

Christians and Social Justice

There is no city on earth quite like Washington DC, steeped as it is in raw politics and enormous social, political, military, intellectual and economic power. I first visited the city in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal (and the hotel of the same name) and people in Christian circles were still asking how the former President of the United States of America acted the way he did, how he managed to abuse his position and the ends to which people will go to secure and retain power.

The second thing I noticed was the impact of the event on Christian America. From the 1960s the office of President had been linked to a growing sense of “civic religion” and association of “God” with decision-making by the Executive. After the disillusionment of the fall of Nixon people I met were talking about a new Christian “right” and the polarization of people along religious lines as well as political ones. The debate about the role of Christians in politics has raged for years.

One of the places I visited was the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, the erstwhile home church of the Reverend Peter Marshall. The story of Peter Marshall had touched the hearts and minds of millions of people. Written by his wife, Catherine, “A Man Called Peter” (later made into a motion picture), it described how a poor Scottish immigrant became chaplain of the United States Senate and one of the most revered men in America. For a number of years he served at New York Avenue. Today the church is a regular denominational entity with a strong Biblical vision and purpose. In earlier times, however, its pastor had enormous power behind the scenes to touch the lives of decision makers for Christ. Marshall believed Christians needed to be involved outside of the sanctuary, to influence the nation for God. He saw the role of the church in political life as consistent with the message of the Gospel. Whether in America or Australia, that truth remains valid today.

Arresting the moral drift

Christians are increasingly expressing concern about the moral drift of nations previously identified with Christian heritages. Many are frustrated about the secularization or Christian institutions and imposition of political correctness that indirectly elevates non-Christian faiths and world views while allowing Christian values to be maligned. They are concerned because they do not know what they can do personally and corporately. The roles of the pastor, the local church, the individual Christian in a non-Christian, postmodern society are subject of ongoing debate. If we are to be relevant, as believers in our modern world, we need to understand our mandate from God and how to exercise it in a Biblical way in the communities in which we live. Wherever they can, Christians need to get involved unashamedly in political processes, while recognizing that the nation will never be a substitute for the Kingdom of God. Christian men and women should have a say, to counter the natural inclination of society to godlessness, to uphold righteous living and for the sake of the next generation.

Societies occasionally break down, decay, and many disappear because of moral vacuums and spiritual bankruptcy. When people of conscience cease to be involved, other values become entrenched as substitutes. As a result of an abdication from social responsibility on the part of the major denominations, few churches today have a role in shaping our national policies. Those that seek to do so are labeled “fundamentalist” or extremist by the media and detractors claim they have no place in the fabric of life outside church buildings.

The opinions of non-Christians should not stop us from doing what is right. Look at what is happening. Divorce rates in recent decades have been the highest in our history. Abortion is out of control. AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases are on the increase. Drug, petrol and alcohol abuse rob our communities of valuable lives. Almost every form of sexual perversion is tolerated, or if not tolerated practiced on a widespread basis. Do we really think we should only be involved in “spiritual matters”, while the environment in which we are children and living is becoming morally polluted? And since when has life outside of the church not been “spiritual” enough for us to get involved and make a difference? If our theology is ecclesio-centric (inwardly focused on church structures) it is not thoroughly Biblical. Over time, we have allowed non-Christian and anti-Christian agendas to side-line us, close our mouths and lock us up in our sanctuaries. Christians need to be involved in the political process in order to provide a brake against the moral slide and model godly behaviour in the community. If we fail to do so, others will move into the driver’s seat and the slide will continue.

Jesus the role model

Soon after commencing his public ministry Jesus proclaimed:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty them that are bruised (Luke 4:18)

Jesus is our role model. I passionately believe Christians should be involved in processes that impact official responses to poverty, hunger, vulture capitalism, sexual oppression, the unequal distribution of wealth and institutionalized injustice. Christians need to stand up for moral standards, in the face of increasing visibility of amoral people in decision-making positions affecting education and health. Christians need to inform themselves about environmental issues, genetic engineering and providing solutions to growing problems of homelessness, alienation and youth and child suicide. Christians can teach society how to treat people with mental and physical disabilities with dignity, not pity or ridicule. Christians need to identify where Government solutions are merely band-aids that do not provide durable solutions.

Biblical Christians are able to have Biblical social justice responses to economic structures that oppress the poor, uneducated and otherwise socially disadvantaged and marginalized. These are all issues on which Christ challenged the people of his day, not only leaders but all who heard him.

Those who suffer injustice often long for God to reach out to them and assure them that the evil present in the world is not omnipotent, but that He is still in ultimate control.

Some Christians baulk at words like “oppressed”, “social justice” and “distribution of wealth” as calls to action, as though the terms are synonymous with liberal theology, Marxism and other world views that are inimical to evangelical tradition and values. It is true that some Christians involved in national social movements are not evangelical. I have met activists and lobbyists whose theological positions put them so far to the left of the political continuum that they are off the chart ideologically. Their belief systems are predicated on humanism and secularism, not the New Testament. They refer to the Gospel in liberal terms. They bear the name “Christian” but do not own Christ except as a fellow-social activist.

On the other hand, why should the unbelief of some get in the way of Christianity in action? Jesus never baulked at taking to task corrupt leadership, injustice, the accumulation of riches by oppressors, the plight of the poor and the need for Christian love to be exercised in the context of accountability before God and man and for Christians to set the example in shaping society. True Christians should never be neutral or complacent about people suffering injustice; if we are able to do so, we should be in the forefront demanding redress for them.

What does the Bible teach about government and politics? Paul taught in Romans 13:6-7 that government is established by God for the promotion of good and the restraint of evil. In I Timothy 2:1-2 he called on Christians to pray for their leaders. Christians ought to pray that people who hold positions of authority be guided by God and include those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and committed to the authority of the Bible.

We believe that all men and women are made in the image of God and have an inherent right to develop their potential. When they suffer we all suffer. The church is called on the provide for those in need, especially fellow-Christians (Galatians 6:10).

No limits

If the church fails to get involved and incarnate the person of Jesus in its responses to the needs of the world, it will run the risk of becoming spiritually and ecclesiastically narcissistic. Let me explain.

Narcissus was a figure of Greek and Roman mythology, who loved himself dearly. One day he came to a pool of water and stooped down to drink. As he did so, he saw the reflection of his image in the water. He gazed with admiration at the bright eyes, locks of hair, rounded cheeks and ivory neck. He could not tear himself away and lost all thought of food. Eventually he pined away and died. When the nymphs came to look for him his body was nowhere to be found; in its place was a flower, purple within and surrounded with white leaves, which bears the name and preserves the memory of Narcissus.

If we only focus on church members, their welfare, marriages, community needs, worship and music styles, membership rights and obligations, buildings and programs, we will become so self-centered that we will not notice the world passing us by. We may even pine away to nothing, leaving only a token of our have passed this way.

Alternatively, we can pray and plan to make a difference. If any group in our society has the challenge and power to become revolutionary it is the people of God.

I have found that several factors limit the effectiveness of Christians in the political arena.

The first is the failure of believers to support Christians who run for office. To laud the notion of positioning Christian influence in politics and decision-making, then not to support such people electorally is hypocritical and deceptive, not to say disappointing.

The second is to assume that just because a person claims to be a Christian they should garner voter support. There are occasions on which Christians belong to opposing political parties and do not promote good policy. The principle of looking for fruit remains valid.

The third debilitating factor is the propensity in many nations to align particular parties with Christian teaching, thus excluding alternative parties and alienating their supporters. I have come to realize that most parties are supported by some Christians and count genuine Christians in their ranks. Just as there is no perfect church, there is no perfect political organization. As Christians we need to be wise and not allow ourselves to be beguiled by rhetoric into taking sides unduly, to the detriment of effective witness and the capacity to make a contribution to the larger debate.

There is another way: Christians who feel called to do so ought to prepare assiduously for office and offer viable, strong, reasoned grounds for broad church support, without being swayed by compromise on the one hand and the politics of hate on the other. If Christians are to make a difference, they must be different. From this position of moral strength they will be able to convince others about where change is needed, rather than lapse into pragmatism and end up looking like all the other players, supporting programs and policies that do more harm than good or that neutralize the impact of genuine reform.

Christian social involvement must remain focused and centred on truth, if it is not to be high-jacked by the agendas of godless secular humanism in its many forms, that have a form of correctness but deny the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Christ. Such philosophies are antithetical to Christianity. Believers have a mandate to be involved in building the community with integrity, simplicity, equity, moral discipline and godly care for others, especially the weak. One effective way to do this is for people who know Christ and experience the presence of a Holy God to participate in policy formulation and the legislative process.

Finally, politics is a human institution. Christianity is a work of the Holy Spirit. Only the power of God can effectively transform human hearts for good. Morality can be encouraged by right-thinking government, but upright living can never be legislated by human institutions. Prohibition alone does not produce lasting change. Nor, for that matter, does institutional religious moulding. Positive change that is both fundamental and practical is the work of the Holy Spirit alone.