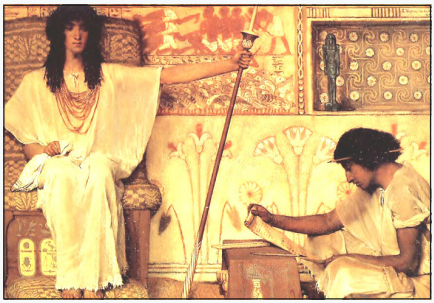
Leading and shaping the civic culture

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My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men
- William Wilberforce (1759-1833)



Joseph, Overseer of the Pharaoh's Granaries
by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1874

The value of civic governance

In an ideal world everyone would love each other and enjoy happy dealings in personal, business, social and political interactions. In such a situation there would be no need for law. But the world is not full of love. Rather, many hate each other, and lack respect for the individual and do not value social cooperation. Such people will do whatever they can get away with.

In response to the sinful and corrupt human condition, God has worked his great plan of salvation. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, sinners can receive the free gift of forgiveness and join the family of God. The Holy Spirit enters our lives and the law of God is written upon our hearts. Christians therefore cease hating others, and are enabled and prompted to love our enemies. We gain respect for the individual (seeing each person as made in God's image) and we value relating in families, churches, neighbourhoods, associations, local communities, the state, and nation.

But what about people who reject God's plan of salvation? As part of the work of grace, God exercises a ministry towards people who are hesitant or unwilling to receive salvation. God has not abandoned such people, but appoints civic authorities to enact and enforce good legislation that is made *not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels* (1 Timothy 1:9). Of course the enactment and enforcement of good law will not turn ungodly people into Christians, nor will it make people love each other. These outcomes are not the biblically defined purpose of law. Instead, the civic authorities serve to prevent chaos and evil. As society is protected from harm, unbelievers are better prevented from destroying one other. This gives people a greater opportunity to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus.

Praying for the civic authorities

God's people have the responsibility to pray for our civic leaders, upholding them as they carry out a divine mission:

> *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness* (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

Many problems facing society have arisen because Christians have neglected to pray and respond as salt and light. Christians cannot therefore be entirely blameless regarding the erosion of the freedom to live *peaceful and quiet lives* as we have neglected to pray.

Proclaiming truth to the civic authorities

Throughout history God has raised up people who confronted the culture in relation to its injustice, corruption and folly. Our challenge today is also respond to situations of injustice and unrighteousness - at times exercising a **prophetic** ministry and at other times exercising a **persuasive** ministry.

A **prophetic** ministry may be expressed when God's people are constrained and compelled by the Spirit to stand squarely in opposition to injustice or corruption. Such a stance can be expressed as a warning or as a caution, as when Jesus sent a harsh word of rebuke to King Herod, *"go tell that fox"* (Luke 13:32) or when John the Baptist rebuked Herod Antipas (Mark 6:18). The prophetic ministry is a often a lonely task since prophets must often stand outside the social, civic or religious community. However, some prophets are called to challenge the system from within: Daniel served as a prophet and a civic authority; Jeremiah was a prophet and a priest.

A **persuasive** ministry may be expressed by God's people who apply the widsom of God, based on our understanding of common sense, thorough scientific research, and a wise appreciation of history, without any special revelation as was given to the prophets. Such a ministry was given by William Wilberforce and Earl Shaftesbury: though they had no dramatic special revelation they understood how they must tackle the defining social crises of their day - slavery (in the era of Wilberforce), and the shocking abuse of women and children in the workforce (in the time of Shaftesbury).

Participating in the leadership of secular civic contexts

Historically God has raised individuals from among his people to give civic influence and leadership in many pagan and ungodly situations:

Joseph led Egypt by God's action and wisdom, saving his family from starvation, along with the nation *and all the countries* (Genesis 41:56-57). **Moses** - was raised as a prince in Egypt (Exodus 2). **Naaman** - commander of the Syrian armies came to faith and continued in leadership (II Kings 5). **Daniel** served in the Babylonian and Persian empires, and he appointed his friends **Shadrach**, **Meshach** and **Abednego** as leaders (2:46-49). Two of the kings he served wrote to urge the nations to honour God (3:29-4:37, 6:25-27). **Ezra** (7:25) appointed judges in Trans Euphrates as a leader of the pagan Persian Empire. **Nehemiah** (1:11, 5:14) ministered as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, and became the governor of the Persian province of Judah. **Esther** (4:14) became Queen of the Persian Empire *for such a time as this*. She risked her life by giving wise counsel to her husband the king and so helped rescue all God's people. Her uncle **Mordecai** also served the king well and became Prime Minister (8:2, 10:3).

Soldiers responded to the message of John the Baptist urging them not to *extort money* nor to *accuse people falsely* but to *be content* (Luke 3:14). **The Righteous Centurion** drew a parallel between his authority and that of Christ and was commended (Luke 7:1-10). The **centurion Cornelius** came to faith (Acts 10). These examples affirm military involvement by Christians.

A **Galilean royal official** believed when Jesus healed his son (John 4:46-53). The **Ethiopian Eunuch** who believed was *an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians* (Acts 8:27). **Sergius Paulus** (the Proconsul of Cyprus) *believed, for he was amazed* (Acts 13:12). The **Philippian jailer** came to faith (Acts 16:29-36) as did **Dionysius** who was *a member of the Areopagus* (Acts 17:34) - the most prestigious civic council of elders in Athens. Greetings were sent from certain **Roman saints** *who belong to Caesar's household* (Philippians 4:22), and from **Erastus** who served as the *Director of Public Works* (Romans 16:24). He probably lived and worked in Corinth, where (in 1929) a pavement was found which dates to about AD 50, stating that *Erastus in return for his aedileship, laid this pavement at his own expense*; the *aedilis* was commissioner of public works in that highly pagan city.

Affirming the sovereignty of God over the Australian nation

The affirmation of God's sovereignty over the nations is clear from Scripture and in history. Biblically, greatness of peaceful and prosperous nations is traceable to God's gra ce, by which the various founders and pioneers worked to established civic and cultural virtue. Since Australia's Christian foundation is clear, our declaration of God's sovereignty is simply a recognition of such existing realities as the following historical facts:

- Most Australians identify with the Christian faith at each census. We hold the Christian festivals of Pancake Day (Shrove Tuesday) along with Easter and Christmas, and we use a seven-day week. We value the BC/AD division of history, and our law code is based on Christian principles.

- The flag has four Christian crosses, and our highest military award is the Victoria Cross. Parliamentary, military and policing symbols show the Crown of King Edward the Confessor - on which is the cross of Jesus.

- The Preamble to the Commonwealth Constitution describes the people as *humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God*. Without such a key statement, the people would not have agreed to federation. Latterly, at a referendum in 1999, the people chose not to change those key words.

- Civic leaders inherit Christian obligations via the Queen's Coronation, and new citizens may promise allegiance "under God".

- All State and Federal Parliaments begin each sitting day with Christian prayer, including the Lord's Prayer.

- Until the mid-1970s the daily television transmission of the Australian Broadcasting Commission ended with the song "God Bless Australia".

- The "Westminster Chime" (with its prayerful Christian lyrics) peals from clock towers across the world:

ALL THROUGH THIS HOUR, LORD BE MY GUIDE
THAT BY THY POWER, NO FOOT SHALL SLIDE.

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