

Why Should Christians Get Involved with Politics?

Fewer Christians nowadays dispute the legitimacy, indeed the imperative, of seriously getting involved with the socio-political world, although from the early twentieth century on they have generally manifested a marked reluctance to do so. In the face of contemporary society structures increasingly antipathetic or indeed hostile to the Christian worldview, some have advocated retreat into a sectarian inwardness or Christian ghetto mentality. Others, however, have vigorously embraced the historic Reformed conviction that the Church's task is to 'transform' society. This approach claims that 'being' the Church involves preserving its God-given distinctives, whilst simultaneously engaging in a meaningful way with 'the powers that be'.

Politics is concerned with debate over values, with worldview, with the shaping of society. Surely that wholly coincides with the Church's mission? And even if its impact ends up muted or ignored, nevertheless the Church is at least being faithful in seeking to connect God with the contemporary world. Theology too must surely be related to the public sphere. For if theology is not about disciplined and applied reflection on the nature and destiny of life, involving an ultimate and absolute frame of reference, what is it? Christians should therefore endorse and model an intimate, interactive relationship between God and the world. Christ himself called them to engage with the world without compromising their faith (John 17).

There are three common arguments put forward from time to time objecting to Christian involvement in politics:

- *The church should stick to religion and spiritual matters.* Some Christians maintain the Church should be concerned solely with the other-worldly Kingdom of God. But indifference to the things pertaining to this life involves flawed biblical exegesis, implying Hellenic rather than the more holistic Judeo-Christian influence. God is consistently portrayed in the Bible as being a political God who acts in the affairs of history. As *Lord, King, and Ruler* of a covenant people, 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.
- *Religion should be a private apolitical affair.* There is undoubtedly a contemporary secularising trend to privatise and individualise religion, especially in the context of a pluralistic society. But is this valid? Surely Christian hope is a public rather than private matter. Compared with the intimate involvement of Christians in social politics throughout history, such a trend is remarkable. The Christian message emphasises both vertical relationship with God and horizontal expression of its faith through community involvement, notwithstanding the fact that its message may be distinctly counter-cultural. Biblical salvation itself is more to do with a cosmic mission rather than a merely individual affair. Christians are supposed to impact and permeate society like salt and light (Matt. 5.13-16). 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? Most Christians deplore much of what is allowed to go on in our world, but detachment is not the answer, as the early part of the twentieth century disastrously demonstrated. Might Christian 'withdrawal' perhaps be viewed more appropriately as a 'spirituality of evasion' - or to put it bluntly - avoidance of social commitment and responsibility?
- *Jesus life and teaching were apolitical, therefore Christians should have nothing to do with politics.* It is a defective argument to suggest that, because Jesus was not directly politically active, Christians should avoid politics. Jesus' mission was unique, but while a form of apoliticism was a necessary element of his approach, as Alan Storkey has recently emphasised in his book *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*, the very announcement by Jesus of the Kingdom or Government of God was an intensely political act. It is therefore wrong to suggest that Christians absolve themselves of responsibility for their world. Pre-eminently, Jesus showed his disciples how to live within the varied contexts of their contemporary existence. Moral pronouncements alone are meaningless without specific living application. Love of neighbour implies not limiting Christian response to the needs of the poor with first-aid, but proceeding to

address the causes of poverty. This in turn involves engaging with and seeking to transform social structures as agents for change.

Politics is an essential aspect of human social activity. Because they are human beings participating in everyday relationships, Christians are, by definition, 'political'. If Christians become isolationist, as Dorothy L. Sayers once declared, they 'become more Christian at the cost of becoming less human'. And because knowledge of God necessarily involves concern for justice and love in action, today's means of offering food to the hungry and water to the thirsty inevitably involves activity of a political nature. 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 meant salvation rather than 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 for the common good, as much as preparing for another one. Christians have a mandate to work to extend the divine work of creation and salvation history. If our understanding of Christ's saving work is restricted to ourselves alone, don't we risk effectively reversing Paul's vital dual perspective, that 'if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men' (1 Cor. 15.18)?

It is against this background that *Christians in Politics* was launched in 2002 as a partnership owned by the recognised Christian groups in the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties. Its aims were:

- To recruit Christians into mainstream political parties and their recognised Christian groups.
- To teach Christians how and why they should participate in government and politics.
- In partnership with Stakeholders, to encourage and resource Christians who are members of the three major political parties.

Whilst much has been achieved in enabling Christians to work together across the political spectrum, developing an informative website, making presentations at seminars and conferences and producing resource material for churches and others, many challenges remain if the the task of encouraging Christian engagement with politics and civic society is to make any serious widespread impact. With capacity severely restricted through lack of funding and a volunteer ethos, there is a need for a fundamental strategic review of the way forward. With the encouragement of a number of partners, including *Forum for Change*, a major review is underway aimed at producing a viable and appropriate business plan so that the task of encouraging Christians to become agents for change at the heart of society really takes off in a way that makes a real difference.

Don Horrocks
October 2007