

The Christian & Politics: Has the Contemporary Church Become Obsessed With Political Solutions?

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Are Christianity and politics compatible? Can individual Christians ever involve themselves in the political arena for the betterment of society? Should the Church look to the power of politics to affect moral reform within America? Such questions are important for us to consider, particularly since evangelicals are growing more fond of political strategies to combat the rising tide of secular humanism. We believe that the following points may help to clarify the believer's relationship to government and politics.

1. Christians may involve themselves in the political arena as individuals, but it is not the place of the Church (corporately speaking) to change political/governmental institutions. Our Lord has not given His Church a political agenda, but a spiritual mandate to proclaim the Gospel and disciple the nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Such a mandate far transcends any political or cultural mission. Interestingly, the early church, living under a much more oppressive government than we in America, willingly submitted to Rome and never once attempted to form a political party or change Roman laws. They refused to allow any political crusade to take priority over the Gospel. They had a heavenly mission and eternal goals as opposed to temporal ones. They weren't merely interested in making a better society; they wanted to completely transform it with the message of the Gospel. If the Gospel is truly "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), why would we preach anything else? Why are so many sincere, but misguided Christians today, down-playing the centrality of the Gospel for a message of moral reform through political action? Have not our priorities become rather mixed?

2. As ambassadors for Christ, we are not to disobey civil government (except, of course, when they compel us to disobey God's Word – Acts 5:29), but subject ourselves to it (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-17) and pray for such rulers and authorities so that we might live a tranquil life (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

3. We must understand that spiritual results can only be achieved through spiritual means. Genuine moral reform will never come by merely changing laws, but by changing the hearts and minds of people. This means that we must recover the art of persuasion (although, ultimately, it is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit to convince and convict humans – John 16:8). As evangelicals, our greatest power is not found in protest, but in Gospel proclamation – for, indeed, if the Gospel is truly "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), why would we ever turn to political rhetoric and ideology?

Strange as it may sound to some, the problems we face in America today are not primarily political or even moral, but theological and spiritual. It is because people are alienated from a holy God and possess no knowledge of Him and His ways, that we are experiencing massive hedonism within our land. The remedy, therefore, must be primarily theological and spiritual. This, no political or moral crusade can ever rectify. The great apostle to the Gentiles has said it well: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4; cf. Ephesians 6:10-18). As a political insider and former presidential aide to Richard Nixon, we would be wise to listen to the words of Charles W. Colson:

Today's misspent enthusiasm for political solutions to the moral problems of our culture arises from a distorted view of both politics and Christianity – too low a view of the power of a sovereign God and too high a view of the ability of man. The idea that human systems, reformed by Christian influence, pave the road to the Kingdom – or at least, to revival – has the same utopian ring that one finds in Marxist literature. It also ignores the consistent lesson of history that shows that laws are most often reformed as a result of powerful spiritual movements (not vice versa). I know of no case where a spiritual movement was achieved by passing laws ("The Power Illusion." Power Religion, ed. Michael S. Horton [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992] p.32).

4. In voicing our opinions and beliefs to those in government, we must never adopt an "in your face" attitude. Arrogance and shouting down one's political opponent may be the way of the world, but it is not the way of Christ. We are, instead, to reply with "discretion and discernment" as did Daniel to Arioch (Daniel 2:14). We are to manifest the kind of respectful demeanor which Paul displayed before Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 26; cf. Titus 3:1-2; Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Peter 3:15). Regardless of our personal feelings towards our political leaders, we are commanded to "honor the King" (1 Peter 2:17).

5. We must not view any country or human government as our ultimate home – "for our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). For the time being, we are "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13; cf. 1 Peter 2:11). We are looking forward to a "heavenly country" (v.16) and God Himself has promised to prepare a city for us (v.16). This being true, why would we so entangle ourselves in the affairs of this world that we forget our heavenly country and the Divine mandate which Christ has given to His Church?

6. We should not be ignorant of the major political and cultural controversies of our day. As evangelicals, we are called to use our minds for the glory of God and to test all issues, whether religious or political, by the standard of Scripture (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

At the same time, however, we must recognize that the Bible will not always be as clear or direct in addressing the issues we currently face. Thus, "we should have Christian approaches to politics, recognizing that there will be a variety of these, but we should not expect to produce 'the Christian political program'" (Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* [Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989] p.139).

7. Because of God's common grace, Christians can work with unbelievers in attempting to promote justice and civic peace – and we can do so not only because it is good for believers and religious liberty, but because it is good for all people (Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15). Writing on this very matter, the authors of *The Search for Christian America* have stated:

Some Christians speak as though there is an absolute antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought, neglecting the degree to which Christians themselves are hampered by sin and error, and the degree to which God's common grace allows substantial room for communication and cooperation among all people in practical everyday life . . . Because we all live in God's world, we have, in God's common grace, some basis for discussing and shaping public policy without explicit appeal to the Bible. In fact, people from all nations of the world have been able to agree on many principles of justice and human interest, as for instance, in agencies and statements of the United Nations. That they violently disagree on other points or on the application of their common principles should not obscure this degree of commonality. So Christians and non-Christians may be able to agree on the value of charity toward the poor and the starving, on the undesirability of genocide, that literacy should be encouraged, on the virtue of loyalty to friends and parents, and on many other things (pp.135-136).

8. Since the arrival of Christ, we must not look upon any nation as God's chosen nation or even upon America as a "Christian nation." "The New Testament teaches unmistakably that Christ set aside national and ethnic barriers and that He has chosen to fulfill His central purposes in history through the Church, which transcends all such boundaries . . . The Lord of history has not aligned His purposes with the particular values of any given country or civilization" (*The Search for Christian America*, p.24).

9. The evangelical church of the 50s and 60s rightly criticized the liberal churches for abandoning its responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and, turning instead, to the "social gospel." Ironically, evangelicals today are doing the very same thing which they condemned liberal churches for doing by seeking to better society, not through Gospel proclamation and intelligent discussion of biblical truth, but through political power strategies, legislation, and efforts to move the unbelieving majority to live like Christians.

It seems that our primary concern is not with accurately preaching a God-centered Gospel and its implications for both pagans and believers, but with abortion, traditional values, and a romanticized view of America as a "Christian nation." While these might be important issues, it is not the Gospel nor is it a message that mankind most needs to hear. How sad it is that some Christians are more versed in conservative politics than in the writings of both the Old and New Testaments. Evangelicals need not repent of their involvement in politics per se, but only of their obsession with it. As Charles W. Colson has said:

That's one of the weaknesses of the evangelical movement today – that it is so obsessed with politics. It believes that there's got to be a political solution to everything . . . You don't change a culture by passing laws. You change a culture by changing people's habits. That's why the Gospel is so central to the possibilities of cultural reformation in American life (Interview, "Running the Race," Rutherford [Journal], August 1996, p.15).

10. We must remember that political solutions are not ultimate, but temporal. We cannot afford to look to human government (even the best ones) for providing the final answers to the moral problems that we face. For that, we must look to Scripture and the God who is portrayed within its pages. "Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation" (Psalm 146:3); "Thus says the Lord, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength'" (Jeremiah 17:5).

What Some Christian Leaders Are Saying About Bringing America Back to God (with my response):

1. Robert Dugan, Director of the National Association of Evangelicals' Office of Public Affairs, believes that he can offer a strategy for "those who want to reshape society through the political process" (Winning the New Civil War, p.88).

The above statement is theologically naïve – for when has any society been reshaped for spiritual and moral good through the "political process"? Genuine moral reform will simply never come through the "political process", but only through lives transformed by the sovereign hand of God working through the greatest message in human history: The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Randall Terry has said, "If righteousness is going to prevail; if paganism is going to be turned back, then we must move to restore this nation to being a Christian Nation. Otherwise, we will lose the war for America's soul, and the United States as we know it will perish. And if we are going to reform and rebuild our country, we're going to have to deliberately infiltrate the power bases of America. We'll deliberately have to raise up men like John Adams and Teddy Roosevelt

to be morally correct, not politically correct statesmen" (Why Does A Nice Guy Like Me Keep Getting Thrown in Jail? pp.80-81).

Terry naively assumes that righteousness will prevail only when America is restored to being a "Christian Nation." But, again, like so many Christians involved in the contemporary "culture war," he has failed to learn the lesson of history which teaches that political power and legislation can never truly reform the human heart. Terry also wrongly assumes that America was a "Christian Nation." While America has, indeed, been influenced by Christian values, it has never truly been a "Christian Nation," unless, of course, we wish to water-down the theological meaning of the term "Christian" and reduce it to one which merely denotes common morality and virtue. The only "Christian Nation" that the New Testament speaks of are those who have been spiritually regenerated by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9) and who reside – not simply in the United States – but in every country and region of the world (Revelation 5:9; 7:9).

One further point. Contrary to what Terry and others may believe, God has not called us to convert whole nations – nor is our "success" dependent upon doing so. We are, indeed, called to faithfully and accurately proclaim the Gospel to those who are unregenerate, but we are not expected to convert them – only God can do that (John 1:12-13; Acts 16:14; Romans 9:15-18; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; James 1:18). Thus, we are called to be faithful to the message of the Gospel, not necessarily numerically successful in "results" (as commonly defined) – for it is God alone who adds to His Church (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 3:6-7; Colossians 2:19).

Evidence that the Early Church Did Not Have A Political Agenda:

1. We need to remember that the first-century period had many of the same problems that we have today (abortion, crime, drunkenness, immorality, poverty, corrupt and evil rulers, etc.), yet they never pursued any form of moral reform through political action, nor did they align with the numerous political/social zealots existing at that time who wanted to either reform or overthrow Rome. They had, undoubtedly, every reason to do so, but never did.
2. Because the early church recognized that man's greatest problem was sin and, thus, the remedy was spiritual in nature, they did not preoccupy themselves with making a society, that was under God's judgment, outwardly virtuous – but, instead, concentrated their efforts on faithfully articulating the Gospel and living lives which demonstrated the reality of their claims (1 Peter 2:11-17).
3. Because Jesus Himself taught that "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36); because the early Christians recognized that "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh," but spiritual in nature (2 Corinthians 10:3-4); because they recognized that "our struggle is not

against flesh and blood," but against demonic forces (Ephesians 6:12); because they recognized that their true citizenship was in heaven (Philippians 3:20); because they viewed themselves as "strangers and aliens" within this world (1 Peter 2:11); and because they desired a "heavenly country" (Hebrews 11:16), they did not concentrate their efforts to pursue political action or even social reform (although the early church did seek to provide for the poor). They had set their minds upon heavenly realities and eternal goals, rather than seeking to apply temporary bandages upon a society that was destined to eternal judgment.

Contrary to what some critics might assume, this was not a case of being "so heavenly-minded that they were no earthly good." It was, instead, a clear indication that their priorities were in order. It must be kept in mind that the early Christians still sought to minister to the physical needs of people (Mt. 26:8-9; Acts 6:1; Galatians 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:18; Titus 3:14). Thus, they were not guilty of neglecting the physical and necessary aspects of man under the guise of a false piety. Even still, this was a far cry from any form of political action and even further from the modern day "social gospel" which seeks to place any political or social cause under the banner of the Gospel.

4. The early Christians of the first century lived under a much more oppressive government than we in America, and yet they willingly submitted to Rome and never once attempted to form a political party or even change Roman laws that they deemed immoral. They had much more justification for doing so than we in America, but never did.

5. When both Paul and Peter dealt with the issue of slavery in their respective epistles (Philemon and 1 Peter 2:18-20), they did not, in any way, encourage Christians to revolt against the evils of slavery, but to remain obedient to their masters – even cruel ones! But we must ask, if the early church possessed such political and social zealotry, why didn't they begin a labor party to protect the rights of slaves? Why didn't they gather all of the runaway slaves and form a protest march all the way to Rome? Even if one argues that this would not have been feasible under the tyrannical government of Rome, couldn't they have done something more than to simply encourage slaves to remain obedient to their masters and endure their abuse? To those who possess the mindset that all, or at least most, of our problems can be solved through the political process, this does not make much sense. But to those who possess the mind of Christ and who recognize the inherent limitations of political/social action, it is Divine wisdom.

6. When Christians were being slandered and persecuted by their pagan neighbors, Peter didn't suggest that the Christians start a "Christian Anti-Defamation League," but instead, encouraged them to "patiently endure it" and to not retaliate (1 Peter 2:12-21; 3:13-17; 4:3-4, 12-19). Does this sound like the kind of advice that would come from one who was politically oriented? Would the current leaders of the "Religious Right" encourage their followers to do the same?

7. It's interesting to note that when Paul stood before the governing authorities on several occasions, he never once engaged such rulers in political or social discourse. No doubt, these instances were grand opportunities for him to complain about such social evils as slavery and excessive taxes, yet he apparently never did. Why would Paul, if he was indeed so politically minded, allow such golden opportunities to pass by? Instead, as in the case of Felix recorded in Acts 24:24-25, we find him speaking to this ruler about faith in Christ, righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come! Was Paul, in this instance, guilty of being so heavenly-minded that he was no earthly good? Shouldn't he have argued vigorously for human rights and social reform (issues which would have affected a broader range of people), than simply limit his discussion to soteriological matters? Once again, where the political zealot sees a missed opportunity, the discerning believer sees fidelity to the Gospel and priorities that are in order.

Evidence that America is Not, Nor Was Founded, As A "Christian Nation":

1. The founding of our country was a mixed bag of both Christian and Enlightenment influences. To say that it was solely Christian ideas and influences which shaped the founding of the United States, is to be naïve of American history.

2. While some of our founding fathers were Christians, many of them were not. For instance, John Adams opposed the doctrine of the Trinity and spoke of the deity of Christ as "this awful blasphemy" which it was necessary to get rid of. Thomas Jefferson, likewise, was anti-supernaturalistic, eventually producing his own version of the Bible which jettisoned all of the recorded miracles – including the resurrection! James Madison believed that the government should in no way sanction national days of prayer. The truth is, while all of the founding fathers believed in a Divine Creator, they did not necessarily adhere to distinctly Christians ideas about Him – nor did they all believe that salvation was found solely in the person of Jesus Christ. Many of them were Deists rather than Christians. Thus, when we find statements from them which speak of "God" or a "Creator," we must immediately ask, "What God do they have in mind?" "Which Creator are they referring to – the impersonal god of Deistic belief or the holy and personal God revealed in Scripture?"

Some well-meaning believers have tried to argue that all, or at least the vast majority, of the founding fathers were Christian because they were enrolled as members of Christian churches. But while it is true that many of them were registered members of Protestant church bodies, this does not at all mean that they were spiritually regenerate (which is the only kind of Christian that the New Testament speaks of) any more than the people today, who regularly attend Christian churches, are truly converted. It must be remembered that church attendance during this period was common and it was quite fashionable and proper to consider oneself "Christian." Moreover, this does not mean that the majority of the founding fathers viewed life from a distinctly

Christian worldview nor possessed a mature biblical-theological foundation in Christian doctrine. And even if, for the sake of argument, they were all genuine Christians, this is far from proving that they were seeking to establish a "Christian Nation."

3. There is no mention whatsoever of Jesus Christ in America's founding documents (Declaration of Independence and The Constitution). In fact, the Constitution doesn't even make a single reference to God! Isn't this rather odd for a nation that's supposedly a "Christian Nation"? Why would supposedly Christian men leave out the founder of their religion in such important documents that will serve as the basis of their "Christian Nation"?

4. The United States was the first Western nation to omit explicitly Christian symbolism (such as the cross) from its flag and other national symbols. Why would the founding fathers neglect to employ such Christian symbolism on the national flag if, indeed, it is true that they were seeking to establish a "Christian Nation"?

5. In 1797, the United States made a treaty with the Islamic nation of Tripoli. This particular treaty was negotiated under George Washington, ratified by the Senate, and signed by President John Adams. But notice what is said in the actual document: "As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion, as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims, . . . it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries" (Hunter Miller, *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States* [Government Printing Office, 1930], Vol.II, p.365).

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Recommended Reading:

Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

Michael S. Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

Eds. Os Guinness & John Seel, *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992).

Ed. Michael S. Horton, *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992).

Thomas W. Frazier, Jr., "The Church: Living in the Present World Under the Cross of Christ," ed. John Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival* [Journal] (Winter – 1996, Vol.5/No.1), pp.65-80.