

HOW CAN CHRISTIANS INFLUENCE THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Don Horrocks

In answering this question we also need to ask a deeper related question, namely why should Christians be involved with politics at all?

Fewer Christians nowadays dispute the legitimacy, indeed the imperative, of engaging seriously with the socio-political world, although during the last hundred years they have tended to manifest a general reticence with regard to political engagement. Faced with contemporary hostility or indifference to the Christian worldview, some have advocated retreat into a sectarian inwardness or Christian ghetto mentality. Others, however, have enthusiastically embraced a longstanding reformed conviction that the Church's task is to 'transform' people and society. This approach claims that 'being' the Church involves preserving its God-given distinctives, whilst simultaneously engaging in a meaningful way with society and 'the powers that be'. If politics is concerned with shaping society and consideration of the values by which we choose to organise ourselves, then this wholly coincides with the Church's mission.

Some Christians maintain the Church should be concerned solely with the spiritual and other-worldly Kingdom of God. But indifference to the things pertaining to this life involves flawed biblical exegesis. God's Kingdom is actually amongst us. God is consistently portrayed in the Bible as being a political God who acts in the affairs of history. God is intimately concerned with laws and authority, and with human issues of justice, peace, and freedom – all enduring socio-political symbols. Jesus himself identified with human needs, both spiritual and material, and called on his Church, as a social institution, to live in proper relation to their neighbours – perhaps the most enduring motivation for social change.

There is undoubtedly a contemporary secularising attempt to privatise and individualise religion, especially in the context of a pluralistic society. But Christian hope is a public rather than private hope and the Gospel is a public Gospel. Historically, Christians have been intimately involved in social politics and the Christian message emphasises both vertical relationship with God and horizontal expression of faith through community involvement. Salvation itself is a cosmic mission – not merely an individual affair. Christians are supposed to impact and permeate society like salt and light or shine like stars (Matt. 5.13-16; Phil. 2.15). If Christianity is confined to the private sphere its radical message of redemptive love may become inoffensive, but also largely irrelevant and meaningless. And what becomes of the Church's task to confront the causes, let alone the symptoms, of

endemic evil in the structures of our society? Detachment or withdrawal, which can so easily become avoidance of social commitment and responsibility, is not the answer.

Politics is an essential aspect of human social activity. Because they are human beings participating in everyday relationships, Christians are, by definition, 'political'. The imperative for Christian involvement stems from Christian belief in a Creator God who gave humanity responsibility for creative management of the world, and to challenge the structural forces of evil endemic as a result of the Fall. God himself became incarnate, thereby identifying with fallen human nature and demonstrating concern for the human material condition and its wellbeing. Through the incarnation God effected his plan for redemption of the world. His coming promised salvation instead of judgement, restoration to wholeness, and transforming new creation life in the 'here and now' of present existence. In other words, it involves his disciples changing the world in which they live, as much as preparing for another one.

It has never been so important for Christians to be involved in the political process and as an integral part of their missional call to demonstrate love in action, to fight for civil liberties and social justice. Christians often need to grasp a broader vision of what 'full-time service' actually means. Being salt and light is not about grasping political power but rather engaging with the challenge to bring the distinctive flavour and light of Christ through public service and leadership in the most public and visible parts of society, such as local and national government, education, health, law, arts, media, voluntary work etc.

During 2009, the reputation of politics was severely damaged, and some of those who sit in Parliament to represent the public were exposed as not always having the most honourable of motives. Most MPs remain committed to serving their constituents and their country, and some have been tainted by a scandal that they were not a part of. At the ballot box in the coming months some MPs will be judged on their conduct, and those seeking to become MPs will face the challenging task of convincing a sceptical public of their motives.

Christian engagement in the political system can help bring integrity and service back to the heart of democracy. The chance to vote is just the tip of the iceberg, and a tiny but important part of a much more holistic approach to our contemporary world. If you support a particular party perhaps you could help campaign for your local candidate. They are usually grateful for all the help they can get. Churches are often the only groups to hold local hustings, public meetings where political candidates can be held to account. Find out if churches in your area are already planning something. If they are join in, or gather together with other churches to help open politics up to your community where everyone can have a say. And above all, be aware of what is going on in your local community, your country and your world. Every Christian can make a difference somewhere.

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