

Relational Musings Concerning God and Politics

By Tim Reddish

God's relationship with political leadership requires citizens to exercise free will wisely and responsively, mindful of God's priorities.

As I write, my home country of Canada has just returned Trudeau's Liberal Party to power (but as a minority government), Britain is undergoing a general election and wrestling with the complex matter of Brexit, and the United States is gearing up for 2020 elections while embroiled in an impeachment inquiry. Democratic politics can be very messy! Where does God come into all this? Does God *already* know who our future elected leaders will be? More to the point, does God manipulate circumstances – so to speak – so that *his* pick wins? In other words, is it really true that, as Paul says in Romans 13:1, “The authorities that exist have been established by God”?

In responding to these questions, I think it's helpful to begin by reviewing God's relationship with his people throughout history, beginning with Moses. God called Moses to lead his people from bondage in Egypt and later established a covenant with them, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Joshua took them over the River Jordan into the Promised Land and, in time, God called special individuals, “judges,” to lead the people. A judge was a combination of a military deliverer, a magistrate, and an administrator. Being a judge was not an inherited right; God continued to appoint his leaders. The last judge was Samuel and, in his old age, the people came to him desirous of *king* as his successor so they could be like the other nations around them. Samuel was unhappy; so – we are told - was God: the LORD told Samuel, “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but *they have rejected me as their king*” (1 Sam 8:6-7). Samuel warned the people of the consequences in having a monarchy, namely taxation and conscription, but the people still wanted a king and the LORD relented (1 Sam 8:19-22). Guided by God, Samuel sought out a suitable king and anointed tall and handsome Saul. Initially popular, he soon disobeyed God's instructions and we are told God “regretted appointing Saul as King” (1 Sam 15:11).

Let's pause for a moment: *God regrets?! Did God not know* beforehand that Saul would turn out to be a disappointment? Apparently not, according to this biblical writer. (See also Gen 6:6.)

Now kingship normally begins a hereditary line but, curiously, rather simply continue with Saul's noble son, Jonathan, God decided to start again with David. Kings were meant to be shepherds of the people, caring benevolently for their subjects as a surrogate for God. But this didn't happen; Israel's history is of a few good kings and many corrupt ones. To counteract this tendency, God raised up *prophets* to speak truth-to-power, to encourage kings to exercise social justice and remind them to worship the one true God. In the end, Israel was repeatedly taken captive by various empires and lost their right to self-determination – the Roman empire in New Testament times being just one such example. The Jewish *religion* and the Jewish *nation*, then, were strongly interlinked. As Israel self-analyzed their plight, they understood their predicament to be a consequence of their repeated failure to keep the covenant made at the time of Moses (see Deuteronomy 28). They therefore longed for a *political* deliverer in the Messiah, and many religious leaders sought to hasten his arrival by encouraging everyone to recommit themselves to following the

Mosaic Law. Christianity was born in this environment as an emerging, minority religion within the Roman Empire.

It was not until Emperor Constantine's edict of Milan in 313 CE that Christianity become acceptable - even respectable - within the Roman Empire. Before long (in 325 CE), Constantine wanted one religion for one empire and he established the first Church Council of Nicaea (in modern-day Turkey) to begin thrashing out church doctrine, create a formal Creed, and formalize the New Testament. Prior to that, the churches around the Mediterranean were semi-independent. The effect of all this was a merging of Church and state and the formation of "Christendom." This infused power, money, and influence into the Western Church and lasted for 1600 years! Even the Protestant Reformation required new national marriages of Church and state to sustain its rebellion from Rome.

In the last few centuries, two important political developments have occurred: the rise of nationalism together with modern forms of democracy. Moreover, in the last 60 years there has been the collapse of Christendom, which many churches are only just recognizing. All three impact upon this question of God's relationship with political leaders today. First, nationalism strives for territorial self-governance, free from outside interference. Coupled with this, however, is an expected sense of prime loyalty to the nation state and its flag. Such loyalty can usurp God and become idolatrous. Second, in modern democracies, a monarch's influence is minimal (or non-existent) and public elections take place to choose a country's leaders. Such a notion was unheard of in Biblical times! Consequently, simply translating biblical ideas, which we can see *evolved* from the times of the judges to that of the early Church, into our contemporary political scenes is fraught with difficulty. Third, the collapse of Christendom has created not only a crisis for the place of the Church within society, but a re-evaluation of the Church's relationship of power and privilege that it previously had with the Establishment, (i.e., its influence in politics, ethics, education, healthcare, taxation, etc.). Some see this demise as a tragic loss of a what was previously deemed to be a "Christian nation." But that "loss" - if that's the right word - really began centuries earlier in Western culture, during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and with the emergence of an individualistic, secular society. Frankly, that is where we find ourselves today and I think it is foolish to waste effort trying to put the genie back in the bottle. It would be better if the (Western) Church recognized we are now in a situation not unlike the 1st century Christians: as a minority religion in a pluralistic society and one where the prevalent culture is not neutral to Christianity.

Given this background, we could ask, "What would Jesus do?" This not as simple a question as it might seem, because Jesus was more political than many people recognize. For example, in choosing *twelve* disciples, he was making a political statement as this signified establishing a new Israel, echoing its original twelve tribes. Jesus also confronted the religious and political leaders of his day; his overturning of the money-changers' tables in the Temple court was a public act of rebellion against corruption. Moreover, as we see throughout the gospels, Jesus keeps talking about the "*kingdom* of God." He, therefore, sounds and acts political. Yet John reports that at Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, he stated, "My kingdom is not *of* this world" (John 18:36). And Pilate was so convinced Jesus was not a *political* threat that he wanted to release him!¹ In light

¹John 18:38b; Luke 23:4,14-15,22. Jesus' claim was, therefore, *not* one of *political* kingship, but his radical upside-down "kingdom" was most definitely *for* this world. That's why it's better to think of the kingdom of God not as a *place* but as a *time* - not a location but an era. And this also explains why the kingdom of God doesn't recognize national boundaries.

of this, trying to establish or maintain an idealized “Christian nation” is precisely what the gospel is *not* about - despite many Christians today thinking the contrary! The ministry of Jesus was *not* an attempt to re-establish a pre-monarchical, territorial form of governance. Nevertheless, it is still theologically appropriate to say, “Jesus is now King.” Through Jesus, God has given his people new hearts, ones renewed by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is the king of *hearts*.

We can therefore see that God’s relationship with political leaders has *adapted* with the times. In that process, it is not unreasonable to say that throughout history God respects human free will and does *not* override it. Instead, the divine Spirit tries to influence hardened hearts through those whose hearts are sensitive and responsive to God’s desires. This being the case, in a democracy, where the public choose their leaders, dare I suggest that God has relatively little to do with the final outcome. Once everyone has cast their vote, however, God will certainly be the first to know who has won the election! But if God is not coercive, and if free will is genuine, then it is *not* a foregone conclusion that the result of an election will also be God’s preference. Consequently, I am not convinced that Paul’s bold claim, “There is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom 13:1) is literally true.

Instead, I think a better way to understand God’s relationship with leaders is to begin with the proclamation, “God is the ultimate ruler” and acknowledge that a leader’s authority is always *in relation* to him. Our political rulers, then, don’t have absolute authority – even though some act and behave as if they do! Ideally, our leaders are benevolent and just. Their role is to create and maintain social cohesion, for God desires order not chaos. But if our leaders claim for themselves the absolute authority that belongs to God, or become agents of evil rather than of good, then I don’t think the appropriate Christian response is to cite Romans 13:1 and passively see their acts as divinely mandated. After all, we believe the biblical prophets were *inspired* to courageously speak out *against* the established authorities, don’t we? If such a government no longer functions as a responsible servant of God, it is not to be blindly obeyed as such. The Civil Rights Movement in America can be recognized as legitimate in this light. But in resisting the state, we are to follow Christ’s example and seek to do it non-violently, and always wisely counting the cost. Paul gave no advice on knowing when a government or a leader has crossed a red-line and become a force for evil and injustice. That we have to responsibly figure out for ourselves, preferably collectively, and always with the help of the Holy Spirit, who - amongst other things - may still be speaking through prophetic voices today.

Biographical Details

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