

If I were God I'd vote for... Christ Church Liverpool @ The Pilgrim

Last Autumn I was having a discussion with a friend; a highly intelligent, educated, Bible believing Christian man. We were talking about abortion, though it could have been any one of a hundred different ethical or political issues. We shared, it turned out, pretty much similar convictions about the issue. But he felt that Christians shouldn't get involved in that issue politically. The reason he gave was that there should be a separation, a gap, as he put it, between church and state.

What my friend was arguing for, of course, wasn't the separation of church and state. The idea of separation of church and state simply means that holders of official positions in a church denomination shouldn't also be members of the government. What my friend was really arguing was that *Christianity should stay private*. That the role of the local church is to foster personal faith, not to be involved in public policy. What my friend was really arguing for was the separation of Christianity and ethics – of Biblical faith and public morality.

It's a common view. Just a couple of weeks ago on the Today programme a Labour MP was arguing, somewhat bizarrely, that atheists are often just as moral as religious people and that therefore all religious groups should stay out of politics in order to protect democracy. That MP, was advocating, along with many non-Christians and not a few Christians in our day, the *privatization of Christian life*.

As a Christian I find that utterly unacceptable. And the reason I cannot keep my Christian life private is that the God of the Bible is not a private God. Although because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ I am privileged to know God personally he is not simply my God. He is the God of the whole universe.

The Bible consistently refers to Jesus Christ as Lord. He is the king, the reigning sovereign of the world. Lord is actually one of the commonest words in the Bible being found nearly 8,000 times.

In recent times this was perhaps best put by Abraham Kuyper, 19th century Dutch pastor, theologian, university founder, newspaper editor, party activist, statesman, prime minister and church reformer. He said that:

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which

Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

If Jesus is king of the universe, and Christians believe that he is, then it is simply not an option for Christians for their faith to be entirely private. It needs to be lived out in the world; and that will, inevitably, have implications for public policy.

I hope, if you are here this evening and you're not a Christian, that you don't find that disturbing at all. And I want to be quite clear that no Bible Christian should ever argue that Christian faith or morality should be imposed by force of violence. So I hope you find it encouraging this evening to hear that the Bible does have something to say to issues of public policy. If you are considering the claims of Jesus Christ I hope you find it a positive thing that he has something to say about all of life and that the Christian world view provides a coherent way of thinking about life.

As a Christian I believe that my views about all of life should be shaped by the character of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures.

That's not an easy thing to do. We live in a complicated world, in which many things are interconnected. We live in a world in rebellion against God. We live in a world where many things are neither black nor white but shades of grey; and where sometimes we wish that some of the things that really are black and white weren't!

But that is no excuse for Christian not to try and think about these issues in a way that reflects the character of the God we worship.

We are now less than 4 weeks from a General Election when we will elect the MPs who will pass most of the principle laws in our country for up to 5 years. So if ever there is a time for us to think about ethical and political issues this is it!

What I'd like to do for the next few minutes is outline to you what we are actually doing when we vote in a general election, and why we should vote at all.

Then we'll think about how Christians have thought about politics in Britain in the recent past and we'll round up by looking at three specific policy areas, what the Bible has to say and what the political parties have to say.

1 What is a General Election?

At a General Election 659 Member of Parliament are elected, each to a constituency

representing between approximately 50,000 and 75,000 people.

Almost all of those MPs (at present there is 1 Independent MP) are affiliated to a political party (at present 412 Labour, 166 Conservative, 52 Liberal Democrat, 29 Others).

At the last election the Labour party won just over 10 million votes from a total UK population of 59.6 million people.

The party with the largest number of MPs is then invited by the Queen to form the government. The leader of that party become Prime Minister and he then invites whoever he wants (as long as they are a member of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords) to be his ministers.

What this means in practice is that when you vote in a general election **you are choosing both a party to govern and a person to be your local MP.**

This, of course, has the potential to create all sorts of problems – what if you really like the person who is your local candidate for one of the parties – maybe they are a Christian – but you really dislike his party’s policy on something? Or the other way round – what if you like one party but really dislike their local candidate – maybe he is a serial adulterer or something?

The fact is that both matter. On many topics MPs are expected to vote with their party so the individual’s views may not enable him to change much. On the other hand there are some topics (like abolishing hunting with hounds or going to war) where parties may give MPs a free vote – they can do as their conscience dictates – so their personal views are important.

Obviously it is up to each of us to decide how much weight we give to person and how much to party. So we probably need write to our local candidates and ask their views on stuff or we simply won’t know what we’re voting for.

2 Why should we vote at all?

Well that’s all very well, you might say, but to be quite honest I’m personally just considering not voting at all.

Not because I don’t think Christians should be involved in the world but just because I think that, frankly, all politicians are the same and it doesn’t really make a lot of difference.

Well I’d have two things to say to that:

Firstly it is simply not true that all politicians are the same. Yes they are all sinful. Yes they do all bear God’s image. Yes in our country at the moment most of politics is fought over the centre ground. But not all politicians are the same. They believe different things. They behave in different ways.

We might find their different policies confusing. But most of the time the reason we’re confused is because we haven’t really bothered to think about it very much!

Secondly and positively, I believe the Bible gives us good reasons to vote. Of course there was no such thing as democracy in Bible times so there’s no verse we can turn to that tells us to go out and vote! But there are plenty of places in the New Testament where all Christians are encouraged to be responsible citizens.

Matthew 5:13-16 and Romans 13:1.

Christians should be responsible citizens. All our national and local leaders encourage us to vote. Therefore we should vote. It is one of our good deeds.

3 How have Christians thought about this in the past?

All analysis of the past tends to be generalisation. But I’d like to give you my perspective on how believers tend to have voted in the past, though obviously there are all sorts of exceptions to this.

On the whole in the past the Conservative party represented a more traditional Christian position on issues of personal morality such as homosexuality. They also represented a strong tendency to emphasise individual responsibility and not wanting the state to step in and do things that they felt individuals or companies should do. That meant that many Christians for whom personal moral issues and people living with the consequences of their actions rather than being “bailed out” by the state tended to vote Tory.

On the other hand the Liberal and Labour parties tended to be less authoritarian on issues of personal morality but more concerned with equality and social justice, which are also, of course, biblical principles.

The perception amongst Christians was, on the whole, that if you were most concerned

about personal moral accountability you would vote Tory and if you were most concerned about social justice you would vote Labour or Liberal.

But recently the lines have become much more blurred.

So as far as I can tell from reading the literature the Conservative party no longer has a party policy on, say, homosexuality that is any different from Labour. In fact neither say anything about the issue in the policy documents I can find on their web sites.

And the Labour party in particular has become much more in favour of things like privatisation, removing social security benefits from certain groups of people, and restricting immigration that would previously have been considered Conservative type policies.

Basically politics has shifted to the centre and there is much more stealing of other parties ideas than there used to be.

Let me give you an example. In Gordon Brown's budget in March he offered £200 rebate to pensioners on their council tax (essentially a Tory idea) and doubled the threshold at which people pay stamp duty when buying a house (essentially a Lib Dem idea).

On the whole most analysts, whether Christian or not, think that all the parties have moved away from a philosophical or ideological approach to a pragmatic one – in other words parties tend to talk about what they think will work rather than what they believe.

That makes it even more difficult than it was in the past to choose between parties on Christian principles because none of them particularly place principles at the centre of what they are about.

4 Some sample policies

But that does not mean there are no differences. So let's look at three areas where there are important differences between the main parties to give us an idea of the kind of things we might want to think about before we put that X on the ballot paper.

a) Asylum

i) The issue

Asylum seekers are people who come to another country seeking protection from

persecution in their own country. We should not confuse it with immigration which means people moving from one country to another for any reason.

In 2004 there were 33,204 applications for Asylum in the UK (population of Winsford, Dunstable or Redcar). That represents 0.05% of the population of the UK. The average asylum seeker receives £37 a week in benefits.

Much coverage of asylum issues owes far more to prejudice than to fact – people consistently overestimate number and cost of asylum seekers.

ii) The Bible

The Bible never speaks of asylum seekers, immigrants or refugees!

But there is a consistent principle throughout the whole of the Old Testament that the people of Israel, God's people, were to welcome among them "aliens", "strangers" or "foreigners". They were also reminded frequently that at one time they had been strangers and aliens in Egypt before the Exodus.

It seems that some of these foreigners became part of Israel – worshipping the Lord and enjoying the full protection of all the laws of the nation.

Whereas others maintained their own cultural identity and had somewhat less integration into Israel and fewer of the rights and responsibilities of a full citizen.

Jesus himself told several parables and had several encounters which involved foreigners.

And the New Testament reminds Christians that we are strangers in the world and encourages us to welcome all sorts of people into the family of the church.

Of course Christians are not to be gullible. So we shouldn't support an asylum policy that encourages asylum claims from people who are genuinely being persecuted. Though we might want to let other people in to our country to work as part of a separate immigration programme.

The OT principle seems to be that immigrants of all sorts should be encouraged to participate in the nation they come to – so Christians should, I think, be in favour of teaching English to asylum seekers, perhaps

of a welcoming or citizenship ceremony and so on.

But I also think that the whole sweep of the Bible's teaching means that where there is doubt Christians should tend to be generous, even to the point that we risk being exploited, rather than tending to be inflexible and rigid.

iii) *The parties*

These summaries are from the BBC web site with minor modification:

Conservatives:

- Will introduce annual quotas for refugees and other migrants entering Britain – no new people will be allowed once quota numbers have been reached. No information available on what quotas will be.
- Will introduce compulsory health checks including tests for HIV and tuberculosis.
- Will create offshore asylum processing centres so that people don't actually come to the UK before their application has been checked.
- Will pull Britain out of UN refugee convention.

Liberal Democrats:

- Support an asylum policy for the whole European Union with the UK having a "fair share" asylum seekers
- Will allow asylum seekers to work so they don't rely on benefits

Labour:

- Will reduce asylum numbers by having tougher rules on settlement and more deportations
- Introduce an electronic register of all people crossing borders

b) Europe and the Euro

i) The issue

The European Union – previously known as the European Community was created after World War II to unite the nations of Europe economically so another war among them would be unthinkable. There are currently 25 member countries with a combined population of 500 million people which is the largest single economic block in the world.

During the existence of the EU, whether because or in spite of the EU is a matter of dispute, Western Europe has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity.

Being part of the EU for all member countries means signing up to a set of policies allowing

free movement of goods, services and labour around the member nations.

This means for example, you have a right to go and get a job in Italy or Poland or Belgium without any need for work permits or the like. You can also buy beer or wine for personal consumption in France and import it to the UK without the government being able to charge you any tax or duty on it.

This, obviously, restricts the ability of national governments to act independently as they are tied to Europe wide standards. This affects things as diverse as weights and measures, health and safety legislation and working hours.

The Euro is a translational currency adopted by 12 of the 25 member states of the EU. Most of the other 13 states are considering adopting it too.

Adopting the Euro means accepting a fixed exchange rate with other Eurozone countries and each member state giving up its own control of interest rates to the European Central Bank.

The supposed advantage of this is that it allows businesses to plan ahead because they know that if they make something for 10 Euros in Germany they can sell it for 12 in Spain and make 2 profit – something they cannot guarantee if exchange rates are constantly altering.

The supposed disadvantage is that it reduces the ability of national governments to control their own economic destiny.

ii) The Bible

The first thing to say is that the Bible has no problem as such with paying taxes to secular governments:

When asked "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" Jesus requested a Roman coin. He asked whose inscription and portrait were on it and, receiving the reply "Caesar's" said: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:15-22).

His teaching makes clear that the state has legitimate but limited claims upon the resources and loyalty of Jesus' disciples.

The Bible does seem to give a prominent place to the idea of nations and states (see eg Genesis 11, Acts 17:25; Revelation 5:9-10) and often sees international empires as,

principally, agents of judgment and places of wickedness (eg Deut 15:6; Amos 1).

This does not mean that Christian should be in favour of withdrawing from the EU or be very nationalistic – the Bible consistently warns against national arrogance and superiority – but it does mean we should probably generally be suspicious of centralised power.

This means we should probably be cautious about closer political integration of the EU and about adopting the Euro.

iii) *The parties*

These summaries are from the BBC web site with minor modification:

Labour: Want adoption of proposed EU constitution after a referendum; support joining the single currency if "economic tests" show it is in UK interests; UK should be at "heart" of Europe.

Conservative: Oppose EU constitution and would hold early referendum; would let other nations integrate while UK gets some powers back from Europe. They oppose adopting the euro.

Liberal Democrat: Would work towards the right conditions for joining the euro and then call referendum; back EU constitution, saying it will make clear the limits on Brussels powers.

UKIP: Support full withdrawal of UK from European Union and seek to renegotiate free trade agreements (though other EU countries would not have to do this).

c) **Abortion**

i) *The issue*

In 2001 there were 186,274 legal abortions carried out in the UK. Since legislation allowing abortion in was passed in 1967 there have been some 5 million legal abortions in the UK.

Of the 2001 abortions no more than 3,500 were carried out because the continuation the pregnancy would put the mother's life at risk or cause her grave permanent mental or physical injury or because the child would be seriously handicapped.

20,000 of the abortion in 2001 were carried out when the foetus was more than 12 weeks old.

Worldwide it is estimated that 55 million abortions take place each year.

ii) *The Bible*

Many Christian thinkers, and thinkers from other religions and from none, consider that the scale of abortion makes it the greatest single evil in the world today.

I am inclined to agree with them!

The Bible picture is that a foetus is human, and alive and to be valued from the moment of conception onwards.

Abortion, however understandable, is therefore always the deliberate taking of life of an unborn child.

There are a number of places in the Bible one could go to support this idea but the most obvious is probably Psalm 139.

Here David speaks of himself in the womb, being knitted together by God. He sees himself as a continuous being – one person from the day he was made in the secret place until the last day of his life.

Scientific and medical evidence seems to back this up with no point during pregnancy at which a fundamental event occurs that could be considered the start of life. Life starts at conception.

Of course that doesn't mean that all Christians should campaign for abortion always to be illegal. I believe that abortion is always immoral but there are plenty of immoral things that we don't think should always be illegal and punishable by the state.

iii) *The parties*

All the parties say that this is not a matter for a general election and none of them have a party policy on the issue of abortion.

All of them would offer MPs in their party a free vote on the issue if it came up in parliament.

Michael Howard has said that his personal view is that there should be a reduction in the time limit for abortions from 24 weeks gestation to 20 weeks. This would affect perhaps 3,000 abortions out of 180,000 a year. Howard has said he would not support a reduction to 12 weeks.

Tony Blair has not made his views public but has said that there are no plans to change the law at present. The current speculation is that he might vote for a reduction to 20 weeks if there was a vote, though he voted against a reduction the last time the issue came up.

Charles Kennedy has said he had previously voted for a 22-week limit but medical advances mean "I don't know what I would do now".

Unless you happen to live in one of these men's constituencies however you need to find out what your own candidates think!

We hope that's provided you with an introduction to the issues and trying to think about them from a Christian perspective.