



SUBJECTS and CITIZENS

MICHAEL P. JENSEN

The politics
of the gospel

Lessons from
Romans 12-15

Dr Michael Jensen has written in a lively manner of the Christian approach to politics. Based on Romans 12–15, it is not party political but intensely practical, and cleverly explains that living out the gospel has quite an impact on earthly politics. It is a great read.

Hon John Howard OM AC

Former Prime Minister of Australia (1996–2007)

The question of how to live today as subjects of Christ and citizens of the heavenly city requires a rich, biblical wisdom. In an age of politicized faith when we are all tempted to find our identity through what we denounce and reject, it can be hard to distinguish allegiance to Christ from alignment with one of our culture's political package deals. Taking account of the deep rhythms of the Bible's story from Genesis to Revelation, and drawing out distinctively biblical patterns of power, peace, grace, and disadvantaging ourselves for the sake of others, Michael Jensen helps us to reflect on how the Scriptures shape a rich posture of wise Christian citizenship in our present political and cultural age, as we await the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Associate Professor Christopher Watkin

ARC Future Fellow, European Languages, Monash University
Author, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's unfolding story makes sense of modern life and culture*

Political systems across the world are desperate for people of conviction, and people with a conscience have a moral duty to participate in democracy. That is why we need thoughtful contributions, like *Subjects and Citizens*, to offer wisdom and guidance as to how to do this effectively.

Kate Forbes

Member of the Scottish Parliament for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch
Former Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy

Michael Jensen has given us two gifts in one: a penetrating study of what it means for Christians to be citizens in a broken and complex world, and a sparkling exposition of Romans 12–15. I found fresh insight on every page. This will help us to be better equipped to engage our society faithfully and to help our churches be places of unique relational health and love. Essential reading for our times.

Sam Allberry

Associate Pastor, Immanuel Nashville

Co-author, *You're Not Crazy: Gospel Sanity for Weary Churches*

This is the kind of politics book Christians need right now: one that reminds us that, because Christ is Lord, Christianity is inherently political while simultaneously enabling Christians to sit loosely to any particular party or government. Through a close and practical reading of Romans 12–15—arguably the richest source of political wisdom in the New Testament—Michael Jensen guides readers out of the anxieties of our moment into the cheerful confidence and humble activism that has always marked the church at its best. This book is part balm, part stimulant. It is as much needed in my new home of America as it is in my homeland of Australia.

The Rev Dr John Dickson

Author, *Bullies and Saints: An honest look at the good and evil of Christian history*

Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies and Public Christianity, Wheaton College, Illinois

Host, *Undeceptions* podcast

This book sets out a way of approaching politics from a Christian perspective which is radical, thoughtful and deeply rooted in Scripture. Dr Jensen gives us permission to relax, to rest in the sovereignty and faithfulness of God, and to commit to living for Jesus, reassuring us that “following Jesus is a political statement”.

Tim Farron

MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale, UK

This compelling and challenging account of how to approach politics as a Christian is a thoughtful, informative and helpful discussion from Michael Jensen. Because he starts in the right place—that simply proclaiming the lordship of Christ is itself a political act, and the sovereignty of God is our primary assumption—he points to a very different politics: humble, just, and without rancour. An excellent guide.

Barney Swartz

Senior Fellow, Centre for Public Christianity

Religion Editor, *The Age* (2002–2013)

Michael Jensen engages in a noble service by offering a reading of Romans 12–15 for our time, showing us how to pursue the things that make for peace and mutual encouragement in a fragmented and fratricidal age. He deftly shows the connection between submission to Jesus’ Lordship and love for others, and how discipleship requires a politics of peace. A timely word indeed!

The Rev Dr Michael F Bird

Deputy Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

Dr Jensen helpfully invites us to look at our political moment through the lens of the letter to the Romans. He gently guides us to re-examine some of our political and theological assumptions in the light of Scripture. I can think of many small groups that would benefit greatly from this honest and disarming book.

Dr Krish Kandiah OBE

Foster parent, adoptive father, broadcaster

Director of the Sanctuary Foundation, a national charity in the UK supporting refugees

Michael Jensen provides an immensely thoughtful application of Romans 12–15 to the circumstances of today. Emphasizing that to call Jesus ‘Lord’ is an inherently political statement, he shows how the Christian way is to build an alternative community that focuses on self-sacrifice, peace, and love. What does that mean for politics in today’s world? Michael offers helpful guidance on such issues as civil disobedience, what it means to respect and honour governments, and the limitations of governmental authority.

Patrick Parkinson

Emeritus Professor, University of Queensland School of Law

Politics has become a disordered love within much of the modern church. In *Subjects and Citizens*, Michael Jensen helps put things back in order by encouraging us to return to our first love and to bring the soundness of scriptural wisdom back to our understanding of our duties in this world as subjects and citizens of the next.

Dr Karen Swallow Prior

Author, *The Evangelical Imagination: How stories, images and metaphors created a culture in crisis*

In the last few years, we Christians have changed what we fight over. We used to fight about doctrine; now we fight about politics. Our divisions used to be reliably along theological lines: Calvinist or Arminian, Pentecostal or Cessationist, Premillennial or Amillennial. But today, churches and Christian leaders are much more likely to come into conflict over vaccine mandates, immigration, or LGBT-related instruction in state schools. Often we change churches, follow leaders, and subscribe to podcasts not so much on their specific content but on their mood or posture on these matters.

In this context, Michael Jensen has written a sure-footed, biblical guide to Christian thinking about politics. Based in exegesis of Romans 12–15, Dr Jensen takes the reader through a journey of understanding—both of what politics in fact is, and how the Christian faith addresses it. Jensen is careful not simply to scratch where we itch with hot takes on the issues of the day. Rather, by carefully walking through the apostle Paul’s message to the Christian community in pagan, imperial Rome, Jensen helps us to think Christianly via the lived example of a church whose experience of the state and the surrounding culture was surely more challenging than our own.

Dr Jensen is both a scholar and a pastor, and this book benefits from that intersection. It is theologically rich and pastorally shaped. And timely. Highly recommended.

Rory Shiner

Senior Pastor, Providence Church Network, Perth, WA

Author, *Forgiven Forever: Living in the Death of Jesus*

Just when it feels like we're drowning in politics of the most divisive kind, *Subjects and Citizens* helps us get our heads above water—way above. By showing us the Lordship of Christ, Michael Jensen gives a wise and liberating vision for living out kingdom faithfulness as earthly citizens.

Glen Scrivener

Author, *The Air We Breathe: How we all came to believe in freedom, kindness, progress, and equality* and the 321 course

The church desperately needs more resources on politics that are deeply informed by the biblical text and attentive to the questions and concerns of the moment—and *Subjects and Citizens* delivers. Michael Jensen pushes readers to think about politics from a wider theological lens and respond to their political contexts with hospitality and charity.

Kaitlyn Schiess

Author, *The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture has been used and abused and where we go from here*

This is a book that someone needed to write, and Michael has done a great job of writing it. As well as being a beautifully crafted piece of writing, *Subjects and Citizens* adds yet another title to a growing list of new Australian reformed evangelical books that provide sharp theological and practical guidance on living faithfully in a rapidly changing world.

Mikey Lynch

Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition Australia
Campus Director, University Fellowship of Christians, UTAS, Hobart
Author, *The Good Life in the Last Days: Making choices when the time is short*

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THE POLITICS OF
THE GOSPEL

LESSONS FROM ROMANS 12-15

MICHAEL P. JENSEN

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Subjects and Citizens

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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ISBN 978 1 922980 18 2

Cover design by Carol Lam.

Typesetting by Lankshear Design.

For Catherine

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PREFACE

One day in August 2023, an email barged into my inbox. It contained a simple message: “Keep politics out of the church”.

At least I appreciated the directness!

But why was I at the pointy end of this missile?

Australia was in the lead-up to a referendum regarding ‘the Voice’. We were about to go to the polling booths where we would respond to the proposal to establish a representative body that would take the concerns of Indigenous Australians to our federal Parliament. There were vigorous campaigns on both sides, and debate was often emotive. The referendum (which was decisively defeated when it finally came to the vote) was the cause of many heated discussions—not just in the community in general, but also within churches and families.

Having been involved in public discussions of political and social issues as a pastor and theologian over many years, both within the church and in the secular media, I felt I had a responsibility to put my view across and to help

Christians to think the referendum question through from Christian principles. I did not mention it from the pulpit, but I wrote what I thought was a moderate case for voting Yes, while outlining some of the issues that Christians ought to think about as they came to their own decisions. My article was widely shared and was referred to in the mainstream media, where I was invited to share my thinking.

As with many political and social issues, there was not one single ‘Christian’ position on the Voice to Parliament. But it seemed to me that very few Christians were able to articulate their views on the issue based on biblical principles. In fact, my email correspondent was actively trying to keep their faith and their political views separate.

I do have some sympathy with their concern. Christians have far too often become wedded to particular political agendas and have confused preaching the gospel with gaining political power. But at the same time, who can doubt that the Bible has a great deal to say about the stuff of politics—about power, government, and justice? The Bible makes strong claims about who ultimately rules (Jesus) and about what human society ought to look like. Can the alternative to too much human politics in the church, then, be mere silence?

To help Christians think biblically about politics is why this book exists.

My interest in politics and Christianity goes back to the 1990s, when I first encountered the work of Professors Miroslav Volf and Oliver O’Donovan. These two theologians think quite differently from each other about the issues, but they share the conviction that the Christian Scriptures are an

impressively rich resource for thinking about politics, even in the contemporary world. Volf and O'Donovan helped me to see that we needn't compromise on our convictions but must also recognize the complexity of what is in front of us. They also helped me to see that it is the Christian church's hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ that makes it able to be a non-anxious—and even life-giving—presence amid the despair and turmoil that often surrounds human politics.

In my doctoral studies at the University of Oxford, I wrote about the importance of martyrdom for a genuinely Christian approach to human politics. I was struck by the quiet confidence in the Lordship of Christ that the early Christian martyrs showed, even in the face of the wrath of the emperors of Rome itself. I also learned to admire Dietrich Bonhoeffer's stand against Hitler in the 1930s and 40s. He certainly did not "keep politics out of the church". Instead, he protested that some Christians had brought politics and the church together in a way that made Christians bow the knee to worldly power at its worst. This protest cost him his life. I was deeply moved, too, by the story of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda, who lost his life in 1977 because he protested against the evil regime of the dictator Idi Amin. He did not "keep politics out of the church", either.

My prayer is for today's Christians to catch something of Bonhoeffer and Luwum's devotion to the reign of Jesus Christ and their ultimate hope in him, even as we try to navigate the complex and anxious times in which we live.

Michael P Jensen

1 | A NEW KIND OF POLITICS

The turbulence of our times

This is a book about Christians and politics.

Now, perhaps the least controversial thing you could say about politics is that politics is a controversial subject. That is true in any age. However, we live in a particularly anxious and turbulent time in history, during which the subject of politics has become especially contentious across the globe. There have been other times like this, certainly—I wouldn't say that this angst is unprecedented—but the current era (which I propose to be the period since about 2016) has a particular tension all its own.

Disagreements about politics are now so passionate that they divide neighbours, friends, churches, and even families. One US study found that at the beginning of the Trump presidency in 2016, Thanksgiving dinners (usually a time when American families gather together) were 30 to 50 minutes shorter than they had been the year before, especially when the guests travelled from areas that voted differently

from their hosts.¹ In other words, it has become noticeably harder for families to gather together when they differ in their political views. The level of tolerance of difference, even within the intimacy of the family, has dropped.

Several recent trends have combined to produce these tensions. In the first place, there's the rise of extremes on both ends of the political spectrum, which have found their voices increasingly amplified as social media platforms have grown in influence over the years. Then there are passionate disagreements about individual identity, sex, gender, race, and who has the right to say what to whom (so-called 'identity politics'). To this we might add what commentators call 'globalization', with factors like the internet and relatively cheap air travel making cultural and economic borders seem irrelevant, at least for those who can afford it. This has made the world more exciting in many ways, but also more complex. Then there is the rise of the social media giants, who exert immense power over our political systems, and the ongoing influence of international media conglomerates, who stand to profit from a more conflict-ridden political scene.²

This has meant that many people's faith in democracy to deliver a form of government that gives them a voice and holds those in power to account has slipped. The cynical manipulation of the democratic system by politicians

1 MK Chen, 'The effect of partisanship and political advertising on close family ties', *Science*, 1 June 2018 ([science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aag1433?mod=article_inline](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag1433)).

2 For a very detailed scholarly analysis of the influence of the social media giants, see Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*.

and political parties, of which the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s is only one example, has meant that we are now seeing what *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks has called a politics fuelled by *alienation*. What he means is that there's a widespread feeling that politics isn't delivering the things to which citizens aspire. People on all parts of the social spectrum feel excluded from the system and left behind. Whatever their political views, people feel misunderstood and unheard by their governments. This then means that we tend to view the political system with frustration and even anger—and we want radical change. In 2017, Brooks wrote “The alienated long for something that will smash the system or change their situation”.³ The result is that people push for more and more radical solutions. Instead of seeing politics in a democracy as a compromise—where we seek to find common ground with people who may differ from us on some issues—citizens now want politics to be a matter of ‘winner takes all’: a complete victory for ‘our’ side over the ‘other’ side.

To this condition of alienation, I would add the rising tide of *anxiety*. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2023 has added to a widespread sense that the world is out of control.⁴ Global events can occur; we will have no say in them,

3 D Brooks, ‘The Alienated Mind’, *The New York Times*, 23 May 2017 (nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/alienated-mind-trump-supporters.html).

4 The World Health Organization states that the COVID-19 pandemic raised anxiety and depression levels globally by a staggering 25 per cent. See World Health Organization, ‘COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide’, WHO website, 2 March 2022 (who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide).

and yet they will dominate our lives. Especially in affluent countries, we have not been used to this. Technology, medical science, and periods of relatively stable government since World War II (especially in the affluent countries of the West) have given us the false expectation that we can indeed control what happens to us. That means we've been ill-prepared to live in a world where the future is uncertain—which it certainly has turned out to be.

The feeling of alienation from the business of government coupled with rising levels of communal anxiety make today's politics extremely fraught.

How politics affects the church

So what about the Christian church?

Of course, the church of Jesus Christ is not immune from the fraught nature of politics. The church does not stand apart from these historical forces, but in the middle of them. If our society is anxious, then so are Christian believers, who consume the same media and have the same conversations at the dinner table or at the water cooler. If our society is divided, then so are Christians. If our society is given to extremes, then that tendency is also seen in the church.

From one perspective, it is somewhat reassuring to know that when Christians experience anxiety and division in their communities, it is partly because that is what everyone else is experiencing, too. But it is also the case that this pressure manifests in particular ways in the Christian churches of the twenty-first century.

A particular anxiety for Christians arises because in

most Western societies, Christianity is retreating in cultural influence and in numbers of adherents. This means, inevitably, that it has less political influence. It's the reversal of a millennium-and-a-half-long trend: Christianity has been in alliance, more or less, with governments in Europe and in European-influenced countries since the time of Emperor Constantine (d. 337 AD). There are crosses on many European flags, such as those of Greece and Sweden. There are a number of countries that are, even today, formally Christian—that is to say, there is an official, Christian state church in many European nations. A number of other nations have strong affiliations with either the Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic Church. France and the US are comparatively rare in being constitutionally secular.

However, most of continental Europe was lost long ago to any deep influence from Christian churches. This is the case even in once solidly Roman Catholic countries like Spain and Portugal, and in staunchly Catholic Ireland. The same is true in Canada and New Zealand, and more and more so in the UK. The latest census figures in my own country, Australia, have pushed self-identifying Christians into the minority for the first time since Federation in 1901.⁵ The US is still more overtly Christian and more actively

5 Almost 10 million Australians—more than 40%—identified as having 'no religion' in the 2021 Census. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Religious affiliation in Australia*, ABS website, 4 July 2022 (abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia). This result has been echoed in the UK, where for the first time, less than half the population identified as 'Christian' in the 2021 Census. See Office for National Statistics, *Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021*, Office for National Statistics website, 29 November 2022 (ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021).

churchgoing, but even there, church membership has started to fall rapidly in recent years.⁶

What does this mean? We know that Christianity does not have a grip on the moral will of our political systems or of our cultures anymore. In fact, Christians are frequently now painted as those who (hypocritically) oppose social changes for the better. Whereas in 1904—and even in 1924—to be Christian was to be moral (and to be moral was to be Christian), in 2024, to be Christian is to be regarded by many people as self-righteous, hateful, and even cruel.

To give this a little more nuance: it is considered okay to be *somewhat* Christian, but not too much so. You can have ‘Christian values’, but you shouldn’t be too enthusiastic about them. The sharing of a Christian view on a particular public policy issue (for example, abortion) is seen as illegitimately ‘imposing’ your religion, particularly if that view is seen as an expression of ‘traditional’ or ‘conservative’ values.

To give an example, one reflection of this change is the highly successful Hulu series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dramatization of the 1985 novel by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, which tells the story of a future in which only a few women are fertile. The US has become a theocratic and totalitarian state where the small number of fertile women are essentially treated as sex slaves. They are farmed out to the homes of powerful men so as to bear them children. As

6 According to a 2020 poll, church membership in the US fell from 70% in 1999 (a level that had been more or less constant since the 1940s) to 47% in 2020. See JM Jones, ‘US church membership falls below majority for first time’, *Gallup*, 29 March 2021 (news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx).

always with dystopian fiction, the real subject is the present day—and it isn't hard to get the message. Religious people are out to control the reproductive lives of women and to constrain their freedom. Christians are totalitarian, misogynistic, and hypocritical.

Now of course this is fiction, but it is evidence of the kind of situation many people think is not far from reality. It is powerful because people find it plausible. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been used to describe contemporary Christianity and the church. It has become an alarmist cultural meme used to warn people against religious—and particularly Christian—influence. In the aftermath of the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022, pro-choice protesters in the US wore the uniforms of the handmaids from the series.

Strong critiques of Christianity are, of course, not new. But for such a critique to have grasped the moral imagination in such a widespread fashion is arguably a particular feature of our times.

Mind you, it's not as if this loss of influence is completely undeserved. It is clearly the case that Christian churches have frequently failed to act in keeping with their own principles. It would be remiss not to mention the appalling number of cases of child sexual abuse, and their inexcusable covering up, in the churches of the Western world. This has mainly affected the Roman Catholic Church, but no Christian community has been left untouched by the revelations of the evil of child abuse and other sex scandals. It's not so much the presence of horrendous evil that is shocking, but the churches' failure to take action in the protection of the vulnerable. The damage to the standing

and authority of the Christian churches has been devastating. As Editor in Chief of *Christianity Today* Russell Moore notes, “Almost every survey of disaffiliating people has also emphasized the scandals within the church—most notably the sexual abuse cover-ups and predatory behavior”.⁷

Furthermore, given the Christian enmeshment in European culture over the last 1,500 years, many of the undoubted failures of European culture are, rightly or wrongly, seen as Christian failures.

How does this feel if you are an active Christian? A Christian church retreating in political and social influence can feel like an anxious place to be. And like society, churches are divided over politics. All the divisions and disputes that exist in society walk into church on a Sunday and are added to the traditional set of Christian disputes. Disagreements over vaccines, lockdowns, and facemasks are only the most recent examples. During 2021 and 2022, I spoke with Christians who were adamant that COVID-19 vaccination should be mandatory for everyone; and I also spoke to those who thought vaccines were killing more people than they were saving. Both of these groups were sure that their view was not simply right, but *the* distinctly Christian view.

As politics has become increasingly polarized, we are less likely to feel we have anything in common with those who think differently from us on political issues.⁸ This means

7 R Moore, ‘Losing our religion’, *Russell Moore*, 15 April 2021 (russellmoore.com/2021/04/15/losing-our-religion).

8 See, for example, the extensive research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014: *Political polarization in the American public*, Pew Research Center website, 12 June 2014 (pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public).

that when Christians have aligned themselves with a particular side of politics, or taken a strong stance on a particular issue, they have met with strong reactions from both within and outside the church. They've become part of the turbulence. And this has had an adverse reaction. As Russell Moore observes, leading sociologists and political scientists (such as Robert Putnam) have argued that “the politicization of American religion is a key driver of people away from religious affiliation”.⁹ This effect may not be quite as marked in other countries, but it is still very apparent.

In short, Christians can no longer assume that their political leaders will share their convictions about the purpose, meaning, and value of human life. That has meant that in the past few decades, many Christians have sought to maintain the Christian character of their governments by campaigning and aligning with particular political parties. On some issues, this has undoubtedly been necessary. But it also means that Christians have been impacted by the current confused and divided political landscape. Nothing seems to have halted the loss of Christian influence in most Western countries, and furthermore, the overtly political behaviour of some churches seems to have had a deleterious effect on their capacity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So is there a better way forward? I believe there is—and outlining my case is the purpose of this book. By returning to a close reading of part of our ‘constitutional text’, the New Testament Scriptures, Christians can recover a truly Christ-centred vision for human politics. That vision lies

9 Moore, ‘Losing our religion’.

in being more authentically who they actually are as the church: *subjects* of the Lord Jesus and *citizens* of the kingdom of heaven. Beginning with this perspective can prove more than an antidote to the alienation and anxiety that so dominate contemporary debates, and it can provide a way to think again about the messy and contentious business of politics.

How politics affected the church in Rome

As I said at the beginning, this is a book about Christians and politics. However, it is not intended to be a comprehensive primer on this subject. I will not offer a complete Christian political theology, recognizing that many highly sophisticated theological accounts of politics have already been attempted.¹⁰ Nor will I attempt to address every political issue that arises for Christians.

Instead, my approach here is deliberately an exposition of a text of Scripture. My aim is to address the Christian approach to politics with the help of chapters 12–15 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Thematic accounts, of course, have their place. Indeed, there is no substitute for an understanding of the whole Bible’s account of God, the world, and humanity if we are to rightly understand politics. Augustine of Hippo’s remarkable book *City of God* is the gold standard when it comes to such projects. More recently, Melbourne philosopher Christopher Watkin has attempted what he calls a Christian ‘social theory’ for the contemporary world

¹⁰ I recommend, among other works, the work of Oliver O’Donovan, especially his landmark book *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology*.

while consciously echoing Augustine's method, in his magisterial work *Biblical Critical Theory*.

However, while a work like *City of God* enables us to see the whole forest that is the Bible, there is a place for looking at the trees as well. Furthermore, a close engagement with the New Testament text takes us back to the situation that Christians experienced before the Roman Emperor Constantine legitimated Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313 AD. The dynamic situation that we encounter in the text of Paul's epistles is surprisingly close to our own situation in the twenty-first century. The smallness and relative powerlessness of the church in the 60s AD may better reflect how things are now for Christians—or how things may yet become.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, they too were living in turbulent times. They lived in the most powerful empire the world had ever seen, and that empire was just starting to take notice of them—and not in a good way. They were seen as a weird and defiant sect. They were to be accused of undermining public morality.

They were also divided, in a particularly obvious way.

Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians struggled with one another at a profound level. To the Jews, the Gentiles were unclean, pork-eating, uncircumcised pagans. To the Gentiles, the Jews had a strange and inaccessible culture—and even now that many of them had become Christians, they refused to compromise the God-given habits of centuries for the sake of getting along.

At the same time, Paul wrote to them because he wanted their help in sharing Christ with the Gentile world. He wanted this church to be a sign pointing to the Messiah.

He had a mission that was also their mission. Paul had not yet been to Rome, but his plan was clearly to visit the Christians there and to use Rome as a base for preaching the gospel even further west.

Broadly speaking, that's the context of Paul's letter. And what's his theme? Romans 1:16–17 is a good summary:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith”.

Paul's letter affirms that the gospel of the Jewish Messiah—who died and rose again, and is now declared to be Lord—reveals how God is completely just and promises that he will one day judge the world; but it also shows how he will justify sinful human beings, whether Jews or Gentiles. The story of Israel miraculously now includes people from every tribe and tongue.

How are they included? After all, both Gentiles and Jews have sinned: neither can claim superiority (though the Jews can claim priority, as they received the law and the gospel first). All have sinned, but they are justified, or declared righteous, freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom 3:21–31). How is that righteousness received? It turns out that Abraham is the great example for both Jews and Gentiles: it is by faith in the promises of God (Romans 4).

By faith, a new people has been created, not now in

Adam, but in Christ. This is a people united by Christ as the true children of Abraham (Rom 5:12–21). For them, there is no condemnation! For what the law of old could not do because it was weakened by sin, God did by sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sacrifice for sin (Romans 8). A sacrifice of atonement has been made to turn aside the wrath of God, and the resurrection of the Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit points to the future transformation and renewal of the people of God, so that they can have hope despite the present trouble and turmoil.

And, make no mistake, there was plenty of that for the Roman Christians in the 60s and 70s AD. Paul addresses them in their suffering and grief and frustration and fear of death, and he talks about the theological puzzle of why the people of Israel haven't yet converted en masse, a personal grief for him (Romans 9–11).

Then, in chapters 12–15, Paul sets out to show this small, divided community of God's people what it means to live together as a people whose 'constitution' is the gospel of Jesus Christ. In these chapters, Paul is outlining the shape of a new human community: a transformed group of people. How are they to live with one another, and amidst those in the unbelieving world?

In other words, what is their politics going to be?

If there is a 'Politics 1.0', represented by Caesar and the Roman Empire, then Paul sees the church living out a 'Politics 2.0', with Jesus Christ reigning in the kingdom of God. Paul shares with the Roman Christians three driving and unforgettable principles—a three-point manifesto, if you will—for his Politics 2.0.

First, *Jesus is Lord*. No other ruler is Lord.

Secondly, worshipping Jesus is a political statement, *because he is Lord*.

Thirdly, *Jesus is a crucified Lord* who rules his kingdom by humble service.

1. Jesus is Lord. No other ruler is Lord.

The Christian faith begins with an overtly political announcement: “Jesus is Lord”. This is the apostle Paul’s own summary of the Christian gospel. It’s a message about who rules.

Who is in charge of the world? The claim of Christianity is quite simple: Jesus is. Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah of Israel, is Lord. Who has ultimate power? Jesus Christ. Who governs human affairs? Jesus, the Lord.

How do we know he’s in charge? Even though he was executed like a criminal, God declared him with power to be his royal Son, the Lord, by raising him from the dead (Rom 1:1–5). That’s a pretty impressive mandate. “Jesus is Lord” is not a private and personal statement. It’s not the sort of thing that can be true for you and not true for me. It’s out there, and it’s public. And if he’s in charge, then it means that other contenders, who might appear to be powerful, are in fact *not*.

This is the marvellously liberating, but also sobering, thing: human power is only temporary. It’s liberating if you are oppressed, because the person oppressing you is not ultimately the one in power. It’s sobering if you are in power, because you are, at most, only in second place to the Lord Jesus.

For the Christians in Rome, this meant that despite

his armies, his roads, his taxes, and his aqueducts, Caesar was not ultimately Lord. In fact, ‘Lord’ was a title that the Roman emperors gave themselves. To call Jesus ‘Lord’ was an unmistakable and defiant challenge to this claim. An emperor was due his honour, as we shall see, but he could not claim absolute allegiance from those who followed another Lord.

For us today, this means that the political, economic, and cultural forces that appear to shape the world are not ‘Lord’. They appear absolute and impregnable. Who can challenge them? Who can deny the benefits that they bring in many ways? Yet these powers do not deserve our absolute allegiance. They are not ‘Lord’.

2. Worshipping Jesus is a political statement, because he is Lord.

As a Christian, you declare your allegiance to the Lord Jesus above and beyond any other power that governs human affairs. You may never have joined a political party or marched in a protest or signed a petition, but if you declare the words “Jesus is Lord”, then you are making a huge political statement—a statement that’s not just about you, but about the world. You are identifying where the real power lies to shape history: not with Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg or Joe Biden or Xi Jinping.

This means that whenever Christians gather together, we declare our citizenship of the heavenly kingdom. With our lips and in our lives, we seek to express this deepest of allegiances. When we worship Jesus as Lord, we are making a thoroughly ‘political’ statement, because we are making

a claim about who is in power. We cannot be apolitical as Christians; we are thoroughly political from the beginning. Christian faith is not adherence to a philosophy or a lifestyle; it is loyalty to a King.

Now, we should be all too aware that those who are in power tend not to like this message. King Herod was just the first in a long line of rulers who were threatened by Jesus as the King. The Roman emperors persecuted the Christians because they felt that they were subjects with divided loyalties. Even today, the secular liberal state can tend to see its own determinations about what is right and wrong as absolutes that are not open to question. In other words, the political statement made by worshipping Jesus as Lord may not win the approval of those other contenders for lordship in our world. Jesus' lordship is frequently contested.

But what kind of ruler is Jesus?

3. Jesus is a crucified Lord who rules his kingdom by humble service.

Jesus is a King who rode into his capital city on a donkey. Jesus the King came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

The truth is that we know power in human life mostly in its distorted forms: as self-assertion, exploitation, abuse, and even tyranny. We know that power is used to serve the powerful, even in a relatively fair society like our own. We know how rulers assert their power and display their wealth. They build mighty castles and palaces, and they erect enormous statues of themselves. They send the message that power works through beating down other contenders.

In his letter to the Romans, however, Paul explains at great length how Jesus Christ was an entirely different kind of ruler. The sign of his rule is not a palace or a castle—or his personal rocket-ship—but the cross on which he died. The story of Jesus the Lord is the story not of a crushing rule but of a freely given grace, despite everything that human beings are. Instead of God paying us the wages of sin, which is death, he offers us a righteousness that is not our own, free of charge.

That means that Jesus as Lord is the *humble* Lord. He rules not by the exercise of sheer power, but by the humble service of those he is given to rule. Even though he is humble enough to be crucified for the sake of others, all of human history will run his way. All things will be put under his feet.

As Paul puts it in Philippians 2:5–11, Jesus will be declared “Lord” by every tongue and will receive the bow of every knee. But the path to his extraordinary exaltation was via his willing humiliation on the cross. He did not grasp power and status, yet they are his.

This tells us everything about how Jesus’ followers are to live—as Paul says, “in view of God’s mercy” (Rom 12:1). Our mission is not the pursuit of earthly power (that is, Politics 1.0). That would be a perverse reading of the way of Jesus Christ. Rather, we are called to live in a different way, as a different kind of community with a different kind of politics—what I am calling Politics 2.0—as we await the final, decisive revelation of what we know and declare to be true: that Jesus is Lord.

Politics 1.0 and 2.0

I have written this book because Christians have been too tempted to think that changing the government or changing the law (or not changing it) is what they should be all about. This is what Russell Moore has called the “politicization” of the church.¹¹ I think that in many instances, Christians become more passionate about a certain *type* of politics (Politics 1.0, that is) than about the gospel of Jesus the Lord (Politics 2.0). Politics 2.0 has strong implications for Politics 1.0, but the two mustn’t be confused. The sad thing about this is that Christians have too often become another one of the anxious tribes battling for power. We’re too happy when ‘we’ win, and too devastated when ‘we’ lose.

I am here outlining a form of what has been traditionally called the ‘Two Kingdoms’ doctrine. This view of human politics has long been held by Protestant Christians, though it is heavily influenced by the great Augustine of Hippo, who wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries. The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms distinguishes between the ‘earthly’ kingdom, which exists temporarily within the present age, and the ‘heavenly’ kingdom, which exists here and now within the church, but will continue into the world to come when Christ returns. God rules over the whole earth, but he rules in two ways. Through the secular kingdom, he restrains evil by the power of the sword, according to his common grace. In the spiritual kingdom, he redeems people by the power of the Spirit.

There are many variations to the Two Kingdoms doctrine.

¹¹ Moore, ‘Losing our religion’.

The question of how the Two Kingdoms are to relate to one another is especially debated. In this book, I will set out some thoughts about this in terms of the relationship of Politics 1.0 to Politics 2.0. Thinking of politics in these terms is extremely helpful for Christians, because it helps them to understand the purpose and the limits of earthly politics. It helps them to not confuse the two.

The fact that this distinction has frequently been forgotten by contemporary Christians is evidenced by three observable tendencies in Christian thinking about Politics 1.0 in the contemporary world.

First, it might be that you are concerned about the advancing de-Christianization of your nation's political scene. Whereas once you could say that the agreed moral compass of your country was roughly Christian, that is now no longer the case. Many Christians would say that this has occurred especially in issues of personal morality, of life (euthanasia and abortion), and of the structure of the family. Your fellow citizens may no longer regard the Christian heritage of their culture and constitution as relevant. Indeed, they might regard Christianity as a deeply problematic part of the political culture of a previous generation and wish to step deliberately away from it. In reaction to these concerns, then, Christians may have a tendency to fight to maintain or restore Christian values—and possibly even an explicit Christian identity—within the political scene.

The second tendency is to see the major issues of concern as primarily systemic rather than individual. Under this view, Christians should be deeply concerned for issues of 'social' justice. We should be committed to radical action

on behalf of the poor or the environment. Perhaps, under this view, it matters much less if a society at any point identifies as Christian, but the mission of the church will be served if a particular vision of social justice is accomplished.

A third tendency for Christians is to opt out of Politics 1.0 altogether. This position is often made more attractive by the politicization of other Christians! The issues of politics are far too complex and debatable, in any case; the church should stay out of the political and concentrate on winning people for Christ, or on living out a version of Politics 2.0 supposedly uncorrupted by the world.

While I have sympathy for all three of these options in different ways, they are each, I believe, deficient accounts of a Christian view of politics. What I want to show in this book is that Christians have a different kind of politics to offer altogether: a Politics 2.0 that is powerfully transformative and yet also authentically Christian. What Paul shows us in Romans is that we have much more to hope for than we imagine. He shows us that even when the church doesn't hold access to the reins of political power, we are still very much empowered. We need not—and must not—be anxious, for the Jesus Christ we worship is Lord.

What I am arguing here is that we need to reconsider what politics itself *is*. We tend to assume that politics is what political parties do in a democracy: they work to hold the power to organize societies to some end that they have in mind (what I am calling Politics 1.0). They represent the interests of certain groups and try to advance those interests. In a democratic society, this work is done, usually without violence, at the ballot box.

It is certainly not wrong for Christians to be involved in that sort of politics. On the contrary, it is right for us to have views about how our nation should be governed, and by whom. Indeed, Paul calls on the Roman Christians to be exemplary citizens—even to pay their taxes to Caesar! This is definitely not a call to withdraw from the world, or to try to be apolitical. However, Paul also shows us that that Politics 1.0 has its limits. It is vital to have good government that restrains wickedness and promotes justice, goals towards which Christians much surely work; nevertheless, *human government cannot deliver the kingdom of God*. We can anticipate it, but only God can establish his kingdom. We should not be surprised that Politics 1.0 is a messy and imperfect business, even when a Christian is in power.

The other kind of politics, however, is that of living together as the people of God as we worship and revere Jesus Christ as Lord, and call others to join us: Politics 2.0. *Just being the church of Jesus Christ is a political act*. When we do that, we testify to our society that human power is not absolute and eternal, and we testify to a different way of doing politics, a way shaped by faith in Jesus Christ, love of our neighbour, and hope in Christ's eternal reign. We do not take power in the name of Jesus. Instead, we are to be witnesses to the truth and the goodness of his power. For Christians who feel frustrated and alienated by our lack of success in Politics 1.0, this is very good news.

Questions for reflection

1. Where, if at all, have you noticed the subject of politics becoming more divisive within your own social networks? Has that affected your church community too?
2. Would you agree that the churches have at times overly invested in Politics 1.0? In what ways have you seen this?
3. What difference do you think it would make if Christian communities focused more on Politics 2.0? How would starting with Politics 2.0 change the way they approached Politics 1.0?
4. This book focuses on Romans 12–15. What other texts of Scripture might be relevant for a full-orbed theology of politics?