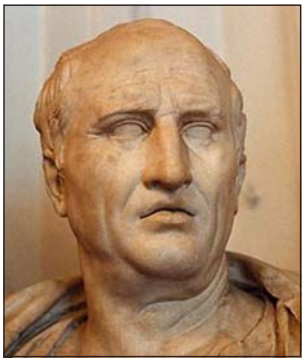
Writing letters to newspapers and MPs

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Marcus Tullius Cicero

The pen is mightier than the sword
- Cicero (106 BC - 43 BC)

Christians in the democratic and free nations have a great opportunity to commend our concerns in writing to newspapers and parliamentarians. In many other nations this freedom of expression is utterly denied: newspapers are often controlled by governments, and the civic authorities refuse to consider the views of the people. But in the democratic nations, political power is divided among parliamentarians. This gives greater accountability than in countries where only a few people are in charge. That division of political power helps MPs to give serious attention to the views of voters (or risk losing their seats).

The privilege of free expression is rare among the nations and should be valued and utilised wherever it is allowed.

Sending letters to parliamentarians and to newspapers, is an important method of challenging the thinking of a society that is abandoning the wisdom of the ages that God has given to the world. However, it would be prudent not to over-emphasise the Christian basis of our views. Sometimes it is wiser to focus on the evidence of sociology, history, psychology etc, since these are also part of God's truth. In that way we do not give the impression of religious fanaticism that could undermine the impact of our letter. Yet we are entitled to convey our own experience and our Christian convictions as a testimony that may challenge individuals as to their own position before God. We are entitled to hold our views, and should not be afraid to share the Christian basis of our views.

Letters ought to be clear, concise, readable, polite, accurate, factual, topical, non-defamatory, correctly addressed, signed, dated, and should contain the name, residential address and telephone number of the sender.

Writing letters to the editor of newspapers

The letters column is one of the most widely read sections of the newspapers, and the column is especially scrutinised by the civic authorities, intellectuals, educators and other persons of influence, including parliamentarians. A letter to the editor may be worth the equivalent of many hundreds of dollars in advertising - so it is a great joy to raise concerns that cost only the effort of considering and composing a useful proposition.

Alternatively, we could pay for advertising (at great expense) or print and circulate specialised leaflets. Those alternatives are important and have their place. But small adverts in newspapers tend to become lost, especially in the less prominent pages, while leaflets may requiring time-consuming letter-box distribution and may incur the common fate of the various unsolicited leaflets that often fill our letter boxes or appear under the windscreen wipers of vehicles in car parks.

But a letter to the editor published in a newspaper has the great advantage of having competed successfully with the many items of correspondence that reach the editor's desk on a daily basis. So a published letter may have greater impact than material contained in a paid advert, or circulated as a leaflet.

It is preferable to submit letters by fax or email, especially if they respond to the day's news, as newspapers like to publish letters which have current relevance. Contact details (along with suggested word limits) are provided in daily newspapers. Shorter letters are more likely to be published.

Letters might not be published, but can help form a critical mass of influence on a newspaper, leading it to print one letter of many on that topic. Writing a letter to the editor can be part of our faithful proclamation as God's people whether we are published or not; at least the letter will be read by the person who edits the letters page! Newspapers will also sometimes publish letters on their websites rather than in printed form. Though a letter may not be published, it can be send to parliamentarians, or other persons of interest.

One of the most famous letters to the editor was sent by a girl named Virginia, asking if there really is a Santa Claus. This prompted the famous editorial published in 1897 by the *New York Sun*, entitled "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," claiming that Santa would live forever. But that at least demonstrated the profound potential influence of a letter to the editor.

Writing letters to Members of Parliament

Most MPs are deeply concerned to understand the beliefs of voters. That is because MPs are accountable to the people (especially on election day) so they are keen to know what people believe. Sometimes MPs are unsure about their position, and they can be guided by voters who express a view.

Nor should we feel unworthy of writing to civic authorities, as they deeply need a reminder of what is good and right. They especially need wisdom to to resist the unrelenting actions of people who seek to influence civic authorities for godless purposes. In fact many leaders do not have a basic knowledge of God's wisdom, and need a constant reminder of the truth.

Leaders must be careful before forsaking the wisdom of the ages, and should know what principles have informed the ways we arrange society.

Letters from voters also give MPs evidence of public concern. They could use this as a valuable tool when seeking to convince their colleagues about what is right and wrong. Letters also enable good citizens to take up their duty towards government, by calling authorities to account, as urged by by **James A. Garfield** in 1877, prior to him gaining the presidency in 1881.



Now more than ever before, the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave, and pure, it is because the people demand these high qualities ... If the next centennial does not find us a great nation ... it will be because those who represent the enterprise, the culture and the morality of the nation do not aid in controlling the political forces.

Letters may be typed or neatly penned. A neatly hand-written letter may be more impressive as it has taken time to produce. Letters should also be written to the appropriate arena: federal issues should be addressed to federal MPs, while State issues should be addressed to State parliamentarians. Meeting MPs, as well as writing to them, is also very important as MPs tend to give more attention to letters written by people they have personally met.

Testifying to the sovereignty of God

We give God implicit (un-stated) recognition simply by writing letters that assert the truth, regardless of whether we specifically refer to God. All truth is God's truth, since the *Spirit is the truth* (I John 5:6). However, we may wish to give explicitly stated recognition of God. This can be achieved when we describe his sovereignty, plan and purpose.

The sovereignty of Almighty God over the civic authorities can be asserted as we draw attention to the following biblical observations: The civic authorities *have been established by God* (Romans 13), and hold a divinely appointed duty: *to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right* (I Peter 2:14) not to impose Christian ideals relating to personal morality, but to ensure community cohesion, safety and stability.

Further, they will be brought to account by Almighty God: as *teachers* who help society to understand what is right and wrong, they *will be judged more strictly* (James 3:1). These thoughts may be frightful, but all who read them can never stand before God and say "We never knew".

Recognition of God can also be achieved in a lesser manner by simply concluding the letter with a brief phrase such as "God bless," or "Every blessing," or "We are praying for you".

Many MPs think they can apply their own wisdom to achieve civic stability, security and prosperity. Some also attempt to oppose the wisdom of God, as though there will be no consequence. So as we share the Lord's wisdom with our parliamentarians we can warn them of God's challenge:

> *"It is not by strength that one prevails;*
> *those who oppose the LORD will be shattered"* (I Samuel 2:9-10).

Finally, letters authored by Christians will help call our culture and its leaders towards recognising *the author and perfecter of our faith*, as the writer to the Hebrews (12:2) described our Lord Jesus Christ - who is *sustaining all things by his powerful word* (Hebrews 1:3).

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