The provision of leadership by Christians at Federation

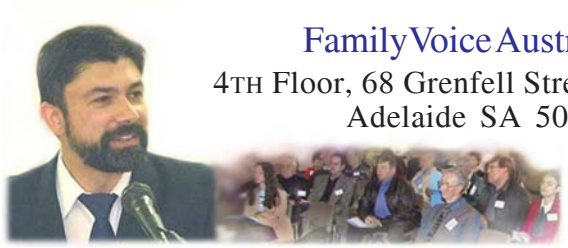
The third biblical principle in the work of the Founders was that Christians provided leadership in the civic arena. They recognized that Christians are not simply to know how society should function, or simply to pray, but to serve as leaders in society, like Joseph over Egypt, or Daniel over Babylon. All Christians are to serve as leaders, since all Christians are to be teachers (Hebrews 5:12) - and all teachers necessarily are leaders. Society needs leaders who will apply the biblical role of government: *to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right* (I Peter 2:13-14)

Their recognition that God is sovereign arose from knowledge of the Bible, and especially its record of the Lord Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate. Our Lord firstly refused to answer the governor's questions. But when Pilate asserted his own power, Jesus stated: *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"* (John 19:8-11). Christians today can echo this assertion of God's sovereignty in all areas of society.

Prayers read at the opening of the Federal Parliament, 9 May 1901

... Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to regard with Thy Merciful favour the people of this land, now united in one Commonwealth. We pray for Thy servants the Governor-General, the Governors of the States, and all who are or who shall be associated with them in the administration of their several offices. We pray Thee at this time to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon the Federal Parliament now assembling for their first session, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper all their consultations to the advancement of Thy glory and to the true welfare of the people of Australia, through Jesus Christ our Lord ....

- quoted in G. McLennan, *Understanding Our Christian Heritage* Vol II, (Christian Heritage Research Institute: Orange, NSW, 1989 p.82).



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Understanding the Christian basis of Federation

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One People, One Destiny
- the Federation motto



The opening of Federal Parliament, 1901
- Tom Roberts (1856-1931)

In 1901 the six Australian colonies formed a new nation, with a civic system that upholds democracy, minimises concentrations of power, and protects the people from the excesses of government. The civic system was shaped by many Christians - including Catherine Helen Spence and Alfred Deakin.

Prior to federation, **Catherine Helen Spence** (1825-1910) - a keen Christian educator and an advocate for proportional representation - wrote (in 1861) -



It is well when there is no dissatisfied, unrepresented class, in a community (*A Plea for Pure Democracy*, p.6).

This echoes a biblical recognition of minority views: *... there are many parts, but one body ... its parts should have equal concern for each other* (I Corinthians 12:20, 25).

Influenced by such a consideration, the Senate gives equal rights to each of the States, regardless of their population. Further, long after Spence died, her call for proportional representation was heeded when (in 1949) it was adopted as the Senate voting system - thereby giving a voice to minority players.

At the success of the referendum in June 1898, **Alfred Deakin** (1856-1919) - a keen Christian who served three times as Australia's Prime Minister - wrote:



God preserve this people and grant its leaders unselfish fidelity and courage to face all trials for the sake of brotherhood. Thy blessing has rested upon us here yesterday and we pray that it may be the means of creating and fostering throughout all Australia a Christlike citizenship. (E. Rogers-Kotlowsky, *Southland of the Holy Spirit*, Christian History Research Institute: Orange, 1994 p.258).

Constitutional recognition of the Sovereignty of God

As we look back we learn that God is sovereign over the formation of nations, and the placement of peoples across the world:

> *When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,*
> *when he divided all mankind,*
> *he set up boundaries for the peoples ....* (Deuteronomy 32:8)

> [The LORD said] ... *"... I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted"* (Jeremiah 18:9).

> *From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him ....* (Acts 17:26-27)

God is sovereign over the peoples and their placement in nations, including:

- The occupation of this great continent by the Aboriginal people.
- The establishment of six British colonies in this land (a process that enabled the gospel to come to the Aboriginal people).
- The formation of federation - the agreement between the colonies to form the new nation of Australia.

The sovereignty of God was asserted when Christians across the continent realised that the emerging Australian nation must recognise God as the Almighty. Thousands of Christians across the land signed petitions that were presented at the 1897 Constitutional Convention, urging delegates to recognise God as sovereign. As a result, the Preamble to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia gives a very strong recognition of the sovereignty of God:

> *... the people... humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown ... and under the Constitution hereby established ....*

By the grace of God, the people in the several colonies struggled through decades of discussion and debate, two conventions and two referendums to set aside their rivalries, and come together as one people, not through dissolving as Colonies, but uniting them as *States* within a *Federation.*

Constitutional checking against the tendency towards corruption

The second principle understood by the Founders of Federation was the reality of the human tendency towards corruption, as described in the Bible (a key source of wisdom many of the Founders):

- *... every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood* (Genesis 8:21);
- *The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live ....* (Ecclesiastes 9:3);
- *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyound cure. Who can understand it?* (Jeremiah 17:9);
- King Ahab and Queen Jezebel coveted Naboth's land, and perverted justice, as Naboth was murdered and his land was stolen (I Kings 21);
- King David coveted, stole, committed adultery and murdered, when he encountered Bathsheba (II Samuel 11-12).

Distrust of power was a key concern of political theorists prior to Federation. Therefore **Lord John Acton** (1834-1902) wisely cautioned in 1887 that: *Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

The Founders of the Australian Federation well understood this human tendency towards corruption, so they devised a Constitution that diffuses power, sharing it between the Governor-General, the six State Governors, two federal houses of parliament, the judiciary and the people. Power is so thoroughly diffused within our federal system that parliamentarians have great difficulty exercising any power at all! Even routine enactments of law can only be made through exact agreement between the two houses of Federal Parliament (and the Governor-General) subject to the High Court.

Further, the most significant change is the hardest to gain - namely, a modification to the Constitution. This “rule book” of federation describes how we agree to operate as a nation. It can be modified only when a plan for change has been passed by at least one of the two houses of the Federal Parliament, with agreement of the Governor-General, and agreement of a majority of people across the nation, plus a majority of people in at least four out of the six States. This vote by the people to modify the constitution is called a *referendum* (as the matter must be *referred* to the people).