

GOD IN POLITICS

Introduction

Why should Christians be involved in politics?

Politics: a range of activities concerned with making and implementing decisions for the community as a whole.

Why should Christians take an interest in politics? Why vote? Why be involved practically? This Bible study explores the Bible's attitude to such involvement. People may vote in an election for several reasons. They may simply want to get one party out of Government or to keep another party out. They may believe passionately in the policies of a party and want it to be elected. They may like the leader of a party. They may have been impressed or otherwise with one of the local candidates during the campaign, or with a sitting MLA. They may simply vote as they have always voted, through a sense of tradition. **Increasingly, many people are no longer bothering to vote at all.** They see politics as dull, corrupt and increasingly irrelevant to their lives. In the elections to Westminster in 2001 the constituency of North Down had the lowest voter turnout of 58.5%.

Whatever your view of politics however, **it is important that, as a Christian, you exercise your right to vote**, and that you do so in a considered and thoughtful manner. In biblical times and until fairly recently, there were few opportunities for Christians to influence the governance of their country. However, in the last century or more, people struggled and died to secure the vote for men and women. And with the vote comes political responsibility. So how do we respond? How do we set about deciding whom to vote for?

Once polling day is over, we will also need to think about what our elected representatives will be doing for the next five years. Will they be representing us wisely? How can we be involved during the years between elections?

We can make a difference as Christians; we can stand up and speak out on biblical principles and ethical issues; and we can have a say in who should be representing us in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Christians today appear to take one of three positions on the issue of political involvement. There are those who tend to assimilate to the prevailing political culture, interpreting the Bible to suit the modern world.

On the other hand, there are those who are inclined to withdraw from the political process and perhaps not even vote. There is, however, a third stance, which is the path that CARE, ECONI and Evangelical Alliance seeks to follow. This aims to engage without compromising the fundamentals; to reflect social

changes and to add a biblical focus to the major social and moral issues of our day. **We would encourage you to think about being involved in this way too.**

These studies are intended to give Christians a deeper understanding of the biblical perspective on politics. We suggest that they are used in the last three weeks before the election takes place, to encourage people to focus on the truths behind the media glare.

We recommend that the study leader takes time to think and pray through the study beforehand, and encourages all members of the group to participate. The studies have a fairly loose structure and are aimed primarily to be thought-provoking.

A number of questions are suggested for you to ask, and a number of Bible references are included, but feel free to add more and direct the study as you feel appropriate for the group of people involved.

This resource can be used in conjunction with other material on our website or available from CARE, ECONI or Evangelical Alliance, covering such questions as "What does an MLA do?" and "How do I decide how to vote?"

Study One: Genesis One

Creation: the original mandate for political authority

Biblical context

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
The Lord created the earth and all its inhabitants for His
glory. (Isaiah 43:7)*

Modern context:

For a study of the Bible and how it relates to our involvement in politics, we need look no further than Genesis 1 to discover that political theory, biblically, begins with creation.

In this chapter, **we see that God has given us a theological mandate to get involved and engage with politics.** God Himself has given us political authority so that we can act as stewards over His creation. This has many implications for the practicalities of politics today.

- Take some time to think about and discuss your immediate, automatic impressions of the words "politics" and "politicians". Are your thoughts entirely negative? Do you agree with George Orwell's comment that politics is "a mass of lies, evasion, follies, hatred and schizophrenia"? Instinctively do you find yourself thinking that Christians should have no part of it? **Or that we should be engaging in an attempt to influence and change the political culture?** If we did not live in a fallen world, do you think there would even be a need for Government?
- Every culture organises itself around an understanding of what it is to be human. Our entire society is based on our assumptions about who we are, why we are here and what we are supposed to be doing here. Christian answers to these questions however are increasingly different from those of the rest of society. **How does society see human beings today?** Do we find ourselves falling into the same mindset?
- Consider the views of Peter Singer, the ethicist and animal rights theorist. He believes that chimpanzees share some of the "morally relevant characteristics" of adult humans - self-consciousness, communication, etc - whereas new babies do not. Therefore, he reasons, chimps have a claim on the notion of "personhood" and babies do not. **Can you see where Singer's theories have had a major impact on the Western mindset?** Think about the justifications for abortion, for example.
- Our society's mindset is also increasingly selfish: the mindset we learn is one that says "I am the centre of my world", and because we have a decreased respect for the intrinsic value of those around us, we often treat one another badly. The worth of someone is often measured by the extent of

their physical beauty and their wealth. This idea is perpetuated by the media. Think of some examples in the attitudes of characters in TV soaps and dramas towards one another, and in the behaviour of the tabloid press.

The Bible promotes a radically different idea. **Read Genesis 1**. Here we see God's view of what it is to be human:

Humans, male and female, are created "in the image of God" - (1:26-27).

Think about the awesome nature of that statement. **We are in the very image of our mighty Creator**. We represent the pinnacle of God's creation. It is not our size (insignificant) that determines our status but our relationship with Him. **Every human is significant to God**, no matter what value society places on us. Look at **Psalm 139** for an indication of His care for us.

Humans are given dominion over every living creature - (1:26-30).

Man and woman are created to be God's representatives, His stewards over His creation. He gives us the role of dominion that is in the first place His own. This worldview completely contradicts that made widespread by Peter Singer. God's creation is ordered and we are placed at the head of that order, as His stewards.

God created the universe stage by stage and separately. He sees that each individual part of creation is good, and the whole is also very good (**1:31**). Even before sin entered the world, order was an important part of God's world. The universe - including humankind - is intrinsically good (before sin), and not ethically neutral. Even after the Fall, and the entry of sin into the world, **creation is good**, and should be respected and looked after as such.

So what does this mean in terms of studying politics with a Christian perspective?

The command to fill and subdue the earth has been called the "Cultural Commission" - a commission that goes beyond personal conversion and **requires us to develop an entire worldview**: a faith that encompasses every part of life and every aspect of the world. Christianity provides a framework for public as well as private life.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 demonstrates the extent of God's stewardship mandate. Our neighbours include all other humans; a point that Jesus emphasised by using the example of the Samaritan, a member of a race hated by the Jews, as the man who showed more compassion to the wounded Jew than a priest and a Levite of his own race. Who do you think Jesus would place in the Samaritan's role if he were telling the story today?

In view of this mandate, how should the Government be conducting its policies:

(a) with regard to other humans?

Each one is intrinsically valuable and should be treated well. Where should the effects of this worldview be seen? Policies regarding education, the running of the economy, employment and benefits, health, old people and unborn children, prisons, etc? Can you draw out the implications and think of more? (For example, should economic policy be aimed at promoting the common good of all citizens, and not just that of big business?).

(b) with regard to the rest of creation?

We are given stewardship over God's earth. How should we tackle the environment? Animal welfare? Perhaps even road building and farming policies (implications for GM crops perhaps?).

Conclusion

Politics does not consist only of Government. There are 108 MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) in the Northern Ireland Assembly, each of the 18 constituencies elect six MLAs to represent between 50,000 and 80,000 people. Do you know the names of the MLAs that represented your constituency between 1998 and 2003? Have they represented the concerns of their constituency well?

Think carefully about the representatives that you elect to carry out practical policies on your behalf, and to represent your local and individual interests.

We have a **responsibility to choose good stewards** for God's earth. We should not simply cast our vote at random, but find out about our candidates' beliefs on a whole range of issues.

- Do you think that what you have studied today will encourage you to see the Election in a different light?
- Think back to the first impressions of politics that you discussed at the beginning of the session. It is hard to be a Christian in today's political environment. Look at 1 Timothy 2:1-4: the Bible tells us to pray for those in authority. Spend some time doing that now, before you close.

Study Two Matthew: 5:13-16

Being salt and light: leading a life that influences society

Biblical context

The passage is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Here he gave directions for living in His kingdom, proclaiming His attitude towards the law and explaining the importance of faithful obedience from the heart. He was preaching to a

crowd that appeared to grow as the sermon continued. Amongst those present would have been the Jewish teachers of the law.

Modern context

This is a clear, unequivocal statement by Jesus that we need to stand up and be counted as Christians. This will be as much by our lifestyles and our behaviour during work and leisure as by evangelism. We are not all called to take this command into the political realm directly, but as the body of Christ we should be involved in all areas of society today. This includes voting. Read **Matthew 5:13-16**. Why does Jesus use the analogy of salt and light? Discuss the importance of salt and light in everyday usage and how we can apply this to the way that we conduct our lives:

Salt: A small pinch diffuses flavour throughout a whole meal. It penetrates, cleanses and preserves. Without salt as part of our diet we cannot physically survive - it is vital. Everything is insipid without it. The same goes for Christians in the world: with the Holy Spirit within us we are made spiritually salty, and the world needs this salt in order to survive spiritually. Salt is a remedy for unsavoury meat, but there is no remedy for unsavoury salt: we need to remain salty through maintaining a relationship with Christ. (**Colossians 4:6**).

Light: Light illuminates and reveals. Without the sun, physical light, we cannot live. Nothing grows, nothing flourishes, nothing survives without light.

Jesus is The Light of the World: He brings spiritual sight to a blind world in darkness. With His Spirit in us, we are also the light of the world. We should be prepared to bring spiritual light into the dark corners around us by living a life that is pleasing to God.

The shedding of light also reveals the light's source: we must also be prepared for people to be watching the way we live. Jesus makes clear that it is not just the occasional action but our **lifestyle as a whole** that demonstrates obedience and consequently makes us different from others. What are the practical implications of this in terms of what we learnt last week, and in its application to politics?

We need Christians in the world of politics and public policy to spread salt and light in this sphere. Politics is often the first item on the news, and its influence reaches down to every one of us.

If there are no Christians in politics and no Christians voting at election time, we are not diffusing our saltiness or shining our light in this important arena.

However, politics has a wider meaning than just that on the national stage and in the media spotlight. Think back to the last session. The mandate of stewardship that we discussed has been given to all humankind. **The world is full of injustices and God looks to all His children to intervene in these situations (Isaiah 59: 15-16)**. He wants us to know His compassion and His sense of justice, and to exercise stewardship in whichever areas He has called us to live and work in.

Have a look at some of these passages:

Psalm 82: 3-4; Isaiah 10:1-4; Isaiah 61: 1-3; Matthew 22: 37-40; Philippians 2: 3-4.

They all reveal God's hatred of injustice. The Bible is full of examples showing God's concern that the poor and needy should be looked after. The Latin roots of the word "compassion" mean "to suffer with". God is all-knowing and all-seeing, which means that He directly observes, and shares in all the suffering in the world. Let that idea sink in. It is this **compassion, suffering with the oppressed**, which vitalises God's all-consuming response to justice, and He wants us to share in this response. This is a huge challenge. How can we meet it? How does God equip us to do so? (**Acts 1:8; 2:17, 39; Romans 8:5-17; 37-39**).

- Can you think of some practical areas where you can exercise stewardship, and so disperse salt and light through situations in your life?

We need to take our role of stewards seriously in whatever line of work we do. Government and politicians, as stewards, cannot right all injustices. There are many problems in our society that have deep social roots and which a government overseeing 1.5 million inhabitants cannot hope to tackle comprehensively. Organisations like CARE, ECONI and Evangelical Alliance are encouraging the church to play its part. For example CARE has encouraged Christians who already do excellent work with children and young people to pass on their experience and expertise to the Government by engaging in the consultations on the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Children and Young People's Strategy.

- We, as members of **local communities and churches also have a role**. For an example, let us take the issue of teenage pregnancy. It is clear that legal constraints alone cannot deal with teenage sexual activity. A comprehensive culture change at ground level is also needed. Teenagers are told every day that sex is purely recreational; totally acceptable; harmless fun; even necessary, in order to prove their credibility among their peers.

Where do these notions come from? How can we, as Christians, in our everyday lives, let them know that this is not how it has to be?

Spend some time discussing this. (Suggestions: media - TV producers, actors, journalists - spread and encourage these ideas; footballers and pop stars are held up as role models; teachers and parents educate children; the peer pressure of friends may force them into certain behaviour patterns).

We need **Christian influence** in all these roles.

- **Romans 12:4-8** tells us that we are **all different parts of the body of Christ**, and we are all called to different jobs and given different gifts, none of which are any more or less valuable to the Lord than the others. By living and working among those who know only the values of today's culture, we can spread our salt and light and show them that there is another way to live.
- The body of Christ is to include those who work in politics, so that they can influence the lifestyles of those around them as we all can, whatever we do. Our nation's politicians are those we, as citizens, have chosen to exercise stewardship over our whole society and ourselves. This adds another dimension to their responsibility. Politicians can and should make just laws and set a moral tone, but the influence of Christians is needed in society, in ways such as we have just discussed, to change the culture of society so that these laws will have some effect. Similarly, we may work very hard to influence our culture, but without laws that reinforce our attitudes, we will not get very far.
- Edmund Burke, the 18th century constitutionalist and political thinker, said: "All it takes for evil to thrive is for good men to do nothing".

Spend some time praying that godly men and women will be elected to parliament during this Election, and that their influence, and our own in our daily lives, will combine **to bring about a just society and a compassionate people who will be pleasing to God.**

Study Three: Genesis 39; Daniel 1

Holding strongly to our faith: facing compromise under pressure

Biblical context

Genesis: Joseph's brothers have sold him into slavery in Egypt, where he has been bought by Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. Joseph is soon put in charge of Potiphar's household and faces pressure from Potiphar's wife to compromise his integrity.

Daniel: In about 600BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has invaded Judah. The king besieges Jerusalem and carries off some young noble Israelites to serve in his palace. Daniel is one of these young men. During the 70 years of exile, he rises to a position of power in an environment hostile towards God and stands several tests of faith.

Modern context:

It is said that society today has rejected God and is often openly hostile to Christianity and that there are parallels with Egypt and Babylon, the pagan societies that worshipped idols foreign to Joseph and Daniel. Today's idols are money and power. We also face pressures to compromise our values, and one of the charges levelled at Christian MLAs is that they compromise their principles because of their allegiance to their party. Today we can draw guidance from the way Joseph and Daniel coped with life right at the heart of these mighty political systems.

- Every day we are faced with making decisions that place demands on our Belief system and may require us to compromise. Read **Daniel 1:1-21**. If Daniel had eaten the palace food, which had been sacrificed to Babylonian gods, he would have compromised his beliefs. Read **Genesis 39**. Joseph found himself in a different kind of situation, but one which was no less challenging.
- Think of a situation where one of your values was threatened or affirmed. What happened, and how did you feel? Why did you make the decision you did on that occasion? What can we learn from **Daniel 1** and **Genesis 39** about the characters of Joseph and Daniel?
- Daniel and Joseph both held political roles and both stood firm against personal compromise. However, there is **a distinction between personal and political compromise**. Day to day politics cannot be conducted without some form of compromise being involved. People living in a society as complex and diverse as ours will have conflicting interests, and part of the task of Government - not just of the country but of smaller units such as the

family too - is to reconcile these and promote the common good. Spend some time discussing the difference between personal and political compromise:

- **Personal compromise** is about choices we make based on our sense of morality. One of our principles is to be truthful, and if we cross the moral boundary and tell a lie, for whatever reason, we have compromised our personal principles. Daniel and Joseph were both men who found themselves in positions of political power and yet who were not willing to compromise their beliefs and lose their integrity, despite the risk of persecution.
- **Political compromise** has a different emphasis. When we live as part of a community, we must **make choices that benefit the common good**. We make such decisions the whole time, for example in deciding what to have for a family meal. It is impossible to live as part of a community and not compromise on a daily basis. Can you think of some other examples where compromise is necessary? Edmund Burke said: "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter; we give and take; we remit some rights, that we may enjoy others."
- The issue of coming up against personal compromise may tempt us to withdraw from society. However, this is not the solution. Instead we need to play an **active role in making sound, value-based decisions that do not compromise our personal morals, but allow room for common goals to be achieved**. Looking back at Joseph and Daniel, and at other passages in the Bible, two points stand out:

(a) God's blessing:

- When Daniel stood for what he believed, God blessed him and his friends with better health and strength than their peers who were eating the palace food. Daniel then stepped out in faith and was able to interpret the king's dreams. The king was so impressed that he appointed Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon (**Daniel. 2:48**). As Daniel grew still higher in the king's favour (**5:29**), his jealous enemies searched for a way to bring him down but found no fault in him.
- Potiphar's wife, in her anger, had Joseph thrown into prison when he resisted her, but God gave him a position of responsibility even there (**Genesis 39:22-23**), and beyond (**Genesis 41:41**).
- God will not leave us to suffer alone and in vain when we are in difficult situations. (**Romans 8:28; Proverbs 29:25**). What can we learn from our readings about God's character? What encouragement does this give us in the situations we find ourselves in?

- Both men were rapidly promoted from the bottom of the pile to the very top. How did they respond to the power they were given? Spend some time discussing the **challenges for Christians today** who find themselves in positions of power and influence, particularly our MLAs and Executive Ministers; also civil servants. Think about those who will be standing at the coming Assembly Election, and the challenges that they will face.
- Pray for our Christian politicians, that they may develop their relationship with God. Find out if any Christian candidates are standing in your area at the election.

(b) There is no authority apart from God's authority (Romans 13:1):

- Read **Jeremiah 29:7**: God told the exiles in Babylon (including Daniel) to pray for the good of Babylon, even though it was ruled by a pagan and tyrannous king. Jesus later acknowledged the authority of Roman imperial rule (**Mark 12:17**), and Paul and Peter did the same (**Romans 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13f**). They urge us not to withdraw from the political arena, but to pray for the good of our Government, for within it lies our own good.
- All today's passages demonstrate that politics and Christianity are innately bound up with one another. This includes our society and our politicians. However ungodly the leadership may be, we see from Babylon that God can use Governments as his instruments (in Babylon's case, to punish His people Israel for rejecting Him as Lord). We may not agree with our Government's policies but we do have a duty to pray for it.
- Spend some time praying for this Government and for our politicians.

A Challenge?

- Do you feel that you have been challenged by these studies? Sometimes it seems that we are faced with a very difficult task, to stand apart from the world's actions and be noticed for being different (**Romans 12:2**). We can feel very vulnerable. The Bible recognises that we do not always put our good intentions into practice. In **Romans 7:18-25**, Paul explains a frustration that we have all shared at some point: "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out". But, says Paul, Jesus provides us with a relief from this situation (v.25). His sacrifice on the cross removed the barrier of sin that prevented us from a close relationship with God. Now we can know God personally and intimately, and through Him, we can know His love for us and our neighbours.
- Look at **Luke 10:27**. These are the two most important commandments of all: that we should **love God with every part of our being and then love our neighbours**. If we know God then we know and share in some of His compassion, and it becomes easier to live a lifestyle pleasing to Him, and to be salt and light. Be encouraged!
- Also, **be an encourager**. Daniel had three close friends around him. They encouraged and supported one another. How can you best support your friends and colleagues; your MLAs and other Christian MLAs?

- Think about local Christian councillors and school governors. It is important for us to **support each other through our prayers**, to be salt and light where we live and work.