

# The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

How should Christians vote at the Referendum?

Dear brothers and sisters,

**O**n October 14 2023, Australians will vote in a referendum on the question of enshrining in our constitution an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament as a way to permanently recognise them as the First Peoples of Australia.

There's no question that issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are in the forefront of Australia's political and social thinking. Since the 1999 referendum in which Australians voted 'no' to a change in our Constitution's preamble which included a recognition of First Peoples, there has been a growing movement pushing for a revisiting of this idea, culminating in the 2017 Uluru Statement which called for reform through a Voice, a Treaty and Truth Telling, and now the upcoming referendum.

If you're an Australian citizen, you will be legally required to cast your ballot on October 14. If you're not a citizen, but call Australia your home, you still have a responsibility to be informed about the issues, and to ask yourself, 'How would I vote if I were a citizen?'

In any plebiscite<sup>1</sup> or referendum we're faced with three choices: vote 'Yes', vote 'No', or vote informally (so that our ballot doesn't count). In some instances the way a Christian should vote might be clear cut, if it deals with an issue on which the Bible is unequivocal, such as mandating the celebration of same-sex marriage by churches, or prescribing idolatrous worship for all citizens, or legalising murder. In these cases (which aren't as extreme or hypothetical as they may first sound) we can draw a straight line from the Bible's specific teaching to the issue being debated.

The referendum on the Voice is not like this. The Bible says nothing about the idea of representative or advisory voices to governments (indigenous or otherwise). And so the question of whether it's right or wrong, good or bad, wise or foolish, from a Biblical perspective isn't as simple as 'yes' or 'no'. As J. Leeman and A. Naselli helpfully put it:

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<sup>1</sup> A plebiscite, such as the 2017 postal vote on same-sex marriage, gives government an idea of what the population think, but its results aren't binding. In a referendum the Government is legally obligated to put into action the wishes of the people. It requires a *double majority* (majority of states and of total voters) in order to pass. Out of Australia's 44 referenda, only 8 have passed.

“Most political issues are not straight-line issues. Most are jagged-line issues. Think of everything from trade policy to healthcare reform to monetary policy to carbon dioxide emission caps. These are important, and Christians should bring biblical principles to bear when thinking about them. But the path from biblical text to policy application is not simple. It is complex. For such issues, none of us should presume to possess “the” Christian position, as if we were apostles revealing true doctrine once and for all time.”<sup>2</sup>

What this means is that as Christians we have a freedom to take into account two things in making a decision on this matter:

1. Biblical principles that should shape our thinking. In doing so we need to make sure we have a clear conscience before God in the decision we make. This is what Paul taught Christians who were debating whether or not to eat meat from the market: “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.” (Romans 14:22)
2. Other non-Biblical factors, including listening to different political views, seeking to listen to indigenous people and hearing their view, thinking of the possible implications on your family, church and community; and weighing them all against Biblical wisdom.

This means that whether we like it or not, Christians *will* differ in their views and values on this matter, and that’s OK. Just as first century meat-eating Christians weren’t to force their practice on their non-meat-eating brothers and sisters, so too we need to avoid imposing our views about the Voice on one another in way that makes someone feel they’re being coerced to go along with us, guilty for having a different view, or unable to share their differing view without ridicule or condemnation.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Leeman and Andrew David Naselli, “Politics, Conscience and the Church: Why Christians Passionately Disagree with One Another over Politics, Why They Must Agree to Disagree over Jagged-Line Political Issues, and How”, Themelios 45.1 (2020): 13-31. 20. Quoted in “A Christian Perspective on the Voice Debate: 4 Key Takeaways” <https://www.akosbalogh.com/blog/hy4jdl6sstn8cayku2kes0kfc5hiid>

*'Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.'* (Romans 14:23). This means that what makes a decision right or wrong in these matters is whether or not it flows from a conscience that has been cleansed and renewed through faith in the justifying work of Christ in his cross and resurrection. As soon as we act out of guilt, fear, or self-justification, it become sin. And only when our eyes are set on the cross will we be able to think and act with a clear conscience before God. As Auntie Jean Phillips, an Aboriginal Christian leader and missionary says:

"To me all of these issues need to be based on prayer and asking God to guide us and to help us. We need to be coming together at the foot of the cross and acknowledge the history of this nation, which has not been a very good history, and it's only as we come to the cross and meet with our saviour that things could change."<sup>3</sup>

Christians know that no political system will ever solve human problems or create a perfect society. It'll only be when Christ returns to bring his reign over all things to its fullness that we'll know a perfected human community, as we live and reign with him in the new heavens and earth. This doesn't prohibit us from being involved in society and working for the good of all, but we need to do so knowing that one day we'll see 'the kingdoms of the world... become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ' (Revelation 11:15)

Christians who take the Bible seriously, believing in its inspiration and divine authority in shaping faith and life, will be able to come up with good Biblically-based arguments for all three options of voting in this referendum. Here are just a few examples:<sup>4</sup>

- "Human beings should be committed to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). So, because I believe the Voice is a good step towards justice for Australia's First People, as a Christian I will vote Yes."

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<sup>3</sup> From Common Grace's campaign for the Yes vote at [https://www.listentotheheart.org.au/listen#auntie\\_jean\\_phillips](https://www.listentotheheart.org.au/listen#auntie_jean_phillips)

<sup>4</sup> I recognise that these statements may come across as simplistic, however for the sake of space I can only give a summary; understand that behind each statement should stand a longer, more thought out and prayerful Biblical argument.

- “Christians are called to love their neighbours in very practical, generous and sacrificial ways (James 2:8). Because the Voice risks being a token, and not a guarantee that the real crises in First Peoples communities will be dealt with, government resources would be better used in on-the-ground initiatives. Therefore as a Christian I will vote No.”
- “The true path to reconciliation between people is in speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and confession of sin and forgiveness (Luke 17:3). Therefore the priority should be truth telling and reconciliation, so as a Christian I will abstain or vote informally.”
- “God created, loves, and is redeeming those from every people, nation tribe and tongue, all of whom will have a place in the new humanity (Revelation 5:9). Because I believe the Voice is a way to honour the peoples, nations, tribes and tongues who lived in this land before colonisation, as a Christian I will vote Yes.”
- “In Christ there is no distinction of status between people because of their race or ethnicity (Colossians 3:11). Because I believe the Voice could draw a racial distinction in our Constitution, as a Christian I will vote No.”
- “Christians are not citizens of this world, but rather ambassadors of their true country, the Kingdom of God and the age to come (Philippians 3:20). So Christians should avoid being entangled in politics, and focus on preaching the Gospel. Therefore as a Christian I will abstain or vote informally.”

I hope you can see that this is both a matter of theology (how we understand Biblical doctrine and principles) and practice (how we apply our theology to our decisions and lifestyle and how we love one another). In each case, Bible believing Christians most likely will agree on the truth of the opening sentence, but may not agree on the application; or they may place them on different levels of what they feel is most important.

I hope also you noticed the personal way in which the conclusions are worded. Because this is a matter that ultimately comes down to *my personal conscience before God*, I must know my freedom in making

my decision without being coerced or shamed into it, as well as my moral responsibility for my decision (if it turns out to be an unwise one) before God, who alone is my judge.

Notice also that I said 'I *will* vote,' not 'I *should* vote.' 'Should' is a word from Law, and when we live under Law we see it as binding on everyone. So saying 'I should' can be a way of justifying myself before God or others, or even a sneaky way of asserting 'You should.' Because we live under grace, our motivation for acting and decision-making doesn't come from legalistic slavery or fear of judgement, but from the freedom we know in the Spirit to choose what is 'true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise.' (Philippians 4:8). That means we can make decisions with confidence that our hearts and minds have been washed and renewed by the Spirit, and He'll be leading us to think and act in the way he's calling us to. If we do end up making a decision that we later regret or turns out to seem foolish or sinful, we can also trust that God in his grace is big enough to deal with it, and bring good out of our errors. This is the wonderful confidence we have in Christ, and it should motivate us to act in confidence, instead of being paralysed by fear or anxiety that comes from trying to sort out all the 'what ifs'.

**A** key passage for thinking about voting, or for that matter any engagement with government and politics, is 1 Timothy 2:1-6:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, <sup>4</sup> who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Our *first of all* responsibility is pray. This isn't a cop-out, because prayer in line with God's will always leads to corresponding thinking and action. Prayer is a gift the Father gives us as he draws us in to participate in his work in his world. So praying for government leaders with Bible-informed prayer will bring our thinking into line with God's,

and will also help us to be godly in how we relate to our leaders. Even if you dislike or disagree with government leaders or their politics, you have a moral duty as a Christian to pray for (not against) them.

Note that it's good and pleasing to God when we pray for the wellbeing of our community. Even though we know the world isn't our true home, we nevertheless are called to pray and work for the good of those around us, even if they're not Christian. Note also that God's desire isn't merely for the wellbeing of people now, but that they come to a knowledge of the truth: that only happens by the preaching and hearing of the Gospel.

**W**hile some churches and Christian organisations have decided to promote one side or the other of this debate, the church and church leaders do not have the authority to bind your conscience on matters of civil politics and government, apart from the Biblical call to pray for and submit to authority, and only resist if they require you to do something contrary to Scripture. 'The Bible alone is the only authority that can bind the conscience of a person absolutely because it is the only authority that carries with it the intrinsic authority of God himself.'<sup>5</sup> So, if a church or a pastor tries to tell you to vote 'yes' or 'no', they have overstepped the boundaries of their authority. We must avoid causing divisions within the church over this issue, as it is not a matter that defines faithfulness to the Gospel or holy living.

This all then gives us three key questions to ask and seek answers to when we vote:

1. Do I believe this change to Australia's constitution will be a step forward in terms of promoting peaceful, quiet, godly and dignified living for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians?
2. Might this change help, or hinder, the advance of the Gospel in Australia - and particularly because this matter concerns them, the proclamation of the Gospel to and by our indigenous peoples?

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<sup>5</sup> R.C. Sproul

3. Regardless of how I vote at the referendum, what can I do to love my Indigenous Australian neighbours as Jesus has commanded me to, by promoting their wellbeing and hearing of the Gospel?

We cannot know the details of the future. We will not know the outcome, short and long term, of this referendum and its results until it happens. We can only make guesses based on godly wisdom and lessons learned from the past, and then step forward in faith that our Father is the sovereign king of the universe. The one to whom he has entrusted the administration of His kingdom on earth is his Son, who died and rose so that the world may be saved through him. Do we trust that he still holds the whole world in his hands?

We should be able to explain, if asked, why we believe with a clear conscience before God that the decision we've made is the best way to demonstrate love towards our Indigenous neighbours. But we should also be prepared, regardless of the outcome, to contribute in practical ways towards their wellbeing, so that we are actually putting into action the faith we profess.

***H**ow should a Christian vote in the referendum? By making sure we have a clear conscience before God, with careful and prayerful consideration of God's Word, a genuine desire to see him glorified through the preaching of the Gospel, and with a commitment to genuinely loving our neighbours in the name of Christ.*

James

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## Some good places to start reading:

### Basic information

- Read the Uluru Statement and extended background information: [tinyurl.com/ulurustoryroadmap](https://tinyurl.com/ulurustoryroadmap)
- The official Government referendum website: [voice.gov.au](https://voice.gov.au)

### Arguments for and against

- A Christian arguing 'No': [adelaideguardian.com/2023/08/08/questions-over-the-voice/](https://adelaideguardian.com/2023/08/08/questions-over-the-voice/)
- A Christian arguing 'Yes': [au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-voice-a-christian-consideration/](https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-voice-a-christian-consideration/)
- The official 'Yes' and 'No' cases on the Australian Electoral Commission website: [aec.gov.au/referendums/files/pamphlet/referendum-booklet.pdf](https://aec.gov.au/referendums/files/pamphlet/referendum-booklet.pdf)

### Some ministries bringing the Gospel to Indigenous Australians

- Australian Indigenous Ministries - Gospel ministry among and by indigenous peoples: [australianindigenousministries.org.au](https://australianindigenousministries.org.au)
- Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship - Fellowship of evangelical aboriginal people and churches [aef.org.au/](https://aef.org.au/)
- AEF Family and Youth Services. An evangelical ministry catering for the holistic needs of Aboriginal people. [fys.aef.org.au](https://fys.aef.org.au)
- Port Augusta Gospel Chapel [ccaust.org/church.php?id=5013](https://ccaust.org/church.php?id=5013)  
(Speak to Peter or Desleigh Wright for more info about their ministry there.)

