

# ***Christian Involvement in Politics Right or Wrong***

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*With a resurgent Christian vote having been identified in the 2004 election there is a renewed debate as we approach this one, as to the rights and wrongs of Christian involvement in politics. ACL clearly believes it is right and necessary to be involved. However, while they are keenly aware that not all models or examples of Christian interaction with politics are productive or perhaps even right, there are considerable challenges in establishing a new paradigm.*

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Thank you very much for the invitation to talk to you tonight about the rights and wrongs of Christian involvement in politics.

It seems particularly appropriate that this topic be discussed at the St Thomas More Forum. Thomas More is, as you well know, the patron saint of statesmen and politicians. He was a consummate politician, and a faithful Catholic and he lived in an age when church-state relations were particularly significant.

His political skill was well demonstrated during several tumultuous years. By impressive political manoeuvring he managed to avoid serious penalty until he was required to accept the Act of Succession. His refusal led to his execution in 1535.

Thomas More is an example of committed faith despite intense political pressure to compromise. He was a principled man, who would not accept political expediency. His final words before execution that he “died the Kings good servant but God’s first”, continue to resonate strongly today for those balancing the tensions of loyalty to conscience and party or even constituency in political life. Yet in other ways, we would perhaps be critical of his methods today, particularly his use of his political office to pursue his religious opponents. Whilst such behaviour was not uncommon at that time, I think we would now regard it as an unwelcome intrusion of the state into religious matters.

Unsurprisingly, Christian political engagement remains a contentious issue. We are dealing with three sensitive topics here: politics, religion, and the relationship between the two. Tonight, I want to consider whether Christian engagement in politics is right or wrong. Now, as managing director of a Christian lobby group, you won’t be surprised if I start by declaring my belief that it *is* right for Christians to be involved in politics. However, I also think that there are better and worse methods of involvement. We can learn many lessons from those who have gone before us and, using their experience and ours, I hope we can avoid pitfalls and make an effective contribution to Australian politics.

There are many different ways of being involved in politics. At the basic level, we cast a vote every few years. Beyond that, we can get involved with a political party, engage with our political representatives, contribute to political discussions in the media, or, if we feel called to it, stand for election ourselves. My comments tonight are primarily on the issue of Christian lobbying.

Whatever our level of involvement, our religious faith ought to inform our political opinions. Faith in Jesus Christ should bring about a personal transformation as God works in us to conform us to the likeness of his Son<sup>1</sup>. As this faith grows, it should also transform our views of what is right and wrong, what is fair and just, which laws are good and which are bad. It is this transformation that leads many Christians to become agents of social change, both at a grassroots level assisting those in need, and also at a policy level, trying to change the laws, policies or cultural attitudes that have caused the damage – which often entails political involvement.

Christian political action is not easily pigeonholed, despite many attempts by commentators to give it one label or another. Some Christian political action, particularly on unpopular topics such as gambling or abortion is characterised as ‘wowsery’ or judgemental. Other Christian political action is derided for being unrealistically compassionate, such as the efforts to increase overseas aid to a much higher level of gross national income. Some Christian political action is seen as too traditional, a desperate attempt to turn the clock back to a time when marriage was honoured and there was no need to clarify its meaning. Other Christian political action has been far too progressive for its surrounding society, such as the Christian women’s temperance and suffrage movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Christian political action has a strong moral compass founded on the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. Any objective look at history shows that Christian political action has played a significant role in improving society.

There are many excellent examples of believers whose faith has led them to politics. Daniel gave faithful service and prophetic counsel to the kings of Babylon, whilst being careful to avoid absorbing the values of Babylonian culture. Joseph was entrusted with the responsibility of stewarding a nation’s resources to survive seven lean years. Esther used her influence to protect the Jews. More recent notables include: William Wilberforce’s campaign for the abolition of slavery and the reformation of society; Lord Shaftesbury’s push to reform working conditions in the factories that powered Britain’s Industrial Revolution; Elizabeth Fry’s work to improve the lot of female prisoners<sup>2</sup> and care for the homeless; and the campaign for equal rights for black people led by such heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as Dr Martin Luther King Jr and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Catholic social teaching has certainly given you a proud record of political engagement at various levels, whether that be in the trades union movement campaigning for the rights of workers, in welfare agencies caring for the poor, or in defence of human life and dignity against abortion or embryonic cloning.

I do believe it is right for Christians to engage in politics. I am encouraged when I see the examples of wrongs that have been righted. But the need remains because we live in a

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:29

<sup>2</sup> In 1818, Elizabeth Fry became the first woman ever to present evidence in Parliament when she appeared before a House of Commons committee to testify about conditions in British prisons.

society that still neglects the poor, still fails to respect the sanctity of life, and still fiercely challenges biblical notions of marriage and family life.

However if Christians are going to engage in politics, then we need to do so with care.

Firstly, we need to remember the way of Christ as we serve the cause of Christ. Politics is a rough business and can sometimes be underhand. Christian engagement in politics must set a high standard of integrity. We need to encourage those in Parliament and respect their confidences. Where there are other Christian groups or individuals engaged in the same work, then we need to remember that we are all part of the body of Christ and seek to honour one another's calling.

It distresses me to hear people claim that the issue they are most passionate about is the issue that the whole church should pursue exclusively, whether it be poverty, overseas aid, abortion, marriage, or something else. All are inevitably important. We can't all be experts in each one, but we can honour one another's work and try to create an environment where politics is more likely to pay heed to Christian opinions and concerns.

Secondly, we need a biblical mandate for our lobbying whilst being aware that there is not a clear-cut Christian answer to every political issue. As Federal Treasurer Peter Costello notes, it is hard to find much support for a direct tax system over an indirect tax system in the Bible<sup>3</sup>. However, we can usually find biblical principles by which we can evaluate a particular proposal. Such principles would lead us to advocate policies that provide for impartial justice, fair business practices, respect for human life, strong families, care of those in need, personal responsibility, and good environmental stewardship (amongst many others). Exactly how these principles should be translated into policy will always be the subject of rigorous and healthy debate! Christians themselves will not always agree. Nonetheless, Christian lobbying should always be able to provide a biblical rationale for its content and its conduct.

Thirdly it is the ACL's belief that Christian lobbying should be non-party partisan: we are campaigning for or against a particular policy, not for or against a particular party. The political world is a world of strong party alignments: Christian lobbyists need to be in that world but not of it. Christians who want to be party-political should join the party of their choice, and there is a strong need for Christian party members and politicians, without whom nothing is achieved. Christians involved in lobbying political parties need, in our view, to remain neutral.

There are several reasons for this. No political party can claim a mandate from God and there will be elements of sin and righteousness in each one. There are also pragmatic reasons for avoiding capture by one party. The party that feels it has won the Christian constituency can soon start to take it for granted, whilst the party that thinks it will never win it will inevitably abandon it and seek to satisfy other, often contrary, agendas. The risks of this alignment are clearly demonstrated by the example of religious engagement in US politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Hon Peter Costello MP, Address to the Australian Christian Lobby National Conference, Canberra 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2006

The American Religious Right has unnerved many Australians, including many Christians. To some extent this apprehension about the relationship between religion and politics is justified. The Religious Right is right to have defended marriage and family values in America, but it has been unduly narrow in its definition of Christian issues and it has made the grave error of aligning itself with the Republican Party. When religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson openly urged their followers to re-elect President George Bush<sup>4</sup> in 2004, Christians were justifiably concerned that their faith had been co-opted for party political purposes.

There is now a growing Religious Left in the USA, which has undoubtedly developed as a counterbalance to the Religious Right. Jim Wallis of Sojourners is right to ask why believing in God and having moral values should automatically make someone pro-war, pro-rich and pro-Republican and to remind voters in the 2004 US elections that ‘God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat.’<sup>5</sup> However, despite their rhetoric, one wonders whether this new Religious Left is at risk of repeating the mistakes of the Right by aligning itself with the Democrats.

This apparent division between politically engaged Christians runs the risk of obscuring from politicians’ sight the growing number of Christians who sit closer to the middle ground. Because they do not believe issues of social justice and personal morality to be mutually exclusive concerns, they seek a Government that performs well across the spectrum of these issues. Importantly this approach is already resulting influence on public policy across the usual political divides.

Australia is the only Western nation to have explicitly stated in its federal marriage laws that marriage is the voluntary lifelong union of one man and one woman (thus rejecting homosexual marriage). This was achieved against the run of play in 2004 when an overwhelming number of Christians made submissions to the Senate Inquiry on marriage, resulting in the largest ever number of submissions to a Senate Inquiry (over 16,000 compared to the usual average of well under 1,000). More than 1,100 Christians came from every corner of Australia to attend the Marriage Forum in Parliament House, impressing on the Government and the Opposition, the need to secure marriage from homosexual activists.

Neither party could afford to ignore the strength of Christian opinion on this topic, especially not so close to a federal election! The weight of demonstrated Christian concern on marriage must have been a factor for the Prime Minister when he acted to overturn the ACT’s same-sex civil union laws, which mimicked marriage.

Similarly, there have been some key issues recently where collective Church action on social concerns has been noteworthy. The Government’s attempt to change migration laws to prevent even genuine refugees finding a home in Australia was thwarted, in large part by concerted Christian action and the stance of some Christian MPs and Senators, which meant the Government withdrew the Bill rather than face defeat in the Senate. Changes to welfare laws and industrial relations laws were also heavily criticised by prominent church leaders, with some success, and of course churches of all colours have been prominent in the climate change debate.

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Falwell, *The New York Times*, July 16 2004 and Pat Robertson, *AP / Fox News*. January 2 2004

<sup>5</sup> Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.* HarperCollins 2005

This is really the new paradigm that I think the Christian community has begun to create in Australia, though we have much further to go. It is a paradigm that sees many different policy issues as being significant to God, whether it is marriage and family, sanctity of life, stewardship of the environment, employment laws, or care of people in need. It is a paradigm that encourages Christians to get involved in politics, either in a general way across many different issues, or in a deeper way on a particular issue that they feel passionate about. It is also a paradigm that asks them to encourage other Christian lobbyists in their work, rather than snipe at one another from across the false divide between 'moral' and 'social' issues.

Achieving this will not be easy as it takes many of us beyond our own comfort zones and can bring challenges to our personal or organisational pride. However, it also seems to draw us closer to God's heart for our broken society, and to his desire for unity amongst his followers.