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CHRISTIANS & POLITICS:

The failure in South Africa to align
political thinking and action with
religious identity

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BAILIE LEADERSHIP CONSULTANCY

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About the Author

Craig Bailie has more than ten years of experience lecturing political science and a history of engaging communities and organisations on racial reconciliation, civic-mindedness, communication, civil-military affairs, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and advancing democratic governance. He is a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Scholar and an alumnus of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (Accra, 2021), the Young Diplomats Forum (Brussels, 2019), the Wilberforce Academy (Oxford, 2019), and the Young African Leaders Initiative (Midrand, 2017). He holds a Master's degree in International Studies from Rhodes University (2009) and has completed courses in Thought Leadership for Africa's Renewal (Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, 2017), Public Leadership (The Open University, 2017), Reconciliation and Nation building (St. Augustine College, 2017), Ethics in the Public Service (National School of Government, 2020), and Transformative Governance (University of the Free State, 2024). He has also graduated from several doctoral courses in Strategic Leadership from the Regent University School of Business and Leadership, including in the areas of culture and values, applied exegesis, leadership communications, faith and ethics, and global leadership. Craig is the Founding Director of *Bailie Leadership Consultancy*.

Christians and politics: The failure in South Africa to align political thinking and action with religious identity

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Overview

In light of Christianity's transformative nature, the author highlights the tension in South Africa between the existence of a majority 'Christian' population and the state of the nation. Focusing on church leadership, he considers reasons for the state of the nation amid a majority that identifies with a transformative faith.

¹ The views expressed in this Working Paper are the author's alone and he reserves the right to change and/or improve them.

Introduction

At the time of writing, South Africa is preparing for its seventh General Elections (National and Provincial) – arguably, the most significant since the first democratic elections held in 1994. South Africa's first democratic elections made for a watershed moment, marking the formal end of apartheid South Africa and the beginning of the new South Africa's democratic journey, what some perceived as the birth of the Rainbow Nation – a term that Desmond Tutu coined but that is no longer in popular use. Both in South Africa and further afield, hopes were high that Africa's youngest democracy would undergo a national transformation characterised by growing peace and prosperity of an inclusive nature, such that South Africa would play a leading role, if not *the* leading role, in Thabo Mbeki's renewed vision of an African Renaissance.

Thirty years on, reflecting the track record of other African countries where former liberation movements govern (Gumede, 2017), South Africa has fallen far short of being the country that it could have been and that many hoped it would be following its first democratic elections. Rather than inspiring and helping lead an African Renaissance, South Africa has in the recent past been identified as the “rape capital of the world” (Leech, 2023), the “protest capital of the world” (Richardson, Swart, Govender & Seedat, 2022) and “as one of the most violent and dangerous places on earth” (Heineken, 2020). The country also ranks high or *the* highest in the world in terms of crime (The World Bank, 2023) (including economic crime) (PWC, 2020), unemployment (Shah, 2022), poverty and inequality (Thorne, 2022).

Several other indicators reflect the dismal state of South Africa's present political, economic, and social landscape. Among these are corruption, decaying and failed infrastructure, municipal mismanagement and decay, declining standards in education, the crises engulfing South Africa's state-owned enterprises (including the South African Post Office, Eskom, Transnet, and South African Airways), the country's ailing economy, failed land reform, ongoing (if not growing) racial tension, xenophobia, gender-based violence, and finally, signs of radicalisation among South Africa's population (de Jager & Steenekamp, 2019).

Based on perceptions of failed governance and the impact of this failure on South African society, several scholars, public commentators and practitioners have highlighted South Africa's democratic fragility (Jacobs, 2018) or decline (Hendricks, 2023). The question of whether South Africa is heading toward state failure or is already a failed state has also arisen (Rossouw, 2021; Business leaders fear, 2023; Mello & Louw, 2023).

Alarmingly, some South Africans, having confused the outcomes of failing to elect democratic leaders with failed democracy, are now questioning the value of democracy, and, by implication, the value of voting

(Runciman, 2017; Patel & Graham, 2019; Steyn Kotze & Roberts, 2023)². A study that the Centre for Social Development in Africa (University of Johannesburg) conducted in 2018, showed that “young

² Why the growing dissatisfaction with and agitation against democracy should concern all South Africans, including Christians, is something I explain in a later paper.

South Africans place socio-economic well-being above democratic rights” (Patel & Graham, 2019; Patel, Sadie & Bryer, 2019). Work of the Human Sciences Research Council reveals a substantial decline in South Africans’ satisfaction with democracy, from 59 % in 2004 to 32 % in 2022 (Steyn Kotze, 2022). An Afrobarometer study conducted in 2021, revealed that South Africans are more trusting of the army than several other institutions and entities including, but not limited to, the courts of law, the president, the electoral commission, parliament, the ruling party, and opposition parties (Moosa & Hofmeyr, 2021). According to Afrobarometer research published in 2023, “a growing majority [of South Africans] would be willing to forgo elections in favor of an unelected but efficient government that delivers security, jobs, and housing” (ANC clings to lead, 2023).

Furthermore, a declining voter turnout is also a sign that South Africans are increasingly losing their appreciation for democracy and are, therefore, increasingly disengaged from democratic procedures and behaviours. In South Africa’s 2019 General Elections, only 49 % of South Africa’s voting-age population (VAP) voted – at the time, the lowest turnout in post-1994 South Africa (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2020). The 2021 local government elections witnessed an even lower turnout, with only 48 % of registered voters (a smaller group than the VAP) choosing to vote (Runciman, Bekker & Mbeche, 2021).

In the lead-up to South Africa’s municipal elections in 2021, Poplak (2021), referred to the elections as South Africa’s “second-last” because, according to him, “the elections of the future won’t matter at all—they’ll be show trials for lousy ideas crafted by an increasingly inept array of

second-rate autocrats.” News media publications including *The Economist* (McDermott, 2023), *Daily Maverick* (Zibi, 2023), and *The Africa Report* (Gumede, 2024), have described the upcoming elections as “defining”, “a watershed moment” and “all-to-play for”, respectively.

The idea that South Africa’s seventh democratic General Elections are the most significant since the first held in 1994, hinges on the belief that if South Africans don’t take the opportunity the elections offer to stem the tide of poor, corrupt governance that has prevailed in the country, then whatever is left of democracy in South Africa may not survive another political term.

This is the thinking behind the title of an article Malala authored in 2022: “What’s left to steal? An election” (Malala, 2022).

The preceding passages make it clear that there is plenty wrong with governance in South Africa today and in need of change. Furthermore, whether South Africans live in a democracy is debatable – it depends on how one defines democracy or what kind of democracy one refers to.

From a Christian perspective, one question that arises from South Africa’s present circumstances is how the country came to be where it is today when 86 % of its population identify as Christian – members of a faith that, many agree, is transformative

(Statistics South Africa, 2015). Tension exists in South Africa between the state of the nation and how the majority of South Africans identify religiously.

This paper reflects on why South Africa faces so many governance challenges, even though most South Africans identify as members of a transformative faith. There are at least four advantages to understanding the reasons for this tension. Firstly, such an understanding allows for a more accurate assessment of the Church's political witness in post-1994 South Africa. Secondly, it can help temper the expectations one may have of the Church in South Africa impacting society around it in and through the political realm, including through voting. Thirdly, it can allow for a clearer sense of the work required to establish and develop a biblically informed political theology in the Church in South Africa. And finally, it reinforces the argument for scripturally informed Christian political engagement in South Africa, including at election time.

There is potential for Christian and non-Christian readers alike to view this paper as support for Christian nationalism or dominionism in South Africa or elsewhere. As a proponent of democracy and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), for which I believe there is scriptural support (Farr, 2022; Huizinga, 2022; Wood, 1978), I don't advocate for Christian nationalism or dominionism (Hulley, 2021; Isaacs, 2013; Miller, 2021). Rather, where this paper calls for the development and application of a biblically based political theology among Christians in South Africa, it is, in the spirit of Matthew 5:13-16³, a

³ Matthew 5:13-16 ESV Salt and Light 13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "You are the light

call for Christians to 'enhance the flavour' of and 'shed light' on politics rather than taking over or being at the helm of politics.

Christians don't need to be 'on top' or 'in control' to be 'salt' and 'light' in politics or any other sphere of human affairs.

Furthermore, this paper stops short of defining a Christian political theology and action (this work is for another day) beyond calling for Christians in South Africa, beginning with Church leaders, to be more scripturally engaged with politics. The purpose of this kind of political engagement is not, in the words of Strange (2024), for the Church to "promote some sort of political, social, economic, or cultural utopia to be achieved in this age".

Also, biblically informed political engagement secures a church from being apathetic about politics and, simultaneously, from becoming politicised to a point where the church becomes a campaign office for a political party

(Bailie, 2019; Bailie, 2023).

Finally, before I present the paper's structure, and since this work is broadly about the relationship between Christians and politics in South Africa, it is important to share my definition of politics – a

of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that[a] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

definition I expand on and unpack in a separate paper:

Politics is the competition for and/or exercise of power necessary for managing resources and creating order, without which humans cannot survive or thrive.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I refer to Christianity's transformative nature to explain why religious identification in South Africa is in tension with the state of the nation. In the second and third sections, I offer Christian nominalism and a reluctance among church leaders to initiate and facilitate necessary conversations and teaching about Christian political engagement as speculative reasons for South Africa being in its current state, despite most South Africans identifying as members of a transformative faith. The reluctance among church leaders to initiate and facilitate political engagement with their congregants (to be political actors) reflects a lack of holistic discipleship – something I explain in the paper's third section. In the fourth, and final, section I expand on my view of Church leaders in South Africa as being reluctant about 'politics from the pulpit', offering four reasons why church leaders might be reluctant political actors.

Referring to the Church's "prophetic voice" and "social responsibility and witness" respectively, Kgatle (2018) and Mkhize (2024) have done work on the visibility and impact of Christian political engagement in post-1994 South Africa. Without going into too much detail here, Kgatle (2018) provides three reasons for why the Church's prophetic voice has been weak in South Africa since 1994: "(1) the prophetic voice became part of the democratic government system, (2) the

system swallowed it, and (3) the prophets retired without passing the baton." Mkhize (2024) outlines six factors that possibly "hinder the church's response to social challenges": (1) rather than the Church being silent, those in power aren't hearing its voice; (2) "internal divisions and weaknesses [of the Church] stemming from conflicts, scandals, and differences of opinion"; (3) the Church in South Africa is diverse to a point where it erodes a "unified voice or action"; (4) "The church is perhaps still finding its voice and vision in a post-apartheid era"; (5) The Church has found itself in a state of "apathy rather than a sense of hope or proactive engagement" because of "the magnitude and complexity of the problems facing the nation"; and (6) "because of the integration of the prophets from the old system (pre-democracy) into the new system."

Although the speculative reasons I offer in the final section of the paper are related to and complement the work of Kgatle (2018) and Mkhize (2024), my focus is more specifically on how church authorities are leading their congregations when it comes to the issue of politics.

My focus is on the possible reasons for what I believe to be a reluctance among church leaders to initiate and facilitate conversations and biblically-based teaching on politics among congregants so that Christians are better positioned to love God and their neighbours through their political thinking and action.

The significance of South Africa's 'Christian' majority

The General Household Survey that Statistics South Africa published in 2015, revealed 86 % of South Africans identify as Christian (Statistics South Africa, 2015). Studies conducted by Pew Research Centre (2018) between 2008 and 2017, show that 79 percent of adult Christians in South Africa say, "religion is very important in their lives". Research findings published in 2017, showed that, at the time, most of South Africa's parliamentarians were Christian and that God was "highly important" to them (Kotzé & Loubser, 2017). Erasmus (2005: 139) writes,

South Africa is considered a very religious country...the church is the strongest and most influential non-governmental organisation (NGO) reaching, on average, 63% of the Christian population weekly... Neither the government nor any other NGO can reach and influence the public more regularly and consistently.⁴

⁴ Admittedly, this reference is dated. Whether the average weekly reach of the Church is the same today is uncertain. Bompani (2007) writes, "Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, African independent churches [AICs] have grown rapidly." According to the Pew Research Center (2018), only 55 % of adults across religious groups (not just Christians) "attend worship services weekly". Ferreira & Chipenyu reported in 2021, that the Reformed Churches in South Africa are in quantitative and qualitative decline. South Africa's news media reported in 2021 (Masson) and 2023 (Nyembezi) respectively, that "churches in South Africa have been busier than ever," and, "Increased

The number of South Africans identifying as Christian and the actual or potential reach of the Church in South Africa is significant because of Christianity's transformative nature – something several authors writing with the global, African, and South African contexts in mind, recognise.⁵ Included among these authors are Winter (1988), Curry (1990), Laloo (1998), Erasmus (2005), Pawliková-Vilhanová (2007), Manala (2013), Agbiji and Swart (2015), Dolamo (2016), Folarin & Folarin (2016), Pillay (2017), Dube and Molise (2018), and Ayegboyin and Ogunewu (2022).

For those who agree that **democracy holds the greatest potential among the different forms of government for the sustainable advancement of human freedoms**, scholarly works highlighting the positive, although not uncomplicated, relationship between Christianity and the development of democracy globally, are also noteworthy. Among these works are those belonging to Smith (1917), McGiffert (1919), Hutchison (1947), Yoder (1977), Neuhaus (1990), De Gruchy (1995), Philpott (2004), Woodberry & Shah (2004), Cope (2006), Roshwald (2006), Kumalo (2009), Tshaka (2010), Woodberry (2012), Vellem (2015), de Jager (2017), Joseph (2019), and Chaplain (2023).

In 2018, before an audience at the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in Westminster Hall, London, Keller shared a message titled, "What can Christianity offer our society in the 21st

church attendance shows faith still has a future in secular SA".

⁵ They have done so without necessarily ignoring the negative effects that accompanied missionary activity or 'Christian' action more broadly.

century?" In his message, Keller relies on Jesus' metaphor in Matthew 5:13-16, of the Church as 'salt,' bringing out the best in a particular culture (like enhancing the flavour of meat) and preventing its worst tendencies (like preserving meat from rotting).

Keller shares a condition, however, upon which the Church's ability to be 'salt' in a society depends: the Church must be distinct from the culture or cultures surrounding it.

Keller shares with his audience how Christians have historically been 'salt' in Western society and how they can continue to be 'salt' if they remain true to their faith. He argues that Western society is founded on and shaped by an "other-regarding ethic", "an ethic of love" and that it would not have been so had it not been for Christianity. Citing several scholars, including Tierney (2005), Habermas (see Gordon, 2013), Hart (2017), and Harper (2016), Keller offers the biblical roots of human rights as an example of the outworking of this Christian-based ethic of love across Western society. Keller's message is echoed in Scrivener's book, "The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality" (2022). Scrivener writes in the introduction to his book,

[W]e depend on values and goals—and ways of thinking about values and goals—that have been deeply and distinctively shaped by the Jesus-revolution (otherwise known as "Christianity"). These values are now so all-pervasive that we consider them to be universal,

obvious and natural: the air we breathe.

Although the universality of Christian values is increasingly questionable today, this doesn't deny the historical role Christianity has played in transforming societies for the good. In "Devoted Citizen," Mathebula (2020) defines the role of the citizen in South Africa's democracy. In the foreword to the book, Lesufi writes as follows:

The state is enjoined by the South African Constitution, to repair the damage of the past, protect civil, political and socio-economic right and provide a raft of developmental programmes to improve the lives of citizens. It has a responsibility to protect the weak and vulnerable and empower the marginalised to participate in the mainstream of society. However, the state on its own, cannot achieve these obligations without an active and vigilant citizenry.

Before a South African audience in 2017, Smyth unpacked the biblical motivations driving good citizenship among South Africa's Christians. In the opening statements to his message, Smyth said that **"generally speaking, you can expect Christ-followers to be the best citizens in South Africa" and "the Bible gives Christ-followers massive motivation" to do good works that benefit wider society or the common good.**

Unsurprisingly, it is the Bible (the stories of redemption and transformation that we read in it) and the application of biblical principles and values across

history and geographies that make for the theoretical and empirical claims regarding Christianity's transformative nature. Among the key scriptures that speak to this transformative nature are 1 Timothy 2:1-2⁶, Proverbs 29:2⁷, Jeremiah 29:7⁸, James 1:26-27⁹, Ephesians 5:11-14¹⁰, Matthew 5:13-16, Matthew 28:16-20¹¹, and

⁶ 1 Timothy 2:1-2 ESV Pray for All People 2 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

⁷ Proverbs 29:2 ESV When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

⁸ Jeremiah 29:7 ESV 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

⁹ James 1:26-27 ESV 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:11-14 ESV 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13 But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

¹¹ Matthew 28:16-20 ESV The Great Commission 16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

the most important of these, Matthew 22:36-40¹².

Therefore, if defined in purely qualitative terms, the Church in South Africa possesses tremendous transformational potential under the country's prevailing conditions. The question then is why, instead of witnessing a positive, holistic transformation in post-1994 South Africa, South African society has in many respects experienced regression.

What explains the negative circumstances that have been and continue to afflict the South African nation? With a supposedly majority Christian population, South Africa (and the political leadership that helps shape it) should look substantially different from what it is today.

To the degree that members of South Africa's population who identify as Christian are eligible to vote and have consistently voted for the incumbent government through free and fair elections, or have consistently chosen not to vote for a change in government, and to the degree that parliamentarians and other government officials located at the national, provincial and municipal level have identified as Christian in each of post-1994 South Africa's governance

¹² Matthew 22:36-40 ESV 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

terms, **South Africa's political, economic and social problems resulting from poor or failed civil governance, are first and foremost religious problems.**

They are first and foremost religious problems because they are problems resulting from the failure of South Africans who identify as Christian to align their political thinking and actions, including who and what they vote for, or how they govern, with biblical principles and values.

The tension in South Africa between religious identity claims and the state of the nation is broadly attributable to at least two factors – Christian nominalism and what I suggest is an unwillingness or inability among church leaders to initiate and facilitate scripturally informed conversations and teaching about Christian political engagement. Each of these factors, defined further down, presents the Church in South Africa, beginning with Church leadership, with a challenge. The realities of Christian nominalism and what I call a lack of holistic discipleship, challenge the Church to reach both outwardly and inwardly with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in pursuit of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20¹³). It is to each of these factors that the paper now turns.

¹³ Matthew 28:16-20 ESV The Great Commission 16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Christian nominalism

Given South Africa's present political, economic, and social circumstances, bearing in mind Christianity's transformative nature, and considering what we read in Matthew 7:15-20¹⁴ – that we recognise people's true identity by "their fruits" – it is highly improbable that as much as 86 % of the South African population are committed Christians.

During his address at the National Conference of Churches in South Africa in 1990, De Gruchy said, "It is an audacious act of faith to confess 'one holy, catholic church' [emphasis added] when so much of the evidence points in the opposite direction".

The survey findings included in the second South African Social Attitudes Report of 2010, are telling in this regard. They revealed that, at the time, seventy-four (74) percent of Christians in South Africa believed without a doubt that God exists; sixty-four (64) percent believed the Bible is the literal Word of God; seventy-six (76) percent believed "Jesus is the solution to all the world's problems", forty-nine (49) percent agreed "it was seriously wrong if

¹⁴ Matthew 7:15-20 ESV A Tree and Its Fruit 15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

taxpayers did not report all their income in order to pay tax", and fifty-eight (58) percent reported it was "seriously wrong to submit incorrect information in order to qualify for a social grant" (Roberts, wa Kivilu, & Davids, 2010).

Despite 79 percent of adult Christians in South Africa saying, "religion is very important in their lives," only 55 % of adults across religious groups in South Africa (not just Christians), "attend worship services weekly" and 52 % say they pray daily (Pew Research Center, 2018). In their work investigating the decline of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA), Ferreira & Chipenyu (2021) postulate as follows:

Qualitative growth should produce quantitative growth unless its quality is suspect: Quality that does not lead to quantity is counterfeit and not genuine. Counterfeit quality occurs when members profess, but their lives do not testify of this claim. According to Luke 6:46 and Matthew 7:22-23, Jesus explains that he does not engage in a relationship with followers who lack quality. Without a relationship with Christ, church members are unable to transform other people, as they are not renewed themselves. They cannot give others what they do not have themselves.

The three above-mentioned studies suggest that rather than having a majority Christian population, South Africa has many nominal Christians.

Citing McClosky, Edre (2015: 57) defines a nominalist "as a person who claims the

name Christian, but who has no authentic, personal, sin-forgiving and life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. His/her allegiance to Jesus is in name only, not in heart.” Day (2011) cites three types of nominalists: ethnic – those who identify as ‘Christian’ because they affiliate with a specific nationality or culture¹⁵; natal – those who identify as ‘Christian’ because their parents and/or grandparents identify in the same manner; and aspirational – those who identify as ‘Christian’ because they hope to be viewed as good and respectable by the members of that community to which they belong or wish to belong.

At the same National Conference of Churches cited above, De Gruchy (1990) said “almost 80 % of the population in South Africa may be nominally Christian”. He continued:

[I]t must be recognised that much of the membership of the church in South Africa is nominal rather than committed to the gospel and the values of the kingdom of God. Large numbers by no means implies truth, and it may well be that a [sic] minority of persons is actually more faithful than a church which is numerically very strong. The church in South Africa may well need to be evangelised before it can make a faithful and transformative impact on society.¹⁶

Writing in 1994, about the statistical picture of Christians in South Africa,

¹⁵ Consider Richard Dawkin’s recent identification as a “cultural Christian” (Heathershaw, 2024; du Preez, 2024).

¹⁶ Keller said, “Christians need the gospel as much as non-Christians do.”

Kritzinger (1994) contended that “Christian nominality...can be as high as 75 %”. More recently, Mhlope’s (2015) recounting of his experience of a radio panel discussion further highlights the implications of nominalism in South Africa:

Sadly what we have in South Africa are Christians who view the world in a manner that is at odds with how God views it but still refer to Him as someone who is sovereign and all-knowing... I think the greatest challenge we have today is not the people who do not believe in God but those who do and yet live their lives as if He does not exist and His views do not matter.

Two authors have made similar observations concerning the Church in America, both relevant to present-day South Africa. In 1923, Machen (2009: 126) observed, “The greatest menace to the Christian Church today comes not from the enemies outside, but from the enemies within; it comes from the presence within the Church of a type of faith and practice that is anti-Christian to the core.” More recently, Evans (2022) has noted, **“Ineffective Christians are one of the major problems in our country today because we have been Christian in name, not in action. We have not been kingdom-minded. We’ve given in to the pressure and have become more culturally minded or politically minded and thus we have contributed to the chaos of the culture.”**

Resane, writing in 2017, made the following observations about the

parliamentarians who identified as Christian and said that God was “highly important” to them (Kotzé & Loubser, 2017):

High profile Christians in [South Africa's] government structures fail to influence the political power when passing the unjust laws. From their positions of power, they utter and promote statements and laws that expedite the negative impacts on humanity such as the perpetual marginalisation from human rights and access to resources etc.

Referring to the African context and lamenting the failure of religious groups to apply their faiths concerning African politics, and their relations with political leadership in particular, Abioje (2010: 787) writes as follows: “It is the view of many scholars that neither Christianity nor Islam have been applied sufficiently to political leadership in Africa to have an impact on mass socio-political and economic welfare, although some heroic individual exceptions are noted.”

Following evidence for a causal relationship between Protestantism and the development of a democratic political culture in countries that were part of the world's first wave of democratisation, and because South Africa has a predominantly Protestant population, de Jager (2017) has questioned South Africa's limited democratic development. She finds that syncretism – “the practice of merging two or more religions (or ideologies) together—often with the pretense of preserving the purity of one, or of both” – possibly explains why South Africa has failed to achieve the democratic standards that many hoped for (Campbell, 2018).

The liberalism within the Church that Machen identified in America in the 1920s, which may also be a reality for parts of the Church in present-day South Africa, and the syncretism that de Jager (2017) highlights are forms of Christian nominalism because each involves mixing Christianity with other beliefs or loyalties, often in tension with God's Word, thereby denying the authenticity that accompanies a personal relationship with Christ.

Christian nominalism is, therefore, one explanation for the disparity between how South Africans identify religiously and what we see playing out in South African society. Based on the realities of Christian nominalism identified above, the group that Kritzing (1994) calls “committed Christians”, is substantially smaller than what statistics about religious identity claims in South Africa suggest. This is why it is disingenuous for political parties or movements to campaign on the notion of a Christian majority in South Africa (Baillie, 2019; Van Niekerk, 2023).

If what we understand by ‘Christian’ is, ‘a follower of Jesus Christ,’ there is no such thing as a practicing ‘Christian majority’ in South Africa.

In short, there are far fewer practicing Christians in South Africa than the number of South Africans who identify as Christian.

A lack of biblically-based Christian political engagement

Christian nominalism is one reality that helps explain how so much about governance can be wrong in a country that has a majority 'Christian' population. How Christians in South Africa relate to politics, if at all, is another. Several authors, for example, contrast the Church's prophetic voice after South Africa's democratic transition with its prophetic voice before the transition, during apartheid. According to Kumalo (2009), "[T]he first decade of democracy has seen the church retreating to denominational conclaves leaving a vacuum in the political arena." Mudimeli (2017) writes, "It is in this time of democracy when real transformation is needed to take its course in a realistic way, where the presence of the church has probably been latent and where it has assumed an observer status." A guest author for the South African newspaper, *Mail & Guardian*, captures both the transformational potential of the Church in South Africa and its failure to realise it in the political context:

In a country that is vastly religious and overwhelmingly Christian, [political] parties remain wary of the potential political energy that remains dammed up in churches, treading carefully when the state threatens to drag religion into the political realm by force. But otherwise they pay little heed to the supposed guardians of morality...despite their influence churches have no ambition to be politically active, little power to convince their congregants to

vote as a block, not a great deal to offer the country philosophically, and are actively making themselves less relevant with every passing day (De Wet, 2016).

Resane (2017) writes about "the silence of the Church in South Africa since 1994" In the context of South Africa's socio-political landscape. He argues, "The Church's prophetic role diminished to a certain degree, regardless of the democratically elected Presidents' affirmations of the critical role of the Church in transforming the society." Kgatle (2018) contends the Church's prophetic voice has been "weak in post-1994 South Africa". Baron and Maponya (2020) argue, "the prophetic voice of the church in South Africa has become silent." Mkhize (2024), "investigates why the Ecumenical Church in South Africa has not responded effectively to social issues such as bad governance, corruption, inequality, crime, and ethical decline" and concludes, "the church is neglecting its moral and prophetic duty to uphold human dignity and value, and to offer hope and healing to all."

Consider the following questions: How many among the South Africans who identify as Christian, attend a weekly church gathering?¹⁷ Of this number, how many are exposed to biblical teaching on politics?¹⁸ Of this number, how many

¹⁷ Pew Research Center (2018) reported that 55 % of adults across religious groups in South Africa (not just Christians), "attend worship services weekly".

¹⁸ If nothing else, how many church leaders in South Africa in the lead to the 2024 General Elections made announcements at their church gatherings, for example, about voter registration opportunities, the elections day, and how many encouraged their congregants to vote?

remain disengaged from formal politics (including from voting, for example) or insist on practicing politics according to their understanding, aside from God's Word?

Christians who view the Bible (read holistically, contextually¹⁹, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit) as God's blueprint for human affairs will agree the likelihood of South Africans experiencing governance for the common good increases to the degree that Christians in South Africa are willing to engage in politics from a biblical perspective.

Biblically-based Christian political engagement depends, however, on the development within the Church of a biblically-based political theology. The development of such a theology cannot happen aside from holistic discipleship.

For this to happen church leaders must be willing and able to initiate and facilitate scripturally informed conversations and teaching about the relationship between Christians and politics. Furthermore, their fellow congregants must be willing to hold whoever is 'speaking from the pulpit' accountable according to God's Word and the leading of His Spirit.

Put differently, church members must be disciplined in a manner that encourages them to think critically, challenge church authorities when necessary, and hear from God personally. Had

¹⁹ This includes an understanding of the implications for civil governance of the distinction between the Old and New Covenants.

this been the case in twentieth-century South Africa, apartheid may have been prevented.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commissions His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Holistic discipleship is the kind of discipleship that teaches the Christian to observe all that Jesus commanded across all aspects of individual and corporate life, including politics.

Holistic discipleship happens when those involved recognize that no area of personal life or human affairs is beyond the reach of what God commands because everything on Earth belongs to the Lord (Deuteronomy 10:14)²⁰, "in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17²¹), and because God is sovereign (Isaiah 46:9-10²²).

The failure of a church to shape among its congregants and even, where necessary

²⁰ Deuteronomy 10:14 ESV 14 Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.

²¹ Colossians 1:16-17 ESV 16 For by[a] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

²² Isaiah 46:9-10 ESV 9 remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, 10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

and welcome, among the congregants of other churches, a biblically based political theology, ultimately reflects the quality or competence of church leadership. Referring to the American context, D'Souza writes, "Too often Christian leadership means not taking a position on politics. Instead, leaders tend to have a hands-off approach and leave politics to itself...**Christian leaders should be the first to teach and advocate the biblical positions on how we approach government**" (Grudem, 2012)²³.

Boyo (2021) captures the failure across the Church in Africa of developing a biblically-founded political theology:

We are not oblivious to the fact that most Christians in Africa have no theological or biblical foundation to guide their involvement in politics. They have not been prepared to think biblically about what to do when personal, group, and national interests clash, nor have they thought deeply about what is

²³ Importantly, taking a position on politics can but need not necessarily involve siding with a political party. Furthermore, there is a substantial difference between a church leader taking a partisan position on politics and that same leader teaching and advocating the biblical positions on how Christians should approach government. The former is explicitly partisan while the latter, even if implicitly partisan, is primarily concerned with equipping and empowering Christians to think about and navigate politics for themselves. Church leaders should exercise discernment before taking a partisan position on politics from the pulpit. There may come a time when this is necessary, as was the case in Nazi Germany, for example but they will need to know for sure when that time has arrived and they must be prepared for the possibility that their congregants may not necessarily agree with them that it has.

involved in living in states characterised by religious pluralism.

De Wet (2016), cites Gerald West, a professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, who makes the following observation about the South African Church's political theology, or the lack thereof: "The kind of theology we have today has no vision for the New Jerusalem. It doesn't know what to do with political power, except to court it, except to be close to it. It doesn't know how to engage with it." Similarly, former Western Cape ANC leader Ebrahim Rasool has decried the idea "that the church has only one role politically, and that is to be the watchdogs of society" (De Wet, 2016).

There are Christians who don't know what to do with political power or are fearful of political power and therefore steer clear of it. There are also Christians who have skewed views of political power with implications for how they exercise that power. These views can be just as, if not more, damaging to a polity than the relative non-involvement of Christians in politics.

During a good governance course, I recently presented, "a prominent Church leader from a country ruled by Africa's oldest dictator boldly proclaimed to...fellow attendees – among them Christian politicians, state employees, and students of politics – 'I hate democracy because God is not democratic. Democracy is demonic'" (Bailie, 2023). Is it possible that there's a correlation between this view and the realities of

governance in the Church leader's country of origin? In 2023, I heard a Christian who wants to run for president in South Africa in 2029, saying before a large Christian audience, "The Church is a government in waiting" – a statement that will concern anyone with a biblical understanding of the Church-State relationship (something to be discussed in a separate paper).

In the months preceding South Africa's 2024 General Elections, staff of a local IEC (Independent Electoral Commission) office in one of South Africa's cities met with a city-wide church fraternal to brief church leaders on the IEC's mandate. At the same meeting, the IEC asked the church leaders for the opportunity to present voter education to their congregants. Any leader who values democracy and the empowering effects of education would eagerly accept such an offer. Unfortunately, this is not what happened.

More recently, while attending a conference on Church-State relations, one Christian speaker explained that if God afforded the ancient Israelites the opportunity to vote on whether they wanted to enter the promised land, they never would have. This negative commentary on democracy from a Christian who has a Ph.D from a Christian university reveals the failure in some Christian circles to understand one cannot compare God's governance of ancient Israel (a homogenous society) under the Old Covenant with human governance in pluralistic societies in the context of the New Covenant.

Christians who understand the impact of politics on society, who recognise the political realm is not excluded from the work of the Great Commission, and who are familiar with the

transformative and life-giving character of God's Word, will agree that when those with the authority and ability to instruct or facilitate the instruction of their congregants on biblically informed Christian political engagement fail to do so, they are doing a disservice to their congregants, the wider community, and indeed the nation and communities further afield, living beyond national boundaries.

This is why West is critical of the Church in South Africa: "The churches have retreated into what you can call maintenance mode: you can almost hear them saying 'we focused outwards during apartheid; now we have to give attention to the structures of the church and its people'" (De Wet, 2016).

To the degree that discipleship fails to be holistic because it excludes teaching about politics or because it fails to properly interpret Scripture concerning politics and therefore properly apply Scripture to the political realm, there will be one of two consequences, both of which undermine good governance and the Church's (political) witness.

Either the Christian refrains from political engagement or the Christian is politically engaged, but not according to Scripture. In the next section, I consider why church leadership might fail to expose congregants to teaching that encourages biblically-based Christian political

engagement. For Christians, beginning with Church leaders, to know and understand these reasons, will better position the Church in South Africa to overcome the obstacles to scripturally informed Christian political engagement, with the potential for closing the gap between how the majority of South Africans identify religiously and how they think and act politically.

Understanding church leadership's failure to engage in politics

There are at least four possible reasons why in any church in South Africa, leadership might fail to expose congregants to conversation and teaching that encourages biblically based Christian political engagement.

> *Government is benevolent:*

A misplaced and, therefore, false sense of security results from the belief that government has the nation's best interests at heart and will act accordingly. For church leadership to hold this view potentially involves at least three further errors in thinking. Firstly, it fails to recognise the reality of humankind's fallibility (Romans 3:23²⁴) – a fallibility that doesn't spare politicians and government officials, including Christian politicians and government officials. Secondly, it erodes the Church's willingness to be 'salt' and 'light' (Matthew 5:13-16) in the political space and a prophetic voice of conscience to government – a necessity precisely because of humankind's fallibility (Abioje, 2010; Boot, 2016: 7; Makhalaria, 2021). To the degree that the Church views government as benevolent, the Church won't see itself as needing to be politically engaged or as having to hold government accountable along with the rest of civil society. Thirdly, it involves trusting in "chariots" and "horses" rather than "in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7²⁵).

²⁴ Romans 3:23 ESV for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

²⁵ Psalm 20:7 ESV Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

This involves Christians placing their ultimate hope in worldly power and human-made institutions, which in fact, is idolatrous.

If it was ever the case in post-1994 South Africa that Church leaders and Christians more widely developed a false sense of security in government, leading to an erosion of the Church's political engagement and witness, it would have been during what one could call 'the heyday of the new South Africa'. It may be that during this period, the Church believed there was no apparent need for it to exercise its prophetic role in a state governed by the country's anti-apartheid political liberators.

Afrikaner public theologian and anti-apartheid activist, Beyers Naudé, was cognisant of this danger when he cautioned in 1996, "People tend to say that now that we have a new government, now that we have a new Constitution, now that we have solved our political problems, for the time being, there is no prophetic role for the Church at the moment. I think such a perception is a very serious mistake" (Singh, 2021).

> *Politics is a dirty business:*

It could be that Church leaders perceive politics as dirty business and that Christians should, therefore, steer clear of it, or, at the very least, keep politics separate from 'Christian life'. Grudem (2012) brings to light in the American context, the view that all government is evil and demonic: "According to this view, all use of government power is deeply infected by evil, demonic forces. The realm of government power is the realm of Satan and his forces, and therefore all governmental use of 'power over' someone is worldly and not the way of life that Jesus taught". It is puzzling to think

how Christians could hold such a view in light of Romans 13:1-14²⁶, where Jesus' followers are instructed to be "subject to the governing authorities." Peacocke (2002) writes, "For hundreds of years, Christians have rejected God's commandment for them to disciple (discipline) and teach the civil institutions of the nations. We have done so believing and accepting as valid that politics is a 'dirty business'".

Encouraging and legitimising the view that politics is a dirty business, is dirty politics. There is no denying that politics can be and often is dirty. Consider again this paper's introductory passages that sketch a picture of the dismal state of South Africa's political, economic, and social landscape - a landscape resulting largely from dirty politicians practicing dirty politics.

Christians who view politics as dirty must be careful, however, to distinguish between politics as a God-ordained institution (consider Romans 13:1-227, for

²⁶ Romans 13:1-4 ESV Submission to the Authorities 13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

²⁷ Romans 13 ESV Submission to the Authorities 13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities

example) and the actions of people who practice politics as a profession. Failing this, Christians risk remaining disengaged or withdrawing from a space that, because of its power and impact, requires more rather than less accountability.

Politics is dirty to the degree that those who practice formal politics, be they 'mere' voters or politicians, Christian or non-Christian, fail to do so according to biblical principles and values. Christians who believe that the Bible is God's blueprint for managing human affairs must consider the implications of supporting a political party whose leaders (in terms of character and competence) and/or policies are not aligned with that blueprint. At the risk of oversimplification, **political problems in South Africa or any other country exist not because of politics as an institution but rather because of how people practice politics, and more specifically, because people fail to practice politics according to a blueprint set by the Creator of the universe.**

Proverbs 29:2 (ESV) sheds light on the implications of Christians failing to engage in formal politics at all (including through the vote) because of the perception that it is "dirty": "When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan."

resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment

Furthermore, the Christian who recognises and accepts that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23²⁸) must also recognise and accept that every sphere of human affairs is tarnished because of the inherent sin that resides within every human being that occupies or operates within that sphere.

Therefore, politics can be dirty, but the same applies to business, the family, and the Church, for example (Peacocke, 2002).

There are Christians who avoid politics because they perceive it as dirty and there are Christians who because they perceive politics as dirty, wrongfully separate or compartmentalise their political thinking and action from their religious lives. At an election campaign meeting I attended, a politician said that while he is Christian, he doesn't “vote for a Christian political party”. Instead, he said, “I go to church for my faith.”

I share this observation not to argue that Christians must vote for a political party that identifies as Christian or one they firmly believe to be Christian, but to offer an example of someone who identifies as a Christian but appears to have lost sight of God's Lordship and the consequential need to bring all that we do, including our politics, under His sovereign and divine command. The Christian must not separate his/her political thinking and action from his/her faith.

> Do evangelism, not politics:

Another erroneous view that Grudem (2012) highlights from the American

²⁸ Romans 3:23 ESV 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

context, but one that is just as applicable to Christians in other countries, including South Africa, is that the Church must busy itself with evangelism and not politics. This is similar to what former South African President Jacob Zuma meant when in 2016, he told a gathering of the Twelve Apostles' Church in Christ (TACC) that the Church should stay out of politics and rather pray for politicians (Olifant, 2016).

The Christian who holds this view says, “We [the Church] should just preach the Gospel, and that is the only way Christians can hope to change people's hearts and change our society” (Grudem, 2012).

The need for Christians to share the Gospel is fundamental – the Gospel is the starting point – but the Gospel's impact on society is inhibited to the degree that Christians are unable or unwilling to apply the Gospel in the political realm.

> The fear of fallout:

A fourth possible reason church leaders might fail to expose congregants to teaching that encourages biblically based Christian political engagement is the view of politics as a minefield – a space ‘where angels fear to tread’.

Depending on a church's makeup and context, including the experience of church leaders and their capacity for skilfully navigating politics according to the Bible, church leaders may perceive politics as controversial and potentially hazardous to the congregation and/or their leadership positions.

Church leaders are likely to have a higher perception and fear of the potential for controversy and fallout following engagement about politics in those churches where congregants have set their identity more in politics or a political organisation or party than in Christ (especially in a country where politics has become highly divisive) and/or where church leaders consider themselves ill-equipped to facilitate discussions about politics from a biblical perspective, and in a manner that maintains and advances church unity rather than fostering discord. De Wet (2016), citing West on the Church in South Africa, is instructive concerning the second of these predictors:

Where churches used to be platforms for change, attracting the best and brightest, they are now “really struggling to attract young people who can operate at a degree level of theological education”, West says. Even as churches proliferate and fracture, and the appetite for preachers grows, the number of students enrolling in anything beyond certificate- and diploma-level studies of religion are dwindling. “We face a very real prospect in the near future that the average level of education of the congregation will be higher than the average level of education of the clergy,” says West. “That will lead to some interesting contradictions.”

It is possible that a church leader’s concern over the potential fallout from Christian political engagement in the here and now could also be informed and shaped by an awareness of and even unresolved feelings of guilt or shame over Christian political engagement in history. Consider, for example, the role some

Christian denominations (especially the Dutch Reformed Church) played in legitimising South Africa’s apartheid government (Nelson, 2003; Oliver, 2011; Masuku, 2014; Farisani, 2014; Joebgen, 2016). Possible negative consequences, perceived or otherwise, of church leadership initiating and facilitating conversations about politics under the above-mentioned circumstances include damaging politicization and polarisation of the congregation and members leaving as a result.

The perception and fear of possible fallout from controversy shouldn’t prevent church leaders from bringing political matters into the light of God’s Word. Jesus was controversial to the point where He was crucified on the Cross.

Individuals who agree to lead a church must make peace with the fact that initiating and facilitating courageous conversations, including about politics, may involve disruptions for the church, including, potentially, the departure of congregants.

Furthermore, church leaders must not allow the Church’s sins of the past to get in the way of its ongoing mission today, which is to share a Gospel that can transform all areas of individual and corporate life, including politics. Rather than allowing the Church’s skewed politics of the past to discourage present-day Christian political engagement altogether, Christian leaders ought to be asking how the Church can do politics better, in a manner that upholds the first and second greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-

40²⁹). The question, therefore, is not whether the Church should be politically engaged, but how? Finally, church leaders who, for whatever reason, feel unprepared to initiate and facilitate conversations about politics among their congregants are responsible for inviting a knowledgeable person or persons from within the congregation or from elsewhere in the broader Church to take responsibility for a task that is neglected to the detriment of Christians and their neighbours.

Successful ministry depends on the knowledge that no member of a church, including the lead elder, possesses all that is required “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12³⁰), and an ability to draw on the skills, expertise, and talents of different members (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, ESV³¹).

²⁹ Matthew 22:36-40 ESV 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

³⁰ Ephesians 4:12 ESV 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

³¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 ESV 12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves[a] or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16

And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, [b] yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Conclusion

This paper is a modest effort to highlight, understand, and mitigate what appears to be one of the greatest contradictions, if not the greatest contradiction in South Africa today: a country where 86 % of the population identifies as Christian is also a country that has, in the recent past, been identified as the “rape capital of the world” (Leech, 2023), the “protest capital of the world” (Richardson, Swart, Govender & Seedat, 2022) and “as one of the most violent and dangerous places on earth” (Heinecken, 2020). It is also a country that ranks high or *the* highest in the world in terms of crime (The World Bank, 2023) (including economic crime) (PWC, 2020), unemployment (Shah, 2022), poverty and inequality (Thorne, 2022). Corruption, decaying and failed infrastructure, municipal mismanagement and decay, declining standards in education, the crises engulfing state-owned enterprises, an ailing national economy, failed land reform, ongoing (if not growing) racial tension, xenophobia, GBV, signs of radicalisation among South Africa’s population, and democratic erosion further reflect the dismal state of South Africa’s present political, economic and social landscape.

Were it not for Christianity’s transformative nature, South Africa’s religious identity would not be at odds with its political, economic, and social realities. Put differently, how South Africans identify religiously stands in contrast to the state of the nation. More specifically, because the citizens of a society made up mostly of self-identifying Christians have had the opportunity to elect their political leaders across six free and fair General Elections, how South Africans identify religiously is in tension

with the state of governance in South Africa today.

In this paper, I offer Christian nominalism and a lack of holistic discipleship (specifically reluctance among church leaders to initiate and facilitate conversations and teaching about Christian political engagement among their congregants) as reasons for this tension. In essence, two broad reasons explain why South Africa’s majority ‘Christian’ population has had relatively little impact on the quality of civil governance. Firstly, many South Africans who identify as Christian don’t follow Jesus and are therefore less inclined in their political thinking and action to apply biblical principles and values that support and reinforce democratic governance. Secondly, among Christians in South Africa who do follow Jesus, the questions arise as to how many have been exposed to biblical teaching on Christian political engagement and, among those who have been exposed to such teaching, how many are willing to apply it in their political thinking and action. Without this exposure, their ability to serve as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in South Africa’s increasingly distasteful and dark political, economic, and social spaces will prove limited.

There are at least four possible factors preventing church leaders from engaging their congregants in conversations and teaching that encourage biblically-based Christian political engagement. These include the view among church leaders that government is benevolent, the view of politics as a dirty business, the belief that the Church should refrain from engaging in politics and focus instead on evangelism, and finally, the fear of the fallout that may result from initiating and facilitating conversations and teaching about Christian political engagement. I have argued that none of these factors

are valid and that church leaders shouldn't allow themselves to be restricted from the kind of work that can ultimately contribute towards good governance and make South Africa a

better place to live in for all. The more church leaders get this right, the greater the potential for practicing Christians in South Africa to align their political thinking and actions with their religious identity.

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