

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Don't Just Do Something – Pray!

Tom Habib

An election is coming.

With Australia Day over, the country is about to wake up from its January stupor and get going again. And it's an election year: ScoMo vs Shorton. A time of catchy slogans, fierce debate and awkward moments with sausage sangers. Be sure not to get hit by all the promises flying around.

And one issue that will be debated – either before or after the election – will be religion. Perhaps now more than ever in Australia there is a clear and present threat to Christian religious freedom.

The high-priests of Secularism are on the move, and they won't stop until they have stuffed Christianity into a box just small enough for a closed mouth. And the mood of the public may swing with them. On the issue of gender and sexuality, what was once a matter of opinion has now, for many, become an issue of justice. Those who consider same-sex unions sinful are seen as not simply backward, but bigoted.

The battleground for this debate will be Christian schools and organisations. For many, to refuse to hire those who do not align with your ethos is no longer simply narrow-minded, it is discriminatory. It will be argued that if we don't put up with racism anymore, why should we put up with this? If we don't give a free

pass to those who discriminate on the grounds of gender or ethnicity, why should Christians get a free pass here? And if this becomes the prevailing view in our society, expect to see our religious freedoms curtailed. You won't see churches shut down or bishops hurled off to jail. But you will see institutions lose their accreditation. Tax-exemptions removed. Lawsuits filed. Charities defunded. Businesses boycotted.

So, what should we do? We should pray.

First of all...pray

I am always rebuked when I read in 1 Timothy that Paul's first instruction for the church is to pray. And I am always amazed that the first group Paul instructs us to pray for are those in authority:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

(1 Timothy 2:1-4)

It sounds like a good thing to do – pray for those in authority. But why is it of first importance for Paul? Paul is not simply giving us here a random list of topics for your prayer time at church. Rather, Paul's reason for praying for those in authority goes right to the heart of the gospel he proclaims.

Pray, so that the gospel can go out

First, Paul prays for those in authority because he wants the gospel to go out. Paul writes that praying for those in authority is good and pleasing to God, "who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). This is the context in which we must understand his command. God wants all

people to be saved – and since there is only one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5) – all people need to hear the gospel.

The gospel is a public message, not a private one. And that is why we must pray for our government. Because their decisions affect whether we can share the gospel in public or not.

The government in NSW currently allows us to teach SRE in schools – a decision that aids the hearing of the gospel. In Victoria, SRE has been pushed out of school-hours – a decision that has limited those who can hear God's word. Put simply, Paul is instructing us to pray for those in authority because they can affect the spread of the gospel. Recently, the NSW Teacher's union declared that they will campaign to remove Scripture

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from NSW schools. What should we do? Pray for those who will make that decision – those in authority – because God wants the gospel to go out.

Pray, so that the gospel can be lived out

Second, Paul prays for those in authority because he wants the gospel to be lived out. Paul commands us to pray so that, “we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Throughout this letter, Paul is concerned to see the application of the gospel in people’s lives and exhorts Timothy to train himself and his people in godliness. And again, it is this gospel imperative which drives Paul’s prayer for those in authority. He doesn’t want the government to stop us living out the gospel in our lives – and so he tells us to pray for them.

Late last year the outrage mob got to work after a letter, signed by the principals of Anglican schools, was sent to Federal MPs. The letter stated that they wished to reserve the right to employ people who ‘support the ethos of the school’. How shocking that a Christian school, where families voluntarily send their kids, would want to be Christian. The same debate is raging in the US, where Second Lady, Karen Pence, received a backlash for teaching at a Christian school that holds to a Christian code of conduct.

There are people who don’t want us to act according to our Christian convictions and live out the gospel in our lives. It won’t begin with police raids breaking up family Bible time. But Christian organisations, schools, uni-groups – possibly even theological colleges – will face growing threats over the next few years when they refuse to hire or appoint people who do not live out the gospel. The godliness of the church is at stake. And so, we must pray for those in authority. We must pray that they will allow us to live out our Christian faith without interference.

The nations rage and the church prays

Paul prays for those in authority because of the gospel. This is a helpful reminder as we think about Christians engaging with politics. When we seek religious freedoms, we are not fighting to gain positions of power or influence, nor are we taking up arms in a culture war raging around us and calling on us to pick sides. We do it for the gospel. It was Paul’s deep desire to see the gospel go out and the gospel lived out that led him to pray. And if we share his desire, we must share his prayer.

The early church is a wonderful example. When Peter and John were released from prison, the church prayed from the words of Psalm 2:

*Why do the nations rage
and the people’s plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
Against the Lord and His anointed One.*

Prayer was the natural response for the early church as they faced persecution. God is the maker of the heavens, the earth, and the sea. He is sovereign. He is in charge, and He is in control. What else should we do when the nations take their stand? Whom else should we call on when rulers rise up against Him? It can be easy to jump to political activism when we feel threatened. But the most practical thing we can do is pray.

Don’t just do something – Pray!

Many around the world have come to despise the phrase, “our thoughts and prayers are with them”. The argument is that we need to stop praying and start doing. Get off our knees and get our hands dirty. Prayer is passive.

Token. An add-on to the real work we need to do. And it is easy for the church to fall into this sort of thinking. To become simply an activist army that seeks to further the Kingdom through political means.

Of course, we can and should still actively fight for our rights. The Apostle Paul had no qualms about claiming his rights as a Roman citizen to escape flogging (Acts 22:23-25). Hoping for a fairer trial, he even appealed to Caesar to avoid being tried in Jerusalem (Acts 25:11). Nevertheless, we must not assume that things will always pan out the way we want them to – regardless of how much we act or pray. The church prayed for Peter and he was released – but James was put to death (Acts 12:2). Had Paul not appealed to Caesar and allowed himself to be tried in Jerusalem, he would have been set free by King Agrippa (Acts 26:32). We can fight for our freedom, but it is still God who will decide what happens. And so, we must pray.

For Paul, this was of first importance. God wants the gospel to go out and to be lived out. So, pray for those in authority.

When we seek religious freedoms, we are not fighting to gain positions of power or influence, nor are we taking up arms in a culture war. We do it for the gospel.



Tom Habib is an assistant minister at Yagoona and Condell Park Anglican church in NSW.

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