

Findings

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Taking a Stand

Why Christians Should Be Involved in Public Policy

By Stephen Daniels



he struggle over social issues in America has continued for decades. Headlines in newspapers almost every day publicize how individuals and groups with different perspectives on the issues are exerting their influence.

One group of stakeholders that has become increasingly active and influential has been Christians. Churches, individuals and organizations have become more mobilized and more educated in their efforts to effect change in government than anytime in recent memory. These actions have had measurable effects on legislation at the state and federal level, and have impacted the results on Election Day and influenced the composition of our nation's courts.

Much of this recent action has been spurred on by concerns over issues like abortion and embryonic stem cell research, increasing hostility to religious expression in the public square, and an activist court system that has attempted to redefine marriage and family. These issues and many more have captured the attention of citizens, including Christians, who are increasingly concerned about the moral decline in today's culture.

So why is it important for believers to speak out on cultural issues and to get involved in political activity? Should Christians even be involved in the first place? Is it really the proper role for Christians to be engaged in this way? These questions have been debated for years, and not just by secular pundits—some in the religious community have raised similar questions. This paper will address the basis of and justification for Christian involvement in cultural issues and the political process.

From the beginning, it is important to make a few points. First, advocating Christian involvement in political and cultural issues does not assume that such action will, in and of itself, be the sole means of redeeming the culture. The Bible is clear that God alone works in the hearts and minds of people to do His will, and it is His desire for people to be in a personal relationship with Him and to live lives of obedience to Him.¹ This is the ultimate change that is needed. Second, it is important to remember that advocacy should be about “loving your neighbor”—seeking God's greatest good for one another as laws and public policies are being considered.

Is This a Proper Role?

In looking at the question of political involvement, it's important to point out that there is not unanimity among Christians on this issue. Some have made it plain that they do not believe that there is a place in the church for such activity. Instead, they assert that the work of evangelism is the sole purpose of the church, and entanglements with political issues are outside the bounds of proper involvement.

Noted Bible teacher and author John MacArthur takes such a view, stating, “There is no biblical mandate for us to spend our time, money, and energy in matters of civil government. We are to be the conscience of the nation through godly living and faithful preaching. We do not confront the nation through political pressure, but through the Word of God. We are to preach against sin and the evils of our time.”² The pastor of a large church in Raleigh, North Carolina put it this way, “The mission, energy and investment of the church is not to clean up the evils of society. The mission of the church is to evangelize society.”³

Few believers disagree that the pre-eminent role of the Christian in this world is to spread the gospel. This responsibility was Jesus' final command, known as the “Great Commission.”⁴ The question really isn't whether evangelism is important. It is whether the role of Christians in society extends beyond just preaching the gospel. Is there more to a Christian's role than just winning souls?

Reconciling the balance between the role of evangelism and social responsibility was addressed at a conference sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship in 1982. From that meeting was drafted a report that concluded that evangelism and social action work together and are related in three ways. First, “social activity is a consequence of evangelism,” meaning that redeemed people should be involved in good works to meet the needs of those around them. Second, “social activity can be a bridge to evangelism,” because actions can create an opportunity for the gospel to be heard, while inaction may hinder the effort. Third, “social activity not only follows evangelism as its consequence and aim, and precedes it as a bridge, but also accompanies it as its partner.” Just as Jesus served the needs of others, so too must Christians be about the work of caring for the wellbeing of their neighbor.⁵

These principles are likely noncontroversial for most Christians. The case for Christians to preach the gospel and help others is clear. Disagreement arises when the question of Christian involvement in the political arena and cultural issues is presented. But is advocacy in these areas not in fact part of caring for the spiritual and physical needs of others? And are promoting laws that are just and good not a part of social action as well?

Compassion

The Bible commands Christians to “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁶ Traditionally this has been interpreted as treating others with love and kindness and caring for their needs. For centuries believers have been doing this by caring for the sick and feeding the hungry. The same compassion that motivates these actions should also stir concern about the condition of society. Author and Biblical scholar John R. W. Stott writes:

“What, then, is the biblical basis for social concern? Why should Christians get involved? In the end there are only two possible attitudes which Christians can adopt towards the world: Escape and Engagement... ‘Escape’ means turning our backs on the world in rejection, washing our hands of it...and steeling our hearts against its agonized cries for help. In contrast, ‘engagement’ means turning our faces towards the world in compassion, getting our hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within us the stirring of the love of which cannot be contained.⁷ ... If we truly love our neighbors, and because of their worth desire to serve them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the well-being of their soul, their body and their community. And our concern will lead to practical programmes.”⁸

The reality is that just as feeding the hungry or caring for the sick are essential parts of engaging the needs of society (and inextricably linked to evangelism), addressing the moral decline in society and the laws of the land are also important because they have real effects on real people. Christian involvement in these things is a part of social action too. Compassion should compel Christians to care about social issues and their influence on others, just as they should care about other important needs. Consider the following:

- Abortion takes the life of an innocent human being (an estimated 47 million unborn human lives have been taken in the U.S. since 1973)⁹ and can also have both physical and emotional consequences for the mother.¹⁰ Therefore, it is compassionate to oppose abortion and inform women of the risks that come with the procedure.
- The consequences of premarital sexual activity can have such life altering effects as unwed pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, abortion, and broken relationships. Therefore, it is

compassionate to encourage sexual abstinence outside of marriage.

- The sanctity of the traditional family, where a man and a woman unite in commitment to one another and in the responsibility to raise children, is essential to the stability of society. Divorce and fatherlessness have become rampant, and are linked to many problems facing society (crime, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, etc.). Therefore, it is compassionate to care about the family and to work to strengthen it by promoting healthy marriages and discouraging divorce.

It is love and compassion for the wellbeing of others that should compel Christians to be concerned about the condition of society.

Promoting good laws that reflect moral truth and do not enable or promote destructive behavior is a part of social action. As the above examples illustrate, the public policy of the land can have direct consequences on the lives of many. It is love and compassion for the wellbeing of others that should compel Christians to be concerned about the condition of society and prompt action to influence the culture and government. Galatians 6:10 says: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to *all* men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (emphasis added).¹¹

Reflecting Moral Truth

A society whose laws reflect basic moral truth and compassion is a society more inclined to hear what Christians have to say about what the Bible teaches, because the direction of a society, including the values encouraged or discouraged by the government, can affect how difficult or easy it is for the church to call people to righteousness. On the other hand, a society that does not hear a clear message of moral truth is less likely to accept and apply what the church says about a wide range of things. For example:

- A society more willing to accept sexual promiscuity, pornography and family breakdown will be less inclined to accept the church’s teachings on sexual purity and marital fidelity.
- A society that is more tolerant of alcohol and gambling will be less open to the church’s message of moderation, pro-

ductive work, and trust in God.

- A society that does not recognize the value of human life as sacred and created in the image of God is less likely to protect the sick, aged and unborn.

These issues and many others are affected by the policies adopted by local, state and federal government. And the government’s direction is influenced by the voices that it hears. Thus, it is imperative for Christians to speak out and make sure the principles of God’s truth are applied in the realm of government.

This is important because there are many other voices proclaiming their beliefs about society and public policy. And very often, their message is in direct contradiction to Biblical values. When Christians do not speak out, there is a critical voice missing from the debate. People of faith must be heard in order for the government to properly reflect moral values. America’s second President, John Adams, recognized this when he said: “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion...Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”¹²

It is worth noting that when the government effectively maintains order and peace in society, conditions are more favorable for preaching the gospel. I Timothy 2:1-4 says:

“I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”¹³

Freedom of religion is one of the most important rights protected by the U.S. Constitution. The maintenance of that freedom should be of utmost importance to believers and is one more reason to be engaged in the issues of government.

Salt and Light

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made clear the role of his followers as agents of change, saying, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.”¹⁴ Salt is a preserving agent used to protect food from decay, and light dispels darkness. In the same way, Christians are to be preserving agents in the culture around them and to present the Light of the World to lost people.

Jesus was not proposing an optional role for Christians; He was expressing who they are. And He did not say be the salt and light in certain areas and not others (note “of the earth” and “world”). Biblical truth has relevance in every area of life, including the social and political arena.

Those who call for Christians to abstain from political involvement must consider the logical extension of such a claim. Does such a limitation extend to other arenas as well? What about Christian involvement in the sports world? What about the business world or academics? Is Christian influence limited to evangelism only, or is there a place for basic moral truth to be applied here as well? God’s call for influence encompasses every part of life. Francis Schaeffer, one of the great Christian thinkers of the twentieth century wrote, “True spirituality touches all of life, including things of government and law, and not just ‘religious things.’”¹⁵ This question should not be considered from an either/or perspective—either preach the gospel, or nothing else. In reality it is a both/and proposition. Christians can both spread the gospel and be socially active too.

Schaeffer also lamented how Christians have not always risen to the task of influencing the culture:

“Most fundamentally, our culture, society, government, and law are in the condition they are in, not because of a conspiracy, but because the church has forsaken its duty to be the salt of the culture. It is the church’s duty (as well as its privilege) to do now what it should have been doing all the time—to use the freedom we do have to be that salt of the culture.”¹⁶

God Ordains Government

Government is not a concept created by man, but an institution ordained by God. Romans 13:1-2 says, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.”¹⁷ As an institution established by God (just like the family and the church), government should garner the attention of His people.

Government is an institution created by God. In this country, government depends on the active involvement of its citizens to function. Unlike a monarchy, where a single person has absolute authority, the United States elects its leaders. The people possess the ultimate power over government, not the other way around.

Abraham Lincoln described it as, “Government of the people, by the people and for the people.”¹⁸ Citizens can vote leaders in or out of office and can petition them to act on issues of importance to them.

As citizens of this country, Christians have a duty to involve themselves in the affairs of the government God has ordained. When the Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay taxes, He replied, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”¹⁹ The word “render” used in this verse indicates a sense of duty and obligation.²⁰ And Christians are to render

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themselves to the system under which they are governed. It is important to note that there are two parts to this verse—rendering to government and rendering to God. The two are not mutually exclusive, but to be done simultaneously.

It is also important to remember that submission to the government does not mean a blind allegiance to government when it acts in violation of God’s law. God’s law is always supreme. The Apostle Peter, when confronted with inconsistencies between God’s law and man’s, stated, “We must obey God rather than men.”²¹

Cost of Doing Nothing

Noting that this country’s system of government requires the active involvement of its citizens highlights another reason why Christians should be involved in the political process—the high cost of doing nothing. Because citizens can petition government to act on a broad range of issues, there are a diverse number of advocates appealing to elected officials to take their position on issues. And among these groups are ones that are diametrically opposed to Biblical truth and the moral standards put forth in the Bible. If Christians are absent from the debate, a critical voice is missing and the voices of opposing views will be heard all the more.

The famed British abolitionist William Wilberforce, a devout Christian and member of the British Parliament, led the

charge against the slave trade in England in the early 1800s. Wilberforce was compelled to actively oppose the evils of slavery after he converted to Christianity. Instead of giving up his seat in Parliament, he used his influence to lobby the government to abolish a practice he knew was wrong. During that time he penned these words:

“To the decline of Religion and morality our national difficulties must both directly and indirectly be chiefly ascribed; and that the only solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend not so much on her fleets and armies, not so much on the wisdom of her rulers or the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many, who, in a degenerate age, love and obey the Gospel of Christ, on the humble trust that the intercession of these may still be prevalent, that for the sake of these, Heaven may still look upon us with an eye of favour.”²²

In 1806, after years of disappointment and wearying debate, he witnessed victory as the House of Commons banned the slave trade in England.²³

William Wilberforce’s words are as appropriate today as they were two centuries ago. God’s people, actively promoting truth and morality in society, are essential to the wellbeing of society. Wilberforce’s actions also provide an inspiring example of someone living out his faith while en-

Taking Action

Here are some practical ways for Christians to be active.

Citizens:

- Pray for those in authority.
- Get educated about the issues.
- Vote.
- Engage elected officials through letters, phone calls and meetings.

Churches

- Hold voter registration drives.
- Pass out voter guides.
- Remember important dates (Sanctity of Life Sunday, National Day of Prayer, etc.)
- Partner with organizations like the N.C. Family Policy Council.
- Hold seminars and classes on issues that are important to Christians.
- Set up a Community Impact Committee to keep your church informed on relevant issues and to motivate others to be involved.

gaging the culture and the government.

Another consequence of the absence of Christians in the debate is the loss of a voice for absolute moral truth and Biblical principles. Today, only one-third of Americans believe that moral truth is absolute²⁴ and only four percent base their decision-making on a worldview that is based on Biblical principles.²⁵ This reality has significantly impacted the debate over truth in society today. People who do not base their worldview on what the Bible says are much more likely to accept cohabitation, approve of homosexual sex, endorse abortion, and are less likely to consider pornography, adultery and gambling as morally unacceptable.²⁶

Attorney and author John Whitehead addressed this point, writing:

*"If the people themselves hold no common set of values, then it is meaningless to ask the government to glean its guiding principles from such a barren field...The active involvement of Christians in the political process means that America's political language may then legitimately draw upon the moral precepts advanced by these citizens. Absent the participation of those who adhere to moral absolutes, the destabilizing forces of relativism carry the day by default."*²⁷

Christians must live a lifestyle based on Biblical principles, engage the culture and advocate for strong moral truths, especially at a time when morality is increasingly considered relative. Proverbs 14:34 says, "Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a disgrace to any people."²⁸

Separate Church and State?

For some, the "separation of church and state" is cited as a barrier to Christian involvement in political issues. However, any claim that this notion precludes Christian involvement in the public policy process is false. There is a fundamental difference between officially combining the government and the church (something the Founders did not intend), and allowing religious ideas and basic moral truth to be introduced and advocated in the halls of government. There is an institutional separation, but not an ideological one.

A distinction must also be made between the actions of an individual citizen and a church. Individuals are free to advocate in any way they wish, including speaking out on the issues, endorsing political candidates and so forth. Churches, on the other hand, have some legal limits on what type of advocacy they can engage in. For example, churches may not endorse or aid political candidates, but pastors are free to speak out on social issues from the pulpit.²⁹

Conclusion

Involvement in political and social issues is an important role for Christians in today's culture. It is a role that is consistent with what Jesus called being "salt and light" and "loving your neighbor." Just as Christians must present the gospel, they must also speak truth in the areas of government and culture. Each of these responsibilities works together and is the natural outworking of Christian love and compassion. The same love that compels believers to share their faith with others is what can and should compel believers to take on the moral decline in our culture and speak out on behalf of God's truth in the public square. Laws and social mores have an impact on people's lives. And a society whose laws reflect moral truth is a society more open to the message of the church and the gospel of Christ.

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Organized in 1992, the North Carolina Family Policy Council is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, research and education organization. Our goal is to serve as a voice for families and traditional family values in the public policy arena. We are supported solely by private contributions which are tax deductible as provided by law. Our mailing address is P.O. Box 20607, Raleigh, NC 27619. Phone: (919) 807-0800. Fax: (919) 807-0900. Web: www.ncfamily.org. Findings is a publication of the North Carolina Family Policy Council which is intended to communicate research findings and perspectives on public policy issues that affect the family. Nothing written here should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the North Carolina Family Policy Council or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress or the North Carolina General Assembly. Printed May 2006.