

should Christians engage in politics?

Mark Bowers says 'Yes!'

It is somewhat surprising that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) rarely gets onto the six o'clock news. Its campaigns on behalf of endangered albatrosses and the protection of Devon's wild wetland are left largely unreported by mainstream media. I say 'surprising' because the RSPB has a larger membership than that of all the main political parties combined!¹ Yes it's true: political party membership is at rock bottom; scepticism rules the day, and 'politics' is very much a dirty word.

Despite this, politics continues to dominate the national imagination. Recently, its relationship with religion has come under attack. Some commentators have warned of the supposed lethality of mixing religion and politics.² They accuse Christian forays into the world of politics of being endeavours to suppress plurality and curtail freedoms. And surely, we murmur quietly in our pews, they have a point.

As Christians we are told not to become 'so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without even thinking'³ so before we score out politics from our possible career list, we first must ask ourselves what God has to say on the matter. Is there any foundation for Christian political engagement in the Bible? And if so, what does it look like?

When we study the Bible, we see many instances where things get political. At the time of the Old Testament, ancient Israel was a theocracy. Its society, economy and culture were largely shaped by divine guidance in the form of the *Torah* (the Jewish name for the first five books of the Bible). The Psalmist stated that 'The Lord is King!' And for ancient Israel, he really was!

By Jesus' time the political set up had changed significantly - but the politics was still there. In his early childhood, Jesus had a close shave with Herod the puppet ruler of the Roman Empire.⁴ During his adult years, his disciples thought he was a revolutionary.⁵ He made radical claims about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a significant seat of political power in the old theocracy.⁶ Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots (all political movements with differing visions for the nation) come into contact with the strange, new Rabbi from Nazareth at one time or another.^{7,8} Indeed, Jesus' talk of the 'Kingdom of God' must have been very controversial in a land under foreign occupation.⁹ Of course, the Kingdom Jesus spoke of was far greater in scope and



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significance than his audience could imagine (Nicodemus found out that to enter it one must experience the phenomena of rebirth),¹⁰ but his claim of kingship over everyone – including Pilate, Caesar, presidents and prime-ministers – is central to the Christian message.¹¹ No, Jesus didn't act like a wannabee mayor or a military revolutionary, but he engaged many of the public issues of his day and didn't hold back when he felt the need to criticise the national leaders.

In considering issues like poverty, social justice and oppression, the sheer volume and tone of the Bible's 'political' nature becomes apparent. For example, God's warning to the politicians of the prophet Isaiah's day: *'Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their*

*prey and robbing the fatherless.'*¹²

And in case the ancient Israelites were not sure what the consequence was for ignoring the poor, Ezekiel enlightened his listeners with a disconcerting spin on the famous story of Sodom's destruction: 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.'¹³

If politics is about leadership and authority, the ultimate reality of Jesus' spiritual kingship urges Christians to engage with politics. And if politics is about how we relate to each other in society, then God's passion for the poor and oppressed should urge Christians to engage with politics, even if it is only to give a voice to those who have none.

the call for Christian engagement in politics is clear, then. But what about medics like us? Is there really a political role for us in the careers God has led us into?

For you, the challenge may be to ask prayerfully *'What am I really passionate about?'* William Wilberforce is best known as a Christian politician who significantly contributed to the ending of the transatlantic slave trade. But did you know he was also a founder of the Society for the Protection of Animals (later RSPCA)? And in his spare time he ran a major campaign for the restoration of politeness in England? Here was a man who had many passions and found himself able to use politics to achieve incredible goals.

One natural area of passion for the Christian medic is resource allocation. At the moment, the UK healthcare system is largely free at the

point of use - but is this sustainable? Are there any real alternatives and how would they affect the poorest in our nation? Besides financial issues, there are myriad concerns about NHS organisation, strategy and morale which all require godly wisdom and good leadership. If anyone should be passionately concerned about the issues that affect the health and welfare of millions, it should be Christian medics.

Then there are the ethical issues that arise in our field. God created each of us, both those who believe in Christ and those who do not.¹⁴ We who have come to know and believe in his love for us¹⁵ must trust that his commands are given with good intent and for our ultimate benefit. To be silent about the gift of his law, then, is not loving! Rather, to be truly faithful to the Great Commission¹⁶ and to genuinely love those around us, we must declare to society everything that our Lord taught us.¹⁷ When appropriate, this must include God's eternal principles about the value of life, the structure of the family, and the image of God in man.

how can we respond to the call for engagement in politics?

National organisations like Care for the Family (careforthefamily.org.uk) and Christian Concern (christianconcern.com) send out newsletters

and run events just for students. There's also the fantastic CMF Summer School in June where you can get schooled in ethics, missions and writing.¹⁸ I know I appreciated the ideas I got there about introducing my faith into my conversation, my medical school, and society in general.

But even before you get that far, CMF has a fantastic collection of material that will help you find out for yourself what you believe about some of the big, difficult issues in medicine. For a great introduction, check out Matt Lillicrap's article: Working out a biblical ethic.¹⁹ Or for a more in-depth look, check out the CMF classic *Matters of Life and Death*.²⁰ It is just possible that knowing what you believe about these issues may be the start of your journey into the world of politics. ■

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