

Why Don't Christians Stay Out of Politics?

Faith and Culture

January 16, 2011

Romans 13:1-7, 2 Samuel 12:1-12

When it comes to Christians and politics,
you can line people up along a number of axes.
You can line people up on how much involvement they think
Christians should have in any kind of politics.

On one end,
there are the people who really think that politics and religion don't mix,
and all politics should be right out the door.
These include people like the Amish,
who try to stay completely out of any politics at any level,
and avoid any governmental services if they can avoid it.
These also include people, perhaps like some in this room,
who simply believe Christianity is between you and God,
it's about your soul,
and so politics should have nothing to do with it.

At the other end of the spectrum are people
who believe faith and politics have *everything* to do with each other,
and whose religious beliefs strongly affect their politics.
People on this end of the spectrum include
Martin Luther King Jr., an ordained Baptist minister
whose march on Washington DC was both symbol and fact.
Today, churches all over the country celebrate him,
and tomorrow our nation honors him.

People on this end of the spectrum also include Fred Phelps,
the man who arranges protests at the funerals of soldiers
and Elizabeth Edwards,
because he believes God is punishing our nation
because of our beliefs about homosexuality.
He actually protested at this church many years ago –
it became one of those early contacts
that introduced Jerry Morris to this congregation,
when churches came together to speak against Phelps.
Those two examples should be enough to show you
that though some agree that faith should be at the forefront of politics,
that doesn't always mean front and *center*.

Which points to another way you can divide people up
over Faith and Politics:
What kind of politics do you have?
When Christians send their political views through the Bible,

they end up with them strewn all up and down this spectrum.
 There are politically active Christians on the far right,
 and on the far left,
 and everywhere in between.
 And I think that could be demonstrated in this congregation alone.
 As some of us talked about this upcoming sermon last Wednesday,
 there was some joking that we would have a
 “blue” seating section and a “red” seating section.
 Somebody wanted to be sure we had an “independent” seating section too,
 perhaps in the balcony.
 They suggested it be the “yellow” seating section.
 I said no, the yellow section was up here where the clergy sit,
 because we are too chicken to take political stances very often.
 We know that most people don’t want politics in the pulpit,
 and we know that most people’s working definition of “politics” is
 “Speaking about an issue in a way I disagree with.”
 So we pastors have a tendency to back up and say things
 no one can disagree with.
 For example, as churches across the nation try to grapple with
 the terrible shooting in Arizona,
 I bet there won’t be as many sermons in favor of gun control,
 or about the deterrent effect of the death penalty,
 as there will be sermons saying that violence is bad
 and there should be less of it.
 Anybody here disagree? Think violence is good? Want more of it?
 I thought not, says she of the yellow seat.

Setting aside my own cowardice, though,
 If you define “politics” a little more broadly, as
attempting to impact public policy or governmental leadership,
 where should Christians stand, on *either* axis?

What does the Bible say?
 Well, when you look at the Old Testament,
 you end up up here in front – faith and politics are intertwined.
 Three of the biggest themes of the Hebrew Scriptures are political.
 The story of God freeing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt:
 highly political.
 What was this but a massive uprising
 and revolt against the government?
 The story of the Kings of Israel,
 including God putting Kings Saul and David and Solomon
 on the throne, anointed and chosen by divine decree.
 What was this but God meddling in the choice of leaders?
 The books of the prophets!
 The story of Nathan and David we read today

was a succinct example,
 but stories of the prophets take up 1/3 of the Old Testament.
 The prophets were sent by God to challenge the leaders,
 condemn them for disobeying God
 (especially when it came to their treatment of the poor and needy).
 What was this but wholesale criticism of the political system?

In the New Testament, things are a bit less lopsided.
 In Jesus' lifetime, the big political issue of the day was
 national independence for the Jews and their country.
 Should they overthrow the Roman occupation?
 Or should they be good Roman citizens and cooperate?
 Jesus chose to stay out of that debate –
 he wouldn't align himself with those who wanted military overthrow,
 and he wouldn't even put himself forward as a candidate for power
 (you might remember the devil offered him the chance
 to rule over all the nations of the earth. Jesus declined).
 He implied there were more important questions,
 and wouldn't get trapped in that particular political debate.
 This is not to say that he didn't have strong opinions about
 the treatment of the poor, our use of money,
 and the way we live our lives –
 and he expressed these strongly, loudly, and sometimes not nicely.

The leaders of the early church advocated a position
 that kept them in an uneasy truce with the powers of the day.
 Be subject to authorities, authorities are from God.
 Pay your taxes.
 Pray for your leaders.
 Remember, they were often persecuted and in danger for their lives.
 So there may have been an element of self-preservation
 and preservation of the fledgling Christian movement
 that had them advocating a position of respect, cooperation,
 and not making any waves,
 like we heard read from Romans today.

On the other hand,
 the book of Revelation, from the height of that persecution,
 is one long, vitriolic, encoded criticism of the Roman Empire,
 from beginning to end.

The Bible offers a mixed picture of how much faith gets involved in politics.

What is our track record?

Throughout the history of the church,
Christians have been involved in politics.

Often with disastrous results.

Wars have been fought in the name of religions.
Countless people have died.

Crusades were launched, in the name of Christ,
but in reality, largely for gain of power and territory.

Pogroms have been led, killing entire Jewish communities
out of very skewed readings of the gospels.

American slavery had many proponents among Christians.
And prohibition came heavily out of a Christian push –
and that was not exactly the most successful attempt
to clean up the morals of the country.

On the other hand,
much political good has come from Christians choosing to act
in ways that extended beyond their own personal souls.

The abolition movement to end American slavery
was heavily religiously motivated.

(When we sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic in a few moments,
pay close attention to the words –
the Civil War's Northern Army claimed God on its side).

Many fought in WWII out of a faithful desire
to turn back a tide of evil, as embodied in Hitler's armies.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's
drew strongly in both purpose and approach
from Christian teachings and leaders.

If you aren't familiar with it,
you should read more about the end of apartheid in South Africa.
I have a friend who grew up there,
and tells powerful stories of Christians who
committed themselves to making this change,
though they exposed themselves to danger and death.

Yes, Christians have *always* been involved in politics.
But it has not *always* been a good thing. Or a bad thing.

To this very day,
you will find Christians involved in politics from every perspective.

On the political left, you will usually find Christians advocating for
environmental protection,
peace and disarmament,
better care for the poor,
and more racial equality.

On the political right, you will usually find Christians advocating for
 a defense of traditional marriage,
 the end of abortion,
 more prayer in schools,
 and “family values.”

Both of these, out of deeply held religious beliefs.
 My guess is you all stand somewhere in that mix.

Christians *are* involved in politics.

“Why don’t Christians stay out of politics?” the world sometimes asks.

I think there are actually several questions behind that one.

Why do Christians get political?

Where should they fall on that political spectrum?

And *How* should they be involved?

I can’t answer for all of you, but I can answer for myself.

If I place myself on the axis of “very involved” to “keep ‘em separate”,
 you’ll find me here.

In the front.

Saying that Faith and Politics are and ought to be intertwined.

It is too much a part of our heritage to refrain from it,
 for me, the Biblical pull being strongest.

God can’t keep his hands out of politics,

and if I belong to God, I have to believe that my faith
 is not just about souls,

but is also about the bodies and minds attached to them.

And as a Christian, I hope that what I believe shapes all of my life,
 including my political views,
 and my voting.

I hope what you believe shapes yours too.

Our faith is too important to be kept in a box, even one with a steeple.

That’s why I think Christians should be involved in politics.

Where should Christians be involved in politics?

In the interests of full disclosure, I’ll tell you where I stand.

[go left of center]

Here. My politics are usually left leaning.

Most of you have figured this out by now.

When I’m in this room, I at least try to lean toward the center,
 so that I can hear what is said on the right accurately,
 and understand and respect that point of view.

But today I think I will choose to be fully honest about where I stand,
 rather than being wishy-washy and evasive.

And I do that, because I also want to model my answer
to what I think is the deepest question:
How should Christians be involved in politics?

I think the *way* Christians have been political
is what has led to this tough question.
“Why don’t Christians just stay out of politics?”
Some fairly recent Barna polls show that 50 to 75% of American adults
think Christians should be less involved in politics.
And when that is unpacked, it turns out that
it *doesn’t* have a lot to do with a Christian’s *right*
to put their faith into action – most would defend that right.
And it *isn’t* completely a critique of the issues
that Christians get involved with –
there is some backlash against the Moral Majority type movements,
but most know that Christians get involved all across the board.

What it *does* have a lot to do with,
is *how* Christians are in politics – the way we behave ourselves.

This Barna research, summarized in a book called *UnChristian* [David Kinnaman]
lists the reasons they heard for people’s discomfort,
with Christians in politics.

They can be categorized into three areas:

People’s experience with Christians in politics have led them to see Christians as:
judgmental,
in it for their own power,
and hypocritical
(both in their tone and political style,
and their own behavior).

When I read that, it strikes me that the problem is not
that we are *too* Christian when we get involved in politics.
It is that we are *not Christian enough*.

And so if we are to be political Christians,
which I think is inevitable for those who take their faith seriously,
then I think we need to pay more attention to *how* we do it.

As we are involved in politics, I believe we need to be
more Christlike. By that I mean:

1. We need to be sure our priorities are really Jesus’ priorities.
Jesus cared deeply for the poor and powerless.

He also cared deeply about our personal behavior,
and we need to keep *both* in mind.

What he did *not* care about was his personal power,
which he completely gave away.

2. We need to have integrity of word and action like Jesus did.

What we want others to do, we must do ourselves.

There can be no advocating of family values,
while being unfaithful to spouses and neglectful of our children.

There can be no advocating for the poor,
while we ourselves hoard wealth.

3. We need to model the grace of Christ.

We need to refrain from being judgmental, or we will be judged.

We need to love our enemies,

even in the midst of heated political debate, and afterwards.

We need to forgive.

We need to be Christ-like in the way we do our politics.

But just as important to mixing our faith and our politics,
we need to remember that we are not Christ.

None of us share the mind of God –
we need to remember we may be wrong.

None of us is the sole voice of God –
we need to beware of arrogance.

None of us is exempt from God's correction –
we need to care for our own behavior first,
before condemning another's.

If we who are Christian can be involved in politics in this way,
then perhaps there will be more respect,
not just for us as people who follow Christ,
and not just for the viewpoints of people of faith,
but perhaps also for the God whose will we struggle to make real
in every aspect of our lives.