

power & politics

Laurence Crutchlow encourages us to use our own political power





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Who is the most powerful person in the world? The well-known (and correct) Sunday School answer¹ doesn't feature Google's selection of online lists, which largely plump for Xi Jinping (President of the People's Republic of China), though a few opt for Vladimir Putin (President of Russia). Joe Biden (President of the United States of America) is usually just behind. Even in an era of immense corporate power, Elon Musk (Space X, Twitter), Jeff Bezos (Amazon) and Mark Zuckerberg (Meta/Facebook) are generally a little lower down the top ten, usually followed by political leaders from the UK, France, Germany, and India, among others.

Politicians hold a great deal of power. They may command large military forces; some may command great public appreciation and affection. Others may be widely feared. But should anyone hold this much power? Doesn't everything on earth belong to the Lord? Should there be any power that might draw focus from him?

After all, politics can be a difficult place for the Christian. How do we deal with personal attacks on opponents, when a more polite approach doesn't get reported in the media? What about the attacks on politicians who have been open about having a personal Christian faith?² Does politics in the UK really ever change much anyway?

This article will look at what (if anything) we can glean from the Bible about our political power systems and suggest ways in which we might engage.

some governance is needed

Of course, God is in control, today, yesterday, and forever. But even in Eden, there was a need for some order to be brought. Adam was to work and take care of the Garden,³ and he and Eve had wider

responsibilities over living creatures as well.⁴ Adam was an authority instituted on Earth to carry out God's will; a first 'governor' if you like.

So, government existed *before* the Fall. Government is not itself a consequence of sin.

governance is affected by the fall

The Fall affects Adam's role as a governor just as everything in Earth is affected. His work will become much more difficult.⁵ Human relationships will quickly become toxic,⁶ and sure enough wickedness soon spreads.⁷ Even after the 'reset' of the flood, with nations establishing themselves and spreading over the Earth,⁸ the pattern doesn't change. The city of Babel must have had some sort of governance to organise building the city and tower, but it was clearly directed to the wrong ends.⁹

Two particular forms of governance are clearly not recommended by the Old Testament.

no king

Not a quote from *The Lion King*,¹⁰ but the altogether more disturbing book of Judges. Moses and Joshua had led Israel after being directly chosen by God. When Joshua died, 'another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel'. (Judges 2:10) During this period, out of mercy, God periodically raises up a 'Judge', and matters improve for a time, but when the judge dies, 'the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors...'. (Judges 2:19) The book chronicles a spiral of worsening anarchy in Israel, ending with a horrifying story of rape, civil war and the near-total destruction of the tribe of Benjamin.

It is clear that 'no government at all' was not an option for Israel - a constant refrain is 'In those days Israel had no King; everyone did as they saw fit'. (Judges 21:25)

godless governance

Israel clamours for a King, wanting to be like the

nations around them. They are warned of the consequences by Samuel, the final judge, but stick to their views.¹¹ Saul is eventually confirmed as King,¹² beginning a long and at best varied line.

After Saul, David (described by God as a 'man after my own heart' (Acts 13:22)) largely follows God's commands, barring one well-known exception¹³ following which he promptly repents.¹⁴ His son Solomon starts well, with Queen of Sheba's visit in 1 Kings 10 perhaps marking the high point of the power of the nation of Israel. However, Solomon is led astray as he marries foreign women against God's explicit command, and eventually is turned from God.¹⁵ Under his son Rehoboam, the kingdom is divided, with Jeroboam leading a rebellion among the northern tribes, and only Judah and Benjamin remaining loyal to Rehoboam in the southern kingdom.¹⁶

No king of the northern kingdom, Israel, gets a favourable review at all. Israel's story ends with King Hoshea, who like his predecessors 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord'. (2 Kings 17:2) The kingdom is exiled and cut off from God.¹⁷

Judah (the southern kingdom) fares slightly better, with some kings being much more faithful to God, particularly Hezekiah and Josiah.¹⁸ However the same pattern ultimately ensues, with King Zedekiah carried off into exile in Babylon and the remaining inhabitants of Jerusalem with him.¹⁹

Non-Jewish kings seem little better, with the Egyptian Pharaoh's responses to Moses perhaps the most egregious example, but closely followed by the King of Assyria.²⁰

Anarchy appears to fail entirely. Given that Israel ought to have had some advantage over surrounding nations in at least having God's law, and the history of what he'd done for them, it is hard to argue that anarchy will work anywhere today.

Absolute monarchy also seems, in general, to work badly. But there are some exceptions which seem to stem from the ethics of the particular monarch; when the King follows the Lord and takes the nation with him, it seems to work a lot better.

government in the New Testament

Instructively, there is much less comment on the government in the New Testament. The entire canon plays out in the early period of the Roman Emperors. Although some more democratic systems were theoretically in place, the Emperor was effectively all powerful, not so unlike the Kings of Israel. The historical context however is very different, with the *Pax Romana* at its height, and the Roman Empire generally peaceful, powerful, and stable.

Early Christians faced hostility from both the Jewish authorities of the day, and the overarching government of Rome. Jesus appears to accept both Jewish and Roman authority over day-to-day matters of government (such as tax²¹), while being clear that God is ultimately in control. The apostles are little different, with Paul often appealing to his status as a Roman citizen when persecuted,²² yet Peter being clear that he must obey God over men.²³

is there any perfect system?

The very end of the Bible gives us an image of the 'perfect' system; God dwelling with his people in a place where there is no sin. Old Testament Israel should have worked something like this, with God's presence seen first in the tabernacle and then the temple; indeed, the church should work this way with God present through the Holy Spirit as we meet. But we are not 'there' yet; there is still sin in the world. Humans still tend to do the wrong thing, and don't always trust in God. Therefore, some other regulation becomes inevitable.

so how should a Christian relate to (imperfect) government today?

'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.' (Romans 13:1) In general, we are to obey government unless there is a situation in which obeying God takes precedence.

But in a democracy, we shape some of the laws by voting or participating, so could be said to be the 'governing authorities' ourselves to a degree.

This can bring significant benefits – usually such systems have allowed more freedom for Christians (and those of other faiths) than non-democratic governments. It also brings responsibilities; the Bible is clear about the accountability of rulers for their actions,²⁴ and we share in this responsibility in a democracy in at least a small way.

It seems that the ‘better’ kings of the Old Testament were those who looked to God. Yet our rulers are not necessarily Christians. And those of us in the UK should remember that our monarchy today is very different from that of the Old Testament (whether in Israel or elsewhere). Although a great deal of power is in theory still vested in the King of the United Kingdom, it is in practice exercised by an elected government acting in his name.²⁵

pray for our rulers

We can pray for those who rule us, even if we have no say in who they are. Those in constitutional monarchies like the UK can pray for the monarch, even if their actual power is very limited. Those in one-party states can pray for the leadership of that party, and the individual in charge. This is the case even when we oppose what they do; Timothy’s exhortation to pray for those in authority²⁶ was in the context of the Roman Empire. It doesn’t stop us praying for a better government under different leadership.

use the power we do have wisely

For readers, at least in the UK and Ireland, we are able to choose our leaders, at least indirectly, as we vote for members of parliament or local councillors to represent us.

Christians can use our votes to influence government, or do more by engaging with consultations, lobbying politicians, or even standing for election ourselves. This article is applied mainly to national government, but similar principles might apply to a professional group such as the British Medical Association (BMA), or a student run body like the SU.

how then do we vote?

We might think that the ‘easy’ answer is ‘get Christians to stand and vote them in’. This almost certainly won’t work. There are usually three or four competitive candidates in a seat in the UK, so usually 35-40 per cent of the vote is needed to win. 2015 figures suggest five per cent of the population of the UK are in church on an average Sunday. Even allowing for Christians not making it to church every week, the figures clearly don’t add up.

Even when Christians are elected, they face significant pressure in public life to conform to secular standards. Tim Farron’s book *A Mucky Business* describes this and is reviewed on page 30 of this edition.

We could look at how MPs have voted on particular issues in the past or seek indications of how new candidates might vote in the future. This might help to shape the law on that specific issue; this has been a common approach amongst pro-life organisations concerned to prevent liberalisation of abortion laws. But this approach is not foolproof. Past votes are not necessarily a guide to future votes, particularly if the question being considered is subtly different. An apparent abstention may simply mean an MP was out of the country on government business, rather than uninterested. A parliamentarian who agrees with us on abortion may hold views we disagree with on another equally important issue.

It is probably then more helpful for us to choose our vote using a broader method. We need to evaluate the programmes of different parties (sites like voteforpolicies.org.uk sometimes help). But we also need to consider whether these policies will ever be implemented (which is affected both by how realistic they are, and whether we trust the integrity of the politician promoting them), as well as the workings of whatever electoral system is in use in a given ballot.

is it any different for a Christian, then?

This may look much like the way any keen person engages in voting; and many of the principles are not

different. Perhaps the biggest difference for the Christian should be that in considering how we vote, we look not only at our own and our family's welfare, but also consider the most vulnerable in society and how a particular policy might affect them.

This might not always lead to the same conclusions – for example one voter may feel that high government spending on welfare (and consequent high taxes) protects the most vulnerable, while another may feel that high welfare spending harms the poorest by promoting dependency on government and makes everyone poorer in the long-run if higher taxes slow down the economy.

It always helps to remember that there are Christians in all the major UK parties. While we might well look beyond ourselves in choosing how to vote, we will still come to differing conclusions. This should make us very wary of saying 'all Christians should surely vote for...' or 'can you really be a Christian if you voted for...'. I hope this article has shown that politics is rarely as simple as one single issue.

people as well as policies – a possible solution?

Character really matters. That is clear in both the story of Israel's kings and in the way the church should govern itself. The qualifications for elders in the church a primarily about character rather than skills.²⁷ Unexpected things frequently happen in politics. Public health hardly featured in the 2019 General Election campaign in the UK yet came to dominate the tenure of Boris Johnson as Prime

Minister within a few months of his winning that election.

Personal attributes and character may give us some idea how our leaders are likely to react to an unforeseen event. It is not only the leader. Who advises and surrounds them or deputises for them should they be unable to work (as Boris Johnson was for some weeks after contracting COVID-19 himself)?

Of course, Christians can pray for the character of our leaders, but I wonder if we also need to do all we can to encourage those of good and honest character into leadership? Currently there seems to be little trust in politics, with a lot of effort made to 'catch-out' politicians or impugn their motives. Do we really need to share that accusatory news post that misses out much of the context? Do we speak well of the good things politicians do (even if they are someone we didn't vote for)?

conclusion

The Bible does not, ultimately, recommend a form of government, though it has plenty to say about how governments can go wrong. Our primary calling is to follow Jesus, and any participation we have in politics should be a part of that. But in a democracy where we bear some responsibility for governing, our discipleship surely includes using this responsibility well, both in selecting those who govern, and considering whether we are called to this ourselves. ■

1. Jesus
2. A recent example is Kate Forbes of the Scottish National Party. bit.ly/3NA6fsm
3. Genesis 2:15
4. Genesis 1:26
5. Genesis 3:17-19
6. Genesis 4:8
7. Genesis 6:5
8. Genesis 10:22
9. Genesis 11:1-9
10. Be Prepared, The Lion King. Walt Disney, 1994. imdb.com/title/tt010357
11. 1 Samuel 8
12. 1 Samuel 11:14
13. 2 Samuel 11
14. 2 Samuel 12
15. 1 Kings 11:9
16. 1 Kings 12:1-22
17. 2 Kings 17:21-23
18. See this helpful reference guide: www.providenceacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Chart-of-the-Kings-of-Israel-and-Judah.pdf – the links in the document will take you to the relevant Bible passages regarding each King
19. 2 Kings 25:1
20. Isaiah 10:12 (among others)
21. Matthew 17:24-27, Matthew 22:21
22. Acts 16:37 among others
23. Acts 5:29
24. Isaiah 10:1
25. This is technically known as 'Royal Prerogative', bit.ly/44nVpfN
26. 1 Timothy 2:1-2
27. 1 Timothy 3:1-12