



# Engaging Culture

A Biblical Case for Christian Influence into Government



## STUDY 1

### **ENLARGING OUR VIEW OF GOD**

From time to time you might find yourself asking the question – is God in control?

As we read the newspaper, watch the news and hear the sad and tragic stories of human suffering, natural disasters, and corrupt government, the world seems to be spiraling out of control, it might cause us to sometimes wonder, is God in control?

As we begin this four week study, we want to zoom out, take a big picture view, and try and enter into the bigness of our God and His perspective on the world and its affairs.

John Stott, in his book 'New Issues Facing Christians Today' makes the case that Christians need a fuller doctrine of God. Someone has recently said that the number one form of idolatry in the world today is on Sunday mornings in churches, as Christians worship a god they have conceptualized or constructed in their own minds, a god they like and are comfortable with, a god who is far from the majestic God of the Scriptures.

I think it's fair to say that so often in the church today, we see God primarily as God of salvation, and almost forget that He is also God of creation. Jesus is Lord of the church and Lord of the nations!

Stott summarizes the problem: *"God is the God of nature as well as of religion, of the 'secular' as well as of the 'sacred'...God is the God of the nations as well as of His covenant people...God is the God of justice, as well as of justification"*<sup>1</sup>

#### **Psalm 47:7-8**

<sup>7</sup> *For God is the King over all the earth.*

*Praise him with a psalm!*

<sup>8</sup> *God reigns above the nations,  
sitting on his holy throne.*

#### **Psalm 24:1**

<sup>1</sup> *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it.  
The world and all its people belong to him.*

In Acts chapter 17, we have the account of the confrontation between the Apostle Paul and the thinkers, orators and philosophers of Athens. His address to them was sparked by his observation that the city was *"full of idols"* and also included inscriptions *"to the Unknown God"*. Paul states: *"This God, whom you worship*

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 49,50, 51

without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about." In the passage that follows, Paul sets out the truth about the nature of God and His relationship to the world.

### **Acts 17:24-31 (NLT)**

<sup>24</sup> "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, <sup>25</sup> and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. <sup>26</sup> From one man[a] he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

<sup>27</sup> "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your[b] own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup> And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

<sup>30</sup> "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

- He is the God who made all things, and gives to all people their life, the very breath they breathe. He also made everyone and all nations from one blood. He is the God who rules over and sets the course of human history.
- "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us."
- He is the God who wants "everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

The Resurrection of Christ is not only a guarantee to believers of their own resurrection life- but is also here a warning to the nations that God will in the end bring all people to the judgment throne.

Let's take a look at the Biblical story of Daniel and the Kings of Babylon, to help us understand the truth of who God is and its relevance to the kingdoms of this world.

### **Daniel & the Kings of Babylon**

Daniel was a prominent leader and a powerful figure before two world leaders of his day. Remember that Daniel was operating in a pagan environment. He was amongst a people and dealing with Kings and rulers who were not part of God's covenant people and who did not at the time acknowledge the God of Israel.

In Daniel 4:23, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has a dream of a large tree, big and strong. Then he saw "a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He called

*in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit.....But let the stump and its roots , bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground in the grass of the field...'*

Daniel's explanation to the king is this, *"...this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven... so that everyone may know that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world. He gives them to anyone he chooses—even to the lowliest of people...your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that heaven Rules..."*<sup>2</sup>

Daniel's bold claim is that it is His God, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, who is the real Sovereign Lord of the world and of human history, and that even Nebuchadnezzar, at that time the most powerful man in the world, needed to acknowledge Him and His rule. There is a higher power in the universe than the leader of even the most powerful of nations.

Today many consider the US a superpower, or perhaps the rising nations of China and India, but even in light of current powerful nations such as these, this truth remains.

Earlier on, Daniel assures the king that his kingdom was significant in the purposes of God, but that it was also limited in time. Other kingdoms would arise and fall. No world power lasts forever, except the kingdom set up by God.

### **Daniel 2:20-21a (NLT)**

*He said,*

*"Praise the name of God forever and ever,  
for he has all wisdom and power.  
21 He controls the course of world events;  
he removes kings and sets up other kings.*

Prophesying about the coming of the Messiah into the world, Daniel says *"During the reigns of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed or conquered. It will crush all these kingdoms into nothingness, and it will stand forever."*<sup>3</sup>

What is said about the sovereignty of God in the Old Testament is fulfilled by Jesus Christ in the New Testament, the Name that is above every other name. It is His kingdom that will stand forever that Daniel is pointing too. Speaking of Jesus, we read in Colossians 1:15-20:

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel 4:25 (NLT)

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 2:44 (NLT)

15 *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.  
 He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,[a]*  
 16 *for through him God created everything  
 in the heavenly realms and on earth.  
 He made the things we can see  
 and the things we can't see—  
 such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.  
 Everything was created through him and for him.*  
 17 *He existed before anything else,  
 and he holds all creation together.*  
 18 *Christ is also the head of the church,  
 which is his body.  
 He is the beginning,  
 supreme over all who rise from the dead.  
 So he is first in everything.*  
 19 *For God in all his fullness  
 was pleased to live in Christ,  
 20 and through him God reconciled  
 everything to himself.  
 He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth  
 by means of Christ's blood on the cross.*

In his book, 'The Faith', Charles Colson writes, *"The phrase, "all things hold together" in Christ is striking. He is essentially the glue of the Universe. John Polkinghorne and others argue that Christ is the animating force that keeps the Universe in order and existence. This gives new meaning to God's rule, God's power and God's understanding – all of which are infinite. God's sovereignty over all creation cannot be denied."*<sup>4</sup>

Imagine for a moment that everyone who knew nothing about this God was quite open to knowing Him. Would these truths about God and His relationship to the world really make a difference to public and corporate life? Would they have anything to say to national and international leadership? Political life, too, has its unique revelatory character and proper calling from God.

Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands, said: *"The son [of God] is not to be excluded from anything. You cannot point to any natural realm or star or comet or even descend into the depth of the earth, but it is related to Christ, not in some unimportant tangential way, but directly. There are no forces in nature, no laws that control those forces that do not have their origin in that eternal Word. For this reason, it is totally false to restrict Christ to spiritual affairs and to assert that there is no point of contact between him and the natural sciences."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Colson, *The Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 106

<sup>5</sup> Kuyper, *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ*, trans. Jan H. Boer (Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, 1991), p. 74. This is the translation of a section from the first volume of Kuyper's *Pro Rege*, of *Het Koningschap van Christus* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911)

When God called Paul to proclaim the Gospel, the Lord said to Ananias, *“Go, for he (Paul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry My name before the Gentiles **and kings** and the children of Israel.”*<sup>6</sup>

We see through Paul’s ministry that he appeared before Roman emperors and rulers of the day, declaring that Jesus is Lord, and that everyone, including them, are accountable to God.

In Acts 17 we read of the Jews accusing Paul and Silas before the city authorities saying, *“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”*<sup>7</sup>

This has sharp relevance to not only world government leaders, but also Australia’s national leadership. As we move into our discussion time shortly, we invite you to turn your attention to the implications of this teaching to our national leadership and the country in which we live.

One passage which demonstrates further application of all this to government, including our response, is Romans 13.

#### **Romans 13:1-7 (NLT)**

*“Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. <sup>2</sup> So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. <sup>3</sup> For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. <sup>4</sup> The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God’s servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. <sup>5</sup> So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.”*

*<sup>6</sup> Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. <sup>7</sup> Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.”*

God ordained the institution of government, and gives rulers their authority and power as we have seen from the examples in Daniel and from this passage. It was his idea. The purpose of government as we read in Romans 13, is to restrain evil by punishing those who do wrong, rewarding those who do what is right, ensuring order and the well-being of society.

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:15 (NLT)

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17:6-7 (NLT)

But what about the notion of Separation of Church and State? This is a common objection raised against Christians who put forward ideas in to the political arena. We need to understand the true origins of this concept.

When Australia and the United States became nations, the founders wanted to ensure freedom of religion so that all religions had equal freedom under the law and so that there was no established or State church like there was in many European nations. For example, England had (and still has) the Church of England as the established church. In the new worlds of America and Australia, it was felt that the church should not interfere with the State nor should the State interfere with the church. This is a good thing.

But Separation of Church and State was never meant to stop Christians from entering politics nor to exclude Christian perspectives influencing public policy.

Sadly it has become a slogan to expunge Christians from the public square. Understanding the true history of this concept will set Christians free again to more fully participate in public debate.

Part of ensuring a just society is a concern for both justice and righteousness - to protect the poor, the oppressed, the weak and the vulnerable. Throughout Scripture, rulers and kings are exhorted to look after the poor.

In Psalm 72, Solomon cries to God *“May he (your king) judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!...May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!”*

Given that God is in control and has established order and authority in His world, what are the implications for our attitude towards government?

The first point that Romans 13 makes very clear in this regard is that we are in submission to governing authorities. We are not to rebel against this authority, but submit to it.

Submission to government does not mean that we never question it or the culture which it governs. However, as we do that, it is important that our attitude towards them reflects one of understanding their God-given authority and our God-given responsibility. Of course a key part of living under the authority of government is obedience, except in circumstances in which that would cause us to disobey God.

Secondly, we are to view them as God’s servants, given for our good. This goes against the grain of the culture in which we live. This reinforces that God is sovereign, that He gives governments their authority and purpose, and His design is that they govern for our good. We need to ensure we view them as servants of God, to fulfill the purpose He has given them.

Finally, we need to give them the respect and honour that is their due. Not only when they make decisions we agree with, but because they are God's ministers, invested with His authority to ensure justice, order and peace in society.

Governments are continually criticized and viewed with contempt. Even though this might be for good reason at times, God requires us to view them from His perspective, with respect and honour for the office they hold. As Christians, our attitude towards government should be very different to the culture around us.

1 Timothy 2:1-4 urges *"first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. 2 Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. 3 This is good and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth."*

Doing this will assist in us maintaining a godly attitude and perspective towards our governments, and serves as a poignant reminder that *"The king's heart is like a stream of water directed by the Lord; he guides it wherever he pleases"* (Proverbs 21:1)

How often do we pray for our members of parliament?

So, as we close, this brings us back to our original question. Is God in control of this seemingly out of control world?

#### **Isaiah 46:8-11**

*8 "Do not forget this! Keep it in mind!*

*Remember this, you guilty ones.*

*9 Remember the things I have done in the past.*

*For I alone am God!*

*I am God, and there is none like me.*

*10 Only I can tell you the future*

*before it even happens.*

*Everything I plan will come to pass,*

*for I do whatever I wish.*

*11 I will call a swift bird of prey from the east—*

*a leader from a distant land to come and do my bidding.*

*I have said what I would do,*

*and I will do it.*

We can see from these Scriptures, that God has a plan, a purpose, He is in control, and will accomplish His purpose. He has used and will use governments, both good and evil, to fulfill His plan. God is indeed ruler, Lord, Sovereign and in control. He alone rules, and to Him all people, including government leaders, are accountable.

This may lead to many challenging questions about how this all works in a world opposed to God. It does not follow however from these challenges that God has relinquished His Lordship of His world.

You'll now have an opportunity to discuss and explore all this further as we turn to our group study discussion.