



POLITICS AND FAITH

Why should Christians be involved in politics?

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Some Christians argue that it is not our business to be involved in politics. First, because we have other matters on which to concentrate: getting people to heaven is more important than trying to straighten out a fallen world. Second, because politics is so corrupt that we must keep a distance, lest we become contaminated. A third argument is that God is sovereign, so he can be trusted to take care of politics. We have to be very careful that appealing to God's almighty power is not a convenient excuse for avoiding our own responsibility. The Bible says a great deal about humans being God's vice-regents in the world and one of God's first commissions to humanity is for us to rule, subdue, and be fruitful in the earth. This is not only significant for how we live our own lives but for how we engage society as a whole. In fact, much of Britain's governmental system was developed using Christian principles. There are three significant principles I would like to highlight in regard to government:

- *There is a need for government*

Human nature is so twisted by our rebellion against God that a government of some sort is essential to protect the weak. The worst government is not a dictatorship, but no government at all; in the resulting anarchy everyone is a tyrant and the weak are mercilessly crushed. This principle explains the essentially positive view of government that is found in the New Testament (Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Our God is a God of order who protects all, cares for all and emphasises the innate dignity of all human beings.

- *There are limits to government*

The power governments wield is loaned to them by God (John 19:11). We are not God but we are his vice-regents on the earth. Because fallen human beings govern political systems, there is potential for corruption (sin). For this reason, limits need to be set on governments. There may even come a time when we can no longer, in all conscience, obey a government that has become too mired in sinfulness and

injustice.

· *God hasn't given us a template for a Christian political system*

In the Old Testament God established a pattern for how Israel should be governed, with rules for tribes, priests, kings, legislation and rituals. There is nothing comparable in the New Testament: instead there is silence on how the new people of God are to be governed. Christ's followers should be prepared to live among all nations as salt and light throughout the world. We are not to isolate ourselves to any particular region, location or nation. So the Christian has no biblical commitment to a particular political structure. Christianity has survived – and even flourished – under regimes of left, right and centre and Christians are found in all the main political parties.

With this foundation I suggest four reasons *why* we need to be involved in politics.

1) We have a moral commitment to politics

At the most basic level, everybody ought to be involved in politics. We are affected either directly or indirectly on a daily basis by the way our nation is managed. So it is crucial that the Christian should stay informed on the workings of our governmental systems. 'For evil to triumph it is merely necessary that good men do nothing' (Edmund Burke). To say it another way – all that is necessary for the weak and powerless to be crushed is for no one to stand up for them. Politics is about how our nation is run; if we want our government to run more effectively and more ethically, we must play our part by getting involved. Through the power of the vote and advocacy, Christians have the opportunity to ensure government is just and fair to all citizens. We should not forfeit or take for granted our valuable voice and our right to vote. Even in Britain the right of all adults to vote was gained only as recently as 1928.

2) We have a Christian commitment to politics

As Christians we ought to go much further than this universal moral commitment. As those redeemed by Christ and brought into the family of God we need to exhibit a spirit of justice, care and mutual concern for our fellow men and women. As Christ went about doing good (Acts 10:38), so should we. We are to get involved in the way the world is run, and seek to do good and restrain evil. As St Theresa of Avila said, 'we are the hands and feet of Jesus'. St Paul described Christians as 'ambassadors for Christ' as though God were making his appeal through us. Part of being Christ's ambassador is to advocate for him and his ways in our political system. We are his workers, who help usher in his Kingdom ways on the earth.

3) We have a historical commitment to politics

In Britain, Christians should feel a particular responsibility towards the political system. Much that is good about our government is due to the legacy of Christians. From the Catholics to the Reformers, Puritans, Methodist evangelists and Victorian evangelical social campaigners, many believers throughout the centuries have stood for justice and freedom, opposing tyranny and oppression. The basis of modern democracy comes from the biblical concept that we are all made in the

image of God and all stand as individuals equal before him. Our Christian ancestors laboured for a democratic system and the rights that we have come to enjoy; we need to preserve the inheritance we have received from them.

4) We need a pragmatic commitment to politics

Because the British political system was founded on biblical foundations, we have assumed that Christian morality would prevail. Yet times have changed and all political parties are now promoting the values of secularism. The traditional rights that Christians have enjoyed for centuries could be curtailed. We now need to be involved in politics simply for self-preservation.

How should Christians be involved in politics?

So if we are to be involved in politics, even at the basic level of voting, how are we to be involved?

- *We should become better informed*

Most of my discussions with Christians regarding politics are based on their ignorant prejudicial opinions and not on facts! We need to be better informed and understand what's critical and what's true. We need to comprehend the platforms of various candidates.

- *We should be those who vote*

When only 30% or 40% of people vote, a minority can end up deciding the fate of the country. This makes it all the more vital that we vote. With perhaps 2 million people in Britain considering themselves evangelicals and around 70% of the population calling themselves Christian, imagine the impact we could have if we all voted. But we should vote not so much for ourselves, as for others. When a country is run badly, the first people to suffer are the voiceless, the dispossessed and the poor. A failure to vote is therefore a failure to look after the interests of those for whom we ought to care (Isaiah 58:5-7).

- *We should carefully consider whom we vote for*

Having decided that we are going to vote, we now face the difficult question of *who* to vote for. Do we vote on local issues or national? Do we vote *for* candidates or a party or *against* them? Do we vote for the candidate we want even if we know that he or she has no hope of winning? Is tactical voting ever permissible? There are no simple answers but we can summarise the areas under three headings: principles, personalities and programmes.

Principles

- We need to find out exactly what the candidates and parties really believe.
- We ought to be very wary of simply voting on the basis of what will be best for us. We should have no interest in self-interest. A distinctive feature of Christians in the political arena should be that they consider what is best for others rather than for themselves.
- Avoid either negative or immoral campaign methods that major on greed,

hatred and fear. Equally questionable is the sort of negative campaigning which focuses entirely on the weaknesses of the opposition.

- We need to strive to see beyond the publicity stunts, video clips and glib slogans. We live in an age where words are cheap; it is important to ask what the reality is that lies behind the words and images.

Personalities

It is important that we do not cast our vote purely on the basis of how someone is portrayed in the election campaign. That said, individuals are important and we should do our best to find out about our local candidates. We might want to ask whether they are genuinely committed to moral values or do they simply adopt whatever is the current fashionable view? Does the candidate place their party's ideology above everything else? Would they be prepared to vote against the party line on moral grounds? Are they grappling with the bigger issues or are they simply interested in small-scale, day-to-day matters? Perhaps, above all, we should ask whether potential candidates seek to be elected in order to serve their self-interest or the interest of others.

Programmes

With regard to particular issues, there are several things, both positive and negative, to monitor. At present it is tempting to focus on the economy. But there are broader and more significant issues. One very important one is how we deal with the growing inequalities in British society. The most unstable societies are those where there is a vast gulf between rich and poor. Over the last few decades the rich have been getting richer and the poor poorer. The problem shows itself clearly in the area of housing, where many people – not just the poor – now find it impossible to get on the housing ladder. Housing is no longer considered a basic human right, but a means of financial gain for the upper class. To let Britain become a nation of haves and have-nots is neither moral nor wise.

Another penetrating issue centres on the question of exactly what sort of country we are to be in the world? The banking crisis has concentrated minds on the matter of how, as a nation, we influence the world. Are we to be merely the bankers and financial experts on the global scene or also a nation of innovators, manufacturers and educators? Linked to these questions are issues such as education, transport and infrastructure. It has been said that 'a politician thinks about the next election; a statesman about the next generation'. We need to look towards the future. We should listen out for sensible proposals for long-term solutions rather than expedient short-term fixes.

- *We should make our involvement as Christians known*

It will do us no harm at political meetings or in discussion at the door with canvassers to pose sensible questions and preface them with something like, 'As a Christian I feel strongly that ... What is your response?' One reason why the Christian voice has not been heard is that we have actually been too silent. Humility may be a virtue, but silence may be a crime.

- *We should maintain our political involvement after the election*

The work of governing a nation continues on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis. Our impact

may be more important in the time between elections than on the actual election day. One obvious way to wield influence is to send letters or e-mails to our MP on matters about which we feel strongly. Another way is more costly; we may actually want to get involved in the political system. Why not consider working as a volunteer with your political party? Why not explore the opportunity to serve in political office ourselves or help someone else to serve? We can also impact the political system for good through advocacy of certain issues. There is much in the British system that needs examination and probably replacement. The 'first past the post' electoral system, which awards all power to one winner in the voting system, is astonishingly flawed. Downright immoral is the way in which wealthy individuals and organisations influence our government disproportionately. The fundamental basis of democracy is that all citizens have a right to vote. We need to do our best to ensure that the weak and the oppressed have a voice that is heard. This will be a powerful witness of the Christian ethic of loving our neighbours as ourselves. So, above all, we should put pressure on politicians to live according to these principles.

What is the worst we can do? It is to give up in despair. One of the supreme Christian virtues is that of hope. If we stay out of politics things may only get worse. If we get involved and work in the world of politics then things may be very different. It will not be easy, but please do what you can. Mother Teresa was asked how she could persevere in her work when she and the Sisters of Charity were just a tiny drop in the ocean compared with the great need of the world. She responded, 'Ah yes, but remember the ocean is made of tiny drops.' Each of us has a part to play. As Christians we are an Easter people, living in a Good Friday world, so we can make a difference. And remember the words of Jesus who said, 'I am with you even to the end of the age.'