

Why so few Christians are politically, active: Excuses Christians Give for Avoiding Political Involvement

In his book *Politics, Americanism and Christianity*, Perry C. Cotham observes, "The major cause for the collapse of society at any level may be traced not to the criminal activities of 'bad people' (which exist and must be punished) but to the sins and silence of 'good people'." Has our generation forgotten the battles fought to gain the right to vote in elections? In a proposed federal statute in 1870, which would have established an income qualification of \$400 a year in order to be eligible to vote, day labourers were excluded even though they might have earned \$400 because as John A. MacDonald (1815-91) put it, "they had no abiding interest in the country." By 1921 only about one-half of Canada's population had the right vote. The universal political right to participate is only decades old.

Why are so few Christians politically active? Let me survey with you some of the arguments for noninvolvement.

Reasons Christians Avoid Political Involvement

- 1. Christians should not get involved because all politics is dirty business.** No member of parliament is perfect. Elected officials simply reflect the general morality of the country. And not all government officials are corrupt. Gross generalizations should be avoided. In every level of government there are hard working and honest elected officials. You can't condemn a whole bushel of apples because one is rotten. And because the belief that "politics is a dirty business" is so popularly ingrained, Christians should show that the opposite can be true.
- 2. Won't political involvement distract us from evangelism?** Certainly we must take this concern seriously. But if we live in the power of the resurrection, both politics and evangelism are ways of serving God. William Wilberforce (1759 -1833) was a leading social reformer, known for his relentless effort to abolish the slave trade. He was also burdened for all who didn't know the Lord. He said, "O remember, that the salvation of one soul is of more worth than the mere temporal happiness of thousands or even millions." So this prominent member of British parliament supported both home and world missions. England's most famous preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon (1834 -1892), was not only active in reaching the unsaved, he also founded schools for poor children and almshouses. He also made occasional commentary on education, war (which he strongly opposed) and Irish home-rule. He also opposed slavery in America, which cost him influence in the southern United States. Wilberforce and Spurgeon made the Gospel visible and credible.
- 3. Why should Christians be involved in politics if the Lord is going to return soon?** Many evangelicals say: "We are living in the last days. Society is on the downgrade until the end of time. As Christ's followers we have withdrawn from politics and culture in general so that we can be ready for His coming." But this position is not Scriptural.

Though we await with eagerness our Lord's return, we cannot avoid being stewards of God's world. Our union with Christ must lead to love for this world; a world God created, sustains and continues to love. A spirituality, which withdraws from the world and reduces Christianity to private worship and inner experiences, shortchanges Scripture. The promised hope of glory should encourage us to minister in every sphere of life. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who were so eagerly awaiting the Lord's return that they quit work, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat.... And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right" (1 Thess. 3:10,13).

4. Are Christians, who advocate political involvement, not expecting too much?

How can we hope for social change unless people are converted? Of course we must continue to long for conversions. The internal change in man's nature and character is necessary. But people turned around by the Holy Spirit have made an impact upon society. Periods of great 'spiritual awakenings have led to the abolishment of slavery, the care of the sick, the founding of hospitals, orphanages, schools and better working conditions in factories, offices and mines. Christians have worked for legislation to improve social conditions. As John Stott puts it: "Legislation can secure social improvement, even though it does not convert people or make them good. Even fallen human beings retain sufficient vestiges of the divine image to prefer justice to injustice, freedom to oppression, and peace to violence."

5. Why should we be involved if there is no guarantee of success? Christians are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The Bible does not give us specific goals to achieve. Our secular society is goal and success oriented. Christians recognize that in this fallen world there are no easy solutions for complex problems. We are simply exercising our responsibility before the Lord, who said, "if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23)

6. We should keep religion out of politics. Politics and religion do not mix. Look at what is happening in the Balkans, Sudan and Northern Ireland! One can also ask, of course, "Have we forgotten the atrocities committed by communist-avowedly atheistic-states?"

The topic religion and politics always raises controversy and sharp debate. A writer on the subject makes himself vulnerable to all kinds of criticism, negative reaction and misunderstandings. Yet no political statement can be divorced from one's religious bias and perspective.

The term religion is often used to describe activities such as church attendance, prayer or joining a religious order. But originally the word meant to be conscientious about every thing in life. Every person looks at life from a particular point of view. His actions are based on his beliefs. Therefore, a political viewpoint cannot be separated from some kind of religious faith. The clash is not between religion versus politics but between true and false religion. The notion of a religiously objective view of life in both politics and culture is based on the false belief that human beings are the autonomous creators of their own values. The assumption is that man can finally know ultimate truth without God and without acknowledging sin. The Humanist Manifesto clearly expresses this view of life:

"Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created... But we can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves." And the same Manifesto declares, "We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience... Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures." Christians, on the other hand, guided by the Holy Scripture in all their experiences of life and in every situation, believe that they have a place and task in God's world.

Our faith also gives direction in politics. Faith and politics always are integrated. The only question is: Which faith? To do politics Christianly we should allow our Biblically formed faith to direct our political thinking and action. In his inaugural address, President Havel of Czechoslovakia said it so well: "We are living in a ruined moral climate, we are sick morally as a nation. But today, freedom has come, and we make a new confession that Jesus Christ—not Caesar—is Lord. Thus being transformed, we shall transform the nation." May this also be our political confession.

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