The Relationship of Church and State and Religious Freedom

(A report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

(This report was endorsed by the Synod on 16 September 2024 via resolution 5/24 and approved for publication on the website.)

Synod Resolution 38/22

Given the impact of the COVID-19 governmental restrictions on church gatherings, weddings and funerals, and in light of changing attitudes in society to free speech, especially on issues of sexuality, compelled by our Lord's call that all people come to repentance and faith, Synod requests a Doctrine Commission report be brought to the 2023 session of Synod which considers –

(a) the relationship of church and state, and in particular the extent to which Christians and church leaders are beholden to obey government directives that are contrary to the word of God and Christian conscience, particularly those concerning –

  (i) the conduct of church gatherings,

  (ii) the exclusion of a person from our public gatherings,

  (iii) the removal of, or the prohibition of, an otherwise suitable person to ministry positions, and

  (iv) forced compliance with certain forms of speech,

  including consideration of when it would be right and proper to disobey such directives, and

(b) what responsibilities does the wider Christian community have in defending believers who, in Biblical conscience, have made costly decisions to disobey directions to limit Christians' freedom to assemble, and freedom to speak and assert Biblical truths.

Further, Synod invites any Synod members who wish to make submissions to the Doctrine Commission on the above, for consideration by the Doctrine Commission, to do so by 31 January 2023.

Executive Summary

- Christians are called to love their neighbours as themselves, to seek to live peaceably with all, and to submit to the governing authorities.
- God's people fulfill the creational mandate (Gen 9:1–7) by working alongside their fellow humans to order society with justice, punish evil, and restrain the effects of sin. Governments are answerable to God for societies whose good order enables people to 'seek God and perhaps find him' (Acts 17:27).
- The kingdom of God can never materialise among an unsaved people, who twist justice and righteousness towards self-worship. But neither can it fully materialise in the church, which lacks the promised land that a true society requires. God's plan for human society will not be fulfilled until its citizens rule with the risen Christ over a new creation.
- In the meantime, God's kingdom is realised spiritually in Christ's church. As his people live by the Spirit they fulfil the law and create communities whose righteousness and holiness reflect the character of God, in stark contrast to the world around.
- In the overlap of the ages Christ's people live in tension with this world. Even hostile governments have been instituted by God and operate under his authority. However, the obedience Christians owe to those with earthly authority is not absolute but is relativised by a prior and higher allegiance to Christ and his word.
- Every Christian is subject to the human laws of outward government, but such laws can never bind the conscience, which has been set free in Christ.
- Because our consciences are free, we can submit to the binding of our outward actions by secular rulers in matters upon which salvation does not depend. Our consciences are not sure guides in themselves; they need to be trained according to the word of God.
- The 'church' is not only a spiritual body held together by word and Spirit; it is a temporal organisation that to some extent governs the outward behaviour of its members.

- Secular rulers have a God-given authority over many temporal aspects of life in which the church and its members are involved. The more active the church is in the public sphere, the more its activities will rightfully fall under the jurisdiction of civil governments.
- The church is not called to govern alongside the state, though Christians can and should seek secular office; but the church should call upon the government to fulfil its responsibility to God to uphold justice and righteousness.
- When faced with government directives contrary to the word of God, the church must distinguish commands we *must* disobey from those we *may* disobey, and wisely consider the latter in the light of the priority of gospel proclamation.
- The stance of the follower of Jesus in a hostile world is marked by patient endurance and faithful testimony to Jesus.

1. Introduction

1.1. As Christians we are called to live out our discipleship in allegiance to Christ and with a responsibility to our neighbours. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) but we live on earth. Our responsibility to love our neighbour is wide-ranging (Luke 10:25–37). We are not only called upon, so far as it depends on us, to 'live peaceably with all' (Rom 12:18), but also to 'be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution' (1 Pet 2:13). In the time of the New Testament, this second aspect included the instruction to 'honour the emperor' (1 Pet 2:17), even though the emperors of that time were hostile towards Christians and in particular their prior and supreme loyalty to Christ. In such an environment, the question of the relationship of church and state was complex, and the answers are no more simple or straightforward today than they were then.

1.2. In addressing the Synod resolution, this report has also extended its scope beyond the precise wording of the resolution in order to identify the theological issues that must be considered before one draws conclusions about what makes for right and wrong responses to government directives. For example, we have gone beyond the scope of point 1 of the resolution ('directives that are contrary to the word of God') because it presumes a conclusion without establishing it and restricts the request for advice to a narrow set of circumstances. Similarly, we have not limited our examination of conscience to the specific examples listed, but have engaged in a broader theological examination of conscience as it pertains to those examples.

2. Methodological issues

2.1. When approaching a subject as complex as this, and one that has such widespread implications, it is important to be clear on our method of approach. Since the Scriptures as God's word are given to direct our lives as Christian disciples, we willingly submit our moral reasoning to them. In Scripture God has not only made known himself—his character, his purpose, and his saving action in the world—he has also made known the truth about us as his created, fallen and yet redeemed people. He, then, must show us how we ought to live as recipients of his grace in a fallen and rebellious world.

2.2. Within this broad theological framework, the practice of determining how the Bible guides and governs our actions and intentions is the main business of Christian ethics. It is the work of the Spirit to conform our moral reasoning (our ethics) to the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Scriptures. In this process, we need to be sensitive to differences in context. For while the meaning of God's word remains constant, the application of its meaning may differ from one context to the next. So, for example, there are important differences to appreciate between Israelite life under King Solomon in the Promised Land, or under Roman occupation, and our experience of living in a modern Western-style (secularised) democracy. At the same time, we must recognise that God's word transcends historical limitations and that 'whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction' (Rom 15:4).

2.3. With these considerations in mind, we will briefly survey a biblical theology of church and state. This will establish a broad framework for further thinking about Christian political engagement, including the role of conscience and the contemplation of civil disobedience. The varying ways in which the Reformers applied the Bible to their own context provide a useful aid to considering how our own times are both similar to and different from ages past. There have been many approaches to

constructing a contemporary political theology. The Appendix summarises the main ones, and provides a rationale for the approach taken by the present report.

2.4. A preliminary definition of the key terms 'church' and 'state' will be helpful at this point. In the New Testament, the word 'church' is most often used for the people of God gathered in a particular place (e.g., Acts 8:1; 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 4:15; Phil 4:15), a local and physical manifestation of the gathering of all believers around Christ in heaven (Eph 2:67; Heb 12:22–23). This is why the New Testament is able to refer to 'the churches' in the plural (e.g., 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Cor 12:13; Gal 1:22). Sometimes, though, the word appears to be more like a collective noun for 'Christians' (1 Cor 10:32), without any hint of physical gathering or institutional structure. It is in the second sense that this report will generally use the word; the exceptions will be evident from context. The word 'state' can likewise have a number of meanings, but in contemporary political theory it is typically defined as a centralised political organisation that makes and enforces laws that direct the lives of those within a particular jurisdiction.

3. Biblical survey

3.1. Christian civic engagement has long taken as its foundation the words of Jesus, 'Render to Caesar the things that Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Matt 22:21). Faithfulness and civic responsibility are not mutually exclusive. There are legitimate obligations to the government just as there are legitimate obligations to God for followers of Christ. The same words, though, make a distinction between 'the things that are Caesar's' and 'the things that are God's.' Confusing these things is potentially as dangerous as placing them in absolute opposition to one another. The precise relationship between these two spheres is a fundamental question of political theology, a question with which Christians have long wrestled. Our task in this report is to consider that question in the light of the Scriptures and this particular moment in Australian history.

3.2. As we turn to the Scriptures, our treatment will inevitably be selective even as we attempt to be appropriately comprehensive. Just as the subject of Christian engagement with the secular world is a vast one, so also there are vast resources in Scripture to guide us. The best service this report can offer is to discern what is necessary and sufficient to ground and guide our thinking on the issue, and to present it as concisely as possible. At the same time, given the danger of basing a political stance on just one or two isolated biblical texts, it is important that we reflect the full breadth of Scripture's teaching to avail ourselves of the whole counsel of God.

3.3. The approach we have chosen is a combination of biblical-theological survey and thematic study. We begin by sketching the story of human society across the Bible, a story of conflict between the rival cities of Babel/Babylon and Jerusalem. Then we sketch the story of Israel, a 'kingdom of priests', designed to model God's perfect society but which was ultimately swallowed up by Babylon. Finally, we consider the way in which the kingdom of Christ resolves both stories, as Jesus creates a new Israel around himself, and reigns as king over every nation in the heavenly Jerusalem. To conclude the biblical survey, we turn to the church as it lives in the overlap of the ages, to note the ways in which it relates to secular rulers.

The creation of human society and the 'Two Cities'

3.4. *Creation*. As the opening chapter of the Bible makes clear, God is the creator and ruler of all that exists. The creation mandate given to humankind is to exercise the Creator's dominion as his royal image-bearers by subduing and ruling the creation with his wisdom (Gen 1:26–28; Prov 8). The basic pattern for human rule is established in Genesis 2: human beings live under the rule of God, who dwells in their midst, and the life that flows from God brings life not only to humankind but to the far corners of the earth. Although Eden as an ideal will play a major role in biblical typology, Eden itself is neither city nor nation; only two people live there.

3.5. *Fall*. Exercise of the creation mandate happens in the shadow of the Fall. Not only are nature and humanity in a state of mutual enmity (Gen 9:2–3), but fallen humans treat one another violently and corruptly (Gen 6:11–12). The first time we see the creation mandate expressed in social form, that is, as possessing social, cultural, and (by implication) political structures, it is already clouded by violence (Gen 4:17–24). In his covenant with Noah, God promises to preserve life on earth, and makes humans responsible for protecting human life on his behalf. The language of Genesis 9:5–6

implies divine authorisation to pursue commensurate retributive justice for acts of violence up to and including murder (cf. Lev 24:20). This requires the development of an organised society and systems of justice.

3.6. *Babylon*. The Noahic covenant is violated by the nations, who fill the earth with violence. The inevitable consequence of this violation will be God's negation of his promise to preserve the earth (Isa 24:1–5). Thematically, the city of Babel/Babylon represents human society organized around the goal of self-worship (Gen 11:4; Rev 18). The result is a culture of violence, directed ultimately against God. God will use Babylon's violence as an instrument of his judgment (Jer 25:8–11; Ezek 21), before finally destroying the wicked city (Isa 14:12–15; Jer 25:12–14). At the same time, the destruction of Babylon will be instrumental in the salvation of God's people (Isa 48:17–22; Jer 50–51).

3.7. *Jerusalem*. Standing over against Babylon is the Edenic ideal of Jerusalem. Zion, at the heart of the land of Israel, was the place of God's earthly dwelling. Only in such a place and under such a rule was it ever possible for humankind and creation to be fruitful as intended (Deut 4:6–8). However, Israel, too, spurned God's lordship and fell under his judgment, and Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon (see below). Zion was to remain an unrealised ideal, described in the Psalms rather than the historical books (Pss 2; 9; 48; 62; etc.).

3.8. *New creation*. Jerusalem in prophetic thought became the eternal city from which judgment will spread across the earth and blessing fill the land (Joel 3:14–21); the city from which God's law will one day spread out to bring justice to the nations and to which the nations will stream (Mic 4:1–5; Zech 2:10–13). In Ezekiel's vision of a new temple in a new Eden (Ezek 47:1–12), the garden watered by the four rivers is an ideal land of Israel, and the ideal city at its heart is named 'The LORD Is There' (Ezek 48:35; cf. Zech 14:8–9). The ideal land, in which Jerusalem stands as the eternal home of God's people, will be no less than 'a new heavens and a new earth' (Isa 65:17–25; Rev 21:1–4). But before this future can be realised, Babylon must fall (Jer 50–51; Rev 18–19).

3.9. *Preliminary implications*. As we await the descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven, we live in an age where dominion over creation and the government of human society is a task given to all who bear the divine image. This task originates from our Creator, not ourselves. He binds all humans by covenant, making all of us responsible to exercise dominion in a manner that 'glorifies him as God' (Rom 1:21). God's people therefore fulfill the creational mandate by working alongside their fellow humans to order society with justice, punish evil, and restrain the effects of human sinfulness. It is beyond the power of any human government to do this faultlessly or fully. Although everyone has been given the knowledge of God that they need in order to rule creation to his glory (see Rom 1:19–20), they suppress this knowledge. We all work together to make creation flourish, but Christians do so knowing that our efforts are subject to futility and that Babylon will ultimately fall.

The rise and fall of the Kingdom of Israel

3.10. *The Law.* God's plan to remedy the situation outlined in Genesis 3–11, a plan foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15, took the form of promises to Abram (Gen 12:1–3). This led eventually to the rescue of the people of Israel from Egypt and its God-defying ruler (Exod 5:2). Israel was uniquely constituted as a holy nation through the Sinai covenant. In the law, God provided a framework for the wise ordering of society, whose benefits would extend to the reordering of creation itself (Deut 4:6–8; 26:1–15; 28:1–14; Jer 8:4–9). Although the wisdom of God's law was intended to make Israel the envy of the nations (1 Kgs 4:34; 10:1–9), the benefits of the law were inseparable from undivided allegiance to the LORD. When Israel forgot the LORD and went after other gods, it was inevitable that injustice and oppression quickly followed. Conversely, when through Israel's prophets God held foreign nations to account for crimes against humanity, which were universally recognised to be wrong, they were not held to account for breaches of the Mosaic law (cf. Amos 1:3–2:3; 2:4–8).

3.11. *The King*. Although the LORD was Israel's king, God's intention had always been to make Israel a nation, not just a people (Gen 17:6). A 'people,' or kinship group, is bound by natural ties; but a nation's unity is not natural; it arises from a common investment in the benefits of nationhood. National identity under the Davidic covenant was focused around the king, who secured Israel's welfare by mediating God's kingship. The human king's role was to look to God in humility, imitate his righteousness, and emulate his wisdom. Josiah demonstrated 'what it means to know me' when he 'defended the cause of the poor and needy' (Jer 22:16), because God 'defends the cause of the fatherless and widow' (Deut 10:18–19). True royal wisdom is the wisdom to know the LORD who exercises justice and righteousness (Jer 9:24; 23:5). The nation his rule creates is distinguished by

the experience and memory of *salvation*; a society marked by *justice and righteousness*; and the possession of a *land* within which this social order could be realised.[1]

3.12. *Idolatry*. Israel's monarchy failed when the nation, led by its kings, withdrew their loyalty from the LORD and gave it to the gods of the nations (2 Kgs 21:7–15). The consequence was the devastation of God's defiled land (Lev 26:34–35) and the exile of his idolatrous people (Deut 29:22–28).

3.13. *Exile*. Exile was the nation's death, an experience whose sole purpose was to recreate them inwardly, making them obedient at heart (Isa 43:14–44:5; Jer 24:5–7; 29:10–14; Ezek 36–37). The experience of exile taught Israel the lesson of Solomon's prayer (1 Kgs 8:46–53): that the LORD is Lord over every nation and all of history, a present help to those who call on him in prayer (Ezek 1; Dan 9). However, neither kingship nor the just society it enabled could be realised without a land. During their years in Babylon, Jeremiah famously instructed the exiles to 'seek the welfare of the city' and 'pray to the LORD on its behalf' (Jer 29:7). The goal was to keep Babylon healthy so that the exiles might emerge from it healthy when the time came for its destruction (Jer 50:17–20). There was nothing missional about these activities; no expectation that Babylonians might repent and believe. Just as Israel's exile was a unique historical event, so God's promise that 'in its welfare you will find your welfare' was also unique to Israel in exile.

3.14. The book of Daniel complements the message of Jeremiah 29. Forced into servitude, Daniel uses God-given wisdom to convince the authorities to accommodate his dietary requests and to interpret the king's dreams in the name of his God. His friends choose death over disloyalty to God, and Daniel himself makes no attempt to hide his private religious activities when they are made illegal. God uses Daniel's faithful and shrewd witness to assert himself forcefully as the king of kings. Daniel's life bears witness, but it is not 'missional' in the sense of seeking the conversion of pagans or the reformation of society. His posture towards God is one of mourning, and his attitude to his Babylonian situation is one of shame. His exhortation to the king in Daniel 4:27 is not a word of prophecy calling on him to worship Israel's God. It is offered as wise 'counsel': if the king renounces the universally-recognised 'sins' of unjust and ruthless rule, his chances of a long reign will improve. Daniel considers himself and his people to be under curse in a foreign land over which God is sovereign but from which, in an important sense, God remains distant (Dan 9:3, 7, 11, 19).

3.15. *Return*. After the fall of Babylon, Israel regained land but not kingship. In a deep sense their exile was unended (Neh 9:1–37). The failure of the historical return to live up to the prophecies of a second exodus pointed to a fulfilment of God's plan beyond history as we know it (Dan 2:44). The true end of exile began with the resurrection and ascension of King Jesus to 'a better homeland' (Heb 11:14–16). As Christ's people wait to join him, we live in Babylon not as exiles under judgment but as *parepidēmoi,* 'foreigners' (1 Pet 1:1, NLT), members of a holy nation who have received our inheritance in the heavenly Jerusalem (1 Pet 1:4; 2:9).[2] Moreover, this new people of God is comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, called and joined together in a common citizenship through faith in Christ (Rom 9:22–24; Eph 2:11–22). It is thus no longer circumcision but new creation in Christ that constitutes the 'Israel of God' (Gal 6:15–16). The names of both the tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Lamb, which are inscribed on the heavenly city (Rev 21:12–14), confirm that the new creation is the place where the kingdom of Israel is perfectly realised for the first and final time.

3.16. *Preliminary implications*. The Sinai covenant laid out a social charter for Israel that depended entirely for its success upon faithful allegiance to the LORD from king and people. The fact that its law lays out principles, derived from the Decalogue, that could be applied to make any society more just and righteous, offers both opportunities and temptations to Christians who engage in secular politics. Elements of Israel's law have commended themselves to many societies, even those without a Jewish or Christian heritage, because they reflect our God-given sense of what is just and right. Israel's law can be a source of wisdom that informs the contribution of Christian members of society as they work alongside others. However, the Sinai covenant binds only those whom the LORD rescued from slavery in Egypt (Exod 20:1). In societies where citizens are free to do so (cf. Acts 16:37), Christians are able to campaign *as citizens* for God-honouring laws. Such laws will increase

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1 Oliver O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 36–46, modified by the critique of J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 81–83, 170–71.

2 The Greek word *parepidēmoi* means *foreign residents* (so Heb 1:13 and contemporary usage), not *exiles*—a translation introduced by the RSV. The Hebrew word translated by *parapidēmoi* in the LXX is *tôšāb*, *foreign resident* (see the allusion in 1 Pet 2:11 to Gen 23:4).

the 'welfare of the city,' but they will not save it, and neither are they necessary for the 'welfare' of the heavenly city from which we are not exiled, though we are temporarily living abroad. On the wisdom of campaigning for such laws, see §§5.2, 6.2 below.

3.17. However, many interpreters—particularly those in nations where the church, historically, has been close to the centre of power (e.g., where the church has been 'established' by the state)—succumb to the temptation to read the Old Testament directly onto modern society. It is more faithful to the biblical material to recognise that the three elements of Israel's nationhood—salvation, justice and righteousness, and land—are inseparable, so that their proper fulfilment is to be sought in the church, rather than the world. Interpreters in times or places where the church lies on the margins of society have, again historically, been more sensitive to this truth, seeing Israel's kings as typological antecedents of church leaders, and focusing application on abuses of power within the church. The challenge of this latter approach is deciding how to treat Old Testament civil laws in view of the fact that the church is not a *polis*, or civic society, because it possesses *salvation* but not *land*.

The Kingdom of Christ

3.18. *Birth*. Luke traces Jesus's genealogy through his legal father Joseph to Solomon's brother Nathan and then back not just to Abraham but to Adam (Luke 3:23–37). Here is a rightful son of David, but his claim is not only to the throne of Israel (Luke 1:32–33; Matt 2:6); as the incarnate 'son of God' (Luke 3:37), Jesus represents and will reign over the entire human race (Matt 16:27–28; 24:30–31; 28:18–20). Jesus therefore comes as the true king who exercises God's rule over the nation of Israel, and the true human who exercises dominion over creation.

3.19. *Life*. Jesus comes to Zion as its eschatological king (Matt 21:5). For this reason, all who recognise his lordship enjoy full citizenship in his kingdom, while all who reject him will themselves be rejected (Matt 21:41; Rom 9:33; 1 Pet 2:4–10; Rev 14:1). However, because Jesus's kingdom is not of this world, he will not identify it with any political state, nor will he attempt to establish it by the sword (John 18:36). Nevertheless, in terms of both his teaching and his practice, Jesus recognised the temporary legitimacy of earthly government and so taught submission toward the civil authorities (Matt 17:27; 22:15–21).

3.20. *Death*. Through his death Christ triumphed over the powers of death, freeing the world from their grip. Christ reigned from the cross both as king of the Jews (John 19:19), and as the one into whose hands the Father has put all things (John 13:3). The absolute sovereignty of God's reign over the earth is revealed as he bends the rebellion of the nations to the will of his Messiah that their punishment for insurrection should become the means of his royal triumph (Acts 2:23; cf. Ps.2:1–4). The kingdom of God means no more and no less than every knee bowing at the name of Jesus; and it was finally achieved not by the faithfulness of God's people, but solely by Jesus's obedience to the point of death on a cross and God's exalting of him to the highest place (Phil 2:8–11).

3.21. *Resurrection and ascension*. Christ's bodily resurrection was followed by his ascension to a place, 'higher than all the heavens' (Eph 4:10), where he stands 'at the centre of the throne', the Lamb who was slain, to receive the worship of the elders and the angels and all who have washed their robes in his blood (Rev 5; 7:9–17). That place is the realm where we have our true citizenship (Phil 3:20). It is the place Christ is preparing for his people, and from which he will return to take us to be with him (John 14:1–4).

3.22. *Session*. In the meantime, Christ is our place, to whom we are joined by the Spirit. In the power of his Spirit, Christ rules from 'the right hand of God', constituting a new people of God, even as the Father works in the same Spirit to make that church a revelation to the powers and principalities of the mystery of his will for the world (Eph 3:8–10). The church in its social organisation can therefore provide a partial realisation of Israel's national ideals (Acts 4:32–35; 6:1; cf. Deut 15:4; 14:28–29; Eph 6:1–4; Jas 5:1–6). The church offers a foretaste of Christ's kingdom, in which the righteousness that will characterise the new creation may be glimpsed (2 Pet 3:11–13).

3.23. *Return*. God's intentions for Israel and his intentions for humanity were realised together in Jesus, who is both Messiah and Second Adam. What this means will one day be disclosed to the world, which will be forever changed in consequence. Christ our King will descend as ruler of the Holy City and Lord of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21–22). God's plan for human society will be finally fulfilled when its citizens gather bodily around the king and rule with him over the new creation (Rev 5:10; 22:5).

3.24. What is true of Christ as king applies equally to Christ as second Adam. The gift that came through the man Jesus is for us to 'reign in life' (Rom 5:17), referring to the heavenly life of resurrection bodies in the new creation (1 Cor 15:45–49); only then and there will humans truly fulfil their creation mandate (Ps 8; Heb 2:6–8; see §3.4).

3.25. *Preliminary implications*. The kingdom of God does not arrive through social reform or through the rule of Christian princes, but there are opportunities within Christian communities to order collective life in ways that anticipate the justice and righteousness of Christ's coming kingdom. The original vehicle of this justice and righteousness was Israel's law. Building on the Decalogue, the Sinaitic legislation encompassed criminal law, family law, case law, cultic law, and compassionate law. All these laws are fulfilled spiritually in Christ (Matt 5), and shape Christian community in a variety of ways. But there are clear limits to the church's ability to constitute itself as a society. For example, while Christians should involve themselves where possible in the *formation* of laws, it is for the state, not the church, to *administer* criminal and family law, which have never been private matters.

3.26. In essence, Christ's Spirit empowers each member of the body to 'live a life of love, just as Christ loved us' (Eph 5:2). To live by the Spirit is to fulfil the law (Gal 5:13–26), creating a community whose righteousness and holiness reflects the character of God, in stark contrast to the world around (Eph 4:17–24; Phil 1:11). Most of the New Testament's instructions to believers concern the nature of relationships within church gatherings and Christian households. These relationships are visible to the wider world (John 13:34–35; 1 Cor 14:24–25). The apostles also provide believers with instructions about how to relate to those outside the Christian community—e.g., secular rulers, hostile neighbours, unjust masters and unbelieving spouses (Rom 12:17–13:7; 1 Pet 2:11–3:7).

3.27. Furthermore, because Christ's people care for one another in all of life, there are points where our collective behaviour is not just visible to the world but overlaps with it. This is especially the case when the church draws wisdom from Israel's compassionate and case law, as the early church did in caring for widows and orphans (1 Tim 5:16; Jas 1:27), selling property and redistributing the proceeds (Acts 4:34–37), or donating for famine relief (2 Cor 8:13–15)—actions focused on the welfare of fellow believers, but not restricted to them (Gal 6:10).

Relating to government in the New Testament period

3.28. Christ's people now live in the overlap of the ages as they await the final fulfilment of what has begun in Christ. Consequently, they live in tension with this world. One of these tensions is expressed in the relationship of Christ's people to earthly powers and authorities. The classic texts for thinking about this are Jesus' response to the question in the temple regarding paying taxes to Caesar (Matt 22:15–22 and parallels); Paul's words in Romans 13:1–7; Peter's in 1 Peter 2:13–17; and the response of Peter and John to the Jewish Council in Acts 4:19 and 5:29.

3.29. A framework for thinking about these texts can be found in Acts 17:26–27, which presents the establishment of nations (and, by implication, their political structures) as instituted by God to allow people to reach out and search for him (see §3.5). This is expressed more explicitly by Paul when he urges Timothy to ensure that prayers are offered for kings and those in authority, with a view to the salvation of all people (1 Tim 2:1–4).

3.30. As the New Testament reveals, the actual governments with which the early church had to deal were relatively hostile, with Rome as the dominating power. And yet each of the passages in Matthew, Romans and 1 Peter is positive about human government to the point of encouraging submission or subjection to all human authorities established by God as part of his plans for this present age. There is no encouragement to oppose or overthrow earthly authorities despite the hostility they might direct to God's people. Instead, the imperial government of the first century was to be respected as a mechanism for punishing evil and commending good (1 Pet 2:14).

3.31. Four types of response to Roman government are worth noting, since each of them has relevance to our contemporary context. The first, already noted, is to 'render unto Caesar': pay taxes, eschew wrongdoing, respect and submit to authority. The second, which underlies the first, is to recognise not only that God has established human government, but that he rules over it. The third response is to warn against emulating Roman government. When Jesus commends the way of servant leadership in his kingdom to his disciples (Matt 20:24–28 and parallels), he is also being critical of the pagan exercise of power. In his trial before Pilate, Jesus explicitly contrasts the non-violent

methods of his kingdom with the violence of worldly kingdoms. His kingdom is one where the chief weapon 'wielded' is the truth (John 19:33–38).

3.32. The fourth response is to commend faithful witness and patient endurance in the face of opposition and suffering. Notwithstanding the positive elements of Luke's, and Paul's presentations of worldly government, John warns his disciples in the book of Revelation about the twin dangers of seduction by the world and persecution from the world. An alliance of hostile political government and acquiescent false religion stands opposed to God's purpose and the people saved by the Lamb's self-sacrifice (Rev 13). In the face of these things the saints are called to 'patient endurance' (2:3, 19; 3:10; 13:10) seen in keeping 'the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus' (14:12). This is the testimony they bear before the nations (Rev 1:2, 9; 12:11, 17), and they will be saved even in the face of the most intense opposition (6:9–11; 7:13–17). Christ's victory over evil brings the nations to worship God and the Lamb (5:6–14), which happens as his followers participate in his victory by 'the word of their testimony' and by not loving their lives 'so much as to shrink from death' (12:11).

3.33. *Preliminary conclusions and further questions*. God desires governments to keep the peace in a way that allows the church to survive and grow. As the allusion to Jeremiah 29:7 in 1 Timothy 2:2 suggests, praying for the authorities along these lines is how Christians 'seek the welfare of the city'. However, when imperial governments abused their power by persecuting Christians, they were called to endure and bear witness rather than fight back. 'Bearing witness' includes living as God commands: loving without hypocrisy, hating what is evil, and clinging to what is good (Rom 12:9). The church's mission is not to make society more just, although this may be a by-product as it bears witness to the truth about Jesus (Eph 3:10; 1 Pet 2:9).

3.34. We live among God-defying neighbours, under the rule of God-defying leaders. What they most need is neither our moral censure, nor our withdrawal from them, but to be reconciled to the God who loved them to the point of sending his Son to die. Christ's first followers used coins stamped with the idolatrous image of Caesar, and many ate meat that pagans had dedicated to their gods. Some of Christ's followers today use emails stamped with idolatrous company messages; others work in health facilities that actively promote voluntary assisted dying. Our actions in the world cannot be neatly disentangled from the actions of those who are without God and without hope. And yet our actions, including the words we speak on our own behalf, must always be truthful, loving, and obedient to God, even if this entails us doing what civil authorities command us not to do, or refusing to do what they command us to do. When Christians suffer as a result, we are to remember those who are mistreated as if we ourselves were suffering (Heb 13:3).

3.35. These are largely negative conclusions, and they leave a number of important questions unanswered—in particular, questions concerning 'the church' conceived of as a community of believers:

- Humans—Christians included—have a mandate to govern God's creation. But does the church have a responsibility to guide rulers in their task?
- The church gives visible expression to the invisible reign of Christ. Does the truth of the gospel determine a 'social space'[3] for the church as a community? If so, what is the extent of the space that counts as gospel territory, over which we resist government authority?
- What is the extent of the 'secular space' in the church over which government has rightful authority?

These are questions whose answers are, to some extent, context-dependent. Our own context has been shaped by two millennia of church–state interactions. The biblical reflections of the Reformers bring these questions into sharp focus.

4. Biblical application in the context of a Christian state

4.1. Christ's people in New Testament times lived in 'Babylon' as often-persecuted citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. However, the miraculous success of the church's mission to pagan society, driven by the preaching of the gospel and the blood of the martyrs (Rev 6:9), laid the groundwork for the downfall of pagan rulers (Ps 2). The conquest of rulers 'from below', by stealing the loyalty of

[3] The term is borrowed from O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 208.

their subjects, implies what O'Donovan calls 'the missionary order': the gospel first transforming a society, and only then affecting its government.

4.2. During the period we call Christendom (AD 313–*c.* 1800), spiritual and secular government often overlapped as rulers who professed Christian faith sought to create temporal societies shaped by the reign of Christ. The Church (or more precisely the Papacy), appealing to the "two swords" of Luke 22:38, claimed that it had the right to exercise both temporal and spiritual authority. The Pope crowning Charlemagne in AD 800 was symbolic of this claim, and a long struggle between a succession of Holy Roman Emperors and Popes echoed throughout Europe in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. The fullest expression of the papal claim came in the bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which spoke of a 'plenitude of power in matters temporal and spiritual'. Just over twenty years later, Marsilius of Padua published his critique, *Defensor Pacis* (1324), in which he warned the church against usurping secular governments and drew attention to Jesus' words to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matt 26:52; John 18:11; *Def. Pac,* II.24). Marsilius was declared a heretic for his trouble. The relations of the two kinds of authority remained a contested question right up to the time of the Reformation.

4.3. Luther's original solution (expounded in his *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, 1523) was to recognize that God's rule over all is exercised in the world by way of two kingdoms. The kingdom of his left hand is the temporal government, where the goal is external peace and the prevention of evil, the means employed is the law, and the ultimate sanction is the sword. The kingdom of God's right hand is the spiritual government, where the goal is righteousness, the means employed is the gospel and the agency of the Holy Spirit, and the ultimate sanction is the withdrawal of fellowship. Every Christian lives in and belongs to both kingdoms. Both forms of government are necessary. But each operates differently and with a different purpose (*Luther's Works* 45:92). Luther reconciled two seemingly contrary propositions, 'the sword can have no place among Christians' and 'you are under obligation to serve and assist the sword by whatever means you can', by insisting that 'at one and the same time you satisfy God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly'. 'In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbour' (*Luther's Works* 45:96). In his later writing on the subject, and in the wake of the rejection of the faith by some German princes, and the Peasants' Revolt, Luther would put a greater stress on the Christian expectation of suffering in the world. He insisted that it is better to suffer tyranny than to contribute to the devil's work of rebellion and anarchy (*Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,* 1525).

4.4. Calvin, too, spoke of two kingdoms (*Institutes*, III.xix.15). He distinguished the 'spiritual' jurisdiction—'whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God'—from the 'temporal' jurisdiction—'whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men'. It is in this context that Calvin makes the following critical observation: 'Through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual freedom, as if Christians were less subject, as concerns outward government, to human laws, because their consciences have been set free in God's sight; as if they were released from all bodily servitude because they are free according to the spirit'. Calvin did not believe this was 'very obscure or involved' but acknowledged others found this difficult 'because they do not sharply enough distinguish the outer forum, as it is called, and the forum of conscience.' Therefore, Calvin did 'commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion'. That was not without proper limits, though. Calvin wrote, 'when I approve of a civil administration that aims to prevent the true religion which is contained in God's law from being openly and with public sacrilege violated and defiled with impunity, I do not here, any more than before, allow men to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God' (*Institutes,* IV.xx.3).

4.5. The early English Reformers, and those who put together the religious settlement under Elizabeth, esteemed Luther and Calvin but were more influenced by the work of Heinrich Bullinger. Bullinger spoke of one kingdom considered in two ways (*Decade 4, Sermon 7*, 276):

> And this kingdom of God is verily but only one; for there is but one God only, one king Christ only, one church, and life everlasting. But this one kingdom of God is considered two ways: first, according to the omnipotency of God; for he, since he is the highest and omnipotent, hath and executeth over all creatures, visible and invisible, most just rule and equal power, nill they or will they be obedient: secondly, according to his Spirit,

> whereby he reigneth in his elect. And so the kingdom of God is again two ways considered: for either it is earthly, and is called the kingdom of grace; or else it is heavenly, and is called the kingdom of glory.

Henry VIII insisted that England was one commonwealth under the rule of the king. Under Edward VI, the English church would be established by law and every citizen of the realm was a member of the church. According to the *Articles of Religion,* 'The King's Majesty hath … the chief Government of all Estates of this Realm, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Civil' by which they meant that 'godly Princes … should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evil-doers'. Nevertheless, 'we give not to our Princes the ministering either of God's Word, or of the sacraments' (Art. 37).

4.6. The Articles do not consider how the church should respond when the prince is not Christian and has no desire to protect the church, the preaching of the gospel, or 'outward worship.' They do not envisage a national church that was not established by law, let alone a pluralist liberal democracy in the modern sense. Nor do they seek to define a 'space', apart from the ministry of God's word and the administration of the sacraments, where the authority of the minister should prevail rather than that of the prince. The answer of the Reformers in general to these questions emerges from their reflections on conscience and 'matters indifferent'.

4.7. Conscience is a foundational concept for the Reformed doctrine of the two kingdoms, and Calvin carefully defines its New Testament meaning, where *conscience* is the inward conviction of sin brought about by the gospel. Only Christ can convict a person's conscience, and only by faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice can conscience be cleared. Calvin thus defines a good conscience as 'inward integrity of heart', and concludes that 'a law is said to bind the conscience when it simply binds a man without regard to other men, or without taking them into account' (*Inst.*, iii.19.16). So when Paul, having explained that secular rulers are God's servants (Rom 13:1–4), instructs believers to submit to them 'not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience' (Rom 13:5), he does not mean that civil laws bind the conscience (*Inst*., iii.19.15). Rather, he is identifying conscience as the internal counterpart to the external threat of divine wrath in the form of civil punishment (v. 4). It is precisely because our consciences are free that we can submit to the binding of our outward actions by the magistrate 'in matters indifferent'.

4.8. The authority of human rulers is God-given and yet provisional. Most fundamentally, they do *not* have authority to command anyone to render to other gods the service due to God alone. Citizens of the heavenly city must disobey this command, even if it costs them their lives (Augustine, *City of God*, xix.17; cf. Dan. 3; 6; Rev. 13:15). But defining what human rulers *do* have authority to command proved more difficult, and one way of doing that was through the concept of 'matters indifferent', or *adiaphora.* Adiaphora has been defined as matters upon which salvation does not depend. Such matters may potentially fall under human authority, because on these matters such authority can bind Christians' behaviour without binding their consciences.

4.9. As the Reformation progressed, however, the question of adiaphora became contentious. Which doctrines taught in Scripture, if any, were not matters of salvation? Should sanctification be considered a matter of indifference, since it flows out of our salvation but is not something on which our salvation depends? Are we free to set aside a doctrine because we do not see it as a matter of salvation? And what about matters of order? As the range of necessary matters expands and the range of adiaphora contracts, the authority of secular rulers contracts with it and is replaced by the authority of church leaders. The same is true in the other direction: as the range of adiaphora expands, the authority of secular rulers expands with it while the authority of church leaders contracts. Yet, as Richard Hooker insisted, the distinction between some things necessary and some things accessory must be maintained because it is grounded in Christ's own teaching (in Matt 23:23) about 'the greater and weightier matters of the law' (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity,* III.4).

4.10. By excluding only 'all things necessary to salvation' from adiaphora, the Reformers preserved the distinction between Christ's direct spiritual rule over the human heart and his humanly-mediated temporal rule over human behaviour. The freedom of conscience from all human law was also upheld. This granted a wide scope to human rulers to regulate Christians' outward behaviour. But it did not define a line between the jurisdictions of *civil rulers*, with their broad powers of coercion and punishment, and *ecclesial rulers*, with their narrow powers of exhortation and discipline. Different systems and philosophies of government have led to different levels of state control being exerted over the visible church.

4.11. With the passing of Christendom, the liberal democratic state's protection and regulation of religion(s) no longer stems from a desire to mediate the reign of Christ, but rather to champion human autonomy. On the one hand, the church is afforded much greater freedom to organise itself as an institution; on the other hand, the social consensus about justice and righteousness arises from idolatry and self-worship, and the church has less freedom to proscribe ungodliness.[4]

4.12. A more recent flashpoint over these issues arose in Germany during the 1930s in what became known as the *Kirchenkampf*. Within a few months of the Nazi party coming to power in 1933, the Protestant Federation in Germany had agreed to write a new constitution and form a new national church which would work closely with the new regime as part of the *Gleichschaltung* or Nazification of all aspects of German society. The forced election of Hitler's adviser as bishop in the new church, the rigging of church elections, the inclusion of 'the Aryan Paragraph' which required the removal of clergy of Jewish descent, the removal of 'non-German' elements in religious services, insistence on the Nazi salute, and even a proposal to remove the Old Testament from German Bibles, all demonstrated that the new church leadership served the agenda of Hitler and his government. Christian opposition to Hitler, led first by Martin Niemöller, and then by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, produced, in May 1934, the Barmen Declaration. It began (after quoting John 14:6 and John 10:1, 9) with the words 'Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death'. For this and other acts in defiance of the Nazi regime, Barth was escorted out of Germany in 1935, Niemöller was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1938, and Bonhoeffer was imprisoned first at Tegel Prison and then Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was executed in April 1945. As it was in the days of Augustine, so in our own time: when human rulers demand to share the honour that is due to Christ alone, Christians must disobey, even if it costs them their lives.

5. Implications for our post-Christian society

5.1 *Implication 1. The Australian church is free to confront the government.* One line of contemporary thought equates our situation today with that of the church before Constantine. As then, so now, we must follow the missionary order: win back society by faithful witness, and wait for godless rulers to fall. However, the intervening centuries of Christendom have left the church in a very different relationship to government. The institution of the church remains protected by the state while no longer being invited to guide its policies. The church's works of service are relied upon by the state while the gospel they bear witness to is spurned. Thanks be to God, the Australian church still enjoys broad freedoms and special privileges. These allow the church both to subject itself to the governing authorities, and also to call upon civil rulers to fulfil their God-given responsibilities—not only to uphold justice and righteousness, but to 'cherish and protect the outward worship of God'.

5.2 *Implication 2. The church is not authorised to govern alongside the state.* Every Christian is called, as a temporary resident in Babylon, to join in the human project to make the world fruitful; but the church, mediating the eternal reign of Christ in the age to come, is not. The church confronts temporal rulers, but is not called to rule alongside them.[5] When the church involves itself in government, acquiring the power to make a space for itself in society, it is doing something at best ambiguous and at worst destructive of its mission. It is when churches look most government-like that these ambiguities are most perilous. Synods are denominational organisations that legislate on matters temporal, so as to assist in the building up of the church and the betterment of society. They must consider their public activity carefully, lest the watching world sees the exercise of political power rather than the declaring of Christ's lordship, the commending of justice and righteousness, and the equipping of the saints for works of service.

5.3 *Implication 3. Christians are authorised to participate in government*. The church can play an important role equipping individual Christians to take their place alongside fellow humans in the task of ruling creation under God. Wherever people come together to work for peace, truth and justice, Christians who make common cause with them can bring the wisdom of Christ to bear on every area of government and in every kind of political organisation. Christians involve themselves in the affairs of this world not simply for the sake of the common wealth, but to demonstrate virtuous citizenship,

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[4] There are some partial exceptions to this, such as England, where the establishment of the church persists in the structures of government. However, even in such nations the government is no longer bound to heed the voice of the church.

[5] From time to time, governments have invited the church to share in government. History shows both the value of the church's guidance and the danger of the church's rule.

so that 'though the pagans accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us' (1 Pet 2:12). Working for justice may also involve working against injustice, and here also Christ's wisdom should guide believers as they consider the form that this should take, even up to the point of civil disobedience. The biblical examples of civil disobedience (e.g. Exod 1:15–22; Josh 2:4; 1 Kgs 18:3–4; 2 Kgs 11:2) concern state-sanctioned killing; but their appropriation is complicated by the fact that in each case redemption history is involved, not humanitarian concerns *per se*.

5.4 *Implication 4. The government has authority to command the church as an earthly institution*. Christ reigns over the visible organisation of the church not only through church leaders, but through the mediation of civil rulers, by whose permission it operates publicly. The state must never declare itself to be the way of salvation. States that cross that line are antichrists. Neither does the state have authority to silence gospel preaching. Believers are to continue to bear faithful witness whatever the cost (Matt 10:18, 28; Mark 8:38; Acts 4:18–20; 5:29). However, when the state issues individual and collective commands to Christians that can be classified as 'matters indifferent,' we are not disobeying God when we comply, even if those commands are unjust, intrusive, or otherwise unpleasing to God. Naturally, we do not comply personally by using the state's licence to disobey God with immoral or unjust behaviour; and in God's kindness we live in a society where we can express the Lord's opposition to such commands. But there is a very significant difference between the command, 'you shall not pray', and the command, 'you shall not pray aloud in public places'. Both commands are displeasing to God, but Scripture only requires us to disobey the first of them. Likewise, the government is not authorised to issue the command, 'you shall condone adultery,' but it may legitimately command, 'you shall not picket a brothel in your street'.

5.5 *Implication 5. The church's protected space is spiritual*. The space occupied by the church is both secular and spiritual. Unlike a natural family, a church family is outwardly a voluntary organisation, and liberal democracies will normally treat churches as such, granting them comparable rights and responsibilities. This is the 'secular space' of the church over which the state has God-given authority. Rights we share with others are God's gifts to us (e.g., freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom to own property, etc.). In his sovereignty, he may allow these to be withheld. The 'spiritual space' which belongs to Christ, which is not the state's to order, is the space created by the preaching of the gospel. This space is the network of Christian relationships, characterised by faith, hope and love, which are the work of the Spirit. By regulating the secular space of the church, the state can squeeze its spiritual space (for example, by forbidding public assembly), but it can never enter or alter that space, which has its true location in the heavenly city.

5.6 *Implication 6. The church's 'service' organisations are secular in the sense that they are of this age*. The services they typically provide to society—education, health and aged care, charity—are gifts of common grace that both increase the general welfare of society, and also bear witness to the gospel with works and words of love. Yet none of these services are themselves the church's mission, which is to make known 'the manifold wisdom of God' to 'the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Eph 3:8–12). In other words, the church's public service organisations are fundamentally *secular*, that is, of this age; they are 'hows', not 'whats', of its mission. They are vehicles of mission that exist and operate at the pleasure of the government, which acts as it does by the permission of God. The more active the church is in the public sphere, the more its activities will rightfully fall under the jurisdiction of civil governments. This means, for example, that government commands which transgress their God-given authority, may result in individual refusal. However, a Christian organisation operating in the secular sphere may ultimately have to submit – or stop operating – given the authority of the state to regulate the church's instruments of public service. If the state makes it impossible to advance the gospel through Christian service organisations, we must either comply for the sake of society's temporal welfare, or redirect our energies toward other forms of gospel proclamation and welfare provision.

5.7 *Implication 7. Conscience guides behaviour but must be trained*. Today, conscience is typically understood as referring to a person's inner moral compass. It is therefore frequently appealed to in discussions about the freedom and rights of individuals, especially in relation to the State. However, the Bible speaks of conscience as an individual's inner conviction of sin and righteousness, arising from their awareness of God as divine judge (see §4.7 above). Hence, in Romans 13:1–5, Paul presents 'conscience' not as a reason for Christians to engage in civil disobedience, but indeed as a reason why 'one must be in subjection' (v. 5). Conscience here is predicated on the knowledge that, because the state is God's servant, to resist its authority is to incur God's judgment.

This biblical understanding of conscience does not negate the Christian's responsibility to engage in faithful deliberation on ethical matters, including the limits of submission to the authorities. An example contemplated by the Synod resolution is forced compliance with certain forms of speech, such as a Christian being commanded to lend their assent to a statement which declares 'it is good' about something that God has declared 'not good'. If God's word has convicted this person that to give the type of assent commanded (e.g., by silence, tolerance, or affirmation) would be to act sinfully, then this may well be an occasion when their conscience should be considered decisive. First and foremost, such a 'conscience stand' is a necessary manifestation of personal righteousness rather than a matter of one's individual rights and freedoms. However, just like every other human faculty, the conscience remains a fallible feature of humanity's fleshly nature, and one which is open to corruption by both sin and Satan. Because the conscience can be 'weak', 'defiled', and even 'seared' (1 Cor 8:7–13; 1 Tim 4:2), its moral judgments are not always reliable. It needs to be trained by the word of God, through the Spirit, within the fellowship of the saints.

It is therefore the rightness of a Christian's public stand, not its basis in their conscience, that might draw public support from the church. Certainly, the church family must provide care, comfort, and compassion to believers who have taken a costly stand, irrespective of the rightness of their action. At the same time, the church has a responsibility to provide faithful discernment about the wisdom of such a stand, and indeed how it might be wisely taken. And in those instances when a 'conscience stand' is not righteous or not biblically warranted, it is the church's responsibility to correct the individual with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim 4:2).

6. Conclusion

6.1. In centuries past, wide-spread profession of Christian faith empowered governments to write laws that sought to closely emulate the ethics of the kingdom of God. Today, as the proportion of Australians who profess faith in Christ has shrunk to a minority, the social consensus has shifted, and continues to shift, away from a belief in the truths of the gospel and the value of the church to society. Nevertheless, our society continues to be shaped by the values and freedoms that it has received from its Christian heritage. These values may be twisted towards self-worship, but for the time being they allow the church the freedom to bear witness.

6.2. This leaves the church with a certain latitude as it is confronted by government directives that are contrary to the word of God—a latitude defined by the space between commands that we *must* disobey and those that we *may* disobey. The best path will not always be clear. The choices we make in any given case will be a matter of Christian wisdom, guided by the absolute priority of gospel proclamation. When our choices bring us into confrontation with the state, the secular authorities may choose to punish or protect us. We can be grateful to God for our current situation in Australia, recognising that in other times and places he allows tyrannical governments to rule, and calls his church to bear witness through faithful suffering. Even if our circumstances change, our task remains the same; namely, to glorify God in our individual and corporate lives, and to call all people to submit to the lordship of the risen Christ. Either way, Babylon has fallen, and we have a promise from the risen and reigning Christ Jesus that 'to the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations' (Rev 2:26).

6.3. The obedience that Christians individually and collectively owe to those placed in authority over them in the state is genuine but not absolute. We are to seek to live at peace with all, as far as it depends on us, but we must not compromise our testimony to Jesus. We honour the emperor, but Jesus is Lord. Aware of the dangers of individualism and an uninformed conscience, we pursue wisdom as we are taught by the word of God and encouraged in the faith by the fellowship of God's people. The church is not a natural enemy of the state, but neither is it a servant of the state, acquiescent in the face of encroachment upon that loyalty which belongs to Christ alone.

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Appendix: The Contemporary Landscape of Political Theologies

A. In the 21st century, evangelical and Reformed Christians are exposed to a range of biblically-based and philosophically literate political theologies. Their conclusions about the extent and nature of the church's role in the secular sphere, and of the government's authority over the church, vary significantly. The backdrop of political thought in the Reformation period (§§4.3–6) is a helpful lens through which to consider the range of positions that Reformed evangelicals variously hold today. In the interests of brevity, we have divided various views into three loose groups. Not every view fits neatly into its 'group,' and the boundaries between groups are blurred. Overall, however, the groups depict a spectrum from maximal to minimal engagement of church with state. There is much of value to be found in the work of theologians from across this spectrum.

B. At one end are those who prioritise the concept of *one divine kingdom* and advocate for *maximal engagement of the church in the state*. They include theonomists, Christian nationalists and, more moderately, Kuyperians who develop Reformed two-kingdom theology towards the idea of a single divine kingdom containing different spheres, in which Christians mould the life of the state and strive to 'take every thought captive for Christ.'

   With a few exceptions (e.g., some liberation theologies), one-kingdom theologians do not imagine that the church's mission is to transform this world into the kingdom of God. It is more a matter of placing the world (or our part of it, at any rate) under the wise ordering of its creator, both as a good end in itself and in order to acculturate the populace to truth, and ultimately to gospel truth.

   However, even if this were the mission of the church—and we have argued that it is not—the attempt to Christianise culture fatally confuses the message of the gospel with its potential effects.

C. At the other end are those who prioritise the concept of *two divine kingdoms* and advocate for *minimal engagement of the church in the state*. They include those such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, who believe that Christians should not involve themselves in civil government, and who advocate for the 'theological politics' of the church: Jesus's salvation as a politics that is meant as an alternative to all social life that does not reflect God's glory. Others, like Rod Dreher, advocate a retreat to the Benedictine Option of withdrawing children from state schools and relocating away from

urban centres. Strictly speaking, such thinkers would resist the idea of 'two divine kingdoms,' because they would only attach the label 'divine' to the church.

The idea of 'two divine kingdoms' belongs more naturally to the 'Reformed Two-Kingdom' school of thought. David VanDrunen is an influential representative of this school among those who apply a biblical-theological hermeneutic to Scripture.

VanDrunen builds on Augustine's two cities—not church and state, but two peoples marked by different loves—with the help of Turretin's version of two-kingdoms theology, in which Christ rules as God over the natural kingdom and as the incarnate God-Man over the mediatorial kingdom. This is the kingdom of the age to come, which has its present-day expression in the church. However, while VanDrunen recognises the mixed nature of the church, he baulks at the role Turretin gave magistrates in ordering the outward church, and so he draws on Kuyperian ideas of common grace, the Noahic covenant, and sphere sovereignty to divide the two kingdoms along covenantal lines. Hence, God rules a common kingdom temporally by the Noahic covenant, in which all humans participate by common grace to preserve this fallen world. God also rules a redemptive kingdom spiritually by the new covenant. It is in this community that we explore the distinctive moral life of the new creation; 'Babylon' cannot be redeemed. Christians should act politically in Babylon as any humans should, by applying Natural Law for the common good. Civil resistance is the task of individuals, not the Church, and the laws we should be resisting are breaches not only of the divine law but of the Natural Law. Natural Law trumps legislated law.

VanDrunen favours this typically Presbyterian view over that of Luther and Hooker (see below), because he judges that 'Scripture presents God's rule over creation in its various aspects in terms of *covenant*'.[6] However, a covenantal separation of God's rule begs the question of the unity of the kingdom of God, whose redemptive history achieves God's creational goals. A covenantal reading of Scripture does not require us to imagine distinct common and redemptive kingdoms.[7]

D. In the middle are those whose interpretation of two-kingdoms theology prioritises *one divine rule but two distinct ages*, and who advocate for *moderate engagement of the church in the state*. The two ages in question are the temporal and the spiritual, and we live in the period of their overlap. The one God reigns in both domains, and Christians live in both domains, being ruled *inwardly* by God through the gospel and *outwardly* by God through the law. Luther spoke of this twofold inward (spiritual) and outward (temporal) rule in terms both of God's two 'kingdoms' and of God's two 'reigns'.

The practical expression of these 'moderate engagement' views is affected by ecclesiology and political context.

a. An American Reformed Baptist version of this approach is advocated by Jonathan Leeman, who argues that the local church is an embassy on earth of the heavenly kingdom. Like VanDrunen, Leeman's work is strongly covenantal and biblical-theological. Against Kuyper, Leeman does not give the task of acting politically as Christians to the institution of the church, but to its members. When we act as citizens alongside other citizens we act as 'delegates' of Jesus. But when our actions become distinctively 'Christian,' we—as individuals or groups of Christians—represent Jesus as a 'deputy.' At this level, a church can become politically active when it 'tie[s] the name of Jesus Christ to some political position' (*Political Church*, 377). Leeman's view on the independence of the institutional church from government is attractive to those who want the government excluded from decisions about the conduct of church gatherings. The roots of his theology lie in the anabaptist movement, not in seventeenth-century non-conformity, for no non-conformist fighting for religious tolerance would have denied that the state could legitimately make rules that could regulate churches and their public worship.

Leeman's argument has a number of difficulties.

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6 David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 41 n. 5.

7 For VanDrunen, Christ's future rule over the redemptive kingdom through the covenant of grace is shown in texts like Revelation 11:15. However, he argues that texts like Matthew 28:18, Ephesians 1:20–21, Colossians 2:10, and Revelation 1:5 point to Christ's rule in the present age through the Noahic covenant. See, for example, David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 117–19.

- With respect to the political independence of the church, his insistence that religious tolerance is necessary for the legitimacy of a secular government uses an argument from silence; namely, that the Noahic covenant does not authorise human beings to prosecute crimes against God.

- Leeman adapts Presbyterian *jure divino* (divine right) models of church government to extend the spiritual power of elders beyond preaching into church discipline and church courts. He rejects a division between visible actions in the church (assent, and church discipline) and the invisible work of Christ in the heart. However, in contrast to Leeman himself, the models he adapts are explicit that church judgments do *not* bind consciences.

- Leeman rightly recognises that, though Christians 'possess a duty to be faithful to their consciences, … they possess a higher duty to be right' (93); however, he does not seem to acknowledge the Reformers' distinction between conscience and conduct (§4.7). Against Luther and Calvin, he argues that if a government compels us to act in ways we might feel are wrong it has bound our conscience. By overlooking the freedom of the Christian's conscience from human condemnation, Leeman brings our consciences into the public arena, as things that may be damaged by unbelievers and must be protected from them. Hence Leeman believes that the government binds our conscience when it makes judgments about our inner person—e.g., by punishing intentional crimes more harshly than accidental ones. And he concludes that we should pit our Christian conscience against the consciences of others over moral (abortion) and even economic (taxation) issues, rather than taking our stand on the rightness or wrongness of these things.

- As a result of these views, Leeman believes that a Christian's role *as a Christian* in wider society should be expanded from proclaiming the gospel to enforcing the moral behaviour that the Noahic covenant exists to protect. Most problematically, Leeman's rule of thumb for deciding that something might require the church's collective civil disobedience is that it must be a matter that would require church discipline. This means that a Christian should by conscience be bound to join in the church's collective act of civil disobedience, or else have their conscience bound by the state, finding themselves excluded from the church and, presumably, under the judgment of God. This grants a power to the church (or the state) that only God possesses.

b. Finally, the version of this approach represented in the Reformed English or Anglican tradition is advocated by Oliver O'Donovan in the UK and, in our own context, D. B. Knox (§§4.5–10). It is unsurprising that this is the approach most closely reflected in the present report, albeit not uncritically. An argument was built on the breadth of Scriptural testimony using a biblical-theological hermeneutic; and in moving from theology to application, the Reformation was selected as a context from which to examine our own culture from the outside. This report has sought to articulate the political theology that most accurately reflects Scripture when read in this way and within this interpretive tradition. Like Leeman, it argues for moderate engagement of the church in the state, but unlike Leeman, it gives weight to the reality that the church is simultaneously a secular and a spiritual institution, and falls under both forms of divine rule, just as individual Christian do.

The final factor shaping the report's conclusions is the modern Australian context—a far cry from the 16th century—within which political theology must become concrete. Applying an unchanged political theology to a changed and changing relationship between state and church is an ongoing task. The final sections of the report have offered just a few applications to specific issues. The issues have been chosen as indicative examples of theological principles put into practice. The ongoing task to which our churches must strive to apply their collective wisdom is the principled application of carefully considered theology.

In short, the present report argues from the Scriptures for an Anglican way of being the church in the world, in its Australian setting, that is both theologically sound and the proper expression of church in our political context.