THE CHRISTIAN AND POLITICS

Vincent Sawyer

Today the debate rages: Should a Christian be involved in politics? Should preachers? And if so, should they be involved in politics individually or collectively (on the organizational level)? Many conservatives today believe that it is time for true Christians to come out of their "shells" and become actively involved politically. On what basis do they make this appeal?

Although I believe individual political involvement is important, it is necessary at this point to briefly correct a few misconceptions, hermeneutical flaws, and improper applications of Scripture which are made by some who advocate the Christian's obligation to political involvement - whether individual or collective. They often support their position by arguing that the O.T. prophets spoke to the moral issues in the government of their day. It must be understood, however, that the prophets of the O.T. lived in a society distinct from the one in which we live. They lived in a "Theocratic (God-ruled) society. It was a society where religious and political elements were fused together (a modern parallel would be a "church-state"). The N.T., however, teaches the separation of church & state, since God is not working through a nation, but through His Church today. Some say the N.T. preacher is like the prophets of old, "calling the nation back to God". Such an assertion is not true. The responsibility of the preacher is to call individuals to salvation. It is impossible to call nations back to a relationship to God that she never had in the first place.

America is not O.T. Israel, and preachers are not O.T. prophets.

Others contend that Christ's Church is to be salt and light (Mt.5:13,14) in the political arena, fighting on behalf of decency and morality. While these are the issues Christians must face and defend, Christ's assertion in its context is directed toward individual responsibility to Godliness and testimony for Christ, and has nothing to do with the activity of organized churches (see Pickering, p.9). To be honest, the Great Commission does not include political activity (Mt.28:16-20); the Apostles and the churches they founded were not involved in political activity; and the epistles entail no teaching or exhortation promoting political activity on the part of churches. As a matter of fact Christ was largely silent about political matters. He never encouraged a revolution against Rome. His kingdom was "not of this world", and His time to set up His kingdom had not yet come.

One must always keep <u>individual</u> responsibilities distinguished from the ministries of the <u>local church</u>. Baptists have traditionally eschewed political involvement, and often cite the example of Roger Williams, who taught the separation of church and state as a reason. When church and state mix, the result is a uniform code of worship, and religious freedom is lost. The phrase "freedom of church and state" means: the church (as an organization) does not tell the state what to do, and the state does not tell the church what to do. This does <u>not,</u> however, prohibit a pastor from informing his people about political issues. He is free to do so though it should not be a "hobby horse" with him, or his church will be led to the notion that its job as an organization is to be involved in politics. Can a Christian be involved in politics? Yes and no. Individual responsibility - yes!, Corporate (church) responsibility - no!

Because "true" government is ordained of God (Rom.13), this aspect of the world's system is not restricted from the believer's involvement. A government such as America's, which is "by the people and for the people," provides advantages that should be redeemed. As long as it remains a free nation, Christians as

individual citizens **may** be involved in politics; However, they **must** submit to the government and pay taxes where required (Rom.13:6). As a citizen of this country an individual believer is to 1) obey the laws (Rom.13:1-7); 2) Pray for political leaders (I Tim.2:1-3); 3) keep informed about issues relating to his role as a citizen (ex. Paul's knowledge of his rights as a Roman citizen - Acts 22:25-29; 25:11); and 4) participate in the elective process by voting. The Christian should have every right the non-Christian has. He has a right to vote and should, a right to participate in public debate, and a right to run for offices if that is God's will for him. (The believer however, is not under any mandate to run for office - while he is free to do so, he is not commanded by God to do so). The believer has the freedom under God (not a mandate) to become active in the affairs of their nation and its government, both locally and nationally. While the freedom in America exists, believers owe it to their children to seek the preservation of liberties every human has a right to enjoy.

Christians need to stand for the principles involving life, liberty & justice. The sanctity of human life, the Judeo-Christian values of morality, the individual's freedom to employ, work, and worship, and the preservation of the family with its values and relationships - all must be defended. No citizen with the right to speech should be neutral - including Christians. Indeed they cannot be, because to be silent is to give consent. That which gets Christian citizens into "hot water" is not their political involvement, but rather their improper attitudes in such involvement. Such attitudes are inconsistent with their title "Christian" - and the world knows

this.

A believer must be a Daniel when he deals with the "powers that be" - gracious in his opposition, remembering that a "soft answer turns away wrath." He must fight against wrong principle and not against the person. As Christians we must ask: "would Jesus Christ do this?" or "what would He do in this situation?".

While the Christian has the liberty to involve himself in the political realm, he must not lose his priorities as a child of God. Nothing should cause the believer to neglect or abandon his God-assigned mission in favor of a different mission, no matter how worthy any other mission might seem. Believers in the N.T. "went every where preaching the word" (Acts 8:4), not holding political rallies (Pickering, p.10).

Many present fundamentalists who are deeply involved in politics readily answer that the necessity for involvement was forced upon them by circumstances. Issues such as homosexuality, feminism, abortion and the loss of freedoms have caused great concern for the evangelical pastor. Despite such circumstances, it must be remembered that the gospel preacher is not to be a political activist! God's preachers must major on preaching God's Word. Nothing must interfere! Nothing should deter a man of God from his ministry of the word and prayer (II Tim.4:2; Acts 6:4). Everyone's time is limited and must be redeemed for God. Preachers who become consumed with patriotic activities (as noble as they may be) are robbed of precious time needed to win souls and feed the flock of God (I Pet.5:1-6).

As the result of pastors who have given themselves to fight in the political arena, churches today suffer from lack of spiritual nourishment. Christians have acquired an altered philosophy of Christ's commission, and this neglect and divergence will snowball if it is not checked.

As deplorable as it is, the fact that liberal clergy have been involved in political matters (thus promoting their liberal views) does not justify conservative clergy doing the same! They have time to invest in those areas because they have nothing to feed their lost flocks! The Biblical pastor, on the other hand has a higher priority which he cannot afford to neglect - even though the pull is great for him to divert into other "good" involvements. As a pastor, he must do what God has commissioned him to do and leave the results with God. This takes faith! Obedience to God is vital! How can any pastor think he is under the blessing of God while involved in politics, when his flock is starving as a result and the true ministry is abandoned?

While pastors need to avoid "hobby horses" from the pulpit, it is not wrong to deal with issues that God's Word addresses - no matter how "touchy" they might be. God's Word speaks much about human government, and these concepts must be taught. For example, it may be taught that communism is not simply a differing political viewpoint. "At its heart, it is a false religion that demands the worship, adoration, and total dedication and service of its people. It is the greatest adversary the Church has ever faced" (Kennedy, p.32). God's preachers must, from the pulpits, address the moral issues of the day with courage and clarity. If the choice comes down to obeying God rather than men (government) and going to jail for it, then so be it. The key word for a pastor's preaching is "balance". The pastor's message is not a political agenda but the full Biblical mandate of submission to the will of God. The preacher must remain steadfast in his assigned work: "holding forth the word of life" (Phil.2:16).

There is a great difference between speaking to moral issues and organizing political activity. The pastor has no Biblical justification for belonging to organizations such as the "Moral Majority". In fact, to join hands with those who are opposed to Bible Christianity is contrary to the doctrine of separation (even if it is for a noble, common cause). Christ's churches are to separate from evil alliances (II Cor.6:14). Pastors cannot join hands with religious pagans without being tainted in some way. Many a church has moved from positions formerly held because of wrong alliances. "Alliances on moral and political issues can prepare the way for alliances on spiritual issues, or at least weaken one's sensitivities to the evils of such alliances" (Pickering, p.10).

The N.T. teaches that the world system is passing away (I Jn.2:16-17), and that it "lies in the lap of the wicked one" (I Jn. 5:19). While it is true that he world's system belongs to the "prince of this world" (Jn. 14:30), it is necessary to note that the institution of government is ordained of God (Rom.13). This aspect of the world (when it rightly fulfills its purpose of punishing evil doers and rewarding those who do good - Rom.13:1-7) is not of Satan; though many (sadly most) of government's representatives are Satan's children. If Satan had his way there would be no strict government, but anarchy - with every man doing that which is right in his own eyes. Individual involvement in politics is justifiable by Scripture, but every believer who is involved must keep his priorities in order. Satan has always tempted believers with "good" things rather than the "best" things. He insidiously tempts pastors, churches, and christian laymen, to be absorbed in most anything, so long as it detracts (diverts) full energies from the God-assigned mission to "make personal

disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19-20).

"Christ's work in this world today is not to gather a "moral majority" but a "regenerate minority" (Pickering, p.10). To encourage the lost world toward "morality" when it is "dead in trespasses and sins" is like attempting to put a "band-aid" on a gaping wound. One cannot truly be moral until he is first regenerate. To attempt to make a lost person or nation moral apart from the miraculous regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is like polishing brass on a sinking ship. What society needs is change from the inside out. not vice-versa. The cause must be dealt with and healed before its effects are dealt with. For example a man dying from heart failure does not need an external bath, he needs internal surgery. Society (in any country) needs the great physician - Jesus Christ to work on individuals. As
individuals change, so do families, when families change so do societies, when societies change so do nations. We cannot afford to waste our time as pastors on the peripheral matters, but need to concentrate all efforts on the deep seated needs of all men, before real political and national change can occur.

Contrary to the opinion of some, pastoral political involvement does not provide an "avenue of free course for the gospel to go forth." Rather it confuses the issue. By linking politics to the gospel, the minds of the "natural man" tend only toward making humanitarian improvements or "christianizing" society. The result is a social gospel - still devoid of Christ. "As ministers we must never settle for less than the radical transformation of heart God requires" (Lutzer,p.101). Regardless of political greatness, or military might any nation will fail if individuals who make up the nation fail to repent of sin. God no where says in His Word that He will revive or maintain the freedoms of His people through organized, ecclesiastical political

activity.

It is "righteousness" that "exalts a nation". The revivals of Wesley and Whitfield resulted in great social changes. However, it was God who brought this about by the miracle of the new birth. As believers, we cannot expect lost politicians to be anything other than lost, blind men. The believer is foolish to place all of his "eggs in the Basket" of political power. "If we look to Washington, we will often be disappointed...If our problems were political, a political solution would be all that is needed. But if they are spiritual (and indeed they are), they must be addressed from that vantage point" (Lutzer, p.103). Christians are strangers and pilgrims who cannot afford to pin their hope on the fortunes of the erratic political process. God alone is the believer's defender. "Political reformation could subtly substitute for spiritual transformation. Of course we all favor laws that reflect Biblical morality. But even such progress falls far short of the real answer to our national decay" (Lutzer, p.101). Political reformation without real internal change in the people and politicians of America provides only a false sense of security. We are "leaning on a broken reed" if we trust Government for security.

> Fortunately, our strength does not depend on a political majority. The fortunes of a nation often depend on a godly minority, as in the case of Gideon. If God does not take up our cause and fight in our behalf, we shall eventually be destroyed... Too often we have blamed the humanists for the moral decay around us without realizing that God may be chastising us through them. It was God's prophet Jonah, not the pagan sailors, who caused the storm of the Mediterranean. If we are able to "turn our nation back to God", it most likely should be attributed to a godly remnant's intercessory prayer for spiritual revival. (Lutzer, p.102).

The challenge for Christians is to keep their priorities right! Christians may involve themselves in politics. The pastor should not, except in those areas that every believer is obligated to. Freedom as it is known in America should be taken advantage of. However full trust must be placed in God. The pastor, church, and christian layman, must fulfill their God-given mandate to the great commission, because obedience to God - not our present political involvement - is what will really matter in eternity!

SOURCES QUOTED

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