

The Church and Politics

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper

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The active involvement by Christians and local churches in American politics is being advocated by many Christian leaders. This exhortation rarely addresses the question of whether it is best for Christians to become involved in the political process. It is normally assumed that political activism is important for Christians and the more active the better.

We believe that political activism is an issue of wisdom and not an issue of morality. In other words, it is not morally wrong to participate in the political process and it is not morally wrong to completely refrain from the political process. As a wisdom issue, there are factors that must be considered as we attempt to please the Lord and plan for effective ministry. These factors lead us to conclude it is unwise for churches to participate actively in the political process.

Reasons why the church should not be involved in politics

1. The Bible does not direct us toward political activism (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

The most important reason why we should not be involved in political activism is due to our mission. We have been called to reach the world with the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We have not been called to moralize our society. The fact that the Bible does not encourage us to attempt to use means to bring governmental change should lead us to conclude that political activism must not be very important to God.

2. Jesus Christ did not seek to bring change in the political realm. Jesus did not join with the Zealots, who were Israelites seeking to bring better government to the Jews. He did not suggest his disciples seek positions in public office. He did not speak out against the oppressive Roman government. He did not attempt to lead a movement to restore Israel as a nation for God. He did not organize a National Day of Prayer. Christ did call sinners to repentance, which made them citizens of heaven.

3. The pattern of the apostles' ministry to the world was to preach the gospel, not reform the government.

Not only does the Bible not encourage us to pursue political means for governmental change, the followers of Jesus did not even attempt to reform the government. This pattern of ministry should lead us to function in the same way, making the preaching of the gospel the vehicle for societal improvement.

4. Biblical and political issues become confused together. While abortion is a biblical issue and is contended in the political realm, most

political issues that Christians advance are not as clear-cut. Far too often issues that are not clearly righteous (taxes, defense, even “prayer in schools”) are advocated with the same aggressiveness as those that are directly moral.

5. Political reformation subtly substitutes for spiritual transformation.

As gains are made in political realm there can be a sense of accomplishment. Yet no government can change the heart of man. Only God can transform our spiritual life and this spiritual transformation results in our service to others. The real answer to national decay is not found in our laws but in our hearts. No law can save a person and no law can save a people either.

6. The purity of the Christian message is lost through political cooperation.

The axiom that “politics makes strange bedfellows” is never more true than when religious people join together for common political purposes. It is extremely tempting to refrain from the clear proclamation of the gospel when you are in a partnership with those who are opposed to Christ. Also, as cooperation occurs it is easy for even those in the church to assume that those who join with us to share similar social concerns are also joined theologically. The political cooperation can make it extremely difficult to maintain a theological conviction that our comrade is in error and even bound for destruction.

7. Our political viewpoints can hinder our ministry to those who disagree.

We are to follow Paul’s example (1 Corinthians 11:1) by becoming all things to all men so that we might by all means save some (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). In other words, we should become like those to whom we are ministering the gospel. To advocate a particular political party or campaign for a particular issue will cause an unnecessary division with those who need Christ as their Lord and Savior. When we join with the Democrats or Republicans or any other group, we will find we are unable to speak the Word of God to every group. The consequence of political activism is that the very ministry that God has called us to will be negatively affected.

8. Political gains are only on the surface and can be very short-lived.

Political gains are expected when there is a clear majority of support. But we know that as Christians we will always be the few, not the many (Matthew 7:13-14). The many often resent attempts to moralize them and may react against those they see as pressuring them. This can lead to overturning certain political gains with a vengeance. In the end the moral agenda may be better served having not even attempted to use political means. The classic example of this is Prohibition.

Addressing arguments for Christian political activism

“To not be involved in the political process leaves our government in the hands of non-Christians.”

As a minority group (Matthew 7:12-13) we are and always will be limited in our

influence. The apostles were notably uninvolved with seeking to change the governmental structure. Also, church history teaches that government in the hands of the church is always bad for the church.

“If we do not participate in politics our freedoms will be taken away from us.”

In principle, our freedoms can only be limited, not eliminated (Proverbs 21:1; Matthew 16:18). In practice, political activism will make the limiting of our freedom more likely as we become more threatening to the political world. In potential, church history teaches that the limiting of freedom may be a blessing for the church.

“America was founded on Christian principles which must be restored.”

Which Christian principles was America founded on? Oppressive slavery is unbiblical and representative democracy is not a “Christian principle.”

“In America we have an opportunity and responsibility as citizens to participate in our government since Christians are called by God to be salt to the earth and light to the world (Matthew 5:13-16).”

While it is true that we have an opportunity as citizens to participate in government, it is not true that we have a responsibility to participate in government. Our government gives us the freedom to not participate if we choose and God does not demand that we participate. We must exercise wise judgment in deciding how or whether to participate in our government. Furthermore, Matthew 5:13-16 teaches that we *are* salt and light and that we should let our *good deeds* shine before men, not our political muscle.

The Church = Christians

Some of the more cautious advocates of Christian political activism will see the danger of its untended consequences for the church and propose that political activism needs to take place but must be outside the church. This is fostered by the United States Internal Revenue Service, which prohibits non-profit religious organizations from participating politically.

There is one critical difficulty with this distinction between the organized church and individual Christians: Christians *are* the church. Church is not a building. Biblically defined, church is the believers in Christ (Colossians 1:24). Without Christians, there is no church and the church is wherever the Christians are. As followers of Christ, we represent Christ every hour of every day. We cannot rightfully participate in the political process without being identified with Christ. Therefore, our participation reflects on Christ, who is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:22). Each of the above considerations against political activism are just as true for individual Christians as they are for the church.

Conclusion

Because of our beliefs, you will not see Valley Bible Church campaigning for any candidates, organizing protest marches, passing out voter guides or even seeking to register voters. We do encourage the exercising of our opportunity to vote because voting is a private way to seek to help the society and does not distract from our calling as believers in Christ. Nevertheless, we do not put any hope in the voting process to bring any real change to people of our nation, for change only comes from the heart.

It is the ministry of the gospel that is a moral issue and each of us is obligated to participate in the spread of the pure message of the good news of Christ. We believe it is wise for churches and for individual Christians to refrain from political activism in order to further the ministry of the gospel that they have been specifically called to advance. The unintended consequences of political activism are too great to bear. This is why the apostles chose not to seek to bring change to the Roman government and we ought to follow their example.

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