the experience of being subject to a governing authority. (See *The Ways of Judgment*, chapters 8 and 9).

and ever.” Christ will be King, and the rulers of this world will cast down their crowns before him (Rev. 4:10).

It’s for this reason that Paul reminds the Philippians that, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). To a church probably full of Roman citizens, this was a reminder that there was a more important reality in their lives now than their country: they were citizens of heaven, part of Jesus’ family, Jesus’ “nation”. In the same way, Peter describes Christians as “aliens and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11). Christians cannot be at home in any earthly nation, because they belong to the heavenly city, to Jesus’ Kingdom. This, of course, has a big effect on how we think about nationalism, which we will return to later.

4. What place does government still have, under Christ’s Lordship?

(a) The role of judgment.

If the destiny of all earthly rulers is to realise that Jesus is Lord and hand their kingdoms over to him, what place is left for government? If the Kingdom of God has come, is there any need anymore for the Kingdom of Queen Elizabeth, or the government of George Bush or John Howard?

The Kingdom of God may have come, but it hasn’t yet come in fullness. Jesus’ reign is not yet obvious, visible. The time hasn’t yet come when, as Paul says in Philippians, “every knee will bow” before Christ’s Lordship. Because of this, the Bible sees there as being a continuing role for earthly governments to play.

This role is to maintain order and justice within society through judgment. This is the teaching of Romans 13:1-7, and its parallel passage in 1 Peter 2:13-17. The apostle Paul writes:

1 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. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 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. 4 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. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

A number of things must be noticed. First, Paul is very clear that “there is no authority except that which God has established.” Governments are given by God. Whatever process this happens through – election, monarchical succession, revolution – God is the one who raises up authority. Second, government is given by God for our good. Government is God’s “servant”, or “minister” (diakonos). Governing authorities are God’s ministers “for our good”! Third, government has a particular job. They are to punish wrongdoing and to praise those who do good; the task of government is to maintain justice by giving judgments. For this purpose the authority “bears the sword” – it can enforce its judgments. In this way political authority defends our good. Therefore, our basic attitude to government should be one of submission, rather than resistance. This involves paying taxes and giving what is due. But this submission is not slavery; it doesn’t just come from fear of possible punishment, but also from conscience – the conviction that this is the right thing to do – from a recognition that authority really is given to us by God for our good. As the passage in 1 Peter makes clear, we submit to authority freely.

The most important thing to note here is that the role given to government is very limited. Many have argued against the supposed “quietism” of these passages; but these passages actually do something radical: they limit the role of government to the practice of judgment. Typically, rulers want to do a lot more than simply maintain justice in society. Governments, paradigmatically the Roman Emperor of Paul’s day, can want to be seen as saviours, the solution to all our problems, the focus of our hopes, and can get big ideas about bringing civilisation and life – just think of Hitler or Stalin, or Pol Pot or Mao Tse Tung. To tell these rulers that they’ve actually just got this little role of giving judgment to play is very powerful. Paul’s political theory is based on his recognition that there is only one Saviour, only one who can bring life and hope: Jesus Christ; and so governments in this age have only a small role left to play.

(b) “Secular” Authority and demonic government

Government under Christ’s Lordship is pushed back, called to humbly perform the task of judgment until Jesus returns and human society finds its perfection. Significantly, the apostle Paul links this role to the Church’s mission:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—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 Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Paul urges that prayers be offered for government so that social order may be maintained – “so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”; but this is not the end in itself. This maintaining order serves a more important purpose: enabling “people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Good government ensures the social space for the church’s mission.

This role of defending the common good by condemning wrong and upholding right, which also serves the spread of the gospel, is the Bible’s idea of secular government. The word “secular” has come to mean “non-religious”; but it was never meant to mean that. “Secular” comes from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means “age.” So “secular government” means “government in this age”. The opposite of “secular” is not “sacred” but “eternal”. As Oliver O’Donovan helpfully expresses:

“The most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as “secular”. It makes the confession of Christ’s victory and accepts the relegation of its own authority... The essential element in the conversion of the ruling power is the change in its self-understanding and its manner of government to suit the dawning age of Christ’s own rule.” (Desire of the Nations, 219)

Good government recognises that it is “secular”, that it has a limited role to play in this age only, until Jesus returns and the Kingdom of God is made visible to all.

Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 describe the place given to government in this age; but their authors well knew that rulers could reject this role and seek to be more than the simple task that was given to them. So elsewhere in the Bible we see that there is another possibility for government in this age: instead of recognising that Jesus is Lord, government can fight back. This possibility may underlie the description (quite possibly of the Roman Emperor) of the “Man of Lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians 2, and is certainly described by John in the book of Revelation. The beast of chapter 13, which the dragon calls out of the sea, and which in turn calls a beast out of the earth is a totalitarian political government, like the Roman Empire, which controls military and economic power and forces people to worship it. The book of Revelation, shows quite profoundly how government can go horribly wrong and become deeply evil, and one can only wonder how the twentieth century might have been different if we

had been more sensitive to John's warnings about the dangers of governments that demand our allegiance?²

5. The Shape of Good Government

We've seen that Government can and does go bad and that the Bible has ways of interpreting this theologically, as the expression of Satanic opposition to Christ's triumph. But let us return to the positive possibility sketched by Paul and Peter: what might good government look like? What would it look like for a government to properly fulfil the role given to it in this age, the role of giving judgment? Books have been written on this subject, some good, many bad. But for now, I want to say just four things.

(i) First, good government will make true judgments; that is, its laws and actions will align with what God says about what is right and wrong – its law will correspond to divine law. This introduces the problematic idea of the separation of church and state. Those who came up with this idea meant simply that government shouldn't tell the church what to do. It was originally a way of defending the church's freedom. What it was never intended to mean was the separation of Christianity from the political realm, so that decisions about policy or legislation cannot be influenced by religious faith and values. Christians cannot embrace this approach; because there is real right and wrong and we know them from God. Good government will be government that judges in accordance with the truth. This does not, however, mean that politicians have to be Christians: it is simply a recognition that good judgments will be true judgments, that is, corresponding to the truth as God has revealed it.

(ii) Second, good government will see that it has limited authority, because there is one who is ruler even over them. As Gregory of Nazianzus put it, Christ "pays taxes, but from a fish; he is king of those who demand them". There are, therefore, some things that it is simply beyond the authority of government to judge. In particular, this includes worship. How a man or a woman stands before God is something a state is simply not competent to decide on, and to attempt to do so would surely be to set itself up as a potential contender for this loyalty. So good government will maintain freedom of religious belief, understanding that there is a higher authority that it, and each of its subjects, will have to answer to.

(iii) Third, good government will be modest about its capacities. Good judgments, as O'Donovan points out (*Ways of Judgment*), have to be both true and effective; and there are some things a government simply can't know the truth about and some things it simply can't effectively achieve. For example, imagine a government trying to make laws against anger, or greed, or lust. It would be impossible for such laws to be just, because political authority cannot tell the truth about these wrongs. Likewise, this helps us understand why laws can change, and can be different depending on the nature of society. Imagine a modern Western government attempting to make adultery illegal. Though for Christians there is no doubt about the wrong-ness of this act, for a government to attempt to judge it in this culture of promiscuity and marriage breakdown would be deeply problematic. We can see, I think, that there are always issues that a government is simply not competent to judge. Good government will be modest about its abilities.

(iv) Fourth, and finally, I believe the Bible gives us reasons to emphasize the responsibility of government to defend the poor and vulnerable in society. We see

² For more on this last idea, see Oliver O'Donovan's essay, "The political thought of the Book of Revelation" now published in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics Past and Present*, as "History and Politics in the Book of Revelation", Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 25-47. I have found this essay deeply interesting and challenging. Reading Revelation with political eyes is very illuminating.

this especially in the Old Testament's teaching about what good kingship looked like.

"A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food." (Prov. 28:3)

"If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established for ever." (29:14)

"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." (31:8-9)

*"God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgement:*

*'How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?*

*Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*

Rescue the weak and the needy;

deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'" (Psalm 82:1-4)

Likewise, when the prophets criticise Israel, they often do so for her failure to do justice, especially in relation to the poor.

Good government will judge truthfully, it will recognise its limited authority, it will be modest about its capacities, and it will defend those in need. These four things, I think, give us a kind of outline of what good government involves.

6. Christian Political Action: Helping Governments Be Good

Well, having looked, at length, at what a Christian understanding of government might involve, let's finally think about the most important question: what does all this mean for us? What should we be doing? I believe the basic answer is, we should do what we can to help our governments be good. This unfolds in two directions: (1) we should engage with politics, as good subjects, in the interest of the common good; and (2) we should bear witness to government by holding fast to the Gospel that Jesus Christ is King.

(a) Engaging with politics for the common good

It is our responsibility as Christians, I believe, to engage with politics in the interest of the common good.

(i) This means firstly participating. Disinterest is not good. We have a unique opportunity, because of our political system, to actually have an impact, if only a small one, on what our governments are like. So we should take our participation seriously. At the least this means thinking about our votes, but it can of course mean much more. The important point is that we have a responsibility to participate.

The aim of participation, of course, is good government: we want to do what we can to help our governments make good judgments. This means that whether or not a particular politician is a Christian or not is not the important issue. Our aim is not Christians in Parliament but good government. The fact that a politician is a Christian might well help them govern well; but it might not. So we must be canny and not just be convinced by catch-phrases like "Christian Democrats" or "Family First". Instead, we should aim to be people who think about a wider range of issues. Especially, we should consider the things we have talked about making for good government: does this party's policy tell the truth about this issue? Does this party have too high a view of itself? How does this party treat the less well-off, such as (in Australia) the homeless, the Aboriginal population, and the mentally ill.

At present, I believe Christians should be particularly concerned about the priority given by government to economic management. Market-economics has

become a kind of law that governments have to obey. Both major parties would sign off on the principle that “whatever’s good for the economy is right.” But Christians cannot sign off on this because we believe government is responsible for upholding divine law, and that that law is not identical with any other principle. Christians must advocate to stop our governments being ruled by the logic of economics. That cannot lead to good government in the end.

(ii) Secondly, we engage with government as good subjects. In the face of legitimate political authority, our attitude is fundamentally one of respect and submission, for “there is no authority except from God.” This means obedience to the law, and especially, paying our taxes honestly and fully. Christians should be good citizens. But as we’ve seen, we do this not just because we want to avoid punishment, but because we realise that it is good and right – for the sake of conscience.

(iii) Thirdly, engaging with government means praying. We are called to this explicitly in 1 Timothy 2. We pray that God would enable our governments to be good, to govern in accordance with the truth, to maintain order in society, and to recognise that they are not God. This prayer is “right and acceptable in God’s sight”, and it serves the proclamation of the gospel.

Of course, there is much more we could say; but these three things – participation, submission, and prayer – describe the basic shape of our engagement with government. This is the first way we help our governments be good.

(b) Bearing witness to government

The second way we help governments be good is different, but crucial: we help our governments stay on the right track by holding fast to the true Gospel and so bearing witness in our society.

The great danger that confronts the church is that it will sell out to government, that it will stop preaching the true Gospel and start preaching a Gospel that fits better with our society, that’s a little less challenging. Because the Gospel never sits very comfortably with those in authority: it is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord and no one else, that the Kingdom of God matters more than any other kingdom, and that no earthly society is ultimate. This is always going to be a confronting message, especially for those in authority. Yet it is a message that desperately needs to be heard; because the alternative is something truly terrible: the demonic social order we see in Revelation 13. A government that fails to realise that there is a higher authority will end up becoming an idol. In Australia, I think we run little risk of making individual politicians into idols (thankfully). But I do think we run a risk of making “Australia” into a kind of idol. Just think about the rioting that happened at Cronulla a couple of years ago, with people waving flags and talking about defending our country and the Australian way of life, and most awfully, “Christian values”. This was, I believe, an example of a kind of nationalism which is actually idolatry. When we start treating people badly in the name of “Australia” (or any other community), we know we’ve got a big problem. The church must help our society and our governments stay on the right track by holding fast to the true Gospel, by keeping on preaching that Jesus alone is King, that our citizenship is in heaven, and that therefore “Australia” can never be the Kingdom of God.

We who belong to Jesus know that human society is destined to be united in the heavenly city, where all tribes and nations will join in praise to Jesus. That is where true justice lives, that’s where we’ll find peace, that’s where we belong. This is a wonderful message; but also one that cuts right across many things that human society tends to hold dear. Therefore, our most important task, our first political responsibility, is to hold fast to this gospel, and to live it out in the fellowship of God’s people that obeys Jesus when he says, “Judge not!”