



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 10 Number 35
September 16, 2015

Should Christians Be Politically Active?
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As I talk to people about moral issues and how to deal with the horrible moral climate in our culture, it is not unusual at all to bump up against a dilemma. On the one hand, the majority of people don't seem to like the moral direction of our nation. On the other hand, they don't like the possibilities which exist for confronting it. If an individual decides to put a focus on the spiritual side of things, it means that person must become bold in sharing their faith. This can be somewhat distressing for those who don't feel comfortable doing that. The other possible focus is on cleaning up the culture using political means. This is also distressing for many because it requires getting down in the gutter where so much moral slime resides.

Obviously, there are those who are naturally bold about sharing their faith and others who don't mind getting down and dirty in the gutter of politics. But the majority of Christians are not comfortable with either of those extremes. They would prefer to land somewhere in the middle. But even there, a certain kind of activism eventually becomes necessary.

The truth is, as Christians, we are called on to confront the culture with the claims of the gospel. And no matter what form that takes, we must be prepared to do it. In the Bible, we are admonished to be ready to share our faith. But there are times when doing that requires that we also become active in some other way.

In this article, we want to focus on the way Christians ought to think about engaging the political

arena. As stewards of the gospel we can't just ignore that part of life, in spite of the ugliness that is often found there. So, as a Christian, just how should we think about political activism?

The Goal of Political Activism

In order to understand political activism, it is first necessary to understand the goal of politics. It is impossible to be effective doing something that is not understood. To be honest, there are a lot of people who actually do try to engage the political system before they understand the nature of the system they want to influence. And, without exception, people who try to do that tend to get beat up pretty badly. I don't know how many people I have talked to who tell me they wish they had known more about the political system before trying to influence it.

While politics generally has a truly bad reputation among the population at large, the purpose of politics is actually rather important. In fact, without an effectively operating political system, society would very quickly degenerate into chaos. The purpose of politics is to administer governmental entities. As such, it is not the existence or the of goal politics that is the problem. Rather, it is the process of "doing" politics which generates all of the unpleasantness.

In order for a society to operate smoothly, there must be a stable governmental system which provides a mechanism to maintain order in the society. In every society, there are many actors who have competing agendas that they want to promote. Without some kind of stable system which provides a means for this to be sorted out, people would have to simply use raw power and violence to get their way. So, instead of

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violence and raw power, we have a system where people can fuss, argue, and, yes, sometimes even resort to manipulation, in order to come up with solutions. But you have to realize, the kind of give and take necessary to make a governmental system operate is extremely messy. And it is that messiness that turns people off.

So, political activism becomes a part of that messy system. People who wish to influence the direction of the government will find it necessary to, at some level, get down into the gutter and confront the people who oppose their position. Political activism is about engaging the political system in an effort to influence what is going on in society.

Different Worldview Perspectives on Political Activism

Different people have different perspectives on political activism. Some just love the rough and tumble of that environment and engage it, seemingly, just for sport. But most who become politically active have a different motivation. They want to influence the political system on behalf of some issue, or issues, they are passionate about.

But it is not just the fact of activism which is important as we consider this topic. The beliefs a person has about "how" to engage the process is, perhaps, even more important. As it turns out, people who have different worldview perspectives actually engage the process differently. We must understand, though, that this is not an issue related to an individual's sincerity. People of every persuasion will generally be quite sincere in their desire to impact the system for their cause. Rather, it has more to do with what is "right," and what kind of tactics are acceptable.

In American culture, of the various worldview possibilities, there are two which tend to dominate the scene. The two are Naturalism and Christian Theism. Let's take a look at how people who follow these particular worldview systems tend to view the task of political activism.

Naturalism

Naturalism is the belief that the material universe is all that exists. It does not believe in any kind of transcendent reality. As such, Naturalists assert that there is no God, so there can be no kind of transcendent moral standard. For them, there is no alternative but that all morality must be derived from human beings.

At this point the question becomes, "Which human beings get to set the moral standards?" And the bottom line answer must be, "Those who have the power to enforce their will." Thus, Naturalism is based on the premise that there is no innately right or wrong belief or action. What is right and wrong can be whatever is acceptable to the people who must live by the standards which are set. This also applies to the methods people use to advocate for their favorite cause. Of course, there are limits on what is acceptable within any given society. But the limits are not based on any kind of objective notion of right or wrong. It is based purely on what is acceptable in society.

As such, things that may have seemed "wrong" to prior generations may become "right" for later ones. And methods of advocating for ones favorite cause are only limited by what is acceptable in the current environment. This is also changeable over time.

Christian Theism

Christian Theism has an entirely different perspective. Based on biblical teachings, God exists and he created the material universe and humankind for a purpose. Beyond that, he has revealed that purpose to humanity,

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and the way we act in relation to the political system fits into that purpose.

Based on Christian beliefs, the purpose of a political system is to create a stable environment which allows for God's work to be done on earth. It is not the work of government to focus on doing Christian ministry. That is the work of the church. But this does not mean that government is divorced from God's will. Government ought to operate based on principles which are consistent with the values God has revealed to be right. When it does this, an environment is created in society which allows believers (the church) to do the work of God without hindrance. (Interestingly, it is this kind of environment which also makes it possible for people with other beliefs to freely advocate for their convictions, as well.)

Political Activism in America Vs. Other Places

Political activism will have very different expressions depending on the circumstances of the political system. For instance, places where power is concentrated in government officials – dictatorship, monarchy, oligarchy, Communism/socialism – will not typically allow political dissent to be freely expressed. (It should be noted that these approaches to governing are normal expressions of a naturalistic worldview). In places where there is significant government control, the leaders typically suppress the citizen's ability to be active in ways which threaten those in power. Places where power is concentrated in the hands of the citizenry, however, generally do provide the opportunity for the citizens to be active in ways which could possibly threaten those who hold political power.

America is in the latter category. As a democratic republic, ultimate political power rests in the hands of the citizenry who elect people to represent their interests in the govern-

ment. When the citizens don't like what is going on, they not only have the ability to vote their representatives out of office, they can also protest against government actions and petition their representatives to redress grievances.

Political Activity as Viewed by Christians and Non-Christians

But the fact that Americans have the right to be politically active does not address the entire scope of possibilities. There are different ways that political activity can be conducted – and the worldview beliefs of an individual will greatly influence what particular issues are promoted, as well as how political activism is carried out. Let's see how this plays out by comparing the approach of Naturalism to that of Christian Theism.

As was mentioned before, Naturalism is the belief that there is no supernatural existence. All that exists is natural reality which operates by the natural laws of the universe. Since there is no God, there is no transcendent person in existence to give mankind any kind of objective moral standard. As such, it is up to human beings themselves to develop their own morality. In doing this, the only possibility for creating a moral standard is for those with enough power and authority in society to decide the way things ought to be, then impose it on the society. This is the approach Saul Alinski pioneered as he developed his "Rules for Radicals" – a naturalistic methodology designed to teach people how to impose their desires on the populace. His methodology involves the use of raw power to get one's way. People who live by a naturalistic worldview do not see anything morally wrong with doing whatever they need to do to get their way. For them, getting their way is the ultimate goal of political activism. For Naturalists, it is permissible to lie, cheat, steal, or use any other tactic, as long as they can get away with it.

Christian Theism, on the other hand, does believe in God and that he has revealed right morality. It is, then, incumbent on Christians to understand that morality and live by it. Rather than a goal of getting one's own way, the goal of political activism for a Christian is to accomplish God's purposes.

This different mindset is expressed using an entirely different paradigm. Rather than seeking personal power, Christians recognize that the power is God's. They believe that he has placed human beings in the world as his agents who are to be stewards of his power to accomplish his purposes. As such, the means, as well as the ends, must be promoted in a way which corresponds with his will.

In engaging political institutions based on a Christian perspective, it is also important to understand that the purpose of those institutions is not to *directly* accomplish the spiritual purposes of God. That is the role of the church. Rather, government is to be God's instrument for creating an environment which allows his work to be done. Individual Christians, then, should become personally involved in the political system based God's particular calling in their life. Some should actually enter a profession which is connected with the political system. Others should be advocates before those in the political system for causes God has revealed to be a part of his will. And everyone should be an active voter to hold their representatives accountable. This is the work of a faithful steward of God given to Americans under our system of government.

To What Degree Should Christians Be Politically Active?

So, should Christians become politically active? Some would say no. The primary argument I hear in this regard is that politics is so dirty that Christians should just stay away from it. But if we took that attitude about all of life, we would not engage the sinful world at all. It is not just politics which is full of dirtiness. The same can be said of business, media, education, entertainment, and even efforts to help the down and out in society. In fact, the list of places where evil resides in the world is practically endless.

The fact is, Jesus stepped out of paradise to live in the gutter of this sinful world for the very purpose of helping human beings get out of the gutter. He did not sacrifice his purity to do it, but he did have to get his hands dirty by reaching out and touching our dirtiness.

Are we better than Jesus? No, we are not. God calls believers out of the gutter of sin. At the same time, he does not do it in a way which allows us to escape helping those who live in it. In fact, just the opposite. We, like Jesus, must be willing to get our hands dirty (though not our hearts).

So when it comes to politics, we must fulfill the responsibility God has placed on us. We must remember, God ordained government. And he ordained it to fulfill a specific purpose – to provide order in society so that his work could be accomplished. It is very difficult to do God's work (or any work at all, for that matter) in an environment where there is chaos. And if God ordained government, he calls people to be involved in it who understand his ways and who have a heart for his purposes. Actually, it is when people who don't know God get in power, that proper order begins to break down.

Certainly, the responsibility for interacting with government is not the same for everyone. There are various callings God places on people according to his purposes. I believe the calling to get involved in the political system can be broken down into three distinct categories.

First, there are those God has called to serve professionally in the political arena. Some of these are elected officials, but others would include those who serve in other parts of the governmental system. These are the people who create, implement and adjudicate laws and policy so as to create an orderly society. God wants people who will govern by principles which correspond with his will to be in positions of power and authority, and he calls some to serve in that way.

A second category relates to those who are involved in political advocacy outside of the structure of government. These are people who advocate for issues which are biblically based. Some of these people will work in organizations which do this professionally. There are many Christian organizations which are engaged in political advocacy. But there are also many who do that in a more informal manner. This could be people who write their representatives, speak out in the public square on behalf of a godly cause, or even who sign petitions.

The third category actually involves every Christian. The American system of government, is a democratic republic. What that means is, the citizens elect people to represent them in the halls of government. In

our form of government, the citizens are ultimately the ones responsible for the running of government. Since government is ordained by God and we have been given this kind of oversight responsibility, that makes us responsible before God as stewards of the political process. As such, Christians have a responsibility to know the issues, follow the work of those who represent them, and hold their representatives accountable by letting them know how they should be carrying out their responsibilities based on God's guidance. We are especially responsible for voting – as that is the ultimate expression of stewardship for a Christian citizen under our American form of government.

Each person must discern from God the degree of direct involvement they should have in the political process. That said, every believer must, at the very least, be informed and vote. That is the bottom line responsibility of a Christian based on the stewardship responsibility God has given us.

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