

# The Christian and Politics

What does the Bible say?

## The question is ...

The question is: 'Should a Christian take any part in politics?' Should he or she:

- Vote in a general or local election?
- Join a political party?
- Become an elected representative?
- Join in political demonstrations or pressure groups?

What is really expected of a Christian? What is the right thing to do?

Christadelphians believe that the Bible teaches us that we should avoid *all* involvement in politics and that the answer to each of the questions above is 'No'. But those who are not familiar with this point of view may well be puzzled by it. After all, isn't the right to vote an important part of life in any democratic society? Isn't democracy the best political system for a country, the way to ensure moderate policies and stability? Doesn't this require all of us to participate by playing our part in the political life of our country?

Millions of respectable citizens vote; there are many sincere Christians who are active in politics; and it could be argued that it's actually part of a Christian's *duty* to see that their country is run properly. Surely Christians should exercise their right to vote, should try to get the right people into power and so help to improve society? It has even been suggested that it is un-Christian not to vote. What would happen, for example, if everybody abstained at election times? Wouldn't it result in complete chaos for us all? How could such a selfish attitude possibly be compatible with a Christian outlook?

## 'Society's point of view'

Our society expects its citizens to take part in the political process. It is also true that there are many politicians who enter politics with the conviction that they can improve the lot of mankind. In the recent history of the Western world, a number of governments have had remarkable success in improving the quality of life of the average individual – the establishment of the Welfare State in the UK, and the post-war German economic miracle are obvious examples of this. There are also many leading politicians who are happy to be known as practising Christians, and who seem to have no qualms of conscience about the exercise of power in the interests of the public good. Some political parties even include the description 'Christian' in their party's name.

All these points certainly look like reasons for Christians to be willing to play a responsible part in the way their country is managed, especially if it is 'for the right motives'. So why do Christadelphians take such a different view of these important issues?

## God's point of view

Everything so far in this booklet has been looked at from a purely human standpoint. The phrases used include expressions such as “the public good”, “the quality of life”, and “improving the lot of mankind”.

Now these expressions are all very well if you are a humanist. If you don't believe in God, and you think that man is the author of his own destiny, then it's perfectly reasonable for you to believe that we can manage our own political affairs in a way which will bring about a better future for the world.

But what about God's instructions? What about the teachings of Jesus Christ?

Surely, if we claim to be Christians, followers of Christ, then we cannot leave them out of our considerations. Quite the opposite in fact, we must look very carefully at what they tell us.

Christadelphians believe that it is *only* God's view on this subject that matters – as with every other aspect of our lives. So we must turn to the Bible to read what He has to say about our relationships with the societies in which we live. What then does the Bible have to say about the Christian and Politics? What is the positive teaching of the word of God?

## Three Bible principles

The Bible has much helpful and clear teaching on this subject; in particular there are three principles which we must consider. Briefly summarised, these are:

- God rules in the kingdom of men
- God has His own political manifesto for us
- We should follow the personal example and teaching of Jesus

It is vital for Christians to understand these principles. They will help us to work out exactly how we should respond to calls to vote or become more deeply involved in the political process of the country in which we live.

## First principle: “God rules ...”

God's claim is that He is King – King over all who worship Him now, and King in the past over the nation of Israel. He called the children of Israel to be “a kingdom of priests, a *holy* nation” (Exodus 19:6). Other nations and their leaders, particularly those surrounding Israel, were influenced by God, often without knowing the part they played in His purpose. One of these was king Nebuchadnezzar, an autocratic ruler of ancient Babylon who lived six hundred years before Christ. Like modern humanists who think that people can improve the world by their own devices, he refuted the supremacy of the God of the Bible in the control of human affairs. The Book of Daniel, in the Old Testament, gives us a picture of this great Eastern monarch full of pride at his own achievements. We read of him boasting out loud: “Is not this great Babylon, which *I* have built by *my* mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of *my* majesty?” (Daniel 4:30)

However, Nebuchadnezzar had a hard lesson to learn; three times in this same chapter the all important principle is repeated that:

“The Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.”

To reinforce this principle, Nebuchadnezzar, the great ruler, was suddenly and dramatically struck down with mental illness, was driven away to make his home

with animals, and was deprived of his kingdom until he humbled himself before God.

Nebuchadnezzar rose from the most humble background to be the leader of a great empire. The world saw him as a man who succeeded through his own abilities, yet his life was ordered by God to teach us that God, and not man, is ultimately in control.

When Nebuchadnezzar had his sanity restored by God, he was honest enough to acknowledge these lessons:

“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives for ever ... he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, What doest thou?” (Daniel 4:34,35)

“He does according to his will ... and none can stay his hand.” What implications there are in these words for us as we listen to the promises and the claims of the political leaders of our times! God’s rule, as Nebuchadnezzar came to know, “is an everlasting dominion ...”

## **The principle illustrated again**

It doesn’t really matter which era of man’s history you look into: if you see it from God’s point of view, His control is always in evidence. His hand can be seen, overruling and directing the will of men – whether or not they believe in Him.

Sometimes, for our benefit, the curtain is drawn fully back, as in the example of Cyrus, the great ruler of the Persian Empire in the sixth century BC.

This example of Cyrus gives us a clear insight into how God works ‘behind the scenes’ with men and nations. In Isaiah 45:1, God refers to this powerful ruler as “His anointed”, even though Cyrus himself was not consciously aware of God’s direct involvement in his life. “I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me”, God said to the king (verse 4). The remarkable thing about these words is that they were given by God to the prophet Isaiah, and written down by him, about 170 years before Cyrus was born. At the time the name ‘Cyrus’ would mean nothing! Why did God tell Isaiah that He would control the actions of this man – why was He willing to smooth his path to victory after victory in his rise to power? The prophet tells us why: it was so that the political survival of God’s people, Israel, would be assured. It was done “for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen” (verse 4). God’s purpose with Israel would be fulfilled by Cyrus, even though he didn’t know it at the time.

## **The principle still applies**

Now you may wonder whether all this history is relevant to the politics of the twenty-first century. Surely this first Bible principle makes it clear that this really is the case. “The Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will”, holds true today just as it did over two thousand years ago. The true Christian, the Bible-based believer, understands that God, and not man, is still in control of human affairs. Throughout the Bible, we are shown how the tangled web of local, national, and international politics – so many aspects of which are hidden even from those directly involved – is all in God’s good hands, both in history and in the

contemporary world. “His dominion”, said Nebuchadnezzar, “is an *everlasting* dominion”. God never changes: this Bible principle still applies today, and it applies whether we recognise it or not.

## **Our personal response**

Our personal response to all this will depend on how much we acknowledge the Bible as the word of God and how much we are prepared to listen to its message to us.

If we refuse to accept that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God”, and that it is able to make us “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”, then Bible teaching about God’s control of human affairs will appear meaningless to us. If this is the case then we are justified in making our own fallible political decisions and to make up our own minds as best we may on the basis of what we see and hear in the world around us. But ... we then need to live with the consequences of those decisions, especially when we get them wrong!

Christadelphians believe differently. We accept fully the authority of the Bible and believe that it tells us of the unchanging and everlasting rule of God throughout human history. To unbelievers, a position of complete non-involvement in political affairs seems to be a negative attitude to the political challenges of the world. However, true Christians are men and women who are convinced that God is in control of human affairs, and that His plan and purpose is being worked out on this earth, regardless of what any man may do to thwart it. They believe that such non-involvement is a positive and deliberate statement of allegiance to God, and a complete subjection to His will. Convinced that God is in control – not man – such people take no part at all in politics. How are we to know which of our leaders is the one God wants to be in power? How shall we be sure, if we cast our vote, that we are voting for the person who is the right one in God’s eyes? It is sufficient to know, and to be certain that God’s will shall be done “on earth, as it is in heaven”.

## **Second principle: God has a political manifesto**

The second principle arises from the first. God is in control of our world; but He is not like some mythical Greek god who amuses himself by tampering with our fate and who makes life difficult for us for no particular reason. Far from it! Instead, the Bible shows us very clearly that our God – the God of the Old Testament and of the New – has His own political agenda. He has planned the ultimate solution for all the problems of our world; and it is for that perfect remedy that every true Christian should pray, as Jesus taught his disciples to say:

“Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. *Thy* kingdom come. *Thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9,10)

The Bible tells us that God, the Creator of this earth, has had one specific purpose in mind for it from the beginning of time. The Bible tells us quite unequivocally what that purpose is. The time is coming when God’s laws will be enforced throughout the whole earth. The word of God contains this divine political manifesto for the earth’s future. It is a manifesto full of promises which God Himself will deliver, and towards which He is constantly at work in our world. Moreover, He gives us an absolute guarantee that what He has promised, He will deliver:

“But truly, as I live ... all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord.” (Numbers 14:21)

## **The manifesto unfolds: 1 – Nebuchadnezzar’s dream**

We shall now look at four Bible passages which summarise God’s manifesto for the future of our world.

The first takes us back again to king Nebuchadnezzar. This king had a dream of a giant statue of a man, made of five different metals. In his dream, the statue was knocked over by a stone and ground into powder by it. The stone then grew into a mountain which filled the whole earth. Perhaps not surprisingly, the king could not understand his dream and he needed the prophet Daniel to tell him its meaning (Daniel 2:36-45). The interpretation he gave is an intriguing and accurate political history of the nation of Israel and the nations which invade it, given in remarkable prophetic detail that can be mapped from Babylon to the present day. The precise identification of these various empires is a fascinating and rewarding subject.

However the important point for us now to notice is that (in verses 44,45) God declares His intention to set up His own kingdom, the establishment of which is foreshadowed by the work of the little stone in the dream:

“The God of heaven (shall) set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

This, in a nutshell, is God’s political manifesto.

## **The manifesto unfolds: 2 – Daniel’s vision**

Later in his life, Daniel had a dream about the fulfilment of this promise. He described it like this:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13,14)

Although the language used in the book of Daniel is sometimes difficult to understand, there can be no misunderstanding of this passage. Here is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. He is given authority by his Father to return to the earth and to rule over it. *All* nations will serve him. What a picture of power and authority this is! When he comes, no-one will be able to resist him.

## **The manifesto unfolds: 3 – the role of Jesus**

Matthew 26 contains the remarkable record of Jesus standing before the High Priest at his trial. Shortly afterwards he will be taken and crucified, but Matthew gives us a picture of him which clearly identifies him with the “stone” of Daniel 2 and the “Son of Man” of Daniel 7.

The significance of this particular occasion is underlined by the fact that Jesus is on oath, and on trial for his life, before the highest civil and spiritual authority of first century Israel. The Jewish leaders, who hated Jesus, were trying to catch him on a charge of blasphemy, and wanted him to repeat his earlier claim to be “the Christ, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63). Jesus, who always spoke the truth, could hardly deny that this was true. “You have said so” was his reply. This is a Jewish idiom

equivalent to saying: 'You're quite right'. Jesus did not leave it there, however, he went on to identify himself to the High Priest as the one like "the Son of Man" in Daniel 7; and he did this by quoting Daniel 7:13 and applying it to himself: "... But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:64)

Jesus could hardly have been more explicit. He was telling the Jews that he was indeed the one promised by Daniel who would come to set up an everlasting kingdom on the earth. This is confirmed by the violent response of the High Priest who knew his Old Testament scriptures and who recognised that Jesus was applying Daniel's prophecy to himself. He was appalled at what he considered to be these blasphemous claims by Jesus.

"Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, 'He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses?'"

No further need at all! Jesus *is* the Son of Man *and* the stone of Daniel; and he will both destroy the kingdom of men at his coming and receive the eternal kingdom of his Father!

## **The manifesto unfolds: 4 – but when? (Acts 3)**

The fourth and final Bible passage picks up that important word used by Jesus in Matthew 26:64: "Hereafter". We know for certain that Jesus will be God's appointed ruler in His eternal kingdom. However it is not until the apostles commenced their preaching about Jesus (after his ascension to heaven) that we get some inkling as to *when* Jesus will finish God's work and fulfil all His manifesto pledges.

Acts 3 gives us a helpful clue about when the "hereafter" might be. This is only the second time the Christian gospel was preached after the ascension of Jesus, and therefore the message is all the more significant. The preacher is the Apostle Peter, who declares:

"Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." (Acts 3:19-21)

Peter confirms the good news of the great promises made by God. His was not a new message but a continuation of those things which God had spoken of from the beginning of the world! What greater assurance could there be that God's plan for the world was still on course? This is what true Christians should be preaching about and praying for today – the kingdom of God on earth ruled over by His Son Jesus. This is the only political manifesto with which true Christians should get involved. This is the *only* solution to all the world's problems which God Himself will bring about, whatever men may say or do either to help or hinder Him. "For who has resisted his will?" (Romans 9:19).

## **Third principle: the example and teaching of Jesus**

The personal example and teaching of Jesus Christ is of great importance to those who think about this subject. How did Jesus act and speak when faced with the political issues of his day? What were his responses and what did he expect of his

disciples as they followed him? Perhaps most important of all, what does Jesus expect of us today?

## **Jesus Christ himself: rendering unto Caesar?**

Thankfully we are not left in doubt about how Jesus behaved when faced with political questions. There are many occasions recorded in the Gospels when his contemporaries asked for his opinions about such matters, or wanted to embroil him (often for their own ends) in political issues. And yet, on every one of these occasions, Jesus steadfastly refused to be drawn into the arguments, or to commit himself to one party or another in the contemporary political scene. His attitude towards the state was based on conscientiously obeying the laws of the land and no more – and even then only if that did not conflict with his duty towards God. Luke 20 contains one particularly important incident of this kind. The enemies of Jesus were keen to draw him into declaring his political allegiance. Was it right or wrong for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome? Here was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to show his solidarity with his people, downtrodden as they were by the cruel power of Rome and the rapacity of their greedy tax-gatherers. Yet the answer of Jesus rose right above the political issues, avoided the minefield of controversy, and placed the answer firmly back on the individual conscience:

“Render ... to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Luke 20:25)

What a wonderfully balanced response this is for every disciple of Jesus Christ! His answer holds true for every generation – not just for oppressed Jews in his day. If we truly gave to God everything we should, then we should have very little time, energy, or resource to devote to anyone or anything else. So while the reply of Jesus may seem to be just a brilliant piece of verbal diplomacy to get him out of a tricky situation, it is actually a searching challenge to every would-be Christian. Where is our true allegiance, and whose claims upon us take precedence? If we are *really* committed to God, then it is impossible for us to balance an interest in this world with our discipleship. God wants wholehearted believers whose political interests lie solely in the coming kingdom of God, for:

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Matthew 6:24)

## **The example of Jesus again: “Art thou a king then?”**

There was an occasion during his ministry when Jesus became so popular with the crowds that they wanted to take him by force and make him their king there and then (John 6:15). So how did Jesus respond to this public acclaim? Did he seize it as an opportunity to make his world a better place, by using his influence and power for the common good? Did he listen to the voice of the people? For here, surely, was a wonderful opportunity for this great leader, with such gifts of oratory and personal charisma, to use his God-given talents to help his nation in their difficulties under the yoke of Rome. How did he behave in such circumstances, and why?

It is worth remembering that the preparation that Jesus underwent in the wilderness, prior to his public ministry, included this very same challenge. One of the temptations he faced was to use his power to reign over the whole earth there

and then (Matthew 4:8-10). He knew that God's kingdom on earth would one day be his. Many Old Testament prophets had promised this (including Daniel, as we have seen). The angel Gabriel had confirmed this to his mother (Luke 1:32,33). "All power in heaven and earth" had been promised to him by God (Matthew 28:18). But this would only happen in *God's* good time – it was *God's* timetable for these things which was important, not that which Jesus was tempted to implement. He had the power of God's Holy Spirit: he could do great good in the world, he could influence world politics more than any other man before or since. Yet he resisted this temptation because it was not part of God's plan. It was not for Jesus to try to seize the initiative from God, or to force his Father's hand.

For this reason Jesus refused to use his popularity with the crowds to try to make his Father accelerate His manifesto programme. So the record tells us that:

"Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself." (John 6:15)

He had the wisdom to recognise that it was not yet the time for him to intervene in world affairs.

Within a short time, however, the fickle crowds who wanted Jesus as their king had turned against him. Small wonder then that Pontius Pilate, when Jesus was brought before him on the charge of claiming to be "the King of the Jews", should ask him point blank: "So you are a king?" (John 18:37). Pilate was used to rebels and zealots rising up against the power of Rome. However, he recognised that Jesus was different, and that the last thing he was guilty of was political resistance to the Roman power. Jesus had never agitated against Rome, and he was not guilty of the trumped-up charge. "I find no crime in him", was Pilate's conclusion after examining his case.

"So are you a king?" was Pilate's somewhat puzzled question to Jesus; and the reply that Jesus gave explains his steadfast refusal to participate in the politics of his day.

"Jesus answered, My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight ... but my kingship is not from the world (or, my kingdom is from another place)." (John 18:36)

## **In the footsteps of Jesus: the early disciples**

No fighting then – the followers of Christ must not bear or use arms, unless specifically instructed by their Lord. For they must "speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, be gentle, and show perfect courtesy toward all men" (Titus 3:2). So no political agitation or direct action for Jesus and his immediate disciples, since their political agenda was set by God Himself, for another time, and "from another place". For his immediate first century followers too, it was a case of following the Lord's example in relation to the state and political affairs. For them, as for Jesus, it was a matter of passive subjection to authority, of non-participation, and of watching and praying patiently for the kingdom of God to come.

They were to learn from Israel of old. The Apostle Peter, writing to Christian believers, said: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). He told them that they were "as aliens and exiles" in the different countries where they lived (verse 11). The example they were to show to

unbelievers was of quiet and humble obedience: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution ... Fear God. Honour the emperor” (verses 13,17).

No doubt they remembered how, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spelled out to them what these things meant in practice. His discourse is found in Matthew 5-7 and we call it the Sermon on the Mount. In it Jesus gave direct answers to the questions we asked at the beginning of this booklet. We can summarise them in the table below.

**Vote in a general or local election or join a political party?**

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (6:21)

**Become an elected representative?**

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (6:24)

**Join in political demonstrations or pressure groups to make a better world?**

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.” (6:34)

All of these things were then summed up by him with the wonderful instruction to each one of us:

“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

For the true Christian, nothing is more important than the coming kingdom and our personal preparation for it.

## **A prime example: the Apostle Paul**

The Apostle Paul is just one of many examples of disciples who followed this teaching of their Master. He was involved in politics as much as any man could be. As Saul of Tarsus, he advanced his career by persecuting the followers of Jesus. He was an energetic member of the most active party in the Jewish political world and was almost certainly the holder of a key party office, a kind of roving representative of the Sanhedrin (the top governing body of the Jews in the first century AD). He may even have been a member of the Sanhedrin itself, even though he was still comparatively young. Yet this same man was completely changed by his conversion to Christianity. Once he became a disciple of Christ, his only ambitions in life were, as he put it, to “win Christ” and to “attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:8,11). As an active disciple of Christ, Paul had no time for anything else. He willingly let go a promising political career to devote himself wholly to Jesus.

As we read Paul’s words, it is important to remember that he was an inspired apostle. He wrote as the mouthpiece of Christ and his words are part of the inspired scriptures. He told of many aspects of the true Christian life, including this issue of whether or not we should become politically engaged in our own day. He said that his words were a matter of commandment – not just some kind of optional advice as to whether we follow the example of Jesus or not. Rather, as he put it in his Letter to the Philippians:

“Let us hold true to what we have attained. Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.” (Philippians 3:16,17)

Paul warned that there would always be those who refused to behave like Jesus and the apostles; and he characterised them very accurately for us:

“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, *with minds set on earthly things.*” (verses 18,19)

Those who are more interested in the things of this present world are the enemies of Christ, however hard this may appear to be. But for those who, like Jesus, look for a kingdom “from another place”, Paul’s reminder is a great comfort, and a helpful guide to what our Christian outlook on the modern world should be.

“But our commonwealth (citizenship) is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.” (verses 20,21)

## **True citizenship**

The Christian’s allegiance is to Jesus Christ as God’s appointed king. “Our citizenship”, for the time being, is in heaven, where Jesus is. We know he will return to this earth to fulfil all God’s promises which are centred in him. These promises, given first to the fathers of the Jewish race like Abraham and David, explain that God intends to centre His worldwide kingdom in Jerusalem, with His laws improving the lot of the world’s population. He sent Jesus to prepare for this time by overcoming sin and death, and promising life and immortality to all who follow him. The political powers of the earth, as the Bible tells us so clearly, are helpless to improve the earth and to bring about the glorious transformation which God has sworn to make.

Psalm 72 speaks of the wonderful things Christ will do at his return. “He shall ...” it says, as it records a time of prosperity and peace, of justice and righteousness that the Son of God will bring about on this earth. This is the manifesto worth voting for and giving all of our time and energy to. When he comes it will be the time spoken of by the Apostle John:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

## **Allegiance to Christ**

In the meantime, the true Christian belongs wholly to Christ, not half-heartedly to this passing world. If he or she is wise, they will give their allegiance to no-one else. Only one man who has ever lived is worthy of such confidence and trust: only Jesus Christ is capable of always doing the right thing and of consistently making the best decisions on our behalf.

It stands to reason that we cannot faithfully serve two masters. So let us make our choice between Christ and the leaders of this world. And if we really want results on which we can depend – peace of mind now, and eternal happiness to come – let us choose Christ as our representative and cast our vote for him, and him alone.

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