

Why Christians should vote – and pray beforehand

We have a few days to go to our next general election on Wednesday 8 May 2019. The news is dominated by political speeches, campaign trails, rallies, wars of words and lamppost decorations of political party candidates and campaign promises.

Whom do we trust? Who do we vote for? With a choice of 49 registered political parties to choose from, many are thinking do we vote at all?

Let's never forget the privilege of democracy, the privilege of the vote. For the majority of South Africans this right did not exist before 1994.

On the 27th April 1994, millions of South Africans arrived at polling stations all across the land, standing peacefully and patiently in long queues, just for the first-time privilege of applying a cross next to their preferred candidate.

In 1994, 86% of eligible SA citizens voted. In 2014 this dropped to only 43% of eligible voters casting their votes. While this apathy can be ascribed to various factors, but let's never forget that the right to vote is a privilege and should be treasured.

I say this not just for patriotic reasons, but also for Biblical reasons.

The Bible teaches that God Himself instituted civil authority and entrusted to them the sword of civil governance.

This is clear from the words of Jesus in Mark 12:17 when He said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Paul elaborates on this authority in Romans 13 where he makes it clear that there is no civil authority that has not been instituted by God himself and that government bears the sword of civil authority on God's behalf. In other words, all Caesars, tsars, kings, socialists, democrats and democratic parliaments are legitimate forms of government in God's eyes.

In Mark 12:17, Jesus also made it clear that both civil government and the "things of God" are God's ideas. The implication for the church is that we have the responsibility to live in the tension between the sword of civil authority and the authority of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus gave to the church in Matt.16:19.

On the one hand, the Bible makes it clear that as members of the church we are to be model citizens of the nation. This includes obeying government, paying taxes, getting involved in social upliftment projects and other philanthropic acts, because this is what Jesus modelled and commanded.

This applies whether we agree with the policies of the existing government or not. On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that whilst we are to be model citizens of the nation, we also owe our loyalty to God, which means that we are to speak up against corruption, injustice, oppression and all the ills that plague our nation.

The church must remain as the conscience of government and therefore the sword of civil authority and the keys of the kingdom of God should never be confused or merged. The separation of church and state as institutions of authority is Biblical, healthy and foundational for any true democracy.

I urge individual Christians, as responsible and conscientious citizens, to vote in the upcoming elections, to stay informed, share in the public debate, write to the newspaper, lobby your chosen representatives and hold them to account for their policies, their actions or inactions, to speak up on behalf of the voiceless and poor and to demand justice.

All of this is to be done peacefully and with humility, especially when civil protests become necessary.

However, as to whether the church as an institution of authority, as a corporate gathering of believers should involve itself in politics, opinions may differ.

At the very least, church as a whole, via leadership, should pray regularly, speak into issues of justice, policy, poverty and all the other challenges that we face daily.

My view is, in the light of the reality in our country and in our city – where most Bible believing congregations are made up of people voting for a variety of political parties and persuasions based on a number of personal, cultural, historical, social and other convictions – that each individual Christian must go to their prayer closet and their Bibles before they go to the ballot box.

It is their duty and prerogative to vote according to their own conscience. Whilst we as church leadership should teach and instruct on Biblical values and principles and speak against social injustice and other matters, we can never as a whole church institution side with any particular party.

Pray, vote and be model citizens. In this manner we will be honouring God and civil government as well as the consciences of others who might not share our convictions.

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