Christian faith in the public square

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In a 2003 media interview, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair was asked about his faith. Mr Blair's strategy director Alastair Campbell, an atheist, immediately intervened.

"We don't do God. I'm sorry. We don't do God," he said.[1]

Why are Christian values sometimes viewed as incompatible with public service – and unwelcome in the public square?

Christian heritage under pressure

In the last two decades there have been several attempts to remove prayers from Australian parliaments. The prayers, comprising the Lord's Prayer and a request for God's guidance, are an expression of our nation's Christian heritage which underpins modern democracy. The prayers are a daily reminder that ultimately we must all answer to the higher authority of Almighty God.

But some Australians are abandoning the nation's Christian heritage – preferring a "secular" society. There is a push, too, to remove Bible teaching from schools.[2]

Secular humanists argue that religious education is harmful to students. They argue that religious groups should not be allowed to proselytise in what ought to be a secular education system.

But when Christian values are pushed out of the public square, other values will fill the void.

As Regent College professor Loren Wilkinson says, "Who doesn't live by a set of values? Every political leader, whether he calls it Christianity, whether he calls it secular humanism, Marxism, whatever, brings his own values to it."[3]

Why be a Christian influence?

Humphrey Dobson gives nine biblical reasons to be a Christian influence in the public square.[4]

1. The glory of God

Christians show their love for God by seeking his glory. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever".

God is glorified when Christians point people to the truth of his Word. By imitating his attributes we bring God glory – his righteous character, his concern for the Church, his love and care for all people.

We are commanded: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us..." (Colossians 1:15; Ephesians 5:1-2; John 7:18).



Humphrey Dobson

The triune God is our Creator and he has designed this universe to reflect his character.

We see God's holy character in his moral law, which requires mankind's obedience.

Every human being is made in God's image and his moral law is written on the hearts of all (Genesis 1:26-27; Romans 2:14-15). This moral law is summarised by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Essentially they set out the Maker's instructions for life on this earth.

If we are followers of Christ, we should work for God's moral law to be reflected in the laws of this land to honour and glorify him.

Not only does promoting the truth of God's Word bring glory to our Creator, it is also for everyone's good. For example, the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman was hardwired by God into our creation from the beginning, before the Fall.

Marriage is for everyone, not just Christians. Disobeying the seventh commandment to maintain the purity of marriage has negative consequences in this life and eternally; a man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7-8). Following God's pattern for marriage will bring a measure of blessing in this life.

2. The lordship of Christ

Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:11), exalted far above all authority, power and dominion (Ephesians 1:21; Revelation 1:5) and his Lordship is universal: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). As the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

It was for loyalty to this truth – that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar – that early Christians were martyred. James calls the moral law a royal law: a law given by a king (James 2:8). Obedience to Christ in all things is a matter for all individuals, governments and nations. On the last day, King Jesus will judge every person according to his law.

3. Common grace

Woven throughout Scripture is evidence of God's common grace – his blessings to all people in this life outside of salvation (Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17; 2 Corinthians 9:10).

Creation was drastically affected by the Fall, but God restrains the effect of sin by providing us with many good things, such as marriage, government and our consciences. Christ himself led by example by showing God's common grace in action. He healed and provided food for many people – those who believed in him and those who did not. Indeed, it is recorded in John 6 that after the feeding of the 5,000 many stopped following him. As imitators of Christ, we too should seek to care for others.

The doctrine of common grace also

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holds that God can work for good through unbelievers, including governing officials.

It was the pagan King Cyrus who granted religious freedom to the Jews and even provided for the rebuilding of the temple.

But when people reject God's common grace, they reject and work against the means which God has provided to restrain sin. We cannot make people accept Christian standards, but in a democracy we can certainly argue for them.

4. The whole counsel of God

The Apostle Paul determined to preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Someone who takes the Bible seriously has to consider passages such as 1 Timothy 2, Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, which deal specifically with the Christian's relationship with government.

Surely churches have to preach on and obey such passages, as they should the rest of the Bible. It is our responsibility to put these passages of Scripture into action.

5. Loving our neighbour

The Lord Jesus said on the night before he died: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Earlier in his ministry he commanded us to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:39).

Loving our neighbour includes both sharing the gospel and showing our love by practical acts of compassion.

In the broader sense loving our neighbour also means seeking good laws that will benefit our neighbour's marriage, children, property and so on.

The unborn baby is also our neighbour. We need to defend the sanctity of life and protect them from abortion. This is a matter of obedience to Christ.

6. Demonstrating the reality of our faith

The book of James is clear that faith without works is no faith at all (James 2:26). Our works can never save us, but they do demonstrate the reality of our faith. And the Bible does not exclude the governing authorities from the scope of our good works. The implications of the gospel extend not just to the forgiveness of a person's sins through Christ's death on the Cross, but also to the transformation of lives and society. While the visible Church as a body focuses on its task of worship, prayer, teaching and evangelism, at the same time individual Christians should be doing good wherever God has placed them in society.

Every Christian has a dual citizenship: of heaven (Philippians 3:20); and of an earthly nation (usually that in which he was born).

Theologian Albert Mohler has reminded Christians that "we live simultaneously as citizens of two cities: a heavenly city and an earthly city. The one is eternal, the other is passing. But the earthly city is also a city of God's good pleasure and divine compassion. As a Christian, I am instructed by the Bible to work for the good and flourishing of this earthly city, even as I work to see as many as possible also become citizens of the heavenly city through faith in Christ Jesus."

In 21st century Britain our democracy provides us with many opportunities. We should use these privileges. Influencing government and laws for good is one outworking of faith in Jesus.

7. Praying for those in authority

Praying for those in authority is a gospel priority. The command to pray for rulers found in 1 Timothy 2 is directly linked to the freedom to live a godly life, and then to opportunities for the gospel.

If it is right to pray for something, it is also right to take action to achieve it. We have a biblical example of this from the Old Testament. Jeremiah 29 records a divinely-inspired letter to the Jews in exile in Babylon. God says to his people in a pagan land (verse 7): "…seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper". So prayer and actively seeking the peace of the city go together. The prophet Daniel responded by doing both, and it was his praying that caused him to be cast into the lion's den. Years before, he boldly declared to King Nebuchadnezzar that he should stop sinning and do what is right (Daniel 4:27). In our day we must do everything we can to influence our rulers so that there is freedom to obey and to declare God's Word.

8. Biblical counsel to secular rulers

The Bible is clear that governing authorities are ordained by God "to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right" (1 Peter 2:14). The likes of Joseph and Daniel brought such counsel to secular rulers. Theologian Wayne Grudem has also pointed to the example of John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul who did the same in their day.

This is a clear biblical pattern for the Church and individual Christians to follow today.

9. Salt and light

The Christian's calling is most vividly described by Christ himself. He tells his followers that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). As salt acts to prevent decay in food, so Christians act to restrain evil on this earth. As light illuminates a dark place, so Christians bear witness to the truth. Supremely we bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus. This is an issue of demonstrating our Christian identity.

God's Word is the truth. It is public truth. It is true for everyone, not just Christians. We are called to bear witness to the truth of God's Word, including its commands to keep the moral law of our Creator and the blessings of obedience, as well as its teachings of the person, work and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Christians are salt and light and this metaphor is probably the simplest summary of why Christians must be involved in the wider world, including seeking to be a Christian influence in the public square. We need to take action: guided by biblical principles and in dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. None of us can do everything, but we can all do something.

What is the greatest reason for being salt and light? It brings glory to God. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Should Christians only do evangelism?

Edited extract from *Politics According to the Bible* by Dr Wayne Grudem, BA(Economics), M Div, DD[5]

One common view about Christians and politics is promoted by evangelicals who essentially say, "We should just preach the Gospel, and that is the only way Christians can hope to change people's hearts and change our society." They say that the church is only called to "preach the Gospel", not to preach about politics.

There are some authors whose writings tend in this direction, even if it is qualified by statements that of course *some* political influence by the church is appropriate – but it will not do any spiritual or eternal good!

John MacArthur, in *Why Government Can't Save You*, wrote the following:

"It is all right occasionally to support legitimate measures designed to correct a glaring social or political wrong ... A certain

amount of healthy and balanced concern about current trends in government and the community is acceptable, as long as we realize that such interest is not vital to our spiritual lives, our righteous testimony or the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. Above all, the believer's political involvement should never displace the priority of preaching and teaching the gospel because the morality and righteousness that God seeks is the result of salvation and sanctification."[6]

'Gospel' understanding too narrow

This view represents too narrow an understanding of the work of God's kingdom and of the nature of the Christian gospel message. "The Gospel" in the New Testament is not just "trust Jesus and be forgiven of your sins and grow in holiness and go to heaven" (though that is the heart of the Gospel and its foundational message). No, the Gospel is God's good news about all of life! Jesus said,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (Matt 28:19-20).

Preaching "the whole Gospel" must also include preaching what the Bible says about civil government. That means that Christians will learn from the Bible how to influence governments for good.

I think of the difference between North Korea and South Korea. Even if the dictatorial, oppressive government of North Korea has not *completely* halted the spread of God's Word, its severe persecution has hindered it so much that millions of North Koreans are born, live, and die without ever hearing of Jesus Christ, and North Korea sends out zero missionaries.

By contrast, the church in South Korea, where the government has allowed freedom, is thriving, and sending missionaries around the world.

Governments do make a difference to the work of God's kingdom. This is why Paul urged that prayers be made "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:2).

That is, good governments help people to live a "peaceful" and "godly" life. Bad governments hinder this.



Wayne Grudem

Governments can allow churches to meet freely and evangelise or they can prevent these things by force of law (as in Saudi Arabia and North Korea). They can hinder or promote literacy (the latter enabling people to read a Bible).

They can stop murderers and thieves and drunk drivers and child predators or allow them to terrorise society and destroy lives. They can promote and protect marriages or hinder and even destroy them.

Governments do make a significant difference for the work of God in the world, and we are to pray and work for good governments around the world.

The 'whole Gospel' includes a transformation of society

When the Gospel changes lives, it should also result in *changed societies*.

So shouldn't "the Gospel" also result in *changed governments* as well? Of course it should! And should churches teach their people what the Bible says about God's will for families, business and educating children? Certainly they should.

But then, shouldn't churches also teach about God's will for human government? Of course they should!

And some Christians are called to implement that teaching by actually influencing governments for good.

It seems to me that the "do evangelism, not politics" view has a mistaken understanding of what is important to God, as if only spiritual (non-material, other-worldly) things matter to him and not the actual circumstances of people's physical life in this world.

That is a philosophical view akin to Platonism, and it is similar to an ancient deviation from Christianity called Gnosticism – but it is not the view of the Bible.

Which parts of the Bible should the church not preach about?

A third response to those who say, *The church should just do evangelism and not get involved in politics*, is to ask this question: "What parts of the Bible have you decided not to preach about because you are 'just going to preach the Gospel'?" Have you decided that you won't preach on Romans 13:1–7? Or that you won't preach on 1 Peter 2:13–14?

What about Genesis 9:5–6? Or what about the narratives of the Old Testament kings and their good and evil deeds? Are you not going to preach about Daniel's influence on the government of Babylon? Or on Isaiah's prophecies to the other nations in Isaiah 13–23? Are you not going to preach on the prophecies to the other nations in Amos 1–2?

What parts of the Bible are left out of your preaching by the idea that you're going to "just preach the Gospel"?



Won't politics distract us from preaching the gospel?

Some object that while political involvement may have some benefits and may do some good, it can so easily distract us, turn unbelievers away from the church, and cause us to neglect the main task of pointing people toward personal trust in Christ. John MacArthur writes, "When the church takes a stance that emphasises political activism and social moralizing, it always diverts energy and resources away from evangelization." [7]

Yet the proper question is not, "Does political influence take resources away from evangelism?" but, "Is political influence something God has called us to do?"

If God has called some of us to some political influence, then those resources would not be blessed if we diverted them to evangelism—or to the choir, or to teaching Sunday School to children, or to any other use.

In this matter, as in everything else the church does, it would be healthy for Christians to realize that God may call individual Christians to different emphases in their lives. This is because God has placed in the church "varieties of gifts" (1 Cor. 12:4) and the church is an entity that has "many members" but is still "one body" (v 12).

The teaching ministry from the pulpit should do nothing less than proclaim "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). It should teach, over the course of time, on all areas of life and all areas of Bible knowledge. That certainly must include, to some extent, what the Bible says about the purposes of civil government and how that teaching should apply to our situations today.

God leaves Christians here on earth both to do evangelism and to do good for others

Think about this: when people trust in Christ as their Saviour and have their sins forgiven, why does God not snatch them up to heaven immediately? Why does he leave them here on earth?

Is it *only* so that they would preach the Gospel to others? Well then, what are *those people* supposed to do after they trust in Christ as Saviour?

Is their *only* purpose on earth to preach the Gospel to others, or does Jesus want us to do some other things, such as loving our neighbours as ourselves (see Matt. 22:39)?

Clearly, if we are here on earth to glorify God, we will glorify him (in part at least) by obeying the command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

But that means that I should seek the good of my neighbours in all parts of society.



"You shall love your neighbour as yourself" means that I should seek *good laws* that will protect preborn children. It means that I should seek *good laws* that protect marriages and families. It means I should seek *good laws* that protect children from the corrupting moral influences that want to use the classroom to teach that all kinds of sexual experimentation outside of marriage are just fine and that there is nothing wrong with pornography.

God established both the church and the government to restrain evil

One significant way that God restrains evil in the world is through changing people's hearts when they trust in Christ as their Saviour (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

But we should not turn this one way into the only way that God restrains evil in this age.

God also uses civil government to restrain evil, and there is much evil that can only be restrained by the power of civil government, for there will always be many who do not trust in Christ as their Saviour and many who do not fully obey him.



William Wilberforce: abolished the slave trade throughout the British empire

For example, why do we need laws against drunk driving?

Someone might say, "We really don't need laws against drunk driving. The influence of the Gospel should be enough to change society.

If Christians were really doing their job of witnessing to others, and if Christians were really being a good example of sober driving, that would be enough to eliminate all drunk driving."

That is a foolish position. We recognize that in this present age there are many people who do not accept the Gospel. (And sadly, even some of those who do trust in Christ continue to do things as foolish as driving while intoxicated.)

Government has been "instituted by God" so that it would be "not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (Romans 13:1, 3).

The *primary* means God uses to stop drunk driving today is for civil government to take away these drunk drivers' liberty to drive.

Government is sent "to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peter 2:14).

The history of positive Christian influence

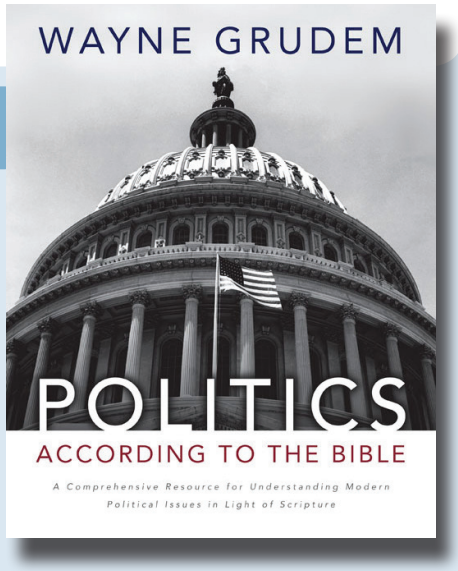
In his book *How Christianity Changed the World*, historian Alvin Schmidt points out how the spread of Christianity and Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374); outlawing the brutal battles-to-the-death in which thousands of gladiators had died (in 404); stopping the practice of human sacrifice among the Irish, the Prussians, and the Lithuanians as well as among other nations; outlawing paedophilia and prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India (in 1829).[8]

In England, William Wilberforce, a devout Christian, led the successful effort to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself throughout the British Empire by 1840.

As for the present time, Chuck Colson's insightful book *God and Government* reports dozens of encouraging narratives of courageous, real-life Christians who in recent years, in causes large and small, have had significant impact for good on laws and governments around the world.[9]

These Christians influenced governments for good because they knew that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works,* which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

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