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# Democracy, Justice, and Allegiance:

## Some Theological Thoughts on the Church's Commitment to Political Life

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### The Churches and Democracy

Democracy is a word that is thrown around too easily and an idea that is too often taken for granted. If any positive benefits are to come out of the challenges to and disturbing erosion of trust in democratic values and institutions, among them will be the demand that we pay attention to what democracy actually is or, maybe even better, what democracy is for and how we can nurture, sustain, and enhance democratic values within and beyond our existing and imperfect social and political structures.

A part of our present situation is that the usual locations for thinking through these issues seem less than hospitable to genuine democratic convictions and practices. A growing minority seem to be of the view that the democratic 'consensus' that has emerged around, for example, representation, the economy, the role of the nation state, has failed to represent their interests. It is also true that anti-democratic movements and figureheads have stoked those fires of discontent. It is undoubtedly the case that corruption, pragmatism, and a lack of genuine political vision and will (accompanied by a paucity of rigorous intellectual political thought thinking) are conspicuous among politicians, within parties and, thus, within parliamentary systems. All this is enabled and encouraged by a media that has often abandoned any sense of responsibility for genuine representation or contribution to the common good. If we need to *think and talk* about democracy, we also probably need to discover or create different locations for the conversation.

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So, I begin these reflections by asserting that faith communities in general, and the churches in particular, might do well to take up the obligation to provide intellectual and institutional space for thinking through the issue of politics. Note that I didn't say 'thinking through political issues'. Faith communities already do that in Australia, to a greater or lesser extent, in relation to wide range of issues, and with an equally broad range of perspectives. Whether the issue is asylum policy, religious freedom, gambling laws, or poverty alleviation, there is already a developed sense, in all but the most separatist of traditions, of the need for the churches to be 'engaged' in the political debates of the day.

What is needed, however, and what the recent 2021 JIM Convention sought to encourage, is a stronger sense that the challenge for the churches is not just what we want to say about political questions, but about what we want to say about the status, focus, and task of politics in general: not political issues, but the nature of the politics itself. In particular, our present moment invites us to give attention to the nature of democratic politics, or of democracy as a form of politics. To the extent that the doomsayers are predicting a looming crisis for democracy, and to the extent that the political class are acting to bring that prophecy to fulfilment, there will need to be places where politics and democracy can be reconsidered, re-visioned, and re-described. In ways that reflect the place of the churches in East Germany or South Africa in the 1980s, this is a challenge to which faith communities and the churches should rise.<sup>1</sup>

My second conviction is that the churches' capacity to engage in these conversations relates in a direct and distinctive way to their capacity to think theologically, not just about political issues, but also about the issue of politics itself. Political theology, or the more commonly found term 'public theology' is not simply a matter of forming a theologically informed perspective on issues of public debate. It should also cultivate a theologically informed account of what politics is, what it is for, and its relation to a theological account of human identity, society, flourishing and destiny. Within the Christian tradition, that account will be specifically informed by Christian claims about God and God's relationship to the world, even as these claims are focused on the New Testament witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It remains all too common for people on either side of the faith/secular divide to think that faith communities can only successfully engage the political sphere when they loosen their ties to the particular faith commitments that shape their identity and history. As I hope to show briefly, theological rigour and political engagement are not in some kind of zero-sum game.

## Christian Faith and Politics: Some Working Assumptions

Before I get into the substance of my argument about why I believe this to be an obligation for the churches, let me set out a few working assumptions about Christian faith and politics in more general terms.

First, Christian truth claims provide no direct legitimation for one form of government over another. The reality is that the majority of Christians through history and across culture have sought to confess their faith and live faithful lives within political systems that we would not recognize as democratic. This should give us pause; a pause long enough to recognize that the relationship between Christian belief and democracy should not be taken for granted and to be grateful for the space that democracy provides for the articulation of faith convictions and the freedom to live out a faith-informed/religious identity.

Secondly, Christian truth claims do provide us with a framework for articulating forms of judgement on political systems, values, and institutions. This is, I think, properly understood as the ongoing task of assessing political life in the light of our convictions about God's identity as creator of all life, as 'lord' of creation, and as the agent of life and transformation through history and across culture: God as Father, Son, and Spirit. In particular, the work of discernment and judgement should be seen as a part of the Spirit's work within and beyond the church as the Body of Christ. The church is called to think about the nature of politics because its own confession compels such reflection.

Thirdly, what we now call liberal, representative democracy developed into its modern forms in ways that were often detached from, and occasionally in resistance to, the belief claims and authoritative institutions of the church. Nevertheless, the church has often and rightly discerned that democratic ideals and institutions are to be supported precisely because of their alignment with Christian truth claims. Affirming democracy, for

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the churches' role in the struggle against South African apartheid see John DeGruchy, Steve DeGruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM, 2004). For a survey of the church's experience in and resistance to the German Democratic Republic see Wendy R. Tyndale, *Protestants in Communist East Germany: In the Storm of the World* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Christians, is not the result of the inherent status of democracy itself, but of continued discernment about its capacity to create, nurture and sustain the forms of common life to which Christian faith bears witness.

Finally, the church does this work of discernment by means of negotiated engagement with the political realm. While there are examples of Christian political thought that argue for complete detachment from so-called 'secular' politics, as well as those that do little more than capitulate to it, refusing the necessary work of critical discernment, Christian faith and the church as a social institution has usually operated through some form of (implicit or explicit) combination of settled participation in the political realm, even as it declares that realm as in need of prophetic critique and reform; thus, a negotiated engagement. Of course, that settlement looks different in secular Australia under Scott Morrison than it did, for example, in England under Elizabeth I, but while the configuration of that engagement varies wildly, the basic positioning of the church in relation to the political has remained largely unchanged.

The question that remains for us to think through is, therefore, how we negotiate our engagement with our own context and, particularly, with forms of 'democracy' that are in a process of change and that, in the eyes of many, are entering a period of some form of crisis.

### Democracy in Crisis?

Democracies, plural, have always been in crisis to some extent or another. The challenge that faces us with greater urgency is the question of whether there is a crisis that faces the notion of Democracy: the democratic vision, as opposed to the many diverse, and always flawed manifestation of that vision in contemporary political arrangements.

'In the West, growing political polarisation, economic frustration, and the rise of populist parties, have eroded the promise of democratic institutions to offer governance that is not only popularly supported, but also stable and effective'.<sup>2</sup>

This 'crisis' in democracy pulls us in two directions at the same time. Each direction relates, I suggest, to a central aspect of the democratic vision. In identifying these two central aspects I will argue that we are in a better position to understand the nature of continued Christian support and advocacy for democracy.



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<sup>2</sup> The Centre for the Future of Democracy, *Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020* (Cambridge: Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2020), 3. See also David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy from World War I to the Present* (revised edition; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) and Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends* (London: Penguin, 2020).

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The first direction relates to the challenges of neo-liberalism and the question of justice. One of the central pillars of the development of democratic institutions is the idea that politics is a matter of securing and preserving basic freedoms towards the ultimate end of providing stable and equitable social relationships. These relationships are an inherent 'good' shared between us; thus, a common good creates the need for a social democracy. For many people the fundamental crisis facing us is that democratic institutions have detached notions of freedom from their ultimate goal in seeking, creating and preserving the common good. Instead, freedom is primarily freedom to choose. Without the broader social goals of stability and equity in play, this quickly turns us into consumers and competitors without conscience, cogs in the wheels of the market, rather than participants in an ongoing project of social transformation towards shared ends.

If this is a true analysis (and we live in the middle of it, so sometimes it is hard to see with clarity), then the question for us is how Christians should articulate their relationship to these distortions of democratic values. The answer, I will propose, lies in our commitment to *justice*.

The second direction that leads many to posit a potential crisis in democracy relates to challenges in the areas of representation and legitimacy or, more straightforwardly, the problem of *populism*. Here we should note that what we call 'democracy' is of course shorthand for a particular way of thinking about the 'rule of the people': one that rejects the idea that the people should be viewed as an undifferentiated 'mass', who's common will determines political life. Instead, representative democracy insists on the need for an ordering of political views in ways that allow for diverse perspectives to be heard and to have influence. Democracy is therefore a recognition of and rejection of its close cousin, demagoguery. As Oliver O'Donovan has put it: the crowd 'is much less than the sum of its parts...The power of the crowd is the power of none'.<sup>3</sup> One way of thinking about the present crisis in democracy is to recognise the extent to which democratic institutions are being used and exploited in ways that reduce societies to crowds.

Here what is at stake is not just the notion of politics as the pursuit of freedom to secure the common good, but also the idea that politics gains its legitimacy from my capacity to genuinely participate in democratic institutions. This can easily become distorted. In a crowd I may think that I am acting, participating, doing my bit, when all that is actually happening is that I am part of a mass that is being acted upon, manipulated, and co-opted toward profoundly undemocratic ends.



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<sup>3</sup> O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgement*, 167.

At the same time, populist political leaders are also distinguished by their attempts to argue that anyone that does not agree with them does not have a legitimate viewpoint and should be excluded from the political process.<sup>4</sup> The storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters is a significant example of such delegitimising of those that hold alternative views. Many of the Trump supporters involved in the insurrection were unwilling to accept that a majority of their fellow Americans would have voted for Joe Biden, a view propagated by Donald Trump himself.

If this is also a part of the current political context then the question for Christians lies in the appropriate response to these undemocratic forms of democracy. The answer, I will propose, lies in our commitment to the place of faith or, less religiously, trust or, even better, ‘*allegiance*’ as a central and defining characteristic of our participation in the political realm.

## Justice and Allegiance: The Political Implications of Christian Confession

So, we turn to these two commitments and consider their relationship to Christian confession. My contention is that Christian tradition implies these very commitments because they can be seen as clear outworkings of the fundamental theological idea of ‘justification by faith.’ In fact, as I will show briefly below, the phrase ‘justification by faith’ is a translation of biblical language that we could just as easily render ‘justice through trust/allegiance’. I make this point not just to be linguistically clever, but to remind us of the fundamental idea with which we began: that theology and politics are not in a zero-sum game. Even at the level of our confessions of faith, our language about God, Christ, and the church, we are using political ideas. For Protestants, this is as true of the central theological claim in our religious tradition—that God justifies through faith—as it is of any of our more explicit political statements and pronouncements. So, we can briefly unpack how these terms connote particular kinds of political discernment, and a particular relationship between the claims of Christian faith and life in the *polis*.

The phrase ‘justification by faith’ goes back to the writings of the apostle Paul, whose theology focusses on the one hand on the claim God ‘justifies’ all people (but for Paul, in particular Gentiles), and on the other hand that this happens when people ‘believe’ or have faith. Every aspect of this simple summary of Paul’s theology is highly contested by scholars.<sup>5</sup> So perhaps it is best to look at one specific text from his most famous letter.

In Romans 1:17 Paul writes:

“For in [the gospel] the righteousness (*dikaïosunê*) of God is revealed through faith (*pistis*) for faith (*pistis*); as it is written, “The one who is righteous (*dikaïos*) will live by faith (*pistis*).”

For us to see how this formulation of ‘the gospel’ might inform political reflection, we need to briefly consider the broader usage and translation of the two key Greek words: *dikaïosunê* and *pistis*, and related terms.

### The Justice of God and Society

The Greek word *dikaïosunê* is often translated as ‘righteousness’ and, as such, is often interpreted exclusively in moral or theological terms: right behaviour or the state of being right with God. The same thing happens with related terms: the adjective *dikaïos* becomes ‘righteous’, and the verb *dikaioō* becomes ‘to make righteous’, although many English translations switch to the language of ‘to justify’ at this point. The basic point is that in Paul’s world these terms refer to the crucial political virtue: justice in the broadest sense. And it is perfectly legitimate to translate Paul’s language with these political associations and implications in mind.

Of course, Paul’s primary focus is on God’s justice in relation to creation, the chosen people of Israel, and sinful gentiles. He uses the terms with associations relating to Jewish scripture and Jewish convictions about the identity, character, rule, and saving power of God. But note how Paul moves from the righteousness/justice of *God* to talk about *our* righteousness/justice. For Paul, this righteousness/justice plays out in the world of social relationships, and in particular the relationships between different and diverse ethnic groups. Given that this is language that Paul’s audience would previously encounter in the promises, values, and ideologies of contemporary political discourse, they would have heard the term as a commitment to justice between different groups, now understood, interpreted, and practiced in the light of the justice of Israel’s God.

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Werner-Muller, *What is Populism?*, (London, Penguin UK, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent discussion of the issues, and of the relationship between Paul’s theology and ethical / political commitments see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul on Identity: Theology as Politics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

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We have no time to go into the various ways in which Paul unpacks the social, horizontal dimensions of justice in his letters.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say that Paul focusses primarily on the challenges that face the church, but that very focus makes the life of the church a question of politics. The questions that relate to justice in the church relate to the issue of justice in society more broadly: how to structure social relationships, how to handle diversity and conflict, the need to identify and practice shared common values, to work together for the common good, to provide material relief and support to those in need, the importance of 'other-regard' as an ethical commitment that, in turn, reconfigures our understanding of the self. Our commitment to justice, predicated on theological claims about the nature of God in Christ, provides us with a criterion against which we can discern Christian responsibility and the need for political change in the current crisis.

### Participation Through Trust/Allegiance

The other key term in Paul's formula is the term *pistis*, usually translated 'faith'. The associated verb is *pisteuō* and is regularly translated as 'to believe'. These are terms that are clearly important in the context of religious language, worship, and doctrine. But, again, this religious sense is too narrow, and Paul's language would have been heard as a term that defined a central virtue for participation in various kinds of social organisation: from the family to the state. It is a way of talking about the kinds of interpersonal relationships that create communities and societies and, as such, refers to something inherently fragile and subject to attack through the opposite propensities for lying, greed, and social division. As Teresa Morgan, in her classic study, suggests that *pistis* 'is never absolutely reliable, it coexists inescapably with fear, doubt, hope, and risk.'<sup>7</sup>

What this means is that the Christian commitment to 'faith' should never be reduced to the idea of passive 'trust' or intellectual 'belief'. Paul's formula refers to the part that people play in making God's justice real in the world by creating and sustaining communities based on *pistis* and its promise of security, mutual support, and shared goals. It is perhaps better to translate the term as 'faithfulness' or even 'allegiance' to others (including God) as the primary means of participating in various kinds of social organization. As with Paul's justice language, the focus in the New Testament is clearly on how all this relates to the church community. But the language itself, and the expansive vision of God's purposes for the world inviting our participation in social relationships that pursue those purposes, is clear. Our commitment to the virtue of trust provides with a provocation to consider where and how we can cultivate such relationships in the political sphere, especially when we acknowledge the threat to society that follows on from the absence of trust.



6 For a recent treatment of these themes in relation to Paul's letter to the Romans see Douglas Harink, *Resurrecting Justice: Reading Romans for the Life of the World*. Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2020.

7 Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

## Democracy and the Church's Task

Teasing out the implications of this theological foundation in terms of political and practical strategies is, then, the church's task. To conclude, I briefly set out three practices to which the church should be committed in the light of its theological confession that the gospel reveals God to be a God of justice and that we are called to participate in forms of community that bear faithful witness to that gospel.

First, the church should take up the challenge of *articulating* a vision of the kind of society that democracy is capable of sustaining. Jonathan Chaplin has recently noted the need for 'larger, integrative visions that balance a wide array of just claims and promote the political common good of the whole nation (and other nations)'.<sup>8</sup> Christian leaders, preachers, and anyone who seeks to articulate what Christian faith means and looks like in modern Australia must be able to give an account of what common good is and how democracy might enable it.

Secondly, Chaplin notes that, at the current time, political parties seem to be particularly poorly equipped to offer such a vision. This suggests that alternative *locations* for discussion of such issues are required, and the churches are ideally placed to host such conversations. Church buildings, church members, and even church resources might be appropriately directed towards enabling local, strategic conversations about democratic vision and participation.

Thirdly, the church should actively participate in the *conversations* and contestations that inevitably are a part of democracy, cultivating what Rowan Williams has called an 'argumentative democracy'.<sup>9</sup> The process of secularization has inevitably muted the church's voice in the public and political sphere, but that is not the same as saying that the church has nothing left to say. But, too often, what the church now 'says' in the public sphere is restricted to a selection of more or less pressing moral or ethical issues. The broader and deeper task is to take up opportunities for solidarity with those people, institutions and social groups that are genuinely working to cultivate the common good, and to become actively involved in forms of resistance to those people, institutions and social groups who oppose it.

Such commitments and practices will lead us to consider our engagement with political life beyond the ballot box and the important but limited challenge of who to vote for. They should provoke us to consider how we engage with other sites of political engagement and activity, beyond the obvious locations of political parties and government. Attention to the ways that a vision of justice and the virtue of trust are, or are not, cultivated in the media and the judiciary, are obvious examples. In a context where consideration of the place and role of democracy is either neglected or has become highly polarized, the church's convictions about the God who 'puts things right' places us under an obligation to construct narratives, communities and practices that promote and pursue the common good. Our commitment to democracy is inextricably linked to our allegiance to the one we call 'Lord'.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, "Democracy: Can These Dry Bones Live?", <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2021/03/23/democracy-can-these-dry-bones-live>. For further reflection see Chaplin's major work *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity*. London: SCM, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> See the Harold Wilson Lecture for 2017: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXPee\\_J1-4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXPee_J1-4o)