

Helen, Don or Winston: Who would Jesus vote for?

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 11 September 2005
Based on material produced by Brian Harris at Mt Roskill Baptist Church

Introduction

The other week I heard a story about a man who was drowning 100 metres from shore. A National Party supporter happened to be walking along the beach. He sees the man in trouble, so he throws him fifty metres of rope and shouts, "Swim the other fifty!" and walks away. But the man can't swim. So he's about to go down, when a Labour Party supporter walks past and sees the man still thrashing about. He throws out 200 metres of rope, and shouts, "Grab hold of your end!" but then forgets to keep hold of his. For months now, there's been a lot of talk about the differences between the main political parties and which of them deserves to be elected into government this coming Saturday. It promises to be one of the most closely fought elections in recent years. Certainly it could be one of the most important. Do you know yet who you are going to vote for?

Some of you might say, "Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You shouldn't talk about politics in church. Faith and politics don't mix." I couldn't disagree more. Charles de Gaul once said: "Politics is too important an issue to leave to politicians." That was certainly the view of most of the prophets in the Old Testament, who were known for their irritating habit of telling the government of their day how to run the country. Jesus, too, had no hesitation in criticising the hypocrisy and corruption that contaminated the local government of his day. And some of his most famous words to his followers were these: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." In other words, you are to exert a positive influence on the society in which you live. Now in a democratic society, that means, at the very least, at election time carefully and thoughtfully exercising our right to vote.

But of course there's no way we can do that unless we know (a) how our reasonably complicated electoral system works – there are papers in the foyer explaining that – and (b) what are the most important issues distinguishing the respective parties. What are they? Now Don Brash will tell you the important issues are tax cuts, welfare dependency, and the treaty industry. Helen Clark is trying to convince us that NZ's nuclear-free policy is one of the main issues in this election. Brian Tamaki – like most conservative Christians – would have us believe that "moral issues" should determine our vote next Saturday. By "moral issues" he means, of course, issues like prostitution and abortion and homosexuality. But what issues would Jesus put at the top of his list if he was voting next Saturday? What does the Bible say? Well, the Bible doesn't give a detailed blueprint for social and economic policy. It doesn't respond to every question that could be raised about the free market versus the welfare state. But it does give an idea about the kinds of issues that really matter. The kinds of principles that any government should hold dear. And it is reasonable to suggest that as followers of Jesus we should vote for the party that we feel will best deliver on those issues. So what are they?

Issue One: Family

The first issue would be family. It's impossible to overemphasise the importance the Bible attaches to stable family life. Throughout the Bible it's the family unit that serves as the first line of provision and protection. Now by "family" I don't mean the little nuclear family that we talk about in New Zealand. Families in ancient Israel were always viewed in their extended form: so single people, elderly people, widows and widowers were all very much part of their extended family, from which they received a sense of identity and security. Let me give you a couple of examples. The law of Moses provided that if a man died, his brother had to offer to take his wife and child and make them part of his family (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). The law also said that the eldest male child was to be given a double portion of the family inheritance, not as a sign of favouritism but to enable him to meet the additional financial responsibilities that came with providing for his extended family (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

What's really interesting is the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). It reads, "Honour your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the Lord your God will give you." Being shaped by western individualism, we tend to read that promise as given to individuals. But the Jews thought in collective terms. They saw it not so much as a promise that "if you were good to your old mum you would live to be 93" – clearly that's not what God was meaning because there have been plenty of wonderful sons and daughters who have had very short lives – but "if as a society you honour the role of parents and support them, then you will build the kind of society that will be strong and which will survive." Throughout history this is actually one of the better-kept commandments. But in the last thirty years the family has started to find itself under significant threat.

Let me give you a rather extreme example from South Africa. During the worst part of the Apartheid era, black South Africans were told that they were only allowed to live in certain homelands or geographic areas that their tribes had once occupied. Around 1½ million people were forcibly relocated to areas that most had never seen before. People were only allowed out of their homeland if they had a definite offer of work in another place and carried a pass that proved that offer of employment. Now because jobs were almost non-existent in the homelands,

many black South Africans had to seek work in the cities outside their homelands. However, one of the most iniquitous parts of the system was that the special permission to work outside one's homeland did not extend to spouses or children. In order to survive, many parents were forced to find whatever work they could in the city and leave their children behind. Families were effectively forced apart. The harvest of that policy has been enormously tragic. The current levels of lawlessness, HIV infection, and reckless disregard for the value of human life can, at least in part, be attributed to a policy that led to the almost complete breakdown of the family within many black communities. The children born under that policy are now adults... It's harvest time. The Ten Commandments teach that if you don't respect, honour and safeguard the role of parents, your society will not survive.

Now we haven't done anything as inhumane in New Zealand, but in just the last few years we have seen the Civil Unions Act give to de facto and same sex relationships the same status as marriage. We have redefined family in the Families Commission Act to include almost every possible grouping of adults and children. With the Care of Children Acts we have given teenage girls the right to get abortions without parental consent. And according to the Commissioner of Police the anti-smacking bill currently before the House will very possibly see parents who smack their children charged with assault. This election it's important to study what each party advocates for the family. Do their policies protect families? Do they defend or erode the institution of marriage? Do they make it easier or more difficult to raise children? Our future in this land depends on the extent that families, marriages, and the role of parents are honoured and safeguarded. That's a key biblical principle.

Issue Two: Justice

A second biblical refrain would be the call for justice. The Bible shows a special concern for those who are vulnerable: widows and orphans. They are mentioned ninety-four times. Take Exodus 22:23: "Do not take advantage of a widow or orphan. If you do, and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry." Or Amos 2:7, where God denounces the wealthy Israelites not for being rich as such, but for obtaining their wealth through unjust means, and for forgetting about the needs of the weak and vulnerable: "They trample on the heads of the poor ... and deny justice to the oppressed." Instead, Amos says, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24). This is what it means to live morally: pursue justice.

But deciding which policies are just is not easy. Let me give you another South African example. One of the most controversial ways of trying to bring change in the old South Africa was through sporting and economic sanctions. Here in New Zealand we know something of the controversy caused by the imposition of rugby sanctions. But more significant were the economic sanctions. In 1984, in response to pressure from the American Government, General Motors decided to close down their motor vehicle plant in Port Elizabeth. The majority of workers at that plant were black South Africans. A pastor I know, Brian Harris, was living in Port Elizabeth at that time and he remembers the enormous amount of unemployment that resulted from that decision. One of his most poignant memories was being woken at 5:00 am one morning. At the door was a black man who, with a note of desperation in his voice, pleaded, "Would you employ me to work in your garden?" Who wakes someone at 5.00 in the morning to ask for a job in their garden? Only the desperate. That man had worked for General Motors and had a family to support. That scenario was acted out again and again and again. The Ford factory closed a little later. Many, many companies shut their doors. Those who study the political changes that came in South Africa usually concur that economic sanctions were amongst the most influential in helping to bring change. I don't doubt that they are right. But in a society that had no provision for the unemployed, the human toll of that policy was enormous.

What am I saying? Justice is a complex issue. Don't be too quick to assume that the policies your party advocates are just. Grapple with the question: What tax policies, what welfare policies, what health policies will best help those who are most vulnerable and most at risk? Our vote should reflect that concern.

Issue Three: Mercy

There's one other biblical principle I'd like to highlight and it's the principle of mercy. As a nation we have a moral obligation to show mercy to those less fortunate than ourselves. Let me explain. In the Old Testament God chose the people of Israel to be his special people. They were just a little insignificant nation, but he rescued them from slavery, gave them the Promised Land, protected them against their enemies, and made prosperous and carefree. As you can imagine, it all went to their heads. They started to think that God had blessed them so that they could be comfortable and forget about the other nations. But God's agenda was quite different. In Genesis 12:1-3 God said to Abraham, the father of Israel, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you ... and all the people on earth will be blessed through you." Abraham and his people were blessed in order to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

We may be a little nation, but we are richly blessed. The issue is not whether we are in the top half of the world's developed nations or not. There will always be others better off than us. The reality is that from a global perspective we are far better off than most. Just for a second put yourself in the sandals of someone living in Iraq or Zimbabwe or Niger. Wouldn't you hope – pray – that people who have been blessed beyond your wildest dreams would be

sensitive and responsive to your desperate needs? The biblical principle is simple: Because we have been blessed, we are under a moral obligation to be a blessing to those less fortunate than ourselves. This was summed up in Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats, the story in Matthew 25 about the final judgment. Do you remember what Jesus says in that parable he will say to those who are sentenced to eternal punishment? "When you refused to help the least of my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me" (Matthew 25:45). So while it doesn't tend to win loads of votes, a commitment to making a significant contribution to the global community – a commitment to helping refugees and war-torn countries – should shape our vote this Saturday.

Conclusion

Yes, there are many other issues I haven't mentioned. God has given us a mandate to be responsible stewards of creation, so our voting should be shaped by concern for the environment (Genesis 1:28ff; 2:15-20). And education is a key issue. As the writer of Proverbs wisely observes: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6). And law and order has to be up there. The Bible is never soft on punishing crime, but we should remember from the Easter story that God's heart is more concerned with restitution and reconciliation than punishment.

But let me finish by highlighting one other special responsibility we have as Christians. It's the responsibility to pray for our nation's leaders. In 1 Timothy 2:2-4 Paul writes: "Pray for kings and others in power, so that we might live quiet and peaceful lives as we worship and honour God. This kind of prayer is good, and it pleases God our Saviour. God wants everyone to be saved." Do you know what government Paul was referring to there? Rome. The hated government of Imperial Rome. We are to pray for our leaders, whether or not we chose them or like them. And the implication is that our prayers will make a difference.

Look at South Africa. One more story from South Africa. Perhaps it was the sheer desperation and hopelessness of the situation there during the last days of Apartheid that forced the nation to prayer. I guess so. But the verse that God's Spirit seem to etch on the heart of the South African church was 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." Apparently, during those days you couldn't drive far without passing a car carrying that verse on a bumper sticker. Many South African Christians decided to take both the conditions and the promise very seriously. Did it make a difference? Well, when F.W. de Klerk became President many people thought not. He was seen as a conservative hardliner. Nothing in his past suggested that he would be a radical leader who would pave the way for free and just post-apartheid elections. Yet time was to prove otherwise. It ranks as one of history's most dramatic turnarounds. Even the secular press described the changes he initiated as nothing short of miraculous. What caused them? Many have speculated. But the people of God know the answer. It's what they had prayed for. It was the promise they had claimed. "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray ..." They had. And God answered. Does New Zealand need healing and transforming? Without question. So this Saturday vote carefully, and pray.

Questions

1. Who are you going to vote for? Why?
2. What do you make of the expression: "Don't mix religion and politics"?
3. Under MMP which of your two votes counts the most? Why? What are the dangers of voting for a smaller party?
4. Genesis 1-2 tells us that the first institution created by God was marriage. How important an issue is family in this election? Which major party in your view has the most family-friendly policies?
5. What do you think is the primary "moral issue" at stake this election?
6. Bruce Logan writes: "The size of the gap between rich and poor is not essentially a justice issue. How wealth is obtained might be – certainly a failure to attend to the needs of the poor is a justice issue – but to focus on the gap between rich and poor and consequently redistribute wealth as a primary function of government is more likely motivated by misguided compassion or envy." Do you agree?
7. Read Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Why is the rich man sent to hell? What are the implications for us and the policies we should support this election?
8. Read Genesis 12:1-3 and Amos 9:7. What does this tell us about God's concern for the world? How might this shape our voting this Saturday?
9. What examples can you recall in history of God answering the prayers of his people in relation to the government of their day?
10. Bono, the lead singer of the band U2, says: "The Left mocks the Right. The Right knows it's right. Two ugly traits. How far should we go to try to understand each other's point of view? Maybe the distance grace covered on the cross is a clue." How entrenched are you in your political allegiance? Do you need to pray for grace to understand that other point of view?