

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Christians and Politics, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 22:17–21; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:19–25; John 18:36; Romans 13:1–7; Ephesians 6:12

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In yesterday's post, John MacArthur asked whether or not politics and legislation can provide the answer to America's moral decline. His conclusion was that "America's moral decline is a spiritual problem, not a political one, and its solution is the gospel, not partisan politics." Today's article expands on that thought, looking through history to see if political involvement has ever produced lasting transformation.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

This is a lesson evangelicals ought to know from church history. Whenever the church has focused on evangelism and preaching the gospel, her influence has increased. When she has sought power by political, cultural, or military activism, she has damaged or spoiled her testimony.

The Crusades during the Middle Ages were waged for the purpose of regaining Christian control of the Holy Lands. Few believers today would argue that those efforts were fruitful. Even when the crusaders enjoyed military success, the church grew spiritually weaker and more worldly. Other religious wars and campaigns tinged with political motivation (such as the Thirty Years' War in Europe, Cromwell's revolution in England, and other skirmishes during the Reformation era) are all viewed with disapproval, or at best curiosity, by Christians today. And rightly so. The military and political ambitions of some of the Reformers turned out to be a weakness, and ultimately an impediment to the Reformation. On the other hand, the strength of the Reformation, and its enduring legacy, was derived from the fact that Reformation theology shone a bright spotlight on the way of salvation and brought clarity to the gospel.

Throughout Protestant history, those segments of the visible church that have turned their attention to social and political issues have also compromised sound doctrine and quickly declined in influence. Early modernists, for example, explicitly argued that social work and moral reform were more important than doctrinal precision, and their movement soon abandoned any semblance of Christianity whatsoever.

Today's evangelical political activists seem to be unaware of how much their methodology parallels that of liberal Christians at the start of the twentieth century. Like those misguided idealists, contemporary evangelicals have become enamored with temporal issues at the expense of eternal values. Evangelical activists in essence are simply preaching a politically conservative version of the old social gospel, emphasizing social and cultural concerns above spiritual ones.

That kind of thinking fosters the view that government is either our ally (if it supports our special agenda) or our enemy (if it remains opposed or unresponsive to our voice). The political strategy becomes the focus of everything, as if the spiritual fortunes of God's people rise or fall depending on who is in office. But the truth is that no human government can ultimately do anything either to advance or to thwart God's kingdom. And the worst, most despotic worldly government in the end

cannot halt the power of the Holy Spirit or the spread of God's Word.

To gain a thoroughly biblical and Christian perspective on political involvement, we should take to heart the words of the British theologian Robert L. Ottley, delivered at Oxford University more than one hundred years ago:

The Old Testament may be studied . . . as an instructor in social righteousness. It exhibits the moral government of God as attested in his dealings with nations rather than with individuals; and it was their consciousness of the action and presence of God in history that made the prophets preachers, not merely to their countrymen, but to the world at large. . . . There is indeed significance in the fact that in spite of their ardent zeal for social reform they did not as a rule take part in political life or demand political reforms. They desired . . . not better institutions but better men. (*Aspects of the Old Testament*. The Bampton Lectures, 1897 [London: Longmans, 1898], 430-31)

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