

Give Us a King

1 Samuel 8:1-22; Galatians 3:26-28

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today marks the third Sunday of our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time between Epiphany and Lent.

From the last week's light and breezy topic of gendered language in the songs we sing, we're moving to another easy one: Do Christians need to defend democracy? Is democracy inherently Christian?

Whether in the realm of politics or the church, is democracy the only or best option? Is every other form of political organization and decision-making sub-Christian?

Democracy can very easily just be assumed as a default. This certainly was the case for me for a big part of my life.

I grew up in the eighties when the Cold War was raging and I kind of just assumed that the good guys, who were Christians, favoured democracy and the bad guys were godless communists.

The good guys let the people have their say; the bad guys were authoritative dictators who ruled by brute force.

Every church I have ever been a part of has been congregationalist and, in theory, non-hierarchical in how it makes decisions and governs itself. Committees, business meetings, people coming to the mic to voice their opinions, votes—these have always just been assumed.

The will of the people was obviously the only reasonable (and probably Christian) way to do it.

But is this right? Is democracy *inherently* Christian?

Well, I think the short answer would have to be, no.

For starters, democracy, at least of a kind, predates Christianity.

The term appeared in the 5th century BC in Greek city-states, to mean "rule of the people", in contrast to aristocracy or monarchy or some form of "rule of an elite."

Citizens were allowed to speak and vote in legislative assemblies. But citizenship excluded women, slaves, foreigners, and youths below the age of military service. Effectively, only around one in four residents in ancient Greek city-states would have qualified as citizens.

This is obviously not a twenty-first century liberal democracy. Only a few voices count. But it's also not a monarchy. And it shows up 500 years before Jesus arrived on the scene.

But even beyond this, we must also acknowledge that most Christians for most of history have not lived in democracies, even when Christianity was the law of the land. For most of the history of the Christian west, ordinary Christians lived their days under the rule of kings and princes and emperors and bishops and priests.

Even if we look at the history of our own tradition, the early Mennonite communities were not democracies.

We perhaps assume that the early Mennonites got rid of all the hierarchies and lived in wonderfully egalitarian communities. But Mennonite communities had elders and bishops and village heads. They were not democracies in a sense that we would recognize today.

Many Christians right now do not live in democracies. If there was an inherent connection between Christianity and democracy, we might expect it to have been a more consistent feature of history.

Now, we must acknowledge that many things that I think are inherently Christian, like the eradication of slavery and the equality of women, took a long time to arrive on the scene. So, just because democracy took a while to get here doesn't mean it doesn't have some deep connections to Christianity.

But even in this brief outline, I think it's fair to say that for most of history, democracy has not seemed to many like an obvious and unavoidable implication of the gospel.

Christians have lived and continue to live in all kinds of political arrangements from monarchies to authoritarian states to communism to some combination of the above.

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What does the bible say about how we should govern ourselves? Well, perhaps unsurprisingly, the bible hardly prescribes one and only one form of government.

I chose our text from 1 Samuel to illustrate this. Up until this point in the story, the people of Israel had been governed by a kind of loose tribal confederation.

In Judges 21, we read these sobering words: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

And so, the people look around at their neighbours and begin to hanker after a king of their own. The elders come to the prophet Samuel and say, “Appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”

We already see a bit of mixed bag, politically. The tribal elders clearly have power, but they evidently need Samuel to bless and anoint this request.

Samuel does not want to do this. “It’s going to go very badly for you,” he says. And he lists all the terrible things the king will do. Taxes, conscription, warmongering, taking of sons and daughters, eventually slavery.

You will cry out because of this king you say you want, Samuel says, and God will essentially say, “Well, this is what you asked for.”

But the really interesting thing about this passage for me was that even though it’s a passage that talks about kingship and concentrated power and all its abuses, it comes via something like a democratic process.

“Listen to the voice of the people,” the Lord says in verse 8.”

This is remarkable. Even though God knows it’s going to end badly, even though this desire for a king is interpreted as a rejection of God himself, God says, “listen to their voice.” He honours human freedom to choose and to choose badly.

And it does. With a few exceptions, most of Israel's history is characterized by a bunch of bad kings doing precisely what Samuel said they would (and worse).

The will of the people turned out to be very bad for the people.

A few years ago, I watched a Polish Netflix series called 1983 which imagined a future where the Iron Curtain is still standing and Poland is a police state.

There was an interesting scene in the first episode where a young law student, is being grilled in an exam by his mentor and professor. The young student had been well-drilled in propaganda: Law and Party are all, and both exist for the sake of justice.

"Ah," his mentor and professor replied, "but you've forgotten to take one thing into account: human fallibility. It's human beings who create laws and human beings who form political parties. And human beings are fallible."

The fallibility of human beings and the political systems and structures they create is not likely news to anyone with a pulse these days.

It was true in the days of ancient Israel, and it is true today. Human fallibility, both in leaders and in those who elect them, has never really lacked for evidence.

And this of course brings us to the obvious point that democracies do not guarantee the best or even a good outcome.

Hitler was democratically elected. Trump was democratically elected. There are numerous relatively recent examples of countries around the world that had revolutions to overthrow some dictator or another, and democracy seemed primed to usher in a new and glorious future... Until the people elected a leader that plunged the people back into chaos and violence.

Voting majorities are clearly capable of making terrible decisions. It happens from the highest halls of political power to church board rooms and everything in between.

I know of many churches that have made all kinds of bad decisions that have led to conflict and pain, even though these decisions were made by earnest people who prayed and discussed and reflected and voted for the option they deemed best.

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Well, what about Jesus. Surely Jesus can sort out our politics for us.

And yet, Jesus had virtually nothing to say about politics as such (understanding, of course, that the separation between religion and politics, church and state, that we take for granted did not exist in Jesus' time – it was all connected).

But Jesus spent almost no time or energy speaking about or agitating against the Roman occupiers of his people or recommending alternative structures of governance.

He said a few things:

- "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Mark 12:17)
- "You know how the Gentiles lord it over each other, but you are to be servants" (Matthew 20:24-26).
- "There's always going to be political turmoil and violence, but don't be anxious" (Matthew 24:3-8).

In the climactic moment of confrontation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, Jesus remains silent (Matthew 27:11-14).

This does not mean that the things Jesus said and did do not have political implications. I think they certainly do.

But politics was not the arena in which Jesus chose to do battle. We would do well to ponder this, particularly in a time when it seems like politics has become many people's religion. Indeed, when politics has become many *Christians'* religion, as in the domain where they find their primary meaning, purpose, and identity.

Jesus primarily chose to address the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

A few weeks ago, I was walking around in a shopping mall in Calgary looking for a birthday present for my dear wife.

I don't like malls, but they are a fascinating place to observe people. What they say, what they do, who they hang out with, who they avoid, what they wear.

At one point, I was walking behind a young couple pushing a baby stroller. They were both wearing black hoodies. His had some kind of a motorcycle logo on the back. On hers, I read these words:

To the person behind me: You are amazing, beautiful, and enough. Remember that.

“Well, how thoughtful of her,” I thought. “How did she know I would be behind her!” ☺

I must confess that this was not my first thought. My first thought was, “What a ridiculous slogan. What if Hitler was walking behind her? Or Donald Trump? Would she think they were beautiful, amazing, and enough? What if the person behind her meant to do her harm? What if.... well, it doesn’t take much imagination, does it?

Indeed, what if the person behind her was a pastor with a *tiny* skeptical streak in him who was a bit grouchy because he was in a shopping mall? Nothing particularly amazing or beautiful about that!

Who would wear such a hoodie? What was she trying to say? She couldn’t possibly think that every person who would walk behind her was amazing and beautiful. Could she?

I doubt she put nearly as much thought into her wardrobe selection as I was. I think she was probably just trying to be nice, to be encouraging, to recognize that many people struggle with self-esteem and maybe could use a little pick-me-up.

It’s debatable how meaningful some people might find such a thing, but who knows, it could be just the thing someone needed.

I would submit that this hoodie is a cultural artifact that could only show up downstream of Jesus and the culture(s) that have been formed by his ethic and his view of human nature.

In all his interactions, with those on the bottom, those on the top, and everyone in between, Jesus treated people as unique, special, image-bearers of God.

That doesn’t mean he was never critical; doesn’t mean he didn’t tell hard truths. But he exhibited a radical equality in his treatment of people. From the leper to the Roman centurion, all mattered equally. Jesus wasn’t impressed by wealth and power and status, and he wasn’t dissuaded by the outcasts and the marginalized.

Everyone mattered to Jesus.

Paul wasn't talking about democracy in our passage from Galatians. He was talking about the church when he said,

There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

But this view of humanity was and is truly radical. And it has spilled out into our cultural assumptions about politics.

Behind the assumption that all should have a vote is the deeper assumption that every human being has value.

Democracy, in our nations and in our churches, is an expression, however conflicted, however imperfect, however easily abused, of this this value. And in this sense alone, I think, it has a connection to Christianity.

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Our church functions democratically. We elect people to positions and rotate people around and we have congregational meetings about important issues.

We have shared and collaborative leadership. Sometimes, if we can't get a consensus on a matter, the members vote.

Next Saturday, we will have our AGM, and we'll see all of this in action! I encourage all members and non-members to come! Only members can vote, but you do not have to be a member to have a voice and to contribute to conversations. If you call Lethbridge Mennonite Church home and care about where we're going and what we're doing, your voice matters. Truly.

We do things the way we do them for mostly good reasons, I think. At the very least for understandable reasons. Democracy is a check against concentrated power. It does give more people more influence in decision making (which, as we've seen, can go very well or very badly).

But a flat “every member gets a vote” is not the Christian ideal for governance and decision making. You could do worse than this. It’s not a bad safeguard. But you could also do better.

One article I read in preparation for this sermon contrasted democracy with “pneumatocracy”—“pneuma” being the Greek word for “spirit.”¹

The goal is spirit-driven leadership being empowered to do what is best for the community. Those with gifts and callings, those who have been identified as having wisdom and vision and leadership skill being set free to lead and to serve the broader community.

You sometimes hear the joke that Mennonite churches can be an endless cycle of committee meetings where nothing ever gets done. Sometimes it can feel this way. Everyone having a voice can lead to paralysis or decision fatigue.

I believe that all people in our church should have a say in what we do and how we do it.

But beyond this, what I hope and pray for our church is that those we entrust to lead us would have the freedom to offer their gifts of leadership and guidance in a spirit of trust and mutuality, understanding that not all are gifted in the same way, that each has gifts to offer.

This has been a bit of a meandering sermon. I’ve probably said a little bit about too many things and perhaps not enough about others. But if I were to try to sum it up in a few points, I would say this:

1. Democracy is likely the least bad of our political options, but it is not inherently Christian.
2. We should always guard against the temptation to make politics our religion. Political structures will not save us or our nation, culture, etc. Only human hearts that have been changed by God can do this.
3. God is ultimately the king we need. This was true in ancient Israel, and it is true today. And God can be trusted to lead and guide us in our church, to change hearts and minds.

May God help us to be good citizens in our nation.

¹ <https://missioalliance.org/not-a-hierarchy-not-a-democracy-but-a-pneumatocracy-the-church’s-true-politics/?fbclid=IwAR0jxJY18q-8TmxYZvDUZST50Puzzml8bGy3SlhQs8BgnrU9dlqPrLWJUfU>

May God help us to seek him and his kingdom first.

May God help us to honour the dignity and value of each person and to trust those he calls to lead and guide our community.

Amen.

