

Keep calm and carry on

How we can respond to politics



Dave Landrum

Dr Dave Landrum, director of advocacy at the Evangelical Alliance. This article was originally published online in February 2017 at www.eauk.org/current-affairs/news/keeping-calm-and-carrying-on.cfm. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.

In the words of the Jerry Lee Lewis song: 'There's a whole lotta shakin goin on.' While terrible earthquakes have hit Europe and North America, metaphorically we've also seen earthquakes hit politics and society, too. Things that appeared to have been fixed and secure for so long have been dramatically shaken up. Most notably, at home we've had the vote for Brexit. In the USA, there was the election of Donald Trump. In the aftershocks of these seismic events there are a number of ways in which Christians could react or respond.

We could be anxious and fret. But Jesus instructs us not to fear and commands us not to worry (Matthew 6.25–34). We could simply try to ignore what's happening. Pretend this shaking doesn't really matter. But God calls for us to pray for our political leaders and for good government (1 Timothy 2.1–4), and also to be active and involved citizens (Romans 13.1–7). Perhaps most dangerously, we could move beyond apathy and get angry in a way that we start conforming to what Paul describes as 'the pattern of this world' – a pattern of frustration and division that is a far cry from the ministry of peace and reconciliation that we are called to. This ministry doesn't absolve us of our responsibility to speak truth to power. When we don't bring the 'fire' of godly convictions to public life we end up with a society in which, in the words of WB Yeats: 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.'

A passion for justice and righteousness is a godly trait and is to be encouraged – as long as we can humbly consider the possibility that we might be

wrong. However, today it needs to come with a health warning. It's dangerous because the recent shaking has exposed a deeply polarised society of 'us and them', an increasingly neat division between those who support the 'populist' revolt or those who support the liberal status quo.

This is called a culture war. A zero sum game in which the complexity of life is replaced by easy solutions, and in which political debate sinks to the level of a slanging match. Let's be honest, there's an appealing simplicity to this. Once we have aligned ourselves with one side or the other, we can then enjoy the freedom and fun of this tribal melee without ever really needing to find practical ways to foster a 'common good' so that we can live together with our deepest differences. After all, that's a really tough task.

So what do we do? How can we be salt and light amidst bitterness and darkness? The Bible describes the men of Issachar as those who 'understood the times and knew what Israel should do' (1 Chronicles 12.32, NIV). Similarly, guided by the Holy Spirit and the word of God, we need to see what's happening from a Christian perspective or worldview, and respond accordingly – but never react.

So what do we see? Take a step back from the culture wars, and it's clear that the first thing we see is godlessness – also known as secularism. We live in time when the atheist scheme for our liberal Western culture is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. As the West has forgotten or wilfully denied God – despite enjoying and abusing the freedoms, wealth and stability

NOTE

1. For more information please visit <http://eauk.org/church/campaigns/what-kind-of-society>

that Christianity has brought – our society has lost its way and is experiencing an identity crisis. Engineered by political ideologues, this crisis is now being exploited by political opportunists.

The result of our secular disorientation is that fear and animosity have become the key drivers for politics. And games are being played – by both sides of the political divide. Games that make claims on our loyalties, and in which rights, duties and even feelings are weaponised. Games that distort the truth and reduce our trust in government and each other. Games that play out with real consequences in real lives.

In America, these games are now in full flow. There are valid reasons to be concerned, and even angry. Emotions are part of what makes us human. However, if as God's people we want to express them, our tone and content must be considered. While hate and hyperbole abound, we should not succumb to what is now described as 'post-truth' politics – bending and breaking the truth to fit an agenda or 'virtue signalling' – publicly expressing moral opinions to boost social status.

It's hard to deny that President Trump is narcissistic and disturbingly volatile, but we need to remember that – whatever our views may be – we are seeing a sovereign state with a legitimate democratic government enacting its election pledges. This is not a justification for silence. Criticising policies is fine, even noble, but what happens when criticism is a cover to delegitimise a government? A key problem in this present situation is that the politics of theatre is unfolding in which Trump sets the media agenda by provocation. The objective being to inflame passions and goad 'the other side' to react, thereby further justifying his own position. The dramatic coverage of this ding-dong by our largely liberal media often doesn't help. In fact, it simply massages grievances and fuels more of the politics of protest – which in turn only serves to perpetuate the unsavoury spectacle of this 'demonisation contest'. But it's great TV!

Regardless of any sincere concerns or reasons to celebrate, followers of Christ should not be baited into these games. So what should we do? How do we beat the bias? First of all we should resist the tribal temptation. Politics is a messy business. No party or politician will ever represent or deliver the perfect Christian manifesto for government. By necessity it involves debate, compromise and making hard choices. We all come to politics carrying our life experiences, knowledge and ultimately our prejudices – and that's OK if our engagement is guided by truth and grace and is for justice and mercy. But followers of Christ should never be swept along by the tides of public opinion. As our culture war heightens, we should be careful to avoid the two political extremes of either domination or victimhood. On the one hand, we should remember that nationalism (as opposed

to patriotism) nearly always ends in tears. On the other hand, we should resist being drawn into the divisive misery of identity politics. We cannot either simply wrap ourselves in the flag or compete in the 'oppression olympics'.

followers of Christ should never be swept along by the tides of public opinion

Essentially, we avoid these extremes by having our identity firmly set in Christ, and holding each other to account for this, challenging each other to know who we are in Christ and who Christ is in us. Neither country, class, race, sex, age or education should define our identity. Neither politics nor politicians should command our ultimate allegiances. Psalm 146 is instructive about where our trust and faith should be placed. Our confidence should primarily and comprehensively be in the Lord. Our passion should firstly be for Jesus and his mission. At the Evangelical Alliance we are passionate about the last prayer of Jesus before the cross, that we would be one 'so that the world may believe' (John 17.21). In this time of social division, the Church has an opportunity to present a model of unity in diversity as a witness to Christ – being in the world but not of the world – living and speaking as a people characterised by what Karl Barth called 'radical dissimilarity and hopeful promise'.

It's from this identity that we can more fruitfully engage as public leaders who serve our communities, by acting in a different spirit and casting a better vision. This is why the Evangelical Alliance has produced an important resource for the UK church this year. Called 'What Kind of Society?' it will help evangelical Christians provide leadership and vision in our society, articulating a plural public square from a distinctively Christian perspective. This resource is based around four principles of love, freedom, justice and truth, principles deeply rooted in the Christian faith but which also resonate strongly in our contemporary society because they are of enduring importance for everyone.¹

In terms of politics, Christians certainly need to be involved, both locally and nationally – because our salt and light is needed more than ever. So be encouraged to join a party, connect to a campaign or just engage in debate. As we commemorate the 500th year anniversary of the Reformation, we are reminded that dissent is biblical and part of the 'protestant' DNA. Even so, in terms of public engagement, our starting point and attitude should be one of participation rather than protest. Challenge, question, expose – but don't follow the crowd. Jesus wasn't co-opted by either the Pharisees or the Romans or the mob. He didn't let anyone set the agenda for him. Likewise, we must

always remember to do the Lord's will in the Lord's way – which means taking seriously Jesus's call to be 'as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Matthew 10.16, NIV) and to 'love our enemies' (Luke 6.27, NIV).

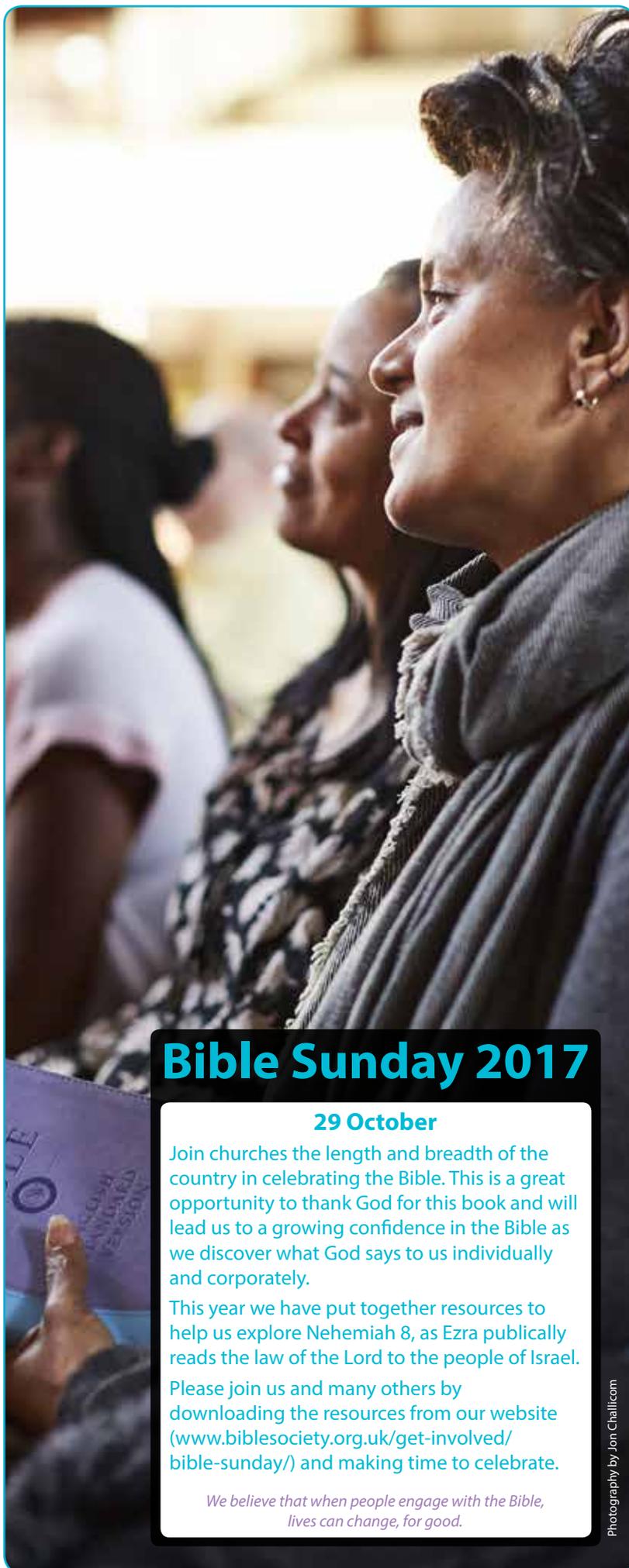
Today, exaggeration and the language of 'war' and 'resistance' is frustrating the better language of 'debate' and 'discussion'. While it's not always helpful when Christians use these military metaphors in public life, the Bible does often describe our place and role in this world with the

we avoid extremes by having our identity firmly set in Christ

language of warfare. Crucially though, 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6.12, NIV). This means we should not only sweeten the debate; we should also challenge anything that seeks to stir up the mob. And we should pray, for peace in politics (1 Timothy 2.1–4), and for God's people to have peace amidst turmoil and strife. Such peace can be a powerful witness in a world that doesn't have it.

A helpful illustration for the Church today can be found in a set of three posters that were produced by the government during the blitz. The first one calling for calm is more famous than the other two, but in our own context today, I think the combined message is resonant for the Church in the UK. Regardless of the hysteria and emotional fury, we should not be distracted from what God has called us to say and do. And what we say and do simply has to be different in both tone and content. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin: 'We must live in the kingdom of God in a way that provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.'

As the media, politics and entertainment combine in ways that increasingly seek to divide and rule it's highly likely that we can expect a whole lot more shaking ahead. Expect more provocative policies. Expect more irrational reactions. The Evangelical Alliance won't provide a running commentary on the latest furore but neither will we be silent. We'll continue to speak up for religious freedom, and work to see the gospel impact all of society, but we're not going to take part in the politics of theatre, responding to every latest outrage. We have a Great Commission, so we hope to keep calm and carry on – and to equip and encourage the church to do the same. After all, 'since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire"' (Hebrews 12.28–29, NIV).



Bible Sunday 2017

29 October

Join churches the length and breadth of the country in celebrating the Bible. This is a great opportunity to thank God for this book and will lead us to a growing confidence in the Bible as we discover what God says to us individually and corporately.

This year we have put together resources to help us explore Nehemiah 8, as Ezra publically reads the law of the Lord to the people of Israel.

Please join us and many others by downloading the resources from our website (www.biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/bible-sunday/) and making time to celebrate.

We believe that when people engage with the Bible, lives can change, for good.