

The Big Picture

Part 1 – Politics

The Big Picture

It may appear that the Christian church is taking a beating as our society becomes increasingly secular, but is this really so? While the Bible paints a picture of struggle for the church it does not paint a picture of the church drifting into irrelevancy. Through November we will be probing Big Picture questions concerning the shape and the mission of the church. I think this may be the most important series I have ever preached. (For notices)

John 18:33-40 (NIV)

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" ³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" ³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" ³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." ³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." ³⁸ "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him." ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" ⁴⁰ They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.

It is interesting going into the wilderness you get a bit of an insight into why God insisted on leading people out there. Because after a while the noise in your head, the unceasing noise of modern living, begins to quiet. Stillness is such a rare and wondrous thing. In stillness you hear things, that were always there, they were just drowned out. The sound of your own heartbeat, the movement of your breath, nature's exquisite sound track, the whisper of God's spirit. Our time in the wilderness was also a unique opportunity to grapple with some of the big picture issues that are going on in the world and the church. There was time to sit and ponder and seek God in the quiet.



While we were away we were aware that the big conversation in Australia was the marriage equality vote. My non-Christian friends and some of my Christian friends were celebrating what they saw as a movement towards a fairer and more equal society. And then there were some of my other Christian friends who were struggling

with the meaning of all this. To them it felt like another nail in the coffin of Australia's identity as a Christian country and underneath all that was a difficult question, does this mean that the church has failed in its mission to create a Christian society? I've been pondering some of these things.

For the next month or so I'm going to try to unpack these big picture questions about the mission, the strategy and the position of the church in this time in our history in Australia and the world.

However, just let me say from the get-go that I am really clearly and passionately of the view that one thing that has never changed is God, who is still our wondrous powerful loving heavenly father and His bride, the church is still the cornerstone of His unfolding plan for this planet. I am as committed and as captivated by the heart of God for this world as at any time in my life but I am also convinced that, in this time, we must carefully guard ourselves against unnecessary feelings of fear or defeat or failure. For this is what God says to us:

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)

What I want to do today, is share what the Bible clearly says is not the mission of the church. This might seem like an odd place to start but we need to clear some things away because at times the churches understanding of its own mission is a bit fuzzy. Over the years we have accepted things as Christian culture which have turned out to be completely out of step with the teachings of Jesus. For this reason it's helpful to take a step back and see if we are being true to our founding principles. The principle we are looking at specifically is the strategic decision God made that the church was not to get involved in politics. Which is not to say that Christians are to be disinterested in politics, Paul urges us to pray for our political leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-4), but Jesus clearly steers us away from pursuing politics as a strategy for furthering the mission God has given us.

Let's look at some important Bible passages that reflect on God's attitude towards politics, firstly 1 Samuel 8. What's happening historically in this passage is that the people of Israel want to transition from a group of tribes lead by priests, to a kingdom ruled by a king.

¹ *When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel.*
² *The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba.* ³ *But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*
⁴ *So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah.*
⁵ *They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." (1 Samuel 8:1-5)*

It's worth noting that as the people lose faith in their church leadership they turn to politics for solutions. This particular dynamic is as relevant now as it was then, but for the moment let's consider Israel's urge to get into the business of politics. The high priest Samuel is not at all pleased about this turn of events, he sees this

clamouring for political solutions as a rejection of his own role as High priest, but God's great concern was that His people had stopped trusting Him.

⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: "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 Samuel 8:6-7)

God encourages Samuel to listen to the peoples request for a King, while at the same time warning the people that if they go down this road, politics will chew them up and spit them out. That it is in the nature of Kings to progressively want more and more of what a country produces, until they want everything. Even this dire warning, that a King would take everything, even their pot plants, did not dampen the people's enthusiasm for government, so against God's better judgement they get their wish, they get a King. What follows historically is a rollercoaster ride of effective and ineffective kings, good Kings and evil Kings, ending ingloriously with two kings getting on the wrong side of two empires and Israel being gobbled up.

(The irony being that when the children of Israel had no King but God, they overcame the most powerful empire of the day, Egypt, you know with Moses and all of that. But when they were a fully-fledged nation with a king, they went down the gurgler. The northern kingdom of Israel being gobbled up by the Assyrian empire (722 BC) and the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (539 BC).

New Covenant

So given Israel's history, it is not surprising that when God comes to re-negotiate a new covenant with his people, in what becomes the New Testament, one of God's key strategies for the new venture is not to get involved in national politics. This becomes clear from the very start of Jesus ministry. As Jesus prepared himself for the task ahead, He goes out into the wilderness to pray and think and one of the things that tempts Him is going down the political road.

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ So if you worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" (Luke 4:5-8)

(A striking feature of this passage is the clear inference that the political process is the domain of the devil) The Devil offers Jesus influence through political power, influence through the authority and splendour of being a ruler, which Jesus completely rejects. The problem is that when we humans think about real influence we immediately think about politics and the people of Jesus day were no different. They were blown away by Jesus, but the only model of leadership they understood was political leadership, they wanted to make him King, something that Jesus totally resisted through-out his ministry.

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:15)

If you want get a clear fix on what Jesus thought about being involved in politics, go to the Palm Sunday story. On that day Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and it

is the perfect moment for a political campaign launch and the big crowd of people that have gathered on that day sensed that, and were very excited by the possibility. They laid down coats and palm leaves in Jesus path-way to honour him and the only other person honoured in this way, was a guy named Jehu, who, when the people were laying clothes in his path, they were about to make him King of Israel. (2 Kings 9:13). Then the crowd begin to chant,

("Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9)

Hosanna! Which means save us, save us, come to our rescue, we are looking to you. They call him "Son of David", their most honoured and revered King in Israel's history.

So you see the people are frothing to make Jesus their King. Jesus enters the gates of Jerusalem and processes to the temple, the heart of the nation, and if this was a movie being directed by the crowd, Jesus would then ascend the steps, he would turn around, acknowledge the great crowd that had followed him and they would rise as one and make him king of Israel right there, right then.

What actually happened on that day was that as the great crowd watches, Jesus keeps on walking up those steps and without stopping disappears into the temple. A fairly confused crowd is milling around outside expecting an announcement or a coronation or something, when suddenly people begin to rush out of the temple, angry people, talking about a madman pushing over tables and driving out the merchandise sellers, telling everyone that the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer not a den of thieves (Mark 11:17). Then this bizarre rumour begins to circulate that the madman in question was in fact Jesus. The crowd then hears that Jesus has settled down for the day in the temple teaching and healing sick people. (Matthew 21:12-14).

I don't know how many of the crowd hangs around waiting for something to happen but when Jesus finally emerges he and his disciples, without saying a word, walk out of the city, heading off to the nearby village of Bethany. As Jesus disappears into the distance I imagine that the question in the crowds mind, was; what?!! What just happened?

What happened was that Jesus, deliberately, in the most public way imaginable, announced to the whole of Jerusalem that he had not the slightest interest in becoming involved in their politics. What Jesus was vitally interested in was prayer, teaching and healing sick people. These were the things Jesus carefully identified as the building blocks of his movement.

This attitude of Jesus towards politics is clearly a strategic decision by God. In conversation with the head of Roman political authority, Pontius Pilate, Jesus spells this out very clearly, he says:

*"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."
"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the*

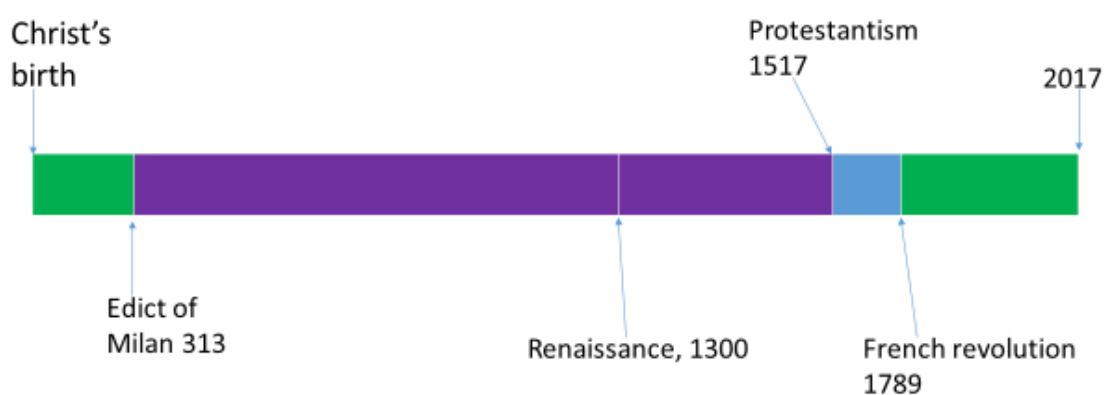
world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."
(John 18:36, 37)

Jesus Kingdom is not of this world, it does not follow the normal strategies that people use to exercise power and influence. Instead the Kingdom is all about the miracle of discovering the truth and reality of the creator of the universe and how that impacts our human heart. Jesus says:

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32 (NIV)

So the 64 dollar question is, what does it mean that Jesus founded a movement designed to be totally divorced from national political power, yet the church became quite the political beast?

Western Christian Timeline



For the first 300 hundred years of the churches life the followers of Jesus were a small base-community movement that by and large stayed out of politics, - that's the green bit on the time line. But when the Roman emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, which decriminalised Christianity in the Roman Empire, Christianity began to go through dramatic changes, this is the purple bit on the time line. The simplicity of life that Jesus taught, the small humble house church movement became increasingly influenced by the values of the Roman Empire. The church acquired and built beautiful opulent buildings. They developed hierarchies of priests who dressed in fine robes just like Roman functionaries. They began to gain great political power and acquire incredible wealth. In time the church even adopted many of the evil and brutal practices of the rulers of their time, using warfare, pain, imprisonment and death as a way of imposing their will upon the people. All because the church normalised political influence as part of its mission and in the process lost its way.

So if influencing the political life of our nation is not the churches mission – what are we supposed to be doing? Whether we like it or not, the church no longer has a significant place of political influence in our society, but instead of viewing that as a tragedy, God is calling us to view this as an incredible opportunity, to rediscover our unique mission and purpose in the world today. This is an opportunity to truly take hold of what Jesus wanted for us when he prayed that we would be in the world but not of the world (John 13:17-18). That we would not be entangled, or encumbered,

by politics, culture, history or the ways of this world but that we would find a new freedom to pursue our calling as a people of hope.

Finishing up, let me nail down what I believe our mission is supposed to look like.

This is Berni Dymet, but I'll let him tell the story in his own words:

As someone who made quite a financial success of his life as a young man, I really didn't think I needed a crutch, or religion, or a "Saviour". Not in a million years. And I like my friend Paul, I found the Christian "there's only one way" dogma arrogant (and in my case, deeply offensive to boot). But the more success, reputation and money that came my way in my jet-setting,

international IT consulting career, the more I realised that something was missing. I knew that it was something really important. I yearned for it ... I just didn't know what it was. All I knew is that the longer I went without it, the more it hurt. The more empty, the more desperate I became. And that ... that was so weird for a person that everybody else looked on as Mr Success and Mr I've-Got-My-Life-Together! It's a hole inside that became deeper and deeper, until it pushed me to the brink of suicide. I was literally standing on a ledge on the 8th floor of a building ready to jump.

But right there and then, I had a revelation of Jesus. Man that sounds corny, doesn't it? But ... in my heart, I just felt to go back inside, kneel down and pray.

God if you're out there, now would be a good time. That's all I had. That's all it took. I still had many difficult and painful things to travel through but since the day I gave my life to Jesus (15th of October 1995) it's been a completely new life. A life of peace, of joy and of power to overcome the human flaws that had so robbed me of life. For me, it's no longer an intellectual argument. But the truth is the truth.

Berni's Prayer for You

I don't know where you stand. Perhaps you're a bit of a born again atheist, violently opposed to all things Christian. Or perhaps like my friend Paul, you have a bit of a bob each way. Or maybe you've believed in Jesus, but it hasn't been working for you. Well wherever you are on your journey, know this. I am praying that God will meet you out on your ledge when the time is right. I am praying that deep in your heart, He will give you a personal revelation of Jesus Christ so that you will know the joy, the peace and the life-changing power that comes from Him and Him alone. I am praying that you and I will have the rest of eternity together to rejoice in what He has done for you.

(Berni Dymet is the CEO of ChristianityWorks)

