



Christians and political engagement as understood through the biblical storyline

A theological paper by Daniel Lee from Micah Australia

Is being politically engaged a valid or necessary expression of Christian faith?

Is it just for *some* Christians who feel drawn to it?

Or might it be a distraction from more important aspects of Christian living and community – rife as it is with the possibilities of creating division and distrust?

As Micah Australia seeks to equip the Australian church for positive political engagement on behalf of the world's poor - engagement that is informed by God's vision for justice, mercy and humility – we felt it important to provide some brief but helpful responses to questions regarding the role of Christians and political engagement.

As we set out to achieve this together, there are several ways we could approach this topic.

- We could begin by listing the dozens of verses throughout the Bible that appear to reinforce the importance of engaging politically, especially on behalf of the vulnerable.¹
- We could seek to base our reasoning entirely on what Jesus called 'the greatest commandment':

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39, ESV)

¹ Examples of advocacy include: Esther advocating to King Xerxes to prevent the genocide of her people (the book of Esther), Moses advocating to Pharaoh to let enslaved people go (Exodus 5-12), Jesus continual advocating on behalf of those in need (A powerful example of this is Jesus standing in solidarity with a woman who was facing the death sentence in John 8).

There are plenty of verses that instruct God's people to stand up on behalf of the poor, vulnerable and oppressed as a way of reflecting the character of God. For example: Deuteronomy 16:20, Job 5:15-16, Proverbs 29:7, Proverbs 31:8-9, Psalm 50:6, Psalm 82:3, Isaiah 56:1, Jeremiah 22:3, Amos 5:24, Zechariah 7:9, Matthew 25:40, Luke 11:41, 2 Corinthians 8:13-15, James 1:27, 1 John 3:17-18

Arguing that showing ‘love for your neighbour’, will inevitably lead you to speaking up for them. We could show that political engagement is a powerful expression of obedience to this command and therefore vitally important.

Both of these approaches would be valid (and no doubt there are many more that could be taken).

However, we would like to engage this question at a *deeper* level.

Rather than seeing the Bible as a library of proof texts to support justifying what is for Micah an area of particular interest (an approach which can be used to justify most things as valid expressions of Christian faith)² we want to look at this question of ‘political engagement’ in the context of the wider storyline of the Bible. A storyline that invites us to see humans as active participants in the story of God and the world.

Once having done that we will circle back to ask the question ‘why’ Christians should engage politically, what Jesus’ political agenda was, and how we might then respond with both our vote and our whole lives.

The famous New Testament Scholar and historian NT Wright says:

“We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it ought to be.”³

If we as Christians are meant to be participating in political engagement, our foundations for doing so must find their footings in this story of God.

The beginning of the story

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... (Genesis 1:1 ESV)

The first few pages of the Bible portray God creating a garden temple. In this garden Heaven and Earth are united and this is very good. People are commissioned to rule in God’s good world, bearing God’s good image. Unlike other ancient ways of understanding God’s relationship to the world, in this story there is nothing standing between humanity and the divine. Humanity themselves are called to stand between God and the rest of creation, tending to the worlds’ needs and ruling over it as reflections of God’s loving rule.⁴

² This includes not just the trivial but also examples of people using the bible to reinforce actions that we would assert are firmly *sub-Christian*, like: the Nazi party during the Holocaust and advocates for slavery who vehemently opposed the likes of William Wilberforce.

³ NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, (San Francisco: HarperOne Publishing, 2011), 119.

⁴ To unpack these ideas found in the creation story see Walton, John. *The Lost World of Genesis One*. Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2009.

The Bible Project also unpack these ideas very helpfully in their theme videos, particularly “Heaven and Earth”. <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/heaven-earth/>

The end of the story

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... (Revelation 21:1a ESV)

The story ends with God's perfect new creation fully invading the world. Heaven and Earth are in symphony once again.

"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

(Revelation 21:3b-4 ESV)

The in-between

As we've seen, the story of the Bible starts with and ends with Heaven and Earth united. The plotline in-between is long and complicated but boils down to two main movements.

Firstly, humanity rejects their God ordained role of bearing God's image in the world. We chose autonomy. This is seen in the story of Adam and Eve. It's also seen in the story of our own lives whenever we choose what we perceive is best for ourselves rather than being images of the God who is love.

Secondly, God continually calls people back to the vocation of being His image bearers, reflecting His loving rule to the world.⁵ Throughout the Old Testament this call is never fully answered because of people's hardness of heart.⁶

This hope is finally met in the character of Jesus. Jesus is the only human to ever perfectly reflect God's image.⁷ Not only that, Jesus is himself presented as the new temple – the meeting place of heaven and Earth. He has the role of bringing them back together once more.⁸

Jesus as the fullest revelation of who God is and what God's rule (or Kingdom) looks like embodies self-giving love. Jesus brings God's healing, and loving justice.

He dies whilst forgiving his enemies and is raised to life to defeat the powers of sin and death.⁹ Each of the Gospel writers emphasise that Jesus' resurrection happened on the first

⁵ We see in the story of God calling Abraham that he is to take up the vocation of bearing God's image, allowing God's blessing to flow to the world (Genesis 12:2-3). The family of Abraham are given their identity as a nation when they are liberated from slavery and are called to be Kingdom of Priests and Holy nation (Exodus 19:6), that is once again, language of bearing God's image.

⁶ For examples of the hard heart motif see (Deuteronomy 31:27, Jeremiah 24:7, Ezekiel 36:26, Romans 2:29)

⁷ We see Paul presenting Jesus as the second Adam in 1 Corinthians 15 and we see Jesus when going through a time of temptation, choosing to bear God's image, rather than mirroring Adam's decision to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Matthew 4:1-11.

⁸ Jesus is presented as the temple throughout the gospels when he forgives sins and pronounces people clean. These were functions of the Jerusalem temple. Jesus also declares he is the temple in John 2:19.

⁹ Luke 23:34, 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

day of the week. This is a clear link to the original story where God begins creating on the first day of the week. Therefore, in Jesus, God's new creation that will one day fully arrive, has begun. The followers of Jesus are then given the temple presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit and sent to spread the loving rule and reign of God into the world.¹⁰

In a sense, we find ourselves in a similar time in history to those first followers of Jesus. We live between the launching of this new creation and its final consummation. Those of us who have accepted Jesus as Lord are given the vocation of hope. We hope and long for the day when God's rule and reign will be fully realised in the world and all things made new. We pray for this day as Jesus instructed his first disciples "your Kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven" (Matthew 6:10 ESV). We can't help but live lives of hope that anticipate the final picture of God's Kingdom coming; by wiping away tears from every eye, fighting back against death, suffering and pain.

As those who call Jesus Lord, we become citizens of Heaven.¹¹ Citizenship is all about where you are from, far more than where you are going. To be a citizen of heaven is about living in the present but being enculturated in the future hope of God's love, justice and peace. When we let this flow through us, we are faithful citizens of Heaven.

With this overarching storyline in mind we can see the profoundly inspired nature of the words given to the prophet Micah centuries before Jesus walked the Earth. As we seek to live out the story God has called us into, they can become our manifesto.

He [God] has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8 CEV)

So, why engage politically as we live out this story?

There are countless ways we can do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. There are lots of ways to seek to love our neighbours as ourselves. The Bible makes it clear we can do these things in our own personal lives and through our church communities.¹²

We should also see the incredible potential to love our neighbours through our political engagement as we seek to affect policies that are good for others, particularly those who are most poor, vulnerable and oppressed whom God is seeking to restore and heal. However, if this political engagement is *not* backed by the example and practice of individuals and churches who practice justice, then we may find ourselves trying to

¹⁰ In Exodus 13:21 we read of the divine presence as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire leading the Israelites. This divine presence then fills the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11). At Pentecost there is huge symbolic significance to the tongues of fire resting on the disciple's heads (Acts 2:3). This empowers the disciples to begin the role of fulfilling the great commission.

¹¹ Philippians 3:20

¹² Throughout the Old Testament law and prophets, we see the constant call for the people of God to enact justice and kindness to the vulnerable. Jesus commands the new covenant people of God in the Sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7) to continue in this tradition of righteous living. This was taken seriously by the first leaders of the Church. See James 1:27 and Galatians 2:10 for examples.

outsource our role as citizens of heaven to our human governments. We must first live lives of authenticity if we are going to call on the government to be more just, kind and humble.

Christians have debated the role of government for millennia. Famous theologians of history have debated whether human forms of government were always intended by God or are a concessional grace, required because of our fallen nature as humans.¹³ Either way, there is a strong sense throughout the Bible that God is the highest power and therefore it is he who allows human governments their power.¹⁴

One of the most significant push-backs to the notion of engaging politically is often taken from the apostle Paul's writing in Romans 13:1-7. Paul states that Christians should be subject to the authority of the government as it has been given its authority by God.

While this passage has been understood in many ways it definitely should not be taken as precluding Australian Christians from using their democratic voice. There are key reasons for this:

1. We need to take this passage in context. Romans 13 comes in between exhortations by Paul about loving others (even enemies). When the historical context is also understood we see that the Christians in Rome could have been swept up in violent revolt against the government. It was the non-violence and love of Christians that was to make them revolutionary. This was very different to other revolutionary religious groups of the day.¹⁵ Paul stresses that violent revolt is not the way of Jesus and we agree.¹⁶
2. There are times when accepting the full Lordship of human rulers and governments can actually mean rejecting the Lordship of Christ. Karl Barth – one of the most influential theologians of the last century – who stood boldly against the Nazi Party said clearly that in certain contexts to obey God was to disobey the government and to obey the government was to disobey God.¹⁷ Wisdom requires us to understand the time and setting in which we find ourselves and not draw on single texts that may seemingly excuse us from being politically engaged as a way of loving justice.
3. We live under a very different form of government to the early Christians. The very meaning of democracy is that power is with the people.¹⁸ It is therefore not only our

¹³ Two such theologians that have been prominent in Christian history, include Thomas of Aquinas and St Augustine of Hippo, who have very differing views on this. For an introduction to political theology see Elizabeth Philips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

¹⁴ Daniel 2:21, John 19:11, Romans 13:1

¹⁵ The Jewish people had a tumultuous history of revolting against the Romans. See *The Jewish War* by first century historian Josephus.

At the time of Paul writing Romans, it was in recent history and living memory that the previous emperor, Claudius had banned Jews in Rome from meeting and also removed them from the city due to "disturbances". See *Divus Claudius 25* by first century Roman historian Suetonius and *Volume 60.6.6-7* by second century Roman historian Cassius Dio

¹⁶ For a similar idea see 1 Peter 2:13-17

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 229-230.

¹⁸ The word democracy comes from two Greek words *demos* (meaning the people) and *Kratia* (meaning rule).

mandate as a citizen of heaven to love justice but our mandate as citizens of Australia to have our say.

What are the political priorities of Jesus?

By standing up for the poor and vulnerable and by standing against the powers that oppressed, Jesus presented as a political threat to those who sought to hoard power for their own gain. In fact, every time the first Christians referred to Jesus as “Lord”, they were denouncing the Lordship of Caesar. Caesar was commonly referred to as the “Lord” of the world and Christians rejected this notion by aligning instead with the authority, rule and reign of Lord Jesus.¹⁹

One of the times Jesus is most overtly political is in Mark 12:13-17. A politically minded group of people confront Jesus with a politically charged question. They ask Jesus if he pays taxes to Lord Caesar. As the true Lord, Jesus shows his political priorities are grounded in a deeper story than the one Caesar is telling, and those asking the question are seeking to pull him into.

Jesus takes a coin in his hand – a coin printed with the image of Caesar. A sliver of silver, imported with power. This coin was the payment for a day of work and contained the power to purchase. This coin was a simple and effective reminder that your own small sense of power (in this case economic) was only enabled and ultimately controlled by the highest power in the world – Caesar, the Lord.

This coin represented the human trajectory and system of power when the God of the Bible is removed. A world where the highest authority is human power rather than God’s power.

And we know that whenever human power becomes ultimate, justice, mercy and humility will always be rendered secondary, if not discarded entirely.

So, when Jesus is faced with this loaded question, he responds by asking, “Whose image is printed on the coin?” and then says:

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (Mark 12:17 ESV)



The Denarius of Tiberius Caesar

¹⁹ For more information on the nature of the imperial cult in the first century and the way this influences our reading of the New Testament and its political nature, see NT Wright “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading,” in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically* (ed. C. Bartholemew, 2002, Carlisle: Paternoster), 173–193.

This reply is a stark reminder of a deeper story. The people want to know how Jesus engages with the political power of his day if he really is the true Lord. Jesus doesn't say to disregard human rulers or governments but rather reminds the people of a deeper reality couched in the bigger story of the bible. Jesus highlights that long before Caesar was printing his image onto coins and ruling through human power, God was printing his image onto humanity. As we have discussed above, bearing God's image is about humanity living out the just, loving and selfless rule of their creator.

Whilst our political context is very different to that of Jesus' day, this story reminds us to frame our own engagement with politics in reference to the same deeper story that Jesus invites us into. Rather than being standard-bearers for this political leader or that political party, we are to be image-bearers of God's loving rule.

As Australians, living in this democratic nation we call home, as we go about living lives of love, mercy, justice and humility, we also have the privileged opportunity to call upon those in power to bring about policies that reflect these virtues. When done well – i.e. with authenticity, humility and respect - this also gives us the chance to invite people into the story that God is telling in the world, where all people bare the image of the divine and live toward the final reconciliation of heaven and Earth. This anticipates the day when all people will submit to the Lordship of Christ and his polity that comes from being image bearers of God.²⁰

How then should we act?

We have hopefully gained an introductory sense of why as Christians it's important to engage politically and what our priorities should be as we seek to do so. So how do we now put legs on this?

Response 1: Voting in the election

We are citizens of heaven and citizens of Australia. Both of these require us to vote.

Firstly, to vote each and every day with the lives we live by acting in a way, and making choices that reflect the kind of world we hope for.

Secondly, come election time, to vote for the candidate and party we believe will enact the kinds of policies, and exert the kind of leadership, that will take our nation most in line with the vision of God's deeper story for the world.

We are strong believers in bipartisanship at Micah. We don't believe that the Kingdom of God can be brought forward by us trying to find and nominate the 'perfect' government or candidate, as we recognise no governments or candidates will ever be fully aligned with God's will, regardless of their professed beliefs or faith.

²⁰ Philippians 2:10-11

Instead, we encourage people not to go right, or left, but to go *deeper* - to tap into the deeper story that God is telling in the history of the world - to let the politics of Jesus determine our vote much more than party allegiance.

This requires us each individually to do some work.

We encourage Christians to:

- **Study the core values of the various parties.** These are available on their websites.
- **Study the substance of each party's' competing policies.** For the 2019 federal election we encourage Christians to read the [Election Guide 2019 Series](#) produced by Eternity News.
- **Check the track record of parties delivering on their commitments.** Do they remain consistent to their values as a party? Do they follow through on their commitments?
- **Pray and be aware of the leading of God's Spirit.** As the Lord of the world, Jesus promised his Spirit would be present in his followers and we therefore navigate our political priorities through prayerful discernment.
- **Be gracious to yourself and others.** As the famous saying goes, "politics is compromise." There are many and different issues Christians will be drawn towards as they do their best to use their vote as an expression of their love for God's world. We must have the grace to see that when other members of God's family vote differently to us based on their prioritisation of a different policy, we can still find unity under the Lordship of Jesus. There is great beauty when a diversity of passion is displayed lovingly.

Response 2: Voting with our lives

There are over 1100 days between federal elections and we have the opportunity to live out the politics of Jesus each and every one of those days. When we find ourselves with governments and policies that don't match up with the priorities of the Kingdom of God (which as we've discussed, will *always* be the case given the fallibility of governments and leaders in ways either big or small), we must use this as our inspiration to act.

Ideas for action:

- **Get involved in a political party and letting your faithfulness to Jesus guide your actions as you do so.** There are Christians in all major political parties. As you understand more of God's story maybe your dual citizenship in heaven and Australia means becoming a member of a political party in the hope of influencing decision making through that party towards the polity of Jesus.

- **Learn how to use our democratic voice through advocacy:** At Micah we believe in speaking up for the world's most poor vulnerable and oppressed. We have resources to equip you to [meet with your local member or hold a community forum](#).
- **Give or volunteer with reputable development organisations both at home and abroad:** Micah Australia partners with [incredible organisations](#) who do fantastic work that we encourage you to learn about and get involved in, healing the world as an expression of faithfulness to Lord Jesus.
- **Come to Voices for Justice 2019:** Where we spend four days in the nation's capital, learning, worshipping and lobbying for the sake of the world's most poor, vulnerable and oppressed as a way of acting out the story that God has called us into. [Sign up](#) to updates from Micah so that you'll be first to know when this year's dates are released (*likely late Nov or early Dec*).
- **Be involved in your local church:** This story that Christians seek to live out is only effective and authentic to the degree it is backed up by the faithful everyday actions of individual Christians and churches. Being involved in an active community of faith is both biblical and critically important as an indication of your commitment to journeying with God and his people in love and humility, as we seek collectively and individually to reflect God's love and justice into the world.

Micah Australia is a coalition of Australia's largest Christian non-government organisations raising a powerful voice for justice and a world free from poverty.

www.micahaustralia.org

