

# Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## Preaching and the election

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Jump, Phil
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-05-16 07:13:55
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159484">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159484</a>

# Preaching and the election

by Phil Jump

**T**he forthcoming General Election will be unlike any in living memory. Since WW2, we have gone to the polls almost certain that one of two large political parties will form our government. But as the countdown to polling day 2015 continues, this remains an election that no-one can call. The resurgence of SNP and the Greens; the anticipated demise of the Liberal Democrats; the advent of UKIP as a serious contender—all combine with a swing between Labour and Conservative to leave a political landscape of significant uncertainty. Predictions suggest that, in many constituencies, the ‘new parties’ are unlikely to win seats, but will deflect votes away from the incumbent to allow the previous runners-up to be first past the post.

This is also an election in which Christian opinion and action is enjoying a notably high profile. Insiders suggest that Church of England bishops were quietly surprised by the media interest in their ‘pastoral letter’—*Who is my neighbour?* It will not be lost on us that our own Joint Public Issues Team has developed a similar resource: *Love your neighbour—think, pray, vote*. This media interest raises questions for preachers and church leaders: what should we say to God’s people? What influence is it appropriate for us to exercise? Why does it matter? In what ways have things changed since the last election? Why are faith perspectives enjoying such a high profile?

In response, we might begin by recognising some of the ways in which the landscape has changed in the past decade or so.

***The place of preaching.*** Preaching is a highly influential and persuasive activity; a reality increasingly acknowledged within politics. The recently deported Muslim cleric Abu Hamsa was regularly designated by the media as a ‘preacher of hate’, and as we struggle to explain the radicalisation of British Muslims, fingers increasingly point at preachers and clerics. Christians are not exempt from this judgement, and whereas some years ago people might have basked in the designation of ‘radical preacher’, it is unlikely to be a comfortable label today! In the midst of this highly charged political climate we might well ask, ‘What are we called to be preachers of?’. How might our preaching be perceived and what limitations might we also fear?

***The growth of extremism.*** ‘Radicalisation’ is a term that is relatively new to popular vocabulary. Criminality is no longer confined to acts and deliberate plans: to inspire or reframe the thinking of an individual in opposition to the received narratives of ‘the free world’ is considered an act of terror—and Christian preachers may well claim to be

countercultural. Speaking at an NWBA conference some years ago, Steve Holmes described preaching as the task of someone ‘who passionately believes something and wants others to believe it too’. The backdrop against which we fulfil that task is an increasingly complex one.

***The emergence of the Lobbying Act.*** There are now constraints on the political messages that charities can disseminate. At my most cynical, I might say that politicians seem to have become so morally illiterate that it is no longer *their* responsibility to resist inappropriate incentive and persuasion, but that of the interest groups not to offer it! Perhaps this is unfair, but it is yet another indicator of the inherent power of a persuasive narrative. As people of faith, we have some of the most effective vocabulary of influence available: ‘Because God wants you to’; or ‘because you will go to heaven if you do’ are extremely potent incentives—if you don’t believe me, ask a suicide bomber. Preaching during an election campaign could potentially be fraught with difficulty.

***Broader political engagement.*** We might therefore be inclined to keep our heads down and quietly ignore the election issues, but we are also likely to find ourselves preaching to a far more politically aware congregation. There is a notable increase in Christian media activity in the run-up to this election, with conflicting messages being promoted. There are Christians to the right, to the left, and all stops in between; and each group seems to be convinced that their politics are rooted in our faith narrative. Now, more than ever, we need to equip the people of God to filter and decipher these various messages. One thing that alarms me as I travel around churches is the often uncritical way in which envelopes of literature seem to be opened and distributed, with little thought about the appropriateness of the messages being propagated. There is a tension between providing leadership to a congregation, yet respecting a variety of political views and not abusing our positions by promoting our own.

***UKIP.*** The emergence of UKIP as a mainstream party has muddied the waters. We have always managed to embrace a breadth of political opinion in our churches, but within limits. We seemed fairly content that God’s grace could extend to Conservative, Labour and Liberal voters, and seemed equally content to dismiss BNP and other highly radical parties as beyond the pale. It felt OK to embrace nationalism within the two Celtic nations (Wales and Scotland) but to dismiss it as fascism in England. UKIP does not fit easily into any mould. Some Christian communities are quite adamant that its values are incompatible with their own, while at the same time a number of UKIP activists are equally open about a faith identity that informs their politics. But UKIP’s rise has also affected the tone and content of the discussion, opening the door to more extreme and outspoken views in the mainstream debates. We are faced therefore with new potential tensions within the Christian community. How do we deal with that, pastorally and ideologically,

when the main vehicle of communication between most Christian disciples and the narratives of their faith is the Sunday service?

As we navigate these tricky waters, we recognise that we are not immune from the various human tendencies that stir them, and have no infallible answers to the questions that emerge. As ministers and church leaders we have our own political views—some, we will be aware of; others will be more embedded and enculturated. How do we remain relevant to the ongoing debates, yet ensure that we proclaim God's word and not a personal ideology? If preachers are those who passionately believe what they want others to believe—where do the boundaries lie?

The ideological temperature in our nation rises during an election campaign. We will gather for worship, having been impacted and exposed to some pretty high octane politics in the days before. To what degree should worship and preaching be a 'detox' and to what degree is it a 'sifting'? To what degree should it contribute to and enable others to contribute to the debate? All are valid, but poor quality engagement will stand out—at the very least, our preaching needs to be up to the mark.

We could still argue that the minister's task during an election campaign is no different from any other time. In terms of public worship, I suggest that there are three core elements.

***1. Enabling a congregation to encounter the living God through his word.*** Worship is first and foremost about creating a place of encounter; where people do not simply meet with one another, rehearse the facts and truths of their faith, or indeed subject themselves to our opinions, but consciously seek the presence of the living God, which shapes our discipleship. It may seem something of a cliché, but the question 'how would Jesus vote?' is a serious one—or perhaps more relevant, 'how would Jesus want me to vote?'.

Much will be said about the people of God being a prophetic voice in our land. While this is something I would struggle to disagree with, I often wonder what we actually understand by 'prophetic'. Is our perception more about an opinion on current issues than about seeking to root that opinion in the voice of the Spirit? We cannot deny that the prophets of the Old and New Testaments were operating, more often than not, in the political arena, but what marked them out was the authority with which they spoke; a divine designation that is most frequently summarised by the simple but profound designation, 'thus says the Lord'.

So perhaps our principal task in the run up to an election is to refocus Christian disciples on the all-seeing, all-knowing God; to nurture afresh their relationship with him, so that we might truly act as those who 'walk in the Spirit'.

***2. Nurturing a congregation's understanding of the revealed truths of our scriptures.*** We should engage in the political process prayerfully and with a true sense of seeking after God's heart, but at times this can be an abstract ideal; and at its worst, little more

than wrapping up our own ideals and opinions in spiritual vocabulary.

The God we encounter has met and engaged with his people for centuries: a God who describes himself as ‘the same yesterday, today and forever’. As we explore the stories of this God and his people, significant political narratives emerge. ‘Word become flesh’ is a reminder that our gospel is not abstract truth, but earthed in the reality of human experience. The God who became flesh was crucified and subjected to a political execution through a coalition of local and international leaders. The message and life of Christ made waves in royal palaces, regional councils and seats of Roman government. At the heart of that message was a call for justice, liberation of the oppressed, a redistribution of economic power and wealth. It was a message that was neither welcome nor tolerated.

Our scriptures are rich with political messages and narratives, and for the preacher these are both a resource and a challenge. They offer a broad resource on which we can draw, yet we must recognise the place of privilege in which we stand, and ensure that it is not just our own political concerns that we declare.

The story of the Good Samaritan, which has yielded the key straplines for many Christian election resources, is one such example. By placing a Samaritan centre stage, Jesus makes the story highly political, striking at the very heart of a racial and political divide and introducing themes of integration, social inclusion, economic migration, devolution, community cohesion, multiculturalism, to name but a few.

The call to ‘love our neighbour’ is particularly pertinent. Policies are increasingly designed to appeal to the self-interest of one particular sector of the electorate, gradually building support through campaigns aimed at other groupings. If we can be seduced by one particular outcome, we might quietly overlook other less favourable political intentions. This is perhaps why Christians are rediscovering the language of ‘common good’, recognising that God’s ideal is a society that is fair and just for all.

But the Good Samaritan is by no means the only resource at our disposal. I remember some years ago being struck by the fact that a significant economic crisis in Europe occurred during Advent. Christians, on the whole, tend to climb aboard the bandwagon of craving stability and security, forgetting that the key scriptures of Advent described the rich becoming poor, power structures collapsing, materialist economies being overturned, as a sign of God’s coming. We might

Christians are  
rediscovering  
the language  
of common  
good

also look to some of the core messages of Deuteronomy and Leviticus as definitive texts on the values and priorities that God would seek in a wholesome society.

**3. *Equipping a congregation to live and act as disciples of Jesus.*** I would suggest that the third key purpose of worship is to equip and commission God's people to live out their faith within everyday life—not simply how we might cast our vote, but how we should conduct ourselves during an election campaign. There is a now long tradition of churches arranging local hustings, trusted and recognised as those who can facilitate an impartial and informative debate between candidates. In doing so, we might also ask what key agendas we might seek to set within the political narratives. This of course, is the underlying philosophy of the Joint Public Issues resource, seeking to centre that discussion on truth, justice, peace and wellbeing (common good).

We have already noted that it would be a very unusual congregation that did not contain a fair breadth of political opinion. This campaign is likely to be a particularly contentious one—so perhaps another task for God's people is to model how to disagree well, to keep things in perspective, and to challenge extremist and prejudiced views, irrespective of their political flavour.

It is because we live as followers of Jesus Christ that the church is not simply the propagator of political opinion, but a vehicle of social action. I would argue that one of our greatest strengths, and perhaps the reason for our increasing political awareness, is the resurgence of the evangelical social conscience in recent years. Our engagement in our communities provides us with a credible platform from which to speak, and informs our narratives, but must also be the means by which we give substance to our political ideals. Whatever the shape and political shade of our government, God's people are called to pursue God's kingdom in actions as well as words.

The election offers itself as a significant opportunity, yet in our desire to be relevant, let us not lose sight of our centre, which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For all their political overtones, the law books of the Old Testament are primarily an exposition of what it means to live as those who love the Lord our God fully. Jesus invites us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

No political party can solve every ill, nor can any produce a manifesto with which we will fully agree. It is when society as a whole, not politicians on its behalf, embraces the eternal imperative to love God and love our neighbours that we will become the community God intends. Our effective engagement in the political arena must be the consequence of our commitment to proclaim the gospel, not a substitute for it.

***Phil Jump is Regional Team Leader of the NWBA. Contact Phil on philjump@btinternet.com.***