

Who are you going to vote for?

Somehow I have managed to become part of *The Australian* newspaper's *Online Opinion* research. Several times a year I am canvassed for my opinion on the Australian Government and Opposition, their policies and their leadership. In the last survey, there were new questions on demographics and whether one's religious conviction affected the way you would vote. I thought this was an interesting series of questions and worth exploring further from a Christian perspective. It also raised the question in me about how we support different candidates (parties) according to their education policies.

When looking at the Scriptures to seek guidance on these matters Christians are confronted by a world in which democracy, as it is known today, was unheard of. The context for both Jesus' words and Paul's writings are in a world dominated by the Roman Empire and where, in Israel, Jewish religious authority commanded both power and influence over the behaviour of individuals. The interplay of these two authorities and their power is best illustrated in the context in which Christ is crucified.

In today's world, many countries know little about democracy and are governed by authoritarian regimes that provide little or no opportunity for the democratic processes of consultation, representation, voting and communication including freedom of the press. Still fewer countries have an adversarial Westminster system that invites criticism, public accountability and many forms of dissent.

There is an election on 21 August and Christians should be grateful for the opportunity to participate. Once on the election role, participation becomes compulsory and should be taken seriously and prayerfully. So what should Christians be looking for when they vote? Do they give their preferences to Christian candidates or parties?

Some Biblical reflections

1. Romans 13

In this passage Paul makes clear that Christians are to submit to governing authorities. He goes further and acknowledges that these authorities *exist* and have *been established by God* (V. 1). He acknowledges the role of governing authorities in maintaining the rule of law (my words) and the collection of revenue. Paul assumes, that in keeping Roman law, that the law is good and supportive of right action by Christians. However, he does not provide any advice on how Christians should deal with corrupt authorities. Complete submission to these verses helped Hitler to power and could see Christians promoting and being submissive to some of the most horrific regimes of today's world.

The principle is to submit to governing authorities, but not without exception and these exceptions always carry consequences. So Christians in Australia will obey the democratically elected Government, but recognise that rebellion on some point or issue will have consequences, sometimes judicial, and that such action should not be taken lightly. A vote on the 21 August will not be for the Government simply because they want it. Even the Government would want to win votes, not command them. Christians should be guided by other principles not simply obedience to the authority of the day.

2. Matthew 5

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to be the *light* and *salt* of the world. Being *light* and *salt* are mainly about showing the goodness of God through our lives so that the world can know the character of God. In the concept of salt there is an added dimension. In the world in which these words were spoken, salt was a preservative. To taste salt was to be assured that the meat, in particular, was right to eat. If the saltiness was lost, then preservation was not assured.

Here Christ is asking his followers to be the *salt of the earth*. To be the force that preserves what is morally good and right even when the wrong is popular. In a democracy, this injunction provides both opportunities for Christians to promote good and to expose evil. It can also form a principle for making judgments about political candidates and parties. Which candidate or party is most likely, irrespective of its general philosophy, to better promote what is good and repress evil? Which candidate or party will most support my role as a Christian in society to promote what is consistent with the character of God (good) and address what is not (evil)?

Some further reflections

1. Christian candidates

As a Christian, will it be better for me to vote for a Christian candidate or party so that God's purposes can be upheld?

If the decision is to vote for a Christian or a Christian party, then it must be recognised that Christians hold a variety of positions on this matter. Some believe that being part of a major political party is the most effective way to witness and influence government and change our community. Others believe that in the major parties conformity to the party line on issues renders Christians ineffective and that standing as an independent or as part of an identified Christian party is more impactful.

Both these valid positions are acknowledged, but how might they affect voting? If I vote for an independent or minor party candidate am I reducing the worth of my vote because they are unlikely to be elected? This is a factor to consider, but it can be off-set by the system of preferential voting that allows all votes to end up with one of the two major parties and in Senate elections direct representation is more likely to be successful. So your preferences become crucial and your direct Senate vote significant.

If voting effectiveness is not the issue and you want to vote for a Christian party or candidate then you should do that.

Others will argue that : Being a Christian does not automatically make a person a better or more effective politician and that they would rather vote for someone or party that has policies that support a broader set of Christian principles like:

- Narrowing the gap between rich and poor
- Supporting families
- Increasing the common wealth so that individuals are more economically sufficient
- Encouraging work productivity and initiative
- Providing a fairer distribution of income
- Caring for the environment
- Providing for those most disadvantaged in the community

These Christians will argue that being the *salt of the earth* is for them supporting the greater good for the greatest number of people and that means a vote for a major party.

2. Excessive scrupulosity

This wonderful term is used in *Christ and the moral life* (Gustafson 1979) and it refers to Christians who are so intimidated by the need to be morally correct that they chose not to act because they might make the wrong choice. In the context of voting this could refer to:

- Christians who do not register to vote because they believe the system is worldly (sinful) and not Christian
- Christians who chose not to vote on the day or vote “informally” because they can not discern a morally correct candidate or party
- Christians who vote for Christian parties because they believe that they can only vote for a Christian and avoid voting for someone or party with other values.

These positions represent the disempowering of Christians. Called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world, every day choices are made about all kinds of things based on an understanding of God, Christian norms and life’s circumstances. If the choice is not to act, then would Christians ever eat (given the ethics of food production, manufacturing practices and marketing hype), would Christians ever use an ATM (given the morality of the banking industry) would Christians ever join a church (given the level of leadership failure due to financial, sexual and relational corruption). Christians are called to live and to act, not to opt out being frightened of making a mistake.

No political party has cornered the market on morality, including Christian parties, and so Christians must chose carefully who they will vote for trusting in God to overcome any errors they might make. Yet each Christian is never alone on the stage of life but part of a Christian community to help them reflect on and to act as a sounding board for such decisions. It’s a pity churches don’t become more involved in political discussion so that Christians can have the benefit of the opinions of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is said: *It doesn’t matter who you vote for, you’ll still get a politician.* However, Christians should both cherish the right to vote and cast it prayerfully.

A similar argument can be mounted for educational issues. While some may vote for a particular candidate or party because of an educational issue, most educational issues are submerged into a general thinking about who to vote for.

How Christian educators vote may be affected more by education issues than the rest of the community, but I suspect that religious conviction may be more influential.

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