

General Election 2017

A Biblical Mandate for
Political Engagement

God's word has much to say about politics – which is the governing of people.

Here is a study of three Bible passages, which focus upon some key issues.

We hope you find these helpful for personal use or to aid Bible studies in small groups.





General Election 2017 – Key Dates

3 May	DISSOLUTION OF PARLIAMENT
11 May	DEADLINE FOR DELIVERY OF NOMINATION PAPERS FOR CANDIDATES
22 May	VOTER REGISTRATION DEADLINE
23 May	POSTAL VOTE APPLICATION DEADLINE
31 May	PROXY VOTE APPLICATION DEADLINE
3-4 June	FINAL WEEKEND FOR POLLING DAY RECOMMENDED DEADLINE FOR HUSTINGS EVENTS
8 June	POLLING DAY (BOOTHS OPEN 7AM – 10PM)

Keep an eye on cut-off date www.aboutmyvote.co.uk for the cut off date for UK citizens aged 18 and over to register to vote in the General Election to be announced. This date will also mark the deadline for voters to apply for a postal or a proxy vote.

engagE17 is an initiative from Christian Public Policy charity CARE to promote active engagement in the General Election. It provides a range of resources to enable Christian thinking about important issues and voter participation.

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The Kingdom of God & Politics

Matthew 13:33 English Standard Version



'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

It is well accepted these days that there are designated areas of cultural life.¹ These spheres are known as the 'seven cultural mountains of influence'. They are: (i) family, (ii) religion, (iii) education, (iv) media, (v) business, (vi) arts/entertainment, and (vii) politics.

- A question we might consider in view of these mountains is, 'is it God's intention that the kingdom of God influence and transform these spheres of culture?' If we subscribe to a sacred/secular divide worldview then we will only elevate the religious sphere, maybe at a stretch the family sphere. The others remain relatively untouched because we don't believe God wants to transform them. However, if we reject the sacred/secular divide, then all the seven cultural mountains are equally essential areas of life that need the touch of God himself. We are CARE subscribe to the latter view.² All the spheres are part of God's world that 'he so loved ... that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16).
- With this in mind we are reminded of a parable that Jesus once taught: '*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened*' The Father wishes for His whole creation to adore Him, surrender itself to Him, always cultivating culture with kingdom of God DNA. The sphere of politics is no different than the others. The Father wants the leaven to seep all the way through the realm of politics. There are no limits to where the kingdom of God should have transformative influence.
- So with the snap General Election in mind, get involved once again, or for the first time, in the sphere of politics through voting and/or running a hustings. Why? Because by getting involved perhaps the kingdom of God will have that bit more influence in the cultural mountain that is politics.

¹ Landa Cope, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Template: Rediscovering God's Principles for Discipling Nations*, YWAM Publishing 2011

² Mark Greene, *The Great Divide*, LICC Pamphlet 2010

Vote for God's Sake

1 Peter 2:13-17 English Standard Version



'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 good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.'

Being subject to all human institutions for 'the Lord's sake' (2:13) sends a very important message to the dispersed Jews of the Greco-Roman world to whom Peter is writing. It doesn't matter whether those institutions refer to supreme rulers over empires or governors; to submit to and live peaceably under those in power is to do so for God himself. Indeed, to live in such harmony with state authorities is to do 'God's will' argues Peter (v.15).

- Verse 14 is fascinating because it describes the role of government in a dual fashion: (i) the powers exist to restrain evildoers, but (ii) it also exists to praise those who add to the common good, those who contribute to communal human flourishing.
- Peter then commissions his readers to go and live under their political ruler 'as free people' (2:16), to thrive in the knowledge that living in harmony with the state is God's will. But this is not to be the kind of freedom that views liberty as an end in itself. To live with a reckless and rudderless freedom is to potentially allow room for doing 'evil' in the name of freedom. Rather, Peter encourages these Christians to see this freedom in light of Christ; live as 'servants of God' who are slaves to liberty in Jesus whilst also in submission to the government. Indeed, this liberty in Jesus is to be expressed through submitting to the governing authorities. To be dutiful towards the empire as a follower of Jesus was commonly the case even though the Christian way was outlawed.³
- How do you do this in a snapshot? Peter helpfully gives us his bullet-pointed version: "Honour all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor" (2:17). What do we see here? Let's try and succinctly put it into modern day categories: (i) concretely respect everyone in your country. (ii) Especially show practical love to your church family. (iii) Live well under the reign of God. (iv) Credit the Prime Minister with your harmonious life in society.

By taking our vote seriously, we do so for God's sake and in accordance with his will.

³ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1947, 202

Governments - God's Servants and Ministers

Romans 13:1-7 English Standard Version



'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,

for 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.'

The Apostle Paul is more specific than Peter by relating the reason the Church should be subject to the governing authorities is because God Himself has put them in this place of power. All authority is given by God in the first instance, so to live a civically responsible life is to acknowledge that God has put this government in place as his 'servant' (13:4).

- Governments exist to restrain disorder and become an agent of God's wrath in delivering restraint if required. If you want to receive God's goodness on the other hand, live in harmony with those who run the country and your peaceful existence will speak of an aspect of divine goodness in your life (v.3-4).
- Furthermore, don't fear the wrath of God that will come your way by state punishment if you choose to live at odds with the authorities, but instead live peaceably in your country for the sake of your conscience (13:5). Conscience is important because Paul has already argued in this letter that it is operational in all humanity to discern the difference between choosing good or evil in society (2:15). Francis Schaeffer says about this: "Despite what man may say in theory, he cannot escape being a moral creature. The man who says morals do not exist is not amoral in the sense that he has no moral motions."⁴ Thus it is crucial to God that we act responsibly within society by paying our taxes, for example, because those who set, exact, collect and put them to use are actually 'God's ministers' (13:6).

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City: The Relevance of the Message of the Bible to the Twentieth Century World*, London: IVP 1970, 68

- To instigate disorder or anarchy is to go against God's own ministers for society. Dietrich Bonhoeffer helpfully puts it: "Yet government possesses a full claim to obedience with regard to the Christian members of the congregation. In this it does not appear as a second authority side by side with the authority of Christ, but its own authority is only a form of the authority of Christ. In obedience to government the Christian is obedient to Christ."⁵
- In practical terms, by engaging government in voting, by analysing carefully where politicians stand on important societal and moral issues, and by casting our vote as intelligently as possible, we bless God by playing a part in shaping those who will be His next servants and ministers of society. When we do this with interest and active participation, we are beneficiaries of God's goodness as we live peacefully in our country.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, London: Fontana 1966, 347

Jesus Reigns Over All Governments

Colossians 1:16-20; 2:9 English Standard Version



'For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.'

Paul creates in this letter such a high view of Jesus that His authority over all things is unmistakable. He is quick to point out that everything in creation was made through Him and for Him. Jesus is identified as both the creator of all things and as its end goal. It is also very telling that this creator and redeemer Christ is far above all others who may make an earthly claim to authority e.g. those enthroned, authorities, governments, and principalities. They are all nothing in comparison to the elevated, resurrected and victorious Christ of Colossians.

- Earthly powers and governments are incomparable to Jesus Christ as earth's reigning Lord and their existence has a place only because Jesus 'holds' them together as the cohesion and source of all creation's vitality. Creation and its powerful authorities could not govern if it were not for Jesus allowing them to. Bonhoeffer says again, "To speak of the world without speaking of Christ is empty and abstract. The world is relative to Christ, no matter whether it knows it or not."⁶
- Because these earthly powers and authorities have been made in, through, and for Jesus, when we interact with them through elections or serving within them, we involve ourselves in a task that was set up 'for Him' and for His honour and glory. Christians who are part of government and/or serving it through voting acknowledge that Christ is Lord over any system and over any ruler. But Christians also claim that by working with principalities and powers they do so because Christ has put them in place and ensures their position.⁷ Christians acknowledge that any government 'would have no power over [Jesus] unless it had been given [them] from above' (John 18:11). Thus, by taking a General Election seriously we proclaim that Jesus is Lord over all to the glory of God the Father.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 207

⁷ Some would claim that 'principalities and powers' does not mean earthly governments, but refer instead to demonic powers who influence earthly lives. Others still take a middle road endorsing that both views can simultaneously exist.

Jesus Fulfils the Prophetic Tradition

Luke 22:25-26 New International Version

'But [Jesus] said to [his disciples], 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.'



As Jesus is in the mode of training his twelve disciples he teaches them a lesson about leadership. To do this he points to the Roman authorities who rule them in their land and criticises the way in which they do so. The Romans used force and intimidation at times to ensure Pax Romana (the 'peace' of the Roman Empire). This was the thinking surrounding crucifixion; executing someone in the most horrendous and public way possible keeps everyone in line.

Nigel Wright rightly commentates, "Jesus apparently saw that the actual reality of kingship was the exercise of domination, but that this was cloaked with an ideology of benefaction. ... Jesus told his disciples to have nothing to do with this."⁸

- As the nomenclature of our devolved parliaments and assemblies suggests, our 'ministers' are there to serve us. But when this is subverted in such a way as to monopolise power and its fruits under the pretence that it's good for society, Jesus wants to challenges this.⁹
- As prophet, priest and king, Jesus fulfilled and fulfils each of these titles and roles. Focussing on the first according to the teaching above, Jesus was not bashful about opposing and/or resisting political powers. He resisted the need to emulate the way of Gentile political force. He also offered an alternative route of service according to the new kingdom that He himself had launched.

⁸ Nigel Wright, 'Government as an Ambiguous Power' in Nick Spencer & Jonathan Chaplin (eds.), *God and Government*, London: SPCK 2009, 24

⁹ Wright, 24

- There are times when we as Jesus-followers need to resist and oppose what is being proposed from those in authority over us when power is abused or when they go awry. In the democracies we live in today, we have the ability to have an ongoing relationship with our elected politicians so that we can raise differences of opinion. So in keeping with Jesus, who fulfils the prophetic tradition of dissent, there will be occasions when we need to say along with Jesus' disciples shortly after this teaching session on leadership: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).
- It will not always be the case that we take this posture. Indeed the other passages mentioned in this resource may be the default position of a Christian. But it is important to mention that on occasion we need to alter our stance. This decision is not to be taken lightly, but it should not be left undone if it is required. Sometimes we have to take the prophetic road of Jesus because certain ways of power should not be so among us.

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