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# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## *Old Testament Wisdom and Politics*

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I can't imagine any Christian welcoming the suggestion that he or she is a fool rather than wise. You are building the house of your life on the teaching of Jesus just like the wise person in Matthew 7:24–27 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Surely this makes you wise and not a fool. Indeed, but what exactly does it mean to build the house of our lives on that rock which is the teaching of Jesus? It has often struck me that an important Old Testament background to Jesus' two houses is the two houses of Proverbs 9, the house of Lady Wisdom and the house of Lady Folly. Proverbs' two houses come at the end of the first major section in Proverbs, namely 1–9, in which the major building blocks of OT wisdom are set out. In later sections of Proverbs the more detailed nuances in wisdom are teased out. As with Jesus' teaching, so with OT wisdom. It is more complex than a decision – vitally important as this is – to follow Jesus and his teaching.

Let me give you an example. I ask you to think about the **wise person**. What, for you, are the major characteristics of such a person? I wonder if any of us thought that the

wise person is one who takes politics seriously! Proverbs is the foundational wisdom book in the OT and the first and the last chapter refer to *a king* as the author. Proverbs 1:1 refers to King Solomon and 31:1 refers to King Lemuel, an unknown king, perhaps foreign, explaining what his mother taught him about governing. I myself was surprised to discover that the word “king” occurs some 32 times in this foundational book of wisdom. Kings *govern* and Proverbs links such activity inextricably with wisdom. In Proverbs 8 we have that extraordinary speech of Lady Wisdom, how she was with God when he created the world, meaning that God's wisdom is woven into the fabric of his good creation, waiting to be discovered by humans. In 8:15–16, we read:

- 15 By me [that is, wisdom] kings reign,  
and rulers decree what is just;
- 16 by me rulers rule,  
and nobles, all who govern rightly.

Notice the key words in these two verses: reign, decree what is just, rule, govern rightly. We cannot and must not

spiritualise this – the Bible is speaking about politics, about government, and linking them inextricably with wisdom. Clearly the person who is wise will take politics seriously.

## 1. Faith and wisdom embrace and include in their remit politics and government.

It is important to say this because far too often the Evangelical church – the church, as the church fathers and the Reformers taught us, being our mother while God is our Father – mediates the voice of the Father to us through her teaching in such a way as to indicate that all that really matters is conversion and church involvement. We imbibe this and then read the Bible through such a dualistic, sacred/secular, distorted lens. Now, of course, conversion and church involvement are fundamentally important, but biblical faith, like wisdom, opens out on all areas of the world as God has made it, including politics.

I myself was converted into a vibrant form of Evangelicalism for which I remain very grateful. But our context was apartheid South Africa, and we were taught that all that really mattered was church and evangelism. When it came to politics Romans 13:1–7 was sufficient. The white, nationalist, racist, government was appointed by God, and we should obey it.

I hope you can see why this is so very dangerous. If we do not recognise that faith and wisdom include politics, politics does not go away but *we* end up unconsciously supporting the worst political practices, such as structural racism. We thought we were exceptionally wise, but, at least in this area, we were fools.

So what about us, are we wise or foolish? Let me offer you a provocative test. Every day for the past five months, following Hamas's brutal, deplorable attack on Israel, we have witnessed daily carnage in Gaza with some 30,000 people killed, by far the majority civilians and far too many women and children. Nowhere is safe in this small, imprisoned area, starvation and disease now threaten, and on and on it goes. The carnage is made possible through the support of Western governments like that of the UK, and especially the USA. Even a ceasefire is vetoed by the US at the UN security council.

Of course, there are complexities to this situation. As the UN secretary general noted, the attack did not take place in a vacuum. And the attack was dreadful. But so too has been too much of the Israeli response, in my opinion. I am happy to discuss this with you, but my question is this: Have we taken note of what is happening? Have we thought about it? Have we done anything about it? Or are we too busy with “church” to concern ourselves with such secular issues? If that is the case, then I think Proverbs says to us, you are not wise but fools because you are ignoring a God-given dimension of our lives, namely politics.

## 2. Faith and wisdom recognise that politics can go horribly wrong.

From the verses above from Proverbs 8 it is clear that politics, governing, is a fundamentally good thing. For any society to flourish it needs good government. For most of us politics is understandably like the plumbing in our houses. Essential, but, unless we are plumbers, the only time we take notice of it is when it goes wrong. OT wisdom is



Left: Heinrich Vogeler, *The Suffering of Women in War - Grieving women* Right: Emily Carr, *Vanquished*



quite conscious that politics, a good gift, can go horribly wrong and be terribly distorted. You see this particularly in Ecclesiastes which wrestles with the brokenness of the world. Take Ecclesiastes 5:8 for example:

- 8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

There is much to say about such a verse; suffice it to note its recognition of corruption and injustice, i.e., political distortion. OT wisdom, like the Psalter and the rest of the Bible articulates a doctrine of two ways, the way of faith, obedience and wisdom and the way of disobedience, unbelief and folly. This potential bifurcation runs through all of life including politics, so that the wonderful gift of good government can also be misdirected and distorted. You see this in Proverbs 16, which contains multiple reflections on kingship. For example, v. 12:

- 12 It is an abomination to kings to do evil,  
for the throne is established by righteousness.

In recent months we have seen bizarre discussions about the extent of the US president's immunity from prosecution. Can a sitting president command the US SEALs to assassinate a political opponent and be immune from prosecution? Here we come to a vital insight of the OT, namely that God and *not* the king is the lawgiver – unlike nearly all ANE societies in which the king promulgates law – and the role of the king is to mediate God's character and law over his people. The vision is one of *lex rex* and not *rex lex*. Indeed, the OT is uniquely ambivalent about kingship as we see in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, precisely because it is so open to abuse.

Power, especially perhaps *political* power, easily corrupts and corruption is a major distortion of the good of politics. It is all around us. In recent months we witnessed, if we were watching, yet another unfree and unfair national election in Zimbabwe, a country which has suffered so very much. When South Africa emerged from the wickedness of racist apartheid in 1994, Desmond Tutu said that once we get it right the whole world will stand up and take notice. This year is the 30th anniversary of that arrival of democracy and it would be very difficult to say that the governing party has got it right. Especially under President Zuma corruption spread through every aspect of public life, with institution after public institution wilfully looted and brought close to collapse, with cabinet positions even up for sale in what became known as “state capture.”

When politics gets distorted and corrupted the poor suffer. The oracle of King Lemuel taught to him by his mother in Proverbs 31:1–9 is remarkable:

- 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel,  
it is not for kings to drink wine  
or for rulers to desire strong drink,  
5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed  
and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.  
6 Give strong drink to one who is perishing  
and wine to those in bitter distress;  
7 let them drink and forget their poverty  
and remember their misery no more.  
8 Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
9 Speak out; judge righteously;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

These striking verses alert us firstly to how politics can go wrong, namely where power is abused for partying and thus forgetting why leaders are in place.



Rodin, *Burgers of Calais*

### 3. Wise politics prioritises the afflicted, the poor, the needy and those without a voice.

Secondly, they alert us to the right focus of political leadership – namely, attention to the afflicted, the poor, those without a voice. Verse 8 has often and rightly been used to champion the rights of the unborn. This, in my view is quite correct. It is a terrible scar on too many of our societies when the unborn are at threat of being killed and discarded at the

whim of a consumer society for whom sex is a fun activity, “unfortunately” connected with the production of children.

But, the unborn are not the only ones without a voice. Who will speak for the children in Gaza who have been killed in the last five months? Who will speak for those silenced in autocratic regimes? Who will speak for refugees fleeing from conflict but with nowhere to go? Who will speak for the men in the UK who have a higher-than-average suicide rate? Who will speak for the women who are so regularly abused? Who will speak for the citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan as China flexes its autocratic, unbelieving muscles in that region? Who will speak for Jews who are targets of growing antisemitism? Who will speak for Muslims suffering from Islamophobia? Who will speak for so many persecuted Christians around the world today? All our societies have the poor and the destitute in our midst, and my fear is that unless the church becomes *a champion of the poor* they are inevitably driven into the arms of unsavoury leaders, a temptation I see not only in countries like South Africa but now, astonishingly, also in the US.

#### 4. OT Israel was never a democracy, but OT wisdom orients us in important ways.

Some years ago, Oliver O’Donovan made the point that a preacher may make the move from the Bible to Iraq today in 30 minutes whereas it may take the scholar a lifetime. But the move from Scripture to contemporary politics and back again *must be made* if the Bible is God’s Word for all of life. This is not a simple journey. Democracy is unknown in the Bible, hence the repeated reference in Proverbs to the king and other such autocratic leaders. Thus, making such a move means knowing history and how politics has developed since then until today. My predecessor, Jonathan Chaplin, has written an important book in this area, namely *Democracy Matters*. As we endeavour to think about politics today we will need input from people like him and the many, many resourceful people in our network.

What OT wisdom and the Bible does do, is orient us authoritatively towards politics, and sometimes in surprisingly, immediate ways.

Let me give you some examples:

Take Proverbs 16:13, for example, which Murphy translates as follows:

Justice from lips, the delight of kings,  
and they love the one who speaks honestly.

It is reported by the *Washington Post’s* fact-checkers that

Donald Trump made 30,573 *false or misleading* claims during his presidential term, an average of about 21 per day. Boris Johnson got impaled on his lies. And recently it was disturbing to see Lord David Cameron squirm when asked about whether or not government lawyers had advised him on the legality of what is going on in Gaza. A culture has developed in which we expect politicians to lie. By comparison, Proverbs alerts us to political speech that invokes justice and honesty, among leaders and their advisors.

Proverbs 20:28 is another fascinating example:

<sup>28</sup> Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king,  
and his throne is upheld by righteousness.

This is a fascinating verse. The Hebrew words here are **חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת**, two words that are great characteristics of God in the Bible. *Hesed* refers to kindness, mercy and love. *Emet* to faithfulness and truth. It is quite astonishing to think of *love* as a duty of politicians, until we remember that leaders are called to serve their people, and to do this well they will need a deep affection for them. According to Proverbs it is such characteristics that guard and preserve the leader. Here we also see how leaders are called to image, to mirror the character of God in their political service. Just as God is gloriously other-person centred so too are they to be. And just as God is righteous and just, so too politics is to be about public justice. Much more needs to be said about this word *justice*. It stems directly from biblical monotheism. There is one God, the source of all, and thus there really is such a thing as justice. It may be actualised in different ways in different cultures and different times, but it is real.

This, incidentally, is why we ought to have a major interest in international law. National law is vital, but so too is international law which governs the nations, especially in times of war. When Russia invaded Ukraine we heard much about the rules-based world order that emerged after WWII from Western leaders, and rightly so. Amidst the current war in Gaza we hear far, far less from Western leaders about such law, leaving it to the countries of the South to raise such issues. And, of course, American leaders appeal to such law when desired, but the US is not actually a signatory of the International Criminal Court.

Proverbs 19:10 may surprise us:

It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury,  
much less for a slave to rule over princes.

The point here is that rulers need to be competent, well trained and experienced in order to rule well.

## Conclusion

My hope is that this paper has alerted us to the importance of politics, of it as a wonderful field of service of the LORD Christ and of people, and of the importance of thinking hard about it. If we do not then when it goes wrong, we all suffer. I have argued that Proverbs orients us towards politics in all sorts of illuminating ways. It is, however, by no means a political handbook, and much hard thinking



Marianne von Werefkin, *Prayer*

and reflection about contemporary issues needs to develop in the light of such an orientation. As we head into major elections this year and as we reflect on the horrors and good things unfolding in our world today, can we summarise the insights in terms of a grid we could use to guide us in our political involvement? Here is my suggestion. “They” refers to politicians or parties.

- Do they understand why politics is so important?
- Do they see the need for healthy politics?
- Do they have the expertise to govern well?
- Are they deeply committed to the rule of law?
- Are they passionate about the poor?
- Can they be trusted to speak the truth and to pursue justice?
- Do they love the people they serve?
- Are they committed to international justice and law?

These are basic questions, but such is the state of far too much contemporary politics that they are surprisingly illuminating.

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