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CHRISTIANS & POLITICS: HOW SHALL THEY MIX?

Various

By

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Special Message

Christians & Politics: How Shall They Mix?

Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; Titus 3:1-2

1 Peter 2:13-17; Ps. 72:1-2, 4, 12-14

"It would be political suicide to give that speech," said an aide to his boss. "He's right, Senator," chimed in another aide. "It's just one clear-cut statement after another."

Perhaps I am committing pastoral suicide to dare to talk on an issue as emotionally explosive as "Christians and Politics: How Shall They Mix?" That may be especially true on the eve of a presidential election in which religious issues have played such an important role.

As you know, President Reagan was swept into office in 1980 by the winds of the "New Christian Right", as it has been called. It is no secret that the same "New Christian Right" is pushing hard for his re-election. Consequently, there is not a person among us who has not been faced with the question, "How much should the church involve itself in politics?" And, "How much should I, as a Christian citizen, be involved in politics?"

I want to address those questions this morning. But first I want to make several disclaimers. The first is that I cannot possibly be comprehensive in one message. I must limit my comments on many points where, if time permitted, much more could be said.

Second, my approach is going to be theological. By that I mean that we will be looking at a number of passages and in some cases talking about doctrines which run throughout Scripture rather than studying a particular text. My goal is not to give you a pre-packaged answer on these issues, but rather to lay down some tracks for you to run on. I want to help you in the process of thinking biblically about the subject of civil government. And thirdly, I am in process in my thinking on these matters. I have done some reading and thinking on these issues in recent months, but I have a long way to go. This message reflects where I'm at now, not necessarily where I'll be 5 or 10 years from now.

I want to make a foundational proposition; then I want to talk about the nature of civil government (in the Scriptures); the relationship of the church and the government; and finally, the relationship of individual Christian citizens and the government. Here is my foundational proposition:

Christ must be Lord of our political views.

That may sound perfectly obvious, but it is anything but obvious in practice. People whose lives are otherwise in submission to Christ have a tendency to forget about His Lordship when they climb into the political ring. Some Christians have maintained that politics is dirty and worldly and that, as citizens of heaven, Christians have no business with politics at all, even to the point of refusing to vote. Others get involved whole hog, but their involvement is more emotional than rational. Few seem to have thought things through biblically.

But if Christ is Lord of all of life, then we must allow Him to be Lord of our political views. In 2 Cor. 10:5 Paul says that his goal involved “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” That must include our political thinking.

1. The nature of government: God-ordained & accountable.

In a nutshell, the Scriptures teach that government is ordained of God and thus accountable to God.

A. Government is ordained of God.

(Read Romans 13:1-7.) When Paul wrote this, the godless Nero was the emperor. Since he obviously fell far short of the ideal ruler, we must conclude that it would be invalid to make exceptions to the principle laid down here: namely, that God has ordained government authority as a part of His plan for this earth. God’s purposes for government can be boiled down to two broad areas:

(1) To promote justice for all.

1 Peter 2:14 says that kings and governors are “for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.” Romans 13 talks about the government “bearing the sword” as an avenger who brings God’s wrath upon the one who practices evil. That points to the power of the state to use capital punishment (and the threat thereof) to bring about justice for all.

Furthermore, Psalm 72 (plus a number of other Old Testament passages) talks about the king vindicating the afflicted, crushing oppressors, and demonstrating compassion on the poor and needy. The Scriptures distinguish between those who are poor on account of laziness and those who are poor due to disease, famine, catastrophes, or the exploitation of the wicked. God's condemnation rests on the first group, whereas His compassion falls upon the second. Government should protect and help those who are truly poor, needy, and innocently oppressed or wronged.

The government does this (in part) by legislating morality. Laws against murder are moral and biblical in that the sixth commandment states, "You shall not murder." Laws against theft encompass the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal." Laws against racial discrimination reflect the biblical teaching that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Deut. 10:17). So don't let anybody sell you the ridiculous notion that we can't legislate morality. That is precisely what the government does, and rightly so. Laws should protect citizens from sin (e.g. prostitution laws, drug laws, etc.). The fact that something is illegal will restrain many who otherwise may be tempted to engage in the particular activity. The real debate is, which morality should we legislate?

Thus the government is ordained of God to promote justice.

(2) To promote peace and order in society.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 states that we should pray for kings and those in authority "in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." This means that the government must maintain adequate national defense so that we are not overrun by some totalitarian power that would rob us of peace and liberty. And internally the government should promote religious liberty to all within the bounds of human safety and rights.

Since the government has been ordained of God to promote justice and peace, it follows that

B. Government is accountable to God.

Note Daniel 4:32; 5:21. God told the mighty Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel repeated it later to Belshazzar that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whom-ever He wishes. Pilate said to Jesus, "Do you not know that I have

authority to release you and I have authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:10-11).

The significant thing in each of these instances is that none of the rulers in question were a part of the covenant nation or believers in God. And yet Daniel and the Lord Jesus reminded these pagan rulers that their authority was not autonomous. It was given to them by God, and the implication is, they would have to give an account to Him someday. Part of our role as believers, as we have opportunity, is to remind even the most pagan government authorities that they rule under God and are accountable to Him. That leads to the thorny issue of ...

2. The relationship between the church and the government:
Not total separation nor total identification, but confrontation.
 - A. Not total separation: There is no such thing as total separation of church and state.

As you probably know, the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" is not in the U.S. Constitution. (It is in the Soviet Constitution.) It occurs in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association dated January 1, 1802 and it reflects Jefferson's interpretation of the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Originally the first amendment was included to insure that the federal government have nothing to do with state religious affairs and that the federal government be prohibited from establishing a national church (such as the Church of England). Several of the colonies had state churches. That was not in question.

The same Congress which drafted the Constitution reaffirmed the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 which states, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of learning shall forever be encouraged." Thus religion and morality (based on religion) were a part of the foundation of our nation's educational system. The founding fathers would be aghast at the current interpretation

of the First Amendment which excludes any mention of God or the Bible from public schools and other government functions.

Since part of the government's God-ordained function is to promote justice, and since, by necessity, that involves the legislation of morality, it is absurd to talk about a total separation of church and state. The church concerns itself with morality, and so there is much overlap. Thus I disagree with Senator Barry Goldwater who said,

I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in "A," "B," "C," and "D." Just who do they think they are? And from where do they presume to claim the right to dictate their moral beliefs to me?

And I am even more angry as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate.

And the religious factions will go on imposing their will on others unless the decent people connected to them recognize that religion has no place in public policy.

They must learn to make their views known without trying to make their views the only alternatives.

The great decisions of government cannot be dictated by the concerns of religious factions....

We have succeeded for 205 years in keeping the affairs of state separate from the uncompromising idealism of religious groups and we mustn't stop now. (*New York Times*, September 16, 1981, p.B9).

Of course, the Senator has his right to his opinion. But constitutionally, we have a right to vote him out of office, as well as to exert as much muscle as possible on moral issues. There is no such thing as total separation of church and state because both institutions concern themselves with morality.

B. Not total identification: The church must be careful to be known for the gospel and righteousness, not for a partisan political stance.

We need to remember several things in this regard.

- (1) Evangelism, not political power, is God's primary means of dealing with the world's problems.

If we forget this, we fall into the trap of the liberal theologians who promoted the social gospel. Since the major problems in this world stem from sin in individual hearts, the only real solution is to see people brought into a right relationship with God. Jesus didn't command us to go and win political races; He did command us to go and disciple all nations.

- (2) The doctrine of depravity must always be in view when the church touches politics.

I believe that Christians err and open the cause of Christ to possible scandal when they become overly enamored with a particular political party or candidate. Neither party is thoroughly biblical. There is a mixture of good and evil in both parties. And all candidates (and all Christians) are fallen sinners who are susceptible to the lust for power and prestige. Thus we also are liable to the danger of using our political muscle for private gain rather than for the public good. And we dare not trust the government to do more than God designed it to do.

When (as in the current election) one party (and its presidential candidate) takes a clear stand against such clear-cut moral issues as abortion, homosexual rights, the ERA (which would undermine the traditional family), and the other party (and its candidate) takes a clear stand on the opposite side, I think that a Christian has virtually no choice on who to vote for, whatever your normal political leanings. But at the same time we must make it clear that we are voting on matters of biblical righteousness, not on a partisan political basis. The church's primary concern is for the gospel and righteousness, not for partisan politics.

Thus the relationship between church and state is not one of total separation nor one of total identification. It is ...

- C. Confrontation: The church must confront the state on matters of immorality and injustice.

In the Old Testament the prophets called the kings to account on these matters. In the New Testament, John the Baptist and Je-

sus confronted the religious and political leaders. The Apostle Paul confronted the governor, Felix and his wife Drusilla, concerning righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25). He preached to Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice.

This brings up a difficult question: How far can we push Christian morality (legislatively) in a secular society?

During the colonial days, some states punished people who traveled on Sunday. Obviously, we don't want to go that far (most of us would be guilty!). I have corresponded with Franky Schaeffer on this matter, and he argues that we need to go for all we can or else we won't have a free country in 15 years. I do not agree. If we press for all we can without being clear about the limits, we will create a severe backlash against Christianity by the secularists who will fear that we will be burning witches. I also talked personally with Dr. Carl Henry about this recently. His answer was that the Ten Commandments (especially the Second Tablet) form an adequate base for legislating morality. But as I have thought about that, I find it terribly inadequate. It would mean passing laws against adultery and coveting.

I'm still thinking this through, but at this point I agree with theologian John Warwick Montgomery (in *Christianity Today* [1/23/81], pp. 60, 63; I've modified his approach slightly, but rely on it here).

- (1) We must distinguish between biblical moral absolutes and gray areas.

Abortion is clear-cut. I do not see how any Christian who believes in the Bible can argue in favor of abortion-on-demand. On other issues (Prohibition would be an example), committed, godly believers differ. On such gray areas you may choose to fight for your position as an individual Christian citizen, but make sure that you make it plain that these are personal opinions, not God's revelation.

- (2) We must not seek to legislate even genuinely biblical moral teachings where the value of that teaching will be recognized only by those who have already accepted Christ as Lord and the Bible as God's Word.

We don't want to prosecute blasphemers or adulterers, even though such things violate God's law. To force unbelievers to abide by such laws would be counter-productive in the long run in that eventually people would rebel against Christianity and cast off all influence of the church.

- (3) We should strive to legislate all socially valuable moral teachings of scripture whose value can be meaningfully argued for in a pluralistic society.

Laws against abortion, laws protecting the handicapped and the elderly, laws against pornography and child abuse--all of these can be argued for on the grounds of broad social appeal, even for the non-Christian. Our reason for arguing for such laws is because God's Word is clear on these matters. But these and many other values can be agreed upon by a broad coalition of people, many of whom would not accept Christ as Lord or the Bible as God's Word. If we argue these issues on the basis of scientific, social, and ethical grounds (such as the Golden Rule) which even the non-believer can accept, then if the matter becomes the law of the land, the unbeliever who disagrees with it is less likely to feel that a particular religion has been forced upon him.

- (4) In the political arena, if the choice is between a reasonable compromise that has a good chance of passing versus the uncompromised position which has a poor chance of passing, go for the compromise.

I am not saying that we compromise our moral standards. I am saying that in a fallen world, where we are dealing with unbelievers, we may have to settle for less than God's best. In the area of abortion, for example, although I believe that it is immoral to kill a developing baby simply because it is the result of rape or incest or because it is deformed, I would be quick to settle for an amendment banning abortions except in those cases rather than in holding out for an amendment which bans all abortions. By accepting the compromise we would end 95 percent of all current abortions. Then we can go to work on the other 5 percent. So I'm not saying that we compromise our standards. I am saying that we need to be politically wise.

We have talked about: 1. The nature of government: God ordained and accountable; and, 2. The relationship between the church and the government: not total separation nor total identification, but confrontation.

3. The relationship between individual Christians and the government.

Here I'm not focusing on the church as a bloc, but on the individual Christian citizen. First I'll show what is required of all Christians; then what is optional.

A. Required of every Christian:

- (1) To be subject to the government unless it asks us to disobey God.

Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-14; Acts 5:29; Daniel 1, 3, 6.

- (2) To grant proper honor to those in authority (1 Pet. 2:17).

This involves our attitude.

- (3) To do right and cooperate with government authorities whenever possible (Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:15).
- (4) To pay taxes (Rom. 13:6,7; Matt. 22:17-21).
- (5) To pray for government authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-2).
- (6) To evangelize and disciple government leaders when possible (1 Tim. 2:3-4; Matt.28:19; Paul's example with Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and others).
- (7) To be informed and vote for candidates and issues which will, to the best degree possible, uphold God's purposes for government (Matt. 5:13-16; Titus 3:1).

The bible does not address this issue directly because democracy was not then practiced. Some Christians argue that we are citizens of heaven and thus should not get involved at all in politics. But we are also citizens of this earth and since we are given a say in who rules over us, to be silent is to allow the ungodly to win the day. Christians who do not vote are abdicating their responsibility and must answer to God.

B. Optional for some Christians:

- (1) To work as volunteers or supporting staff for politicians who uphold justice and morality.

This is not required of every believer, but it may be the calling of some. Those who are not so called should not censure those who are; and those who are so called should not expect those who are not to be involved to the same degree as they are.

- (2) To run for political office.

Again, this must be a matter of personal calling before God. It may be on a local level (school board, city council, etc.) or on a state or national level. The church ought to be supplying the government with men and women of integrity who fear God. Government is a difficult place to maintain a strong testimony for Christ. But there are two notable examples in the Bible of men who served well in pagan governments: Joseph in Egypt, and Daniel in Babylon.

Conclusion

Let me return to my foundational proposition:

Christ must be Lord of our political views.

I trust that you now have some tracks to run on as you think through the implications of that statement for your own life.

Discussion Questions

1. Should the government grant religious freedom for all? What about Mormon polygamists? What about cults?
2. Does the Bible support a particular political theory of economics--for example--free enterprise vs. socialism?
3. Is it ever right for a Christian to withhold taxes in protest?
4. Do Christians ever have the right to be involved in revolution or the use of violence to further their aims? Would you have participated in the American Revolution? Would it have been right to attempt to assassinate Hitler?

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