

Discovery Hour
The Church and Politics
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Dave Timmerman

The manner in which the Church as a whole and local churches in particular have chosen to involve themselves in the political realm has varied over time and as a function of the traditions and theology of various denominations. In our own country the Establishment clause in the Constitution (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”) draws a line of separation of between the Church and the State and has also had a significant impact on how involved American Churches have been able to be. For most, the issue is not whether or not Christians should seek to serve and alleviate the suffering of others in this world, but rather the most appropriate means to do so both in terms of the theology of the Gospel and the philosophy of ministry of the Church.

One distinction to keep in mind is between social service (relieving human need) and social action (removing the causes of human need). Some Christians and some churches have felt that the former of these was appropriate but not the latter. When we use the word “politics,” what do we mean? Does it refer to the rights and responsibilities of those who live in a community or city or country? Or, by politics do we mean something more specific as in the science of government and how it operates in the real world, warts and all?

If we look across two thousand years of church history we will see great swings and differences in the way the church has approached civic and political involvement. Perhaps more helpful is to look at the last century or so in our own country and in England. For example, we can find a striking example of political involvement in England in the 19th century with William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect leading the way.

It is largely to the Clapham Sect that the credit belongs for the first settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone (1787), the abolition of the trade (1807), the registration of slaves in the colonies which put an end to slave smuggling, and finally their emancipation (1833). ... In addition to the slavery question, they involved themselves in penal and parliamentary reform, popular education, British obligation to its colonies (especially India), the spread of the gospel (they were instrumental in the founding of both the Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society), and factory legislation. (Stott, *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, pp. 21-22).

And this great activity in England was duplicated in the United States both in terms of the anti-slavery movement in the North, as well as the founding of schools, hospitals, and a wide range of relief organizations.

Yet, interestingly, this period was followed by what Church historians have referred to as “The Great Reversal,” a time following World War I when the evangelical movement drew back and in some cases renounced social responsibility. The causes for this included the response to theological liberalism (The Fundamentals were published between 1910 – 1915), a reaction to an what Evangelicals saw as a near rejection of the gospel in favor of a complete devote to changing current conditions for the better. A third cause was the disillusionment with human society generally following WWI, the Great War, and a final reason was the rise of premillennialism which envisions the world becoming progressively worse until the return of Christ. In fact,

And then, right up to our present moment we can look back over the last 30 years and see a trend upward in terms of Evangelical involvement in American politics, with one marker being the

founding of the Moral Majority in the late 1970s leading up to and participating in the Reagan revolution. Even more recently, through the leadership of megachurch pastors such as Rick Warren, American Evangelicals have begun taking on global issues such as combating AIDS and Environmental Concerns. But these variations only further beg the basic question, what is the proper role of the church in terms of political involvement?

Some passages that have been seen to challenge the idea that the church should be involved in politics:

John 18:36

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

Matthew 22:21

Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Mark 14: 6-9

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

2 Thessalonians 3:10

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Some passages that have been seen to support the idea that the church should be involved in politics

Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[c]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[d]"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he

took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins^[e] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

