SAMPLE PAGES
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Guidelines

Bible study for today's ministry and mission

Sample readings on
The Bible and politics
by Andrew Goddard

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Guidelines

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The Bible and politics

Thinking biblically about the exercise of power and authority in human communities is a major challenge for Christians. We live in a world shaped by false post-Enlightenment divisions between private personal faith and public political life. We live in a post-Christendom world where old understandings of the relationship between church, state and society no longer apply. Many Christian politicians are reticent about speaking of their faith and its impact on their political life. If they are asked, then, in the famous words of Alistair Campbell, the answer is likely to be, 'We don't do God.'

Our Christian faith is, however, full of political language. We proclaim Jesus as '*Lord*'. We bear witness to the '*kingdom*' of God. Often, we do not make the connections between these terms and how we think about politics, yet politics is an important aspect of Christian discipleship. In the narrow sense of politics and government, we should all be concerned and involved with the politics of our nation. In the wider sense of how we understand, use and respond to power and authority, our workplaces and our churches are all political worlds.

This week's readings try to give a taster and overview of the biblical message by studying a few key, classic passages from different acts of the biblical drama that relate to political power and authority. In Genesis we see the importance of a proper understanding of humankind made in God's image. The reality of worldly politics and God's response are then revealed in Exodus. Liberated Israel was shaped by the gift of the law and the early lack of centralised power seen in the period of the judges. That changed with the coming of kingship. This was a highly ambiguous development (as evident in 1 Samuel 8) but one that God took and used to reveal a vision of godly rule in passages like Psalm 72. The political reality was, of course, far from that biblical vision and Israel was judged through exile, where she again experienced pagan rule as described in our reading from Daniel.

True politics is, of course, embodied in Jesus Christ. His saying about 'rendering to Caesar' provides our Gospel focus before we conclude with Paul's account in Romans 13, which has dominated much Christian thinking about politics down the centuries.

Quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

1 Made in God's image

Genesis 1:26–31

The vision of humanity in these verses is vital for all areas of Christian ethics and discipleship, including politics. To understand their political significance, it is important to be aware of some of the ancient Near Eastern parallels. The creation myths of Babylon and Egypt were used to legitimate the existing, oppressive social and political structures of those cultures. In their stories, the kings and rulers were the representatives or even the embodiment of the gods. Human beings as a whole were thus made to serve their politicians and the gods whose image those rulers bore.

In our reading we have a totally contrasting vision of creation. It brings about a liberating subversion of the common understanding of politics in the ancient and much of the contemporary world. Here, humankind as a whole, both male and female, bears the divine image. All human beings, not just those who are rich or powerful, are called to image God.

Much debate continues about 'the image of God', with various theories focusing on our rationality as the quality that distinguishes us from the rest of creation, or the relatedness within humanity evident in our being made male and female (v. 27). Whatever the value of these interpretations, a central corollary of being made in God's image is the calling to rule. This is found in verse 26 and again in verse 28, either side of verse 27 with its account of humanity's creation and double reference to 'the image of God'. The author is making clear that human rule within and over creation is part of God's plan in creation. Indeed, in making us in his own image, the creator God has effectively delegated his own rule over his creation to all of us.

This vision has major implications not only for *who* has a right to rule but also for *how* we exercise any authority to rule that we might have in any sphere of life. We should rule in a way that reflects the rule of the God whose image we bear. And so, in the light of Christ, 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation' (Colossians 1:15), we see that human beings are called to develop a creative politics of humility and service, not one of domination and oppression.

2 Oppression and liberation

Exodus 1:8–22; 2:23–25

In contrast to the creation vision, this narrative, foundational to Israel's identity, reveals the mindset of many political rulers in our fallen world. It also reveals the politics of God. In verse 8, regime change, change at the top, results in a new politics. It is a politics of fear, expressed in populist propaganda, leading to division into 'us' and 'them', oppression and genocide.

In a subtle sign of God's faithfulness to his promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:2, 15:5), the Israelites have become so numerous that they are perceived as a political threat, an alien community that could choose to work with foreign powers (vv. 9–10).

The political solution implemented is a sad constant in human history. First there is forced labour to build the status and prestige of the ruler (v. 11). Far from solving the problem by depleting the Israelites and eliminating Egyptian fears, the result is the exact opposite and serves God's purposes (v. 12; cf. Genesis 28:14). Rather than effecting a U-turn, however, the Egyptians' political strategy is to tighten the screw. This is seen in the repetition of 'ruthlessly' in verses 13–14, and the original Hebrew's fivefold use of the same root, 'serve', which is sadly lost in our varied translations as 'worked', 'labour' and 'used'.

Finally, a policy of ethnic cleansing is implemented against future generations. Those called to help bring forth life safely are ordered to become agents of state murder against their own people (v. 16). The designation of the midwives and mothers as 'Hebrew' combines the senses of wandering and animal-trading and probably had derogatory connotations, like our contemporary 'travellers'. The response is a bold act of non-violent civil disobedience as the (interestingly, named) midwives demonstrate that they fear God more than Pharaoh. Their allegiance is first to God, not to political power. The depressing response to such faithfulness, however, is national mobilisation to implement ethnic cleansing (v. 22).

Hope appears with Moses' rescue but vanishes with his violent revolutionary reaction (2:11–12) and flight. Then God re-enters the drama in 2:23, in response to the apparently non-political act of a groaning and crying out to God from slavery. He acts in four ways: God hears, God re-

members his covenant, God sees and God knows. Although these do not strike us as political actions, they are the origin of the political liberation that follows and the source of the very event that Pharaoh's oppressive politics sought to prevent: the Israelites will 'leave the country' (1:10; the Hebrew phrase reappears in 13:8).

3 Good government

Psalm 72

In the face of much bad government, this and other royal or kingship psalms (for example, Psalms 101 and 110) provide an alternative vision of what politics should be. Presented as a prayer of David for his son Solomon, it closes the second of the five books of the Psalter (Psalms 42—72) and so concludes with a doxology (vv. 18–19).

The opening two verses highlight, in a symmetrical repetitive structure, two central qualities needed for good governance that are frequently paired together in the Old Testament: justice and righteousness. They appear in verse 1 as the only clear request to God (a reminder of the need to pray for these gifts in rulers) and then in verse 2 as a description of the actions of the king. Justice (*mishpat*) is strictly an act of judgment and speaks of legitimate and authoritative decision-making. Righteousness (*sedeq*) is not simply a personal moral uprightness but a matter of acting in the right way in relationships, and so its meaning is also captured in our idea of faithfulness.

Although one of the features of the psalm is its relative lack of militaristic imagery (though note verse 9), it is clear that politics will involve struggle and conflict. The one who rules is to side with and defend the 'afflicted ones' (vv. 2, 4, 12) and the 'needy' (vv. 4, 12, 13). That stance means being determined to 'crush the oppressor' (v. 4). It means a politics that faces up to oppression and violence in society and works to rescue those who are the victims of such behaviour at the hands of others. The description of the king in verse 12 clearly echoes the pattern of God's own rule, which we saw in his response to the Israelites in Egypt when they cried out to him.

The psalm also points to the need for the ruler to be concerned about

the material well-being of the people and provision of food, drawing a connection between what we would call social and economic justice and ecological well-being (vv. 3, 16). In addition to describing the task of rulers, the psalm makes clear—in the descriptions of the nations' recognition of godly governance (vv. 9–11, 15)—the importance of righteous rulers receiving proper acknowledgment of their rule.

The final words before the doxology (v. 17b) present the righteous ruler as the one through whom God's covenant promises to Abraham are being fulfilled (Genesis 12:2–3) and, from a Christian perspective, point forward to Jesus, the Messiah, as the true king of the Jews.

4 The fires and idolatries of political involvement

Daniel 3

Whether we date the book of Daniel to shortly after the period it describes—the late sixth century, the time of Israel's exile in the superpower Babylon—or, with most scholars, to the early second-century period of Jewish resistance to Antiochus Epiphanes, its political message is clear, constant and depressingly contemporary.

Contrasting with Psalm 72's vision but echoing the actions of Pharaoh, it shows how to respond faithfully to a pagan politician who is persecuting God's people. Central to this chapter's narrative is the connection between the abuse of political power and idolatry—the mistreatment of those made in God's image by those committed to the making and worshipping of images of power.

Despite having apparently heeded the warning of his dream in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar reverts to type and acts according to standard ancient imperial practice. He enlists all the governing élite (emphasised by the repetition of the long list of officials in verses 2 and 3)—indeed, the whole world (vv. 4, 7)—in his latest idolatrous project. His significance is highlighted by the repeated statements in verses 1–12 that this is Nebuchadnezzar's policy. As is typical in court conflict and political intrigue, dissenters—three faithful Jews integrated into the established political system, thanks to Daniel (2:49)—are swiftly identified and denounced by their political enemies before the all-powerful ruler (vv. 8–12).

Called to account for their 'religious' failure to serve the king's gods and their 'political' failure to obey his orders, the three Jews refuse to compromise or to pursue politics as 'the art of the possible' (Otto von Bismarck). Their response demonstrates that political power should be limited, as they offer no defence but challenge Nebuchadnezzar's right to question them (v. 16). They subordinate the powerful politician to the God whom he has claimed to exceed in power (v. 15), confident in God's power (v. 17) but also aware that God's power may not be exercised on their behalf (v. 18). They present a solid politics of principle rather than pragmatism (though there are aspects of both in Daniel 1) and a commitment to doing what is right, whatever the political and personal consequences.

In the dramatic denouement we see a fulfilment of Isaiah 43:2 as God preserves the three unharmed, leading to another dramatic confession by King Nebuchadnezzar (v. 28). His subsequent decree, however (v. 29), suggests that he still had quite a lot to learn about politics in the image of God!

5 Render to Caesar…

Matthew 22:15–22

This is perhaps one of the best-known political sayings of the Bible. It is also perhaps one of the most misinterpreted and misused, frequently cited by politicians, upset by Christian critiques, to defend the view that religion (the realm of God) must keep out of politics (the realm of Caesar).

If our biblical study so far has not shown the falsity of that reading, the text itself makes it clear. This is a trap for Jesus (vv. 15, 18) but he fails to fall into it (v. 22). His answer about paying taxes is neither a revolutionary rejection of political authority (which would have given grounds for action against him by the authorities) nor an uncritical acceptance of Roman rule (which would have alienated many of his followers).

Three features stand out. First, Jesus has to ask for the coin (v. 19). This perhaps suggests his detachment from the world of imperial economics. It certainly implicates his questioners, who provide the coin, as being involved in what later appears an idolatrous political system.

Second, his question asks whose image the coin bears. The language of image is not simply pointing to the coin's owner. In the light of the Old

Testament prohibition on making images (Exodus 20:4), it highlights the fact that the coin would have been considered idolatrous or blasphemous by many Jews.

Third, Jesus also asks about the inscription. Here, there is no question about its blasphemy and idolatry. The coin on one side declared 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the deified Augustus' while the other side heralded him as 'high priest'. Once again, the pretensions of political power are revealed.

Jesus' answer (v. 21) tells the Pharisees, in effect, that they should have no problem returning such sacrilegious coinage to the occupying political power. But—and here there is a sting in the tail (especially given the earlier parable of the tenants seeking to resist the claims of the landlord, Matthew 21:33–46)—their primary calling is to recognise God's claim, a claim over all of life. That claim of God's kingdom, which Jesus announces and for which he will shortly die, requires a different type of politics. It calls for a politics driven not by Caesar and trick political questions but by those made in God's image, determining to respect God and his image-bearers and to give themselves back to their Creator rather than seeking to live without reference to him.

6 The politics of the church and the world

Romans 12:14—13:7

Probably no biblical text has shaped and misshaped Christian thinking about politics more than Romans 13. It has been quoted by oppressive rulers to demand total allegiance—forgetting the Hebrew midwives, the three faithful Israelites in the furnace and texts such as Revelation 13. One problem is that it is often read without reference to its wider literary and political context.

The preceding verses provide an alternative vision to that of standard politics. They show how Christians are to live together as the community of the Church in the world, describing an ecclesial politics and its practices of Christian love. With echoes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5—7, these verses portray the challenging pathway of following Jesus as Lord, especially that of refusing revenge in the face of evil.

However, the lordship of Christ and the Church's calling do not elimi-

nate the need for political authority in our world. Paul, though writing to Christians in Rome under Nero, is clear that God has established political authority to serve him. Given the pretensions of Romans rulers, as seen on the coin discussed in the last reading, Paul's words do not deify political power. Rather, they de-deify it. Paul is emphatic that political rulers are not gods but God's servants or stewards (vv. 4, 6).

What might it mean for political rulers to be God's servants? As in the Old Testament (think of his servant Cyrus in Isaiah 45), it means partly that God is able to work through them even when they do not acknowledge him. But it also means that their proper task is one that is determined and limited by God. We have already seen something of that task in Psalm 72. Here there is the same emphasis on the work of just judgment, with a focus on commending and encouraging the good (v. 3) and restraining and punishing evil (v. 4).

That last task is described in verse 4 in a way that contrasts starkly with the calling of Christians in 12:17–21. Some, notably in the Anabaptist tradition, have argued that Christians cannot therefore hold political office. Most Christians, however, have distinguished between private revenge (which is forbidden) and public judgment (which is divinely ordained and open to Christians). What cannot be denied is that Paul—despite having experienced a lot more political abuse than most of us—expects all Christians to have a positive attitude to political authority that expresses itself in proper respect, honour and submission.

Guidelines

These short selections have shown the Bible's insight and realism about political power—its potential and calling to bring about great good and its capacity for great evil.

- Think of situations in the world that fit with the Israelites' experience in Egypt or Babylon. Pray that God will redeem and rescue those who are oppressed and enslaved by political powers and strengthen those who, like the midwives, resist their abuses.
- How can you discern when—in the politics of work or your local community or the nation—it is necessary to oppose the commands of those

with power? What disciplines will help you make such judgments and act on them in a Christ-like way that still respects authority?

- What can you do to encourage those with political power to implement the vision of the godly ruler in Psalm 72?
- What are some of the idols that threaten to drive contemporary political life and make Christian witness so difficult?
- Pray for wisdom and courage for church leaders and Christians in politics who, like Jesus, are faced with political questions that are traps, seeking to ensnare them and undermine their work for God's kingdom.

FURTHER READING

Jonathan Bartley, *The Subversive Manifesto: Lifting the Lid on God's Political Agenda*, BRF, 2003.

Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Eerdmans, 2003.

Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbours: Church and State in the New Testament*, Augsburg Fortress, 1999.

Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP, 2004 (especially chs. 7—9).

Chris Wright, *The People of God and the State: An Old Testament Perspective*, Grove, 1990.

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