



Sermon series: Viral – Acts 11-18

#2 Gospel vs. Government

(with discussion notes following)

How should Christians regard governments?

Today's passage from **Acts chapter 12** raises this question for me because we see there a huge clash between **the values of the Gospel and the values of a 1st Century ruler.**

Let's look at **verses 1-4...**

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Herod Agrippa I was a grandson of Herod the Great. Because of his family associations with Rome Agrippa ruled a **vast region**, including **Judea**.¹ But because of his ethnic makeup Jewish religious leaders gave him no allegiance, so Agrippa regularly tried to **curry favour** with them to **keep the peace** and to please Rome at the same time.

At the time of a big religious festival in Jerusalem, Agrippa sought Jewish favour by **publicly slaying a well-known Christian**² and imprisoning another with a view to do the same to him.³

How do you think you would you have reacted if you were watching on?

In verse 5 of Acts 12 we see how the **first Christians reacted**. We're told...

"5 ... the church was earnestly praying to God,"

¹ including Judea, Galilee, Perea and more from 41-44AD

² James, the Son of Zebedee

³ Simon Peter, vss. 2 & 3. Imprisonment in Roman times almost always led to execution.



In our day and age Christians respond to bad governments or poor policies in a **variety of ways...**



1. One example in last week's news was about a Tasmanian family that has **refused to pay taxes for years**, saying their government was **not of God**.
2. In an opposite example from the NSW coast the **Salvation Army offered to work with** their State government to provide relief to **bushfire victims**, believing they should **do good to all people in the name of Jesus**.
3. Then, recently we've seen Christians join **public rallies** and **political movements** to call upon governments to address injustices because they believe God cares for the **poor**, the refugee, and the environment.

Which of these is a **right response** when **governments get it wrong**? What biblical basis would justify these actions?

Did you notice that, despite the brutal injustice of Agrippa in **Acts 12** there's **no** reference to Christians **speaking out** or **rising up** against his wrong-doing. Instead, as we see in verse 5, they **turn to prayer**.

Even the reaction of **Peter himself is interesting**. After his miraculous release from jail, see **Acts 12:11-17** what his immediate action is...

Peter said,

“Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches...” When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter... described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said.⁴

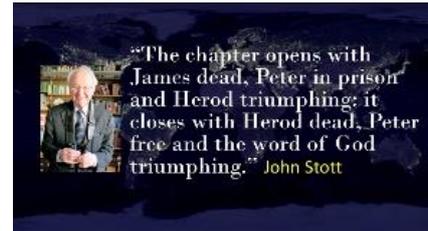
Peter's first step after freedom was to encourage the faith of the church. Neither Peter, nor the church made any public **protest** against **Agrippa's terrible behaviour as a ruler**.

⁴ The “James” in vs. 17 is James, the brother of Jesus, who went on to lead the church in Jerusalem (Mk. 6:3; Acts 15:13, 21:18)

Why didn't **they rally or rise up?**

- Firstly, the early church in Jerusalem was just a **small group** with **no legitimate status** as a religion,
- Secondly, peasants had **no right to protest** and no political participation available to them – it was highly risky to do so.
- Thirdly, Luke, has a **narrow focus in writing Acts, to show the spread of the Gospel**. John Stott wrote:

“The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the word of God triumphing.”



Luke was **not teaching** directly about Christians and public policy.

Yet, we *can dig a bit deeper* in the Bible on this topic. For example, the apostle Peter himself, when writing to persecuted Christians, wrote:

“**Submit...** for the Lord's sake, to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Peter 2:13-16).

Likewise, the **apostle Paul**, writing under circumstances of a **brutal government regime**,⁵ wrote in Romans 13...

“...submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” (Romans 13:1)⁶

It seems, to this point, that the emphasis in the bible is on **trusting** in God's **sovereignty**, on **prayer**, and on **humility?**

These are all important, but let's also **dig a little deeper...**

- **Civil Disobedience** - Earlier in The Book of Acts, the same apostle Peter **boldly stood up to authorities** who sought to repress the spread of the

⁵ Nero - AD 54 to 68

⁶ In another place Paul called for prayer for all rulers and leaders (1 Timothy 2:2)



Gospel. John Stott called these occasions grounds for **Christian civil disobedience** in some circumstances.

- In **Acts 4** Peter (and John) said: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to God? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”
- In **Acts 5** Peter proclaims, “We must obey God rather than mortals.”⁷

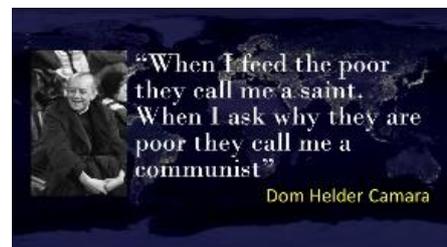
➤ Then we should consider **the politics of the Gospel** – Like Jesus, the Gospel the church was spreading **challenged society’s status quo**.

- Jesus called himself the bringer of **justice, freedom, peace and hope to the poor and oppressed** (e.g. Luke 4:18).
- His Gospel promoted **radical change** to values, ethics, and regard for human dignity.⁸

Paul went on to teach that it **breaks down the barriers** created around **race, gender, and religion**.⁹

So, **as we dig deeper**, we see that the Gospel that was spreading like wildfire as **not a passive comfort** to individuals, but a **catalyst** for personal, **political and societal transformation**.¹⁰

Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, who ministered during military rule in the 1980’s, once said, “When I feed poor people they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor they call me a communist.”



No wonder **Agrippa was devastated** when news of Peter’s escape from jail **went viral**. Christians were trouble for **misusers of power**.

Look at Acts 12 from vs. 18...

⁷ Acts 4:19-20, Acts 5:29. See Stott’s commentary (BST). These instances of opposition to Christians came from Jewish authorities, not the King, but under Herodian laws these community leaders had great civil power.

⁸ The Gospel threatened Roman and Jewish leaders alike, offering a bold alternative to classism, sexism, racism, and the underpinning of Roman prosperity – slavery.

⁹ “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (Gal. 3:28); “no... circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Col.3:11)

¹⁰ For example, within the 300 years that followed, the fundamental system of slavery at the heart of the ancient Rome was officially dismantled.



18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed...

Luke goes on to tell how, after this, Herod **curled up and died** (something the ancient historian Josephus independently confirms). Then he notes in v. 24...

“But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.”

What can we take away?

We are **blessed** here in Melbourne to **live in a society with democratically elected**, accountable, public leaders. Compared to many other Christians past and present **we have so many opportunities to work with governments to make changes for good**, and we can **share the good news** of God freely.

The spread of the Gospel today, in our setting, even includes, I believe, helping to **shape public policy** and **influence priority values** in society.

So, here's a few **take-aways** to discuss or think about where you are today:



1. We should **pray** –

- Pray for **the spread of the Gospel**, especially in challenging places, for **God to act** powerfully to make Jesus known in word and deed,
- Pray for **civil leaders** that they may **act justly and wisely** for the benefit of all people, especially the **poor** and vulnerable.

2. **Get involved** in public policy

- Our opportunity is greater than those first Christians. Let's be sure we **get involved** in **assisting civil leaders** in making **good policy**. You could be on a school council, an ethics committee, or supporting someone at some level of government. Some of our members have



skills and professional access to do more. This is important Gospel ministry today.

3. We can **speak out and take action** –

- When we believe governments get it wrong Christians can **speak out and take non-violent action** and should do so within the laws of the land.
- If Christians do step over the line of law (as may seem inevitable in some circumstances, particularly when authorities suppress the spread of the Gospel) they may have to accept the “unjust” punishment meted out by authorities and leave ultimate justice in God’s hands. This reminds us to **pray for the persecuted church in many parts of the world today.**¹¹

4. Check **the Church’s track record**

- **Before** we go railing at rulers, we should get our own house in order. In this “post-truth” era Christians can err by quickly criticizing civil authorities without fact-checking the fine detail. As important is the need to be certain the Church is not negligent in or a perpetrator of the same injustices being protested for the sake of the reputation of the Gospel.

The early church’s **innocence** and **humility** was a powerful force. As the apostle put it in 1 Peter 2:15-17... “...by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish ones. Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as committed servants of God.”¹²

May God give you wisdom in your circumstances for your approach to living faithfully in those times when the Gospel clashes with government.

¹¹ This was the pattern of Jesus himself before Pilate. It is also reflected in the ethics taught by Paul (e.g. Romans 12:17-21) and is perhaps the most difficult course of action stemming from our faith in Christ.

¹² 1 Peter 2:17 In this so-called post-truth age, many Christians are quick to call out their government for injustices without checking the facts and complexities, and often without regard for our own sins and misdemeanours. It’s important to fact-check our claims before defying government, and more importantly, see that our own actions are under the same scrutiny so that we lead by our example, not merely our outrage.



Discussions for Small Groups

1. Praying for the spread of the Gospel

One of the great prayers in the Bible comes from the early church in Jerusalem in relation to opposition to the Gospel. It is found in Acts chapter 5:24-31. Consider how you might write a prayer for your church in its context today that trusts in God's power and plans. The church at Jerusalem prayed...

24 "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together

against the Lord and against his anointed one.'

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to **speak your word with great boldness**. 30 Stretch out your hand to **heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.**" 31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Acts 5:24-31

2. Loving the world, but not loving the "world"

The word "world" appears as the English translation of the original Greek in the bible with several different meanings (e.g. the physical planet and environment, a culture in opposition to God's ways due to sin). In John's gospel the latter is often in use referring to false values that Jesus came to transform. For example, John 15:18-27 depicts Jesus saying, "If you belonged to the world the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world therefore the world hates you. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." We may not face direct persecution for being a Christian in our time and place of the kind described in Acts 12, so how should we find encouragement and relevance in those words today?

Does this saying of Jesus in John's Gospel still have relevance in the lives of Christians today?

Was Jesus referring only to the original disciples in these statements? If it's true today, in what forms is it seen to be true?

1 Jn 2:15-17 says

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world the – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its



desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. Here flesh is understood as habits instincts and tendencies of the mind.”

How can Christians today safeguard against being swept up into an insatiable appetite of servicing wants and pleasures?

What can Christians do to avoid developing an inflated inappropriate pride in their own achievements and independence from God as is often the way of the “world”?

Some say that modern people have made rationality a “god”, and that “spirituality” should be lampooned as “irrational”. How can we navigate life-choices in a biblical, spiritual manner today without disregarding common-sense and intelligent planning?

How do you apply fundamental Christian virtues to your shopping, your paths of income, your hospitality, your plans?

3. Bearing Witness

The context for conflict in both John 15 and Acts 12 is in **bearing witness to Jesus** and his Gospel.

What do you think of the notion that in a post-Christendom society like ours (where the values of the Gospel and knowledge of Jesus are already known) witnessing to Jesus can include bringing the values of the Gospel to light and applying them to public policy and culture?

In what ways do Christians sometimes stay in their own “bubble” and relate only in their own sub-culture? What balance of involvement in “church life” and public life should Christians aim for?

How are the Church’s views on civil involvement or civil refuge or retreat reflected in buildings, budgets, programs and activities? What innovative changes could you suggest for those categories if we were to take seriously the call to engage with public values, politics and culture?

4. Civil Disobedience

There are at least **three common positions** on the matter of **civil disobedience**...



1. The **anarchist** view says that a person can choose to disobey the government whenever personally justified in doing so. Such a stance has **no biblical support**.
2. The **extremist patriot** says that a person should always follow and obey his nation, no matter what the command. It's **hard to substantiate biblical support** for this view. For example, during the Nuremberg trials, the attorneys for the Nazi war criminals attempted to use the defence that their clients were only following the direct orders of the government and therefore could not be held responsible for their actions. However, one of the judges dismissed their argument with the simple question: "... there is not a law above our laws?"
3. A third view is one of **biblical submission**, with a Christian being allowed to act in civil disobedience to the government **if it commands evil**, such that it requires a Christian to act in a manner that is contrary to the clear teachings and requirements of God's Word.

Before considering when you might think it right and proper to flout the laws of the land to overturn unjust situations in your context. Consider the biblical material we do have on matters of civil disobedience.

- We have examples of Peter and John in Acts 4 and 5 mentioned in the sermon above in relation to authorities seeking to suppress the spread of the Gospel
- Another example of civil disobedience is found in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 13 the figure known as "Antichrist" commands all those who are alive during the last days to worship an image of himself. But John, the writer of Revelation, states that those who become Christians at that time will disobey the Antichrist and his government and refuse to worship the image (Revelation 13:15). This has a connection to the example from the Old Testament in the life of the prophet Daniel whose companions violated King Nebuchadnezzar's decree to worship the idol representing him.
- Other considerations come from church history. For many Christians in the first two centuries after Jesus faced this kind of binary option from governments. For example, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (modern day Izmir in Turkey) was dragged before the public and called to recant his faith in Christ and instead to worship the emperor and the gods of that city. They called him an "atheist" and killed him in the public square in 156AD. Curiously, not far away in Sardis Christians were able to live and move freely in society, even owning and operating shops in the marketplace.

This latter example points to times over many centuries since when the values of the "world" have clashed heavily with the values of the Gospel and Christians have found themselves outside of public favour and law. There are terrifying examples today to keep in our prayers.¹³

The sobering circumstances justifying civil disobedience in the examples above, both biblical and historical above should be kept in mind as we discuss the hypothetical matter of what action we might take when governments get it wrong in our view.

¹³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/november/11-places-where-persecuted-christians-need-our-prayers.html>



Think of some hypothetical situations in your setting that you think may justify civil disobedience by Christians today?

Could there be other, lawful options available to Christians in the hypothetical situation you have imagined?

How would you go about determining what you believe to be “contrary to God’s Word” or clashing with Gospel values in your accusations toward the government in your hypothetical?

What other factors might affect the decision-making process?

4. Get involved

Given the post-Christendom opportunities that exist (the Gospel and gospel values, though not believed or practiced by the majority, are still known and evident in society and politics), come up with some ways Christians in your setting can assist in shaping public policy and culture to be more aligned with God’s values expressed in the Gospel of Jesus. E.g.

- Join an ethics committee in your industry
- Join a school council
- Write to local politicians on issues
- Use your professional status or education qualifications to access policy-shaping bodies
- Put yourself forward for public office
- Can you suggest a variety of other ways....?