

Why Christians need to be involved in Government



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Overview

This discussion paper is written by politicians, current and past.

However it is not about party politics! Rather it is about the role of government as part of God's plan for the nations of the earth. Likewise it is not a theological treatise but rather endeavours to trace the linkage between the establishment of government in the biblical record and the need for Christians to be involved in the government of New Zealand as it exists in our time. This paper is designed to encourage Christians to participate in the election of a government, because people of faith have a duty to engage in civic affairs.

Summary

In His love for humanity God has instituted government so that the people of the nations may, in a fallen world, live together in harmony and peace. It is to that end that He gave the law, including the 10 Commandments, to the children of Israel at Mt Sinai. Today, too, law and the punishment of law breakers is necessary so that every citizen of a nation has an understanding of right and wrong and a clear set of values to direct and restrain their actions day by day.

In a constitutional democracy, such as New Zealand, the government is appointed by the Governor General from those people who have been elected to parliament by the people, through general elections. Christians have a duty to participate fully in the election of good government. They also have the opportunity to vote for candidates and parties, who will uphold the principles of justice and advance the welfare and happiness of the people, so that God's kingdom comes and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. As such they need to be well informed and encouraged to participate in government in every way possible.

We have been called to be salt and light in every area of life, including all aspects of government. Accordingly we encourage followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ to recognise the role of government and their responsibility as citizens or residents of New Zealand, to vote and be informed on the issues of the day; to be open to a vocation in politics or government; to provide counsel to political leaders in the development of policy; to hold governments to account when their actions are inconsistent with gospel principles; and to support and pray for those who govern our nation.

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Note: All scripture quotations are from the New American Bible

Introduction

God has established four human institutions; the family, the nation (Acts: 17-26), government and the church. Christians receive a great deal of teaching about the family and the church, some about God's plan for the nations, but much less about government. There are a number of reasons for this. Historically some streams within the Church have actively discouraged involvement in politics whilst some pastors steer clear of talking about government because it is 'too political'.

Government in the Biblical Record

Having recorded the establishment of a covenant between God and a family – the children of Abraham – the book of Genesis moves on to record the formation of a nation; the nation of Israel which comprises the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. God's way of moving from a single family to a nation, involved taking the children of Israel (Abraham's grandson) into Egypt and subsequently into slavery for 400 years, so that the descendants of Israel would not be absorbed into the nation of Egypt and lose their identity.

God then (as recorded in the book of Exodus) led them out of Egypt with great signs and wonders and began to form them as a nation; His nation. However, the Hebrew slaves knew nothing of government so, in His providence, we read that God gave them Moses; a leader who was educated in the household of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Moses knew Egyptian government, but it was not God's government. God's plan, born out of His love for the whole human race, was to establish in Israel a government which was based on His law and precepts.

Thus God led the new nation of ex-slaves to Mt. Sinai, took Moses to the top of the mountain, gave him the Ten commandments and the rest of the civil law (He also gave Moses the religious and ceremonial law, but we are not concerned with that in this paper), together with the penalties for breaking that law.

He instructed Moses to write it all down in the Scriptures so that the government of Israel (and potentially all the nations of the earth) would rest upon the principles underlying those laws.

Is democracy part of God's Plan?

We think the answer is yes. In Deuteronomy 1 : 9-18 Moses' instructions to the nation of Israel included these words '***Choose wise, intelligent and experienced men from each of your tribes, that I may appoint them as your leaders.***' Later leadership in Israel also included women since we know from Judges 4, that Deborah was a judge in that nation.

The system in New Zealand today has some parallels. Through our electoral system we are also tasked with choosing wise, intelligent and experienced men and women from the parties contesting the elections and, from their number, those appointed by the Governor General on behalf of the Queen of New Zealand, form our Government until the next elections.

So although many of us were taught at school that democracy originated in Greece (and they certainly gave us the word 'democracy'), it seems clear that '*government by the people of the people for the people*' (to quote Abraham Lincoln), is part of God's plan for all the nations of the world. Democracy is not perfect, and to paraphrase Churchill, "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." How does the law given to Moses relate to New Zealand today?

The Ten Commandments and the underlying principles of many of the other laws given by God, coupled with the values of the Judeo - Christian tradition, remain foundational to New Zealand's legal system and culture. Nevertheless people may ask to what extent does the rest of the civil law, contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and the various forms of punishment listed, apply to New Zealand today?

Let's begin our answer by looking at the big picture.

God instituted government and gave us the law because, in His love for us, He recognised that, in a secular world, we would be unable, without it, to live undisturbed, tranquil lives in peace and dignity. He has established government and law for our good (see Timothy 2:2). It is not simply something which God put in place to restrict our freedom to do whatever we like, but rather the necessary foundation of civilisation.

The law does that in a number of ways; it teaches us the difference between right and wrong by informing our conscience and it prescribes punishment (including the principle of restitution), for breaches of the law since it is necessary, for the benefit and protection of everyone else, that law breakers are deterred (see Romans 13: 1-7).

These realities continue to apply today, just as they did thousands of years ago, because the sinful nature of our world has not changed.

A study of the law given to Israel will reveal that it contains many principles which continue to apply today. For example the law provides that, if you steal and kill an ox which belongs to somebody else, you must repay five fold! The principle here is restitution and it can usefully be applied today to the theft and destruction of property e.g. a car rather than an ox. In the same way crimes against a person such as assault, rape or murder remain punishable by imprisonment because it remains necessary both to correct and rehabilitate the offender and to protect the law-abiding from violence.

Other parts of the instructions given to Moses deal with a wide range of issues such as health, sanitation, healthy food, education, fair dealing in commerce, the role of private property etc. and again the underlying principles remain valid for our time.

The New Testament modifications

Jesus taught that the foundation of the entire law can be summed up in just two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (see Matthew 22: 37-40).

However it is necessary to add that the New Testament does outline some specific modifications to the Old Testament since the new covenant, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not just for Israel, but for the whole human race.

For example Jesus declared all food to be ritually clean (although not necessarily healthy – see Mark 7: 17-23). He did not demand death by stoning for the woman taken in adultery but, while making it clear that her actions were sinful, sought her repentance (see John's Gospel 8: 1-11). Instead of demanding her death by stoning as required by the law, Jesus shortly afterwards, gave His life for her sin and indeed for the sins of the entire world! In that new way both God's justice and mercy were revealed. The Church continues to make it clear that fornication and adultery remain sins and continues to encourage our repentance for those sins and all other sins, before God.

This reality also makes it clear that, although civil law no longer outlaws such actions, they remain immoral. Therefore, in today's New Zealand, legality does not always equate with Christian morality.

However, notwithstanding these and other modifications, many of the Mt. Sinai laws and principles, since they are universal in their application, remain as the God-given touchstone for our laws in New Zealand today. Their application will, in the words of the prayer with which Parliament opens its proceedings each day (a practice which has continued from the first day of the New Zealand Parliament in 1854 until now, without interruption), ensure "*the maintenance of true religion and justice*" and "*the welfare, peace and tranquillity of New Zealand*".

The wider role of government

Government does a great deal more than pass and uphold the law. It provides education (and determines what is taught in the curriculum), pays out billions of dollars in welfare to those in need including superannuation to the elderly, stands ready to defend our nation through the armed forces, builds roads, railways, electricity grids, dams and the other infrastructure we need; provides health care through hospitals and housing for the needy.

In short it touches and sometimes intrudes into many facets of our nation's life. Christians are called to look after the most vulnerable in society (Matthew 25: 35-36). Government is in a position to effect this on behalf of its citizens. Therefore we have a duty to engage in the process of government.

Importantly government appoints the people who run our police force, judge in our courts, teach in our schools and serve on the many boards and commissions which it establishes. It employs tens of thousands of people and levies the taxes and duties to pay for it all!

Should Christians be involved in government?

Given these realities we believe that politics is a high calling in a democracy and Christians have a duty to participate in every way possible.

This certainly includes voting in the elections because it is we who choose the people who govern us. Without Christians in all aspects of government (including local government, school boards and the like), we risk a continued drift away from the principles and values that God wills for us leaving the running of the government to others who may have a different agenda. Paraphrasing Edmund Burke *'All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men and women to do nothing'*.

We also have a specific mandate from the Lord, to pray for our government ***'especially for kings and all those in authority'*** (1 Timothy 2:2). In our case that means that prayers for the Queen, the Governor General, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, all MPs and all others who exercise authority in New Zealand, should continually be offered, so that our nation knows God's blessing in every area of life.

We also encourage Christians to join political parties, stand as candidates for election to parliament and make submissions to select committees on legislation which has been introduced to parliament.

New Zealand's Christian heritage

New Zealand has a proud Christian heritage which dates back to the start of the 19th century and is still relevant today. This Christian heritage was further enhanced within Maori by the establishment of the Ringatu church which was founded in 1868 by Te Kooti Rikirangi, and the Ratana movement founded by Tahupötiki Wiremu Ratana in 1918.

Christianity has played a role in the major political parties, although it has never formed an explicit part of them. The Christian conservative strands that arose in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the founding of several Christian political parties. Christianity today is New Zealand's primary religion. At the 2006 Census more than 50% or more than 2 million people identified themselves as Christian. Christian organizations in New Zealand remain heavily involved in community activities including education, health services, chaplaincy to prisons, rest homes and hospitals; social justice and human rights advocacy.

Christianity has played and continues to play a significant role in building New Zealand's national identity, culture, beliefs, institutions, and values.

While Christians uphold and protect the rights of all faiths and religions that continue to grow in New Zealand, there is now a greater need to build an understanding and appreciation amongst people of diverse faiths and cultures. Parliament therefore has a duty to promote and preserve New Zealand's Christian heritage.

The relationship between the State and the Church

It is recognised that Government (the State) and the Church are two different institutions and each operates in a different domain. This relationship is made clear by Paul in Romans 13: 1-7, where the State, for example, is the ruler in the civil sphere.

This is not the role of the Church!

Christian politicians

Christian politicians must however not buy in to the non-Christian proposition that their faith should be relegated to the private realm and their politics limited to the 'secular' only. That is impossible for any person of genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus instructed us to be 'salt and light' in the world (although not of the world). That requires Christian MPs to exercise courage in a difficult calling because, if the salt should lose its flavour, it is good for nothing and all Christians are asked to let their light shine before men (see Matthew 5: 13-16).

It is right for Christians to serve their community and country by becoming Members of Parliament. Christians serve their communities in many ways outside of politics and to bring this experience in community service to the fore in local and central government is a logical extension of community service which is usually an outworking of their Christian ministry. Many Christian politicians feel that they are called to stand for public office in the same way any other Christian may feel a calling to a particular area of service.

There is a need to recognise the tensions that exist in working within political parties between the adherence to the collective responsibility of the caucus and the values of the individual member of parliament whether they be Christian or otherwise. This pressure can be substantial and is not always appreciated as a consideration by secular members of a political party as a valid concern when the tension arises from a conflict of faith and politics.

The need to display Christian values in political debates is just as important as showing values in daily life and to this extent there should not be a suppression of values in any debate merely because it addresses political issues. There is no less call upon Christians to show these values in one occupation or vocation than any other. Christians are called upon to have a good moral influence so members of parliament who hold to a faith should seek to bring these values to the fore in the formulation of policy.

These values may not necessarily be attributed as being essentially Christian, but nevertheless Christians would recognise them as reflecting such values.

Conscience votes on moral issues are the prerogative of the individual member of parliament and which way a vote is cast is for the judgment of the individual. Members apply their experience, wisdom, their moral judgment and will often seek the advice or views of others including their constituents before coming to a position on an issue. It would be ridiculous to suggest that all Christians would vote the same way on all conscience questions put before them, in the same way as Christians express their faith in many different ways.

How should Christians cast their vote?

We can't tell you how to vote, but we can encourage you to vote. The New Zealand Parliament and the Government formed from those elected, is intended, through the democratic process, to represent the people of New Zealand. Hence Parliament is known as the 'House of Representatives'.

Accordingly, like all other residents of New Zealand, Christians have the opportunity under our MMP system to vote for a candidate and a party, who they believe will best represent their values and policies and be prepared to act on them.

Choosing the best candidate and party is not always straightforward. You may need to do some homework on the values and character of candidates standing in your electorate (in order to choose people who are committed to the values of God's kingdom) and understand the policies of the parties, before you cast your two votes.

Christians of course will hold a variety of policy positions and political preferences.

For the most part pastors will not advise you how to vote, but some church leaders will give general guidance as to the issues and policies which they believe best represent gospel values, while leaving individuals to make their own decision on how to vote.

Having done that, don't forget to vote!

About the Authors

Hon Chester Borrows MP

Chester Borrows is the Member of Parliament for Whanganui, Minister for Courts, Associate Minister of Justice and Associate Minister for Social Development.

He was raised in Nelson, spent 24 years in the Police as a uniformed and CIB officer before obtaining his LLB from Victoria University and working for three years in Hawera as a criminal lawyer. He was elected to Parliament in 2005.

While in Parliament he has been the National Party Police spokesperson and Chair of the Justice and Electoral Committee. He was made a Minister following the 2011 election.

He is Patron of Birthright Whanganui and is also involved as a Lay Preacher and Funeral Celebrant in his community, and enjoys tramping, canoeing and painting. Chester has been married to Ella for over 30 years and they have three adult children.

Mr Gordon Copeland

Gordon Copeland was born into a Pentecostal family and became a Catholic at the age of 29. This background has given Gordon a strong desire for ecumenism. He coordinated Celebrate Jesus 2000 which brought some 28,000 Christians, from the whole spectrum of the Church, to the stadium in Wellington.

His career has included executive roles in the oil industry, business consultancy, Church financial administration and 6 years as an MP until 2008. He maintains his interest in politics as a member of the Conservative Party. He has been married to Anne for 50 years, has 5 children, 10 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren.

Mr Ross Robertson MP

Mr Robertson is the Labour MP for Manukau East. He was first elected to Parliament in 1987, and has served as the local MP since that time. He is married to Grace, and has two daughters and two sons.

Mr Robertson is currently an Assistant Speaker of Parliament, and Labour's Spokesperson for Racing and Associate Spokesperson for Disarmament and Arms Control.

On the international stage he is President of Parliamentarians for Global Action, a non-profit, non-partisan international network of over 1,000 legislators in approximately 130 elected parliaments around the globe, whose aims are to promote peace, democracy, and the rule of law.

About Franklin Christian Lobby

Franklin Christian Lobby, based in Pukekohe, has sponsored the publication of this booklet.

To find out more about us please visit our web site

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