



PRAY
FREELY



RAISE
PASTORS



GO
OUT



LEARN
ALWAYS



CHURCH
AS FAMILY

Minding the Gap (Between Church & State)

This paper lays out a positional framework for approaching varied issues of political theology in the public square.

NO TALKING ABOUT RELIGION, SEX, OR POLITICS?

A few years ago, when some members of our church spoke with our local political representative about an injustice to an asylum-seeker, I wrote a small paper to settle church nerves. It was clear that they were jangling. Discussing religion as a church is what people call a 'no-brainer' and we seem to have become more used to talking about sex, but this experience showed that there is still a gap between church and politics. I discovered the old family dinner-table rule still applies, at least when it comes to politics.

The reasons people hold against the church world talking to the political world are many and obvious.

1. Politics appears to thrive on a discourse of division, but churches don't. We know that political divisions should never compromise spiritual unity. Why talk with a world that thrives on division.
2. Our 'main game' is gospel proclamation in love, not position papers on debatable points.
3. Our hope is in Jesus' kingdom, not in Canberra. Amen.
4. Australians are pretty cynical about politics, and prefer to keep cynicism outside the church door and enjoy unusual sincerity within it.
5. We are anxious about a phrase called the 'separation of church and state', the origin and definition of which we are largely unsure, but the power of which is undeniable.

The reasons some people give for speaking about politics as a church are also many and obvious.

1. Biblical ethical material overlaps with matters debated in the political realm.
2. Biblical teaching seems to contain something like a framework for a 'political theology'.
3. We are members of a representative democracy, and can hardly do justice in speaking to our representatives if we speak as though we are not also representatives - of Christ.
4. Our representatives sometimes *seek* opportunities to speak with us.

Clearly, this leaves us with something like the anxiety of a country kid at Central Station. When someone first points out a gap and tells you to mind it, you can only imagine what dangers might befall you if you don't. In the same way, the 'separation' of church and state is full of unspecified fears for us.

We hope to be more mindful of the gap than this. In particular, we hope to replace unspecified fears with clear understanding. This paper argues it is inevitable and necessary to cross the gap and speak as Christians in the political realm.

We are going to begin exploring reasons to relate as a 'church people' to the 'state' from both ends. Firstly, we will explore why the Australian state permits us to interact as Christians, and in what manner. Secondly, we will explore why the bible offers no reason why we should not, and in fact, gives us some helpful shape in how we ought.

WHY RELATE?: REASONS FROM AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

Some might immediately object - "Why do we need any reasons from democracy?! We are bible people!". This is surely not the place for Christians to begin.

As we shall soon see, the bible gives us a command to submit ourselves to ruling authorities. It follows that it would be good to know exactly what those ruling authorities are asking us to submit too. So let's begin there.

The basis of this ruling authority in Australia (since 1901) is the Constitution, which has at least one helpful thing to say on the matter. Let's consider its' background, its' text and then some interpretation and application.

a. The Text of the Constitution

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth. Section 116

b. Interpreting the Constitution

Now began a long history of constitutional interpretations and tests at law.

The Preamble of the Constitution, with its explicit mention of God makes clear enough that talk of God would be acceptable in the public sphere, if without much conviction.¹ The Constitution was clearly not a sign of a stridently atheistic state. But Section 116 makes clear that competing talk of God is more desirable than single religious voice and that no single church shall be enabled to gain hegemony. The section preserves

1. religious pluralism within the nation by excluding religious exclusivism within the state
2. freedom from state imposition of religion
3. freedom from state restriction of the exercise of religion
4. freedom from a religious test as a qualification for state positions

So, if religion is not to be privileged, or rather, no religion is to be privileged over another, how does the relationship work? What does the constitution suggest that the state wants the church to do and be? Two options present themselves.

1. Part of a principled pluralism - part of a variety of voices in public life.
2. Part of an ideological separation - accepting of the removal of all religious influences from the public sphere.

I would argue that Australia's polity sought *pragmatic pluralism* with some cursory consideration for *principled pluralism* on the basis of freedom of

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conscience. Many modern commentators are motivated by *structural* or *ideological* separation. (Marion Maddox, Max Wallace, Helen Irving). The battleground for constitutional interpretations is drawn up in such a manner.²

c. The Background to the Constitution

Long before Federation, a trajectory had been set for the relationship of church and state. In 1836, with more than 30% of the population Irish Roman Catholic, religious pluralism was already well-advanced in fact in various states. This began to be enshrined in law *with particular regard to the freedom of individual conscience*. In NSW, the *Church Act* of 1836 confirmed that the Church of England would not be regarded as an Established church in New South Wales, and religious practice was to be separated from any coercive power of the state.³

‘in a New Country to which Persons of all religious persuasions are invited to resort, it will be impossible to establish a dominant and endowed Church without much hostility and greater improbability of its becoming permanent. The inclination of these Colonists, which keeps pace with the Spirit of the Age, is decidedly adverse to such an Institution; and I fear the interests of Religion would be prejudiced by its Establishment.’

As went New South Wales, so went the new nation. In 1901, its new constitution made the distinction between state power and church practice doubly clear.

d. Applying the Constitution

So it seems that the necessary ‘gap’ between church and state in the Constitution does not serve to limit Christians or ‘The Church’ in communicating with the state, but it does protect us from the state establishing religion, and yet allows us freedom in the practice of it.

Our voice, then, should not be regarded as insignificant, as representative democracy must in some way seek to be representative of us too. Yet our expectation of representation should be modest, as representatives stand for the common association of all citizens, not our special interests. Representation is a political concept that requires significant room for imperfection and generosity of spirit.⁴

In summary, nothing prevents us from relating to our political representatives as self-declaring Christians, or as representatives of church bodies, with attendant agendas, and much encourages it.

It would seem that the gap between church and state is valued from the state’s end in a commitment to religious pluralism (indeed, pluralism of conscience more generally), and ought to be valued by Christians for the same reason. It teaches us due modesty about Christian expectations of power, while encouraging the free exercise of the rights of democratic citizenship.

There is no reason constitutionally for Christians, churches and Christian collectives of other forms not to cross the gap and communicate as the ‘church’ with the ‘state’.

WHY RELATE?: REASONS FROM THE BIBLE

There is, in fact, no real possibility of having no relationship with the state, whether we like it or not. Our popular conception of strict separation is

² This information and much following is drawn from Tom Frame, *Church and State*, UNSW Briefings, 2007

³ It is important to note that the idea of a ‘wall of separation’ was first phrased by Roger Williams, a Baptist founder of the Rhode Island colony as a protection of religion against the state. He envisaged religion as a ‘garden’, which would be protected by a useful wall, on the other side of which was government, which regarded to be a ‘wilderness’.

⁴ Oliver O’Donovan *The Ways of Judgment* Fordham 2005

unworkable and impossible. While we are 'in the world, but not of it', we are still 'in' it. No surprise then, that the bible has lots of advice for us on how to handle being God's holy little microbe within such an overwhelming host!

The scriptures leave eight positions for us to adopt in relation to government powers, and some of them to adopt simultaneously. If it is a 'political theology', it is complex and multi-faceted.

Prayer for the powers (for the gospel's sake)	(1 Timothy 2:1-4)
Submission to the powers	(Romans 13:1-2)
Counsel to the powers (when called upon)	(Daniel 1:17-21; 2 Samuel 12:7-10; Proverbs 16:13)
Protest against unjust powers	(2 Samuel 12:7-10; Luke 18:1-8)
Appeal legitimately to the powers	(Acts 16:37)
Suffering under the powers	(Acts 4:25; 1 Peter 2:21-23)
Honoring the powers	(Acts 24:3 & Acts 26:25; 1 Peter 2:17)
Exemplary to the powers	(???)
Hope beyond the powers	(Isaiah 9:6-7)
Victory over the powers	(Revelation 17-19)

The scriptures clearly expect a relationship between God's people and the 'state' of a complex nature on multiple levels.

So, we have reasons from the state to relate, and more reasons than we imagined from the scriptures. Both also give us direction as to *how* to relate. How to put glue in the gap, if you like.

RELATING IMPLICITLY AND EXPLICITLY

How do you know *what* to relate about?

Most of the time we do not need to ask this question, for we are relating *implicitly*, without any thought about it whatsoever. We engage in public discourse at work, we pay our taxes, we obey the road rules, we allow disagreement, we are peaceable. We are being politically useful as Christian citizens more often than we realise. It is remarkable that it is both so normal to us and unremarkable.

We become more anxious when our attention is called to it *explicitly*. When there is a possible religious influence upon the public sphere. This usually happens when we feel we have 'something we ought to say'.

Do we speak up about same-sex marriage? If we do, then why not about the treatment of asylum seekers? What about something as significant but, dare I say it, incomprehensible as superannuation law? Aid? Maintenance of rights? How can we dare pick and choose? Inevitably, we will.

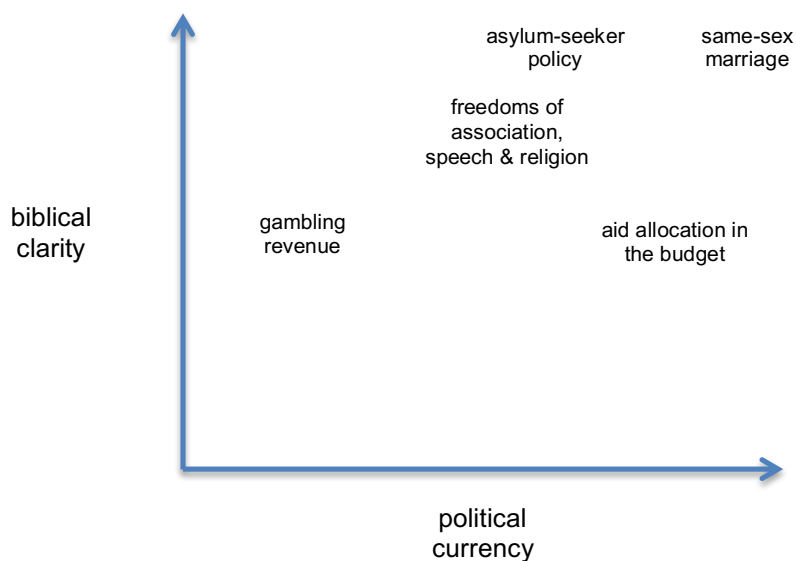
Of course, we will want to economise on our engagement with the political realm to some degree (time, communications) because our main game is gospel proclamation in love, not political engagement for the common good (as good as that sounds, and is!). So it becomes more important to choose our measure of action carefully.

I propose a simple formula for an issue:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Weight of biblical ethic} \\ \times \\ \text{Strategic importance in political realm} \\ \times \\ \text{Knowledge of the subject} \\ \times \\ \text{(Gospel cost)} \end{array}$$

A combination of clear biblical-ethical compulsion *with* present political currency would seem both obvious and sensible. What is more, possession of wisdom on the matter increases the usefulness of action.

For this reason, it would make sense for a church to periodically decide which issues it might wish to speak to. I think what would be best is if a small group of engaged church-members met to consider that question. They might generate an approach like this:



Against this simple matrix we would need to consider the degree of wisdom we might contribute, for 'the prudent keep their knowledge to themselves, but a fool's heart blurts out folly.' (Proverbs 12:23)

We hope we have explained both the 'why' of relating to the state, and shown a plausible 'how'. Yet we have not attended to a large remaining concern - guarding the unity of Jesus' flock against controversy and petty division.

Unity Guarded #1: Freedom to Disagree

The greatest fear in relating church and state is that we will end up dividing by an issue what Christ has brought together by his blood. This is a very reasonable fear and needs addressing.

The first thing to say is that church life is full of greater and lesser things. Preaching the gospel is always of greater importance than song choice. Prayer beats the morning tea recipe list. So there are different levels of necessity to a unity of opinion.

We unite around Jesus (his divinity and humanity; his life, death, resurrection & ascension) and agree on him as the greatest and most non-negotiable matter. The gospel of Jesus is our first-order issue. Yet we manage to hold a variety of positions within our church over such important things like the Lord's Supper or baptism. While the way the gospel is lived or expressed in these biblically-

significant forms is important, it is still second-order. As we descend through the orders, so the demand for unity of opinion must decrease.

Furthermore, practically, the sheer complexity of political strategies may cause us to differ even where we agree on principle.

For these reasons, because of a weighing of orders of importance, and because of issue-complexity, there must be freedom to disagree.

Unity Guarded #2: Church Discussion, Personal Action

So while we may *speak* to politics in church, we *act* on politics outside it.

This gives the power of action to the right people (the people), and allows for a freedom of expression and diversity of practical political policy and strategy. By this too, unity is guarded.

Gluing it All Together

So here are our thoughts gathered, summed up and stuck together.

1. We know a relationship exists between Christians, church and politics that is biblically complex and involves prayer, submission, counsel, suffering, protest and hope.

2. We work on a practical assumption that Christians *should* speak to politics when there is a clear biblical ethic, an issue has high political currency, and there is sufficient wisdom.

3. We distinguish between a church's response to political issues and a Christian's response by asking church to *speak to biblical principle*, and Christians (individually or collectively) to *act on political policy*.

We hope these principles will help us know where to (and how to) put the glue in the gap between church and state.

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