

SHOULD CHRISTIANS ENTER POLITICS?

By Denver Cheddie

There are basically three schools of thoughts on the involvement of Christians in politics. The first, sectarianism, urges believers to isolate themselves completely from the process. The second, Christendom, teaches that the church should seek to influence society for Christ from a position of political power. I choose to use these names for convenience, but whether others would call them by different names, it makes little difference. The third view, a position of balance, states that Christians individually may be involved in politics but the church as a body should abstain. This is my view.

What is Political Involvement?

First it is important to properly define political involvement. Some say that voting is an indirect form of involvement, however that leaves the basic question unanswered. Others questionably claim that Jesus, in teaching of the kingdom of God, took an extreme political position that challenged the authority of Rome i.e. he opposed the existing order of which Caesar-worship was part. Then according to this hypothesis the gospel itself is political in nature since it challenges the status quo. But again this fails to address the real issue, since it does not tell whether Christians should seek political office. I define political involvement not in indirect terms such as

voting and being abreast of current issues, but directly seeking office and positions of rulership, or seeking to influence local and national leaders. By all means Christians should be aware of political issues, vote, and have personal preferences.

Postmillennial Theology

At the heart of the Christendom school is a postmillennial theology. I don't agree with postmillennialism because it is naively optimistic. It believes that the church will affect society in a Christian way and bring about large scale religious reform. Then when the earth has been Christianized, Jesus will return to establish his kingdom. Postmillennialism entails a "spiritual" interpretation of the OT while neglecting the explicit teachings of the NT which presage societal decadence in the last days (e.g. 2 Tim. 3). It is impossible for sinful man to accomplish otherwise. Only Jesus' future physical presence combined with the binding of Satan could bring about an elysian society. It is not totally correct to assume that society is in its current shape primarily because Christians have become complacent. This was all predicted.

It is also wrong to presume that if our political leaders are "righteous" then that righteousness would be transferred to the populace. King Josiah was a righteous man, yet Jeremiah lambasted the people of his time for their wicked ways. Josiah's righteousness hardly influenced the people (including his own children) in a positive way. Society is in a downward spiral, because of the mystery of iniquity at work, which no political leader can reverse. Actually the only leader who will have any success before Christ's second

coming at bringing some measure of sanity to society will be the antichrist, and that would only be superficial and short lived.

A Christian Nation?

Another premise of Christendom is that nations can be Christianized. There really is no such thing as a Christian nation. Christianity is an individual issue not a national one. There are Islamic states where everyone is obliged to be a Moslem. However there cannot similarly be Christian states since individuals must freely choose Christ. Some believe that America is a Christian nation because it was founded on Christian principles. Or should it be said that America was founded on religious, ethical and moral principles? What are Christian principles? The ten commandments? The ten commandments are not even unique to Christianity. They are Judaic. The only principle that is uniquely Christian is the atonement of Christ and its ramifications. All religions basically teach good social values. These are not necessarily Christian principles. Was America founded on the belief that Jesus is the only Way, the Truth and the Life, and that there is salvation in no other name? Then what makes it a Christian nation?

Bill Suggs believes that America has always been a Christian nation and continues to maintain that status because "*the vast majority of US citizenry claim at least a nominal adherence to Christianity*" ^[1] i.e. they tick the "Christian" box under religion when filling out forms. **Nominal adherence means absolutely nothing.** I expect to hear such misapprehensions from

those unlearned in the Way, but Christians should know better. One must actively believe in Jesus and his atonement to be saved and considered a Christian. Suggs continues, *“America is fully capable of taking political positions on moral matters without establishing a religion. America is fully capable of instituting public policies that reflect the thinking and attitudes of most Christians, indeed most Americans, without establishing Christianity. America is fully capable of being a Christian nation without violating the rights of conscience or the free exercise of religion.”* [ii] Although I agree that Christianity should not be forced down the throats of people, as far as the mission of the church is concerned, what is then the point of having a “Christian nation”? It is just a name. The majority of the citizens will still go to hell.

The real purpose of the church is to evangelize individuals not Christianize nations^[iii]. Clark van Wyk asks rhetorically, *“how can we implement God’s Word and demonstrate love for the poor if we do not get involved in politics? How do we take care of the poor, the widows, the orphans, without getting involved in politics?”*^[iv] **Maybe we could get involved in an evangelizing church.** Early believers accomplished all these things outside the political arena. This is what James calls pure religion (James 1:27). The truth is that if we can’t do this outside of politics, it is naïve to think we will do it if we get into office. The real problem is not lack of political power, but the absence of pure religion.

Lessons From History

I believe that the church as a body should not pursue political power. History militates against it. For its first 300 years, the church had no political

involvement, until the conversion of Constantine. What history has taught is that the church as a political body does not exert a Christian influence on society, it is society that leavens the church. There is a tendency for man to try to institutionalize Christianity, but radical faith in Jesus can never be institutionalized. If society is to accept the church as a political body, we would have to dilute our message i.e. to preach a gospel of nominal adherence. True Christianity is politically incorrect and antithetical to the spirit of the world. The church cannot enter politics without losing its impetus and eternal focus.

van Wyk gives the examples of William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftsbury as Christians who were instrumental in the abolishing of slavery and the correcting of child labor abuses respectively. I applaud these men. But let it be remembered that Paul also lived in an age of slavery, yet never campaigned against it. Not for one minute endorsing slavery, I believe that individual Christians may rally against social injustices, but the church must not lose its focus. There are social aspects of Christianity that are concomitant with missions e.g. the building of schools, orphanages, clinics etc. thus it is quite possible for the church to make a social impact outside of politics.

Brandon Bayne: ^[v]

Since the conversion of Constantine in 311 A.D. the Christian Church slowly gained cultural dominance and political control while witnessing countervailing spiritual decline. Although the church's numbers have grown, its mission as salt and light to the world has been forgotten.

More importantly, it has compromised the message of the cross as the scandalous representation of our sin and our natural separation from God.

Jesus is counterculture. He is and must be a stumbling block to all who would approach Him. And if we want the Good News of the cross – that God has come to man, that we are reconciled through the atonement of Christ – we can not expect to be part of the culture. Christians are resident aliens. We can not be the establishment. The establishment must be rocked to the core.

If Christians cannot control the law and politics, how can we lead the nation to Christ? To begin with, we can take up our lifelong pursuit of holiness in imitating Jesus. We can go out into all nations spreading the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. In short, we can do what the church was called to do.

Christians can and should be involved in every aspect of politics, its discourse, and its application. However, the church qua church, (i.e. when gathered as a community) should never endorse candidates or specific issues. Its members should fight for social justice and stand against immorality, but its funds and focus must not be diverted from the true cure of souls, the spiritual cure.

American politics and American Christians stand at a crucial juncture. For the first time since Constantine, western Christianity has been radically separated from the state, making the call to a spiritual community more urgent than ever. We should not give up on the public sphere, but we should not expect to impose the principles of the Bible on a society that rejects its authority.

How Should We Be Involved?

As individuals, Christians are free to enter politics. There are numerous references in Proverbs to righteous and wicked rulers. Of course Proverbs defines righteousness in terms of social justice and equity, not personal right standing with God through Jesus Christ. So it is very possible for non-Christians to rule righteously according to the definition of Proverbs. However there are certain countries, like Trinidad & Tobago and Guyana, where the electorate is racially divided. I would strongly advise against Christians in those countries going into politics, unless they wish to see the church racially divided as well.

Concern is expressed that if Christians are not involved in politics, our right to evangelize cannot be taken for granted. That is a fair concern. Of course it cannot be assumed that by having Christians in politics, that right will be preserved. What we can assume and what the Bible clearly teaches is that if we wish to have that right preserved we should pray for those in

government (1 Tim. 2:1-2). And if that right is taken away, preach the gospel anyway, in season and out.

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^[i] <http://www.christiananswers.net/menu-ag1.html>

^[ii] *ibid.*

^[iii] It is understood in Matt. 28:19,20 that teaching all nations meant evangelizing and teaching the inhabitants of the nations because that is what the apostles did.

^[iv] http://www.frontline.org.za/articles/should_christians_be_involved_in.htm

^[v]

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/standard/Oct96/Editorials/christian_coalition.html