

## **Evangelistic Politics**

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I contend in this paper that Christian political activity is not only an appropriate expression of the Christian faith, but also that it actually can help the church accomplish the task of evangelism. There are four possible results of Christian political activity that, in my view, have not received sufficient attention in current literature. I will examine each one of these four areas briefly and then will make a few comments about the nature of Christian political activity. There is not space in this paper to discuss the potential impact of Christian political activity on the search for common justice except to say that Christians certainly have much to contribute. The focus of this paper will be on what impact, if any, Christian political activity might have on the evangelistic mission of the church.

### **Background**

Over the last forty years, much has been written concerning what role the church should play in political affairs. Some have maintained that there should be a strict separation between church and state, with the role of the church limited to making pronouncements on various moral and ethical issues. Some have claimed that Christians essentially have lost the Culture Wars because of ineffective efforts in the areas of evangelism and discipleship; therefore the solution lies in more effective evangelism and discipleship, even if that means curtailment of political activity. One such author is David Gushee, who contends that conservative Christians have made a serious error in their

attempts to address the moral and social decline of America primarily through the political process.<sup>1</sup> Gushee does not advocate a total withdrawal from the political arena, but rather a drastic reordering of priorities, which necessarily would entail a reduction in the amount of time and resources spent on political activity. That same call was issued recently by David Kuo, a former White House staff member. In an article that appeared in the *Baptist Standard*, Robert Marus quotes Kuo as calling for a “two-year fast from political activity to refocus on the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how such a reordering of priorities advocated by Gushee and Kuo might take place and the extent to which it might be necessary. What we must be careful to avoid is the possibility of missing out on opportunities for evangelistic dialogue that might be created by participation in the political process itself. Other writers have maintained that society needs the prophetic voice of the church and that the role of the church inevitably must include analysis and criticism of specific policy proposals. One such author has is Richard Mouw. In *Political Evangelism*, Mouw contends that the Christian message to society includes pointing out where unjust laws and practices exist and showing that they were the result of corporate sin.<sup>3</sup> Former Congressman John Anderson had made a similar observation a few years before Mouw. Anderson said, “The attempt to delineate basic Christian social principles...is worthless if we are unable to apply these principles to specific political problems.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Gushee, Ed. *Christians & Politics Beyond the Culture Wars*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marus, “Former White House Insider Urges Christian Political Fast,” *Baptist Standard* 118 No. 22 (October 30, 2006), 13

<sup>3</sup> Richard Mouw, *Political Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Anderson, “Principles for Participating in Politics,” *Theology Today* XXVI

Despite the assertions of such people as Mouw and Anderson, there still remains a sizeable contingent of Christian leaders who claim that the only real mission of the church is evangelism (which in my view includes discipleship) and that politics should be left to the politicians. In this view, they stand somewhat in the tradition of Luther and Calvin, who saw the church and the state existing in two separate, if complementary, spheres. What most commentators fail to consider is the possibility that political activity on the part of Christians, assuming proper goals and methods, might actually help the church to accomplish its evangelistic mission. I believe that political activity can help the church accomplish the evangelistic mission in four specific ways. One, Christian political activity could help to clean up the cultural environment, which in turn could make it easier for Christians to remain faithful to the assigned task. Two, Christian political activity can serve to enhance the credibility of Christians with people to whom the political realm is an important area of life. Three, Christian political activity can help to create laws and structures that are more in line with God's purpose for law, part of which is to prepare a person for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Four, Christian political activity can serve to create apologetic and evangelistic opportunities with people that otherwise might not ever participate in such dialogue. I will move now to look briefly at each one of these possible effects of Christian political activity.

### **Improving the Environment**

Christian people in general tend to underrate the effect that the surrounding culture has, even on godly people. We tend to focus on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit while forgetting that even the best Christian people are still human beings and do

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not always experience the power of the Spirit. Consider the effect that living in a world filled with ungodly people can have. Proverbs 13:20 warns, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” The implication is obvious. People are affected by the kind of people with whom they associate, which is another way of saying that we are affected by the environment in which we live. Two further examples from Scripture will serve to illustrate that even good, Christian people can be affected adversely by the culture in which they live. The culture of Sodom had a definite effect on Abraham’s nephew, Lot, as described in 2 Peter 2:6-8. Three times in that passage, Lot is described as a righteous man. Yet, Lot found himself “oppressed” and “tormented” by what he saw going on around him. Lot was affected by the culture in which he lived. Today, a common term for such influence is “peer pressure,” and it is a very real factor in the ability of Christians to live as representatives of Christ in this world. Second, think about the implications of the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:12, “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.” Again, we see that people are powerfully affected by the moral and ethical atmosphere in which they live. Certainly it is true that God’s grace and power are sufficient for every situation. However, it also is true that Christians function better in an atmosphere of righteousness and justice than we do in an atmosphere of unrighteousness and injustice. How does this truth affect our perception of the value of Christian political activity for the evangelistic task?

It is the legitimate function of government, according to Romans 13, to reward good and punish evil. Suppose, for example, that Christian political activity were to succeed in obtaining a ban on all public displays of pornographic material and requiring

that persons desiring to purchase such material would have to do so in a separate room, access to which was restricted to people over a certain age. Such a ban would not in any way violate an individual's right to view such material in his or her own home or to purchase such material from a public establishment, such as a convenience store. Nor would such a ban violate the right of the owner of the convenience store to sell such material. However, such a ban would have the effect of shielding other people, including youth, children and Christian adults, from exposure to such material in everyday life. They would not be exposed to it just because they went into a convenience store to buy a snack. Reduced exposure to objectionable material also could help to reduce the numbers of people who might become addicted to it. The overall effect would be to improve significantly the cultural environment in which we live, thus making it possible for Christians to remain more faithful to the task of living a godly lifestyle and sharing Christ with friends, fellow students and coworkers.

At this point, some might object that the key to transforming culture does not lie in political activity but in more extensive efforts in evangelism and discipleship, which would result in more people living lives transformed by the power of Christ. The contention of people who adopt this view is that culture is composed of individuals and the key to transforming culture is a stronger effort at evangelism and discipleship that produces transformed individuals. There is a certain element of truth to that contention, but we also need to take note of a balancing insight given by H. Richard Niebuhr, "...corrupt nature produces perverse culture, and perverse culture produces corrupt nature."<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between individuals and

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<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, et al: Harper Colophon Books, Harper And Row publishers, 1951), 211.

culture, and what affects one necessarily has a corresponding effect on the other. Any effort- including political efforts- that results in a cleaner cultural environment, will affect, at least to some extent, the values and lifestyle of the individuals who comprise that culture. So we cannot afford to overlook the possible contribution that political activity might have on culture, with a corresponding effect on the kinds of individuals produced by that culture. The potential positive effects of Christian political activity will then have an effect on the ability of Christians to live godly lives and to remain faithful to the evangelistic task.

### **Christian Credibility**

The second way in which Christian political activity can help the church to accomplish the evangelistic mission is by improving the credibility of the church among people who are active politically. Former Senator Charles Percy made a pertinent observation in 1970 regarding the lack of political involvement on the part of Christians, “The church seemed uninvolved; as a result, many people could not see their way to becoming involved with the church.”<sup>6</sup> Percy’s point is that because the church did not seem to care about the political process, the church lost credibility with people to whom the political process was very important. Active participation in the political process, assuming proper goals and methods, can help to restore that lost credibility because it sends the message that we care about the things that are important to them. If I were an unbeliever, to whom would I be more likely to give an audience for communication of the Christian hope- the person who demonstrates by her actions that she cares about the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Percy, “Relating Religion to American Life,” *Theology Today* XXVI January, 1970), 415.

things that are important to me, or the person who demonstrates by her actions that she does not care about the things that are important to me? Responsible political activity can go a long way toward restoring the credibility of the messenger of Christian hope, which in turn could improve the credibility of the message itself. This would be particularly true if Christian political activity is characterized by an attitude of respect and courtesy toward people who do not agree with specific policy proposals- an idea to which we will return shortly. One anecdote will serve to illustrate the possibility that relationships formed by participation in the political process can lead to evangelistic dialogue. A pastor in a medium-sized city in Texas led his church to become very active in local politics. By conducting himself in a courteous, respectful manner, the pastor was able to form a friendship with one of his staunchest opponents, and the man and his family eventually were baptized into the fellowship of that church.<sup>7</sup> To restate the point, when we invest time and energy in things that are important to other people, we gain a level of credibility with those people that otherwise might not be possible.

### **The Role of Government**

The third way in which political activity can help the church to accomplish its evangelistic mission is by helping law and government fulfill the role for which God designed them. That role is delineated clearly in Romans 13:3-4, where Paul describes government as a servant of God to reward good and punish evil. Since God is the One who designed law and government to restrain evil and reward good, it follows that God has definite standards by which government is to operate and upon which law is to be

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<sup>7</sup> This account can be examined more completely in Rick Scarborough's book *Enough Is Enough*.

based. God reserves to himself the right to define the good that is to be rewarded and the evil that is to be restrained or punished. Laws that are in keeping with God's standards are more likely to accomplish God's purposes than are laws that violate God's standards. Using the concepts articulated by Aquinas, we would say that for the laws of any nation to be just, they must be based upon the eternal law by which God governs the universe. But, we also must remain cognizant of the limits of politics. Political activity, as Ralph Reed has noted, cannot cure what ails the soul of America.<sup>8</sup> This concept of the limits of human efforts to bring about righteousness and justice on the earth can be traced back at least to the time of Augustine. Only the kingdom of God ultimately will endure, and that kingdom is not established by political activity. Having acknowledged that limitation, it still is true, as John Warwick Montgomery has noted, a "biblical philosophy of law offers two overarching contributions to the human search for justice: explicit, external norms against which positive law can and must be judged, and a redemptive perspective for all juridical activity."<sup>9</sup> It is important to note here that Montgomery's statement implies the possibility that political activity, the process of working to establish laws to govern a country, can have a redemptive effect. This point leads us to consider the second purpose for which God has designed law- to prepare people for the gospel of Jesus Christ. This was true particularly for Israel and the Law of Moses, but I contend that the laws of any nation can serve that same purpose. The Apostle Paul said, in Romans 3:20, "...for through the law comes the knowledge of sin," and in Romans 7, he makes the point that he never would have known about the covetousness that was within him had it not been

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Reed, *Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 262.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Montgomery, "Law and Justice," in C. E. B. Cranfield, David Kilgour, John W. Montgomery, *Christians in the Public Square: Law, Gospel and Public Policy*. (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, INC, 1996), 173.



for the commandment that forbade covetousness. So, in God's plan, one of the purposes of law is to reveal indwelling sin and to prepare people to receive Christ. I contend that law still can play that same role today, *iff* such laws are based upon the principles of God as revealed in Scripture.

If the laws of the United States, or of any nation, were to be based clearly and unambiguously on principles contained in Scripture, then the people would be more likely to see themselves as violating, not just the laws of the land, but also the laws of God. When people see themselves as violating the laws of God, they will be more likely to see their need for salvation, and the law will have fulfilled one of its primary purposes. Some might object at this point that it is not practically feasible to enact laws based upon Scripture because we live in an essentially postmodern culture that does not recognize any transcendent source of morality. In response, I would direct our attention to a remark made by Dallas Willard, Professor of Philosophy at USC, that at the level of university faculty, postmodernism essentially has run its course. It no longer is considered a viable worldview by many at the highest levels of academia.<sup>10</sup> If Willard's contention is accurate, it may take a number of years to filter down to everyday life, but the opportunity might be ripe for presentation of a competing worldview- a Christian philosophy of moral values and justice- in the public square.

If laws are going to be passed that are based upon a Christian worldview, then one obvious requirement is for more Christians to be involved at all levels of politics. There

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Willard made that comment during an informal question and answer session at an event titled *Epicenter*, sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, January 28-29, 2005. Used by permission.

are two basic approaches to dealing with that problem. One approach is more long-range in nature. The church needs a stronger emphasis on evangelism and discipleship. The more committed, mature Christians we have in society at large, the more likely it becomes that elected representatives will be Christians. These committed Christians must see political activity as part of the work of the kingdom of God. They must run for office at the local level, where they will learn how to be effective in the political realm. The second approach is the one advocated by Richard Mouw- take the evangelistic message out into the political arena itself. This leads us to move to the fourth way in which political activity might help the church accomplish the evangelistic task.

### **A New Audience**

Responsible political activity can help the church with the evangelistic task by providing apologetic and evangelistic opportunities with a group of people that otherwise might never hear the message. Researchers such as George Barna have documented the lack of involvement by the larger culture in such traditional church activities as Bible studies, worship services, etc...Writing in 1990, Barna indicated that less than one-half of adults attend any kind of church on Sunday and that the membership in Sunday School classes was declining.<sup>11</sup> Barna's work, as well as that of other pollsters, shows that the activities that the church formerly could count on for communicating the Christian message simply are not attended by most people. Of the one-half of adults who attend any kind of church, less than one-half of those attend as often as once a week. Contact with, and witness to, evangelistic prospects, increasingly must take place outside the

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<sup>11</sup> George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, a Division of Gospel Light, 1990), 115.

church. Mouw has contended that the political arena is one of those potential arenas in which evangelistic activity can take place. Political activity could result in opportunities to share the gospel directly, with not only legislators, but also legislative staff, political commentators, etc... These conversations might take place privately, out of the public eye, but they would take place. The very fact that Christians are willing to take part in public policy discussions in a common search for earthly justice would provide a platform for apologetic activity as proposals are made for laws that reflect Christian values. For this to happen, politically active Christians must learn to see their political involvement as an evangelistic opportunity, not just as a public service effort. In addition, if such evangelistic activity is to be supported by political activity, there must be no hint of any attempt to obtain favored legal status for Christianity. Much of the suspicion with which Christians are regarded in the public square can be traced directly to the perception that politically active Christians are seeking to establish Christianity by law as the “official” religion of the nation. Such an effort is both self-defeating and unnecessary. It is unnecessary because, if Christianity is the *dominant* religion in the United States, then it does not need to be made the official religion. It is self-defeating because if Christianity is not the dominant religion in the United States, then to make it the official religion serves no useful purpose and might actually increase antagonism toward the Christian message.

One final thing is required if political activity is to be used as a vehicle for evangelism. Policy proposals will have to be presented in language that unapologetically reflects the values of the kingdom of God. In recent years, there has arisen an almost pathological fear of using religious language in policy discussions. I believe that fear to

be unfounded. I would give to politically active Christians the same encouragement and admonition given to Christian philosophers by Alvin Plantinga. In “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” Plantinga addressed the subject of Christian philosophers engaging in a discussion of Quine’s sets and tropes from a theistic perspective. Plantinga commented, “Perhaps here we *could* (author’s emphasis) proceed without appealing to what we believe as theists, but why *should* we, if those beliefs are useful and explanatory?”<sup>12</sup> If religious language is useful and explanatory in presenting a policy proposal, then we should not be afraid of using it. Wolfhart Pannenberg, among others, has urged Christians to allow the coming kingdom of God to define their political goals. Pannenberg said, “Christian political ethics should be marked by the expectation of the kingdom of God, the coming rule of God over the world.”<sup>13</sup> Mouw joins Pannenberg in this notion, claiming, “Our faithful witness to the triumphs of God’s grace must direct man to the coming of God’s kingdom.”<sup>14</sup> And it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about the kingdom of God in non-religious terms. Certainly Christians always must be careful to present proposals with attitudes of respect and courtesy. To do otherwise fails to acknowledge others as persons created in the image of God. But when proposals are presented courteously, but in unambiguously Christian language, opportunities for dialogue might occur with people who otherwise might remain isolated from the Christian message because traditional church activities simply are not part of their regular routine.

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<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, James F. Sennett, Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 314.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Faith and Reality*, Trans. John Maxwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 106.

<sup>14</sup> Mouw, *Ibid.* 24

To summarize, political activity on the part of Christians actually can help the church to accomplish its evangelistic mission in four ways. One, the cultural climate can be improved, which would help Christians to be more faithful to the task assigned by the Lord. Two, the credibility of the church could be improved by demonstrating that we care about things that also are important to other politically active citizens. Three, political activity can help the institutions of law and government do a better job of fulfilling their God-assigned responsibilities, one of which is to prepare people to receive Christ by revealing the sin that indwells them. Four, political activity can create apologetic and evangelistic opportunities with a group of people that otherwise might not hear the message of salvation because the church has little or no interest for them.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me mention several things of which politically active Christians must be cognizant. There is not sufficient space in this forum to discuss these in any detail, but they do need to be explored by Christians who want to use the political process in an effective way. First, we need to acknowledge the value of trans-denominational political action groups. The value of such groups is that they usually are issue-oriented, not doctrine oriented. Most of them have some kind of generic doctrinal statement that includes the basic truths with which the vast majority of evangelical Christians can agree. As long as those basic truths are in place, and we can agree on the specific issues, then there is no reason not to work together toward a common goal. Second, as I have

mentioned already, politically active Christians must avoid any perception of an effort to gain favored legal status for Christianity. Such efforts are both dangerous and unnecessary. If Christianity were the dominant religion, it would not need to be the official religion. Third, and this is an area that needs ongoing attention and dialogue, there must be conversation on exactly what constitutes “Christian values” or “biblical principles” that could be used as criteria for analyzing policy proposals. There will always be some tension here because significant disagreements exist even in evangelical circles on different moral and ethical topics. Ron Sider and Wolfhart Pannenberg see such disagreements as a threat to the ability of Christians to make any meaningful changes in the surrounding culture. Sider says, “The Bible is the norm for all who want a biblically informed political agenda. But a common commitment to biblical authority does not preclude major disagreement.”<sup>15</sup> One partial solution is to focus on the areas of common agreement that can be the objects of common action. Again, this is where issue-oriented groups can play a vital role. Four, Christian political activity must be carried out with an attitude of respect and courtesy for those who do not agree with specific policy proposals. Robin Lovin notes an assertion by Reinhold Niebuhr of the need for Christians to recognize that the search for justice inevitably require that some men contend against them.<sup>16</sup> We must recognize that not everyone will agree with all of our proposals, and we must be as careful as possible that our opponents do not become our enemies. To accomplish this delicate task requires that we remember that the higher goal is apologetics and evangelism, not winning a political battle.

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<sup>15</sup> Ron Sider, “A Plea for Conservatives and Radical Conservatives,” *The Christian Century* 103 No. 28 (October 1, 1986), 836.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Lovin, “The Limits of Freedom and the Possibilities of Politics,” *Journal of Religion* 73 No. 4, (1993), 571.

Finally, if the Church, in the sense of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, is to have any lasting impact on culture, the local congregation is where the action has to be centered. Large symposiums and meetings can produce statements of agreement, but these will have little long-term effect. John Whitehead's observation, "If America is to be revitalized or reformed in a Christian sense, it will be done at the local level,"<sup>17</sup> is very pertinent. His emphasis was on Christians running for political office at the local level, but those candidates come out of local congregations. They get their spiritual input from local pastors and local church leaders. Strong efforts at evangelism and discipleship in local churches can produce strong, well-grounded Christians who have a consistently Christian worldview. Kingdom influence must begin, and continue to be sustained, at the level of the local church congregation. Ronald Thiemann refers to the comment of James Madison that the true hope for democracy lay "in the character of the representatives whom the people would elect."<sup>18</sup> That character essentially is formed at the local level through the influence of families, schools and religious institutions. This particular insight into the involvement of Christians in politics can be seen as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed, "In the United States, religion exercises but little influence upon the laws and upon the details of public opinion; but it directs the customs of the community, and by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state."<sup>19</sup> Christian political activity can help the church to accomplish its evangelistic task for the four reasons we have discussed, but the local church must do a better job of preparing Christians for life in the political arena.

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<sup>17</sup> John Whitehead, "The Christian Connection," *Christianity Today* 26 No. 18 (1982), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald E. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 25

<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. I. Trans. Henry Reeve. (New York: J & H. G. Langley, 57 Chatham Street, 1840, Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 304.

Jesus Christ has called us to be salt and light. The political realm needs at least as much salt as any other realm of life, and possibly more than most. To withdraw from that realm is not an option. It is an appropriate arena for evangelistic political activity that points people to the reality of the coming kingdom of God. We must speak the truth in love and trust in God to use our efforts to draw people to Jesus Christ.