

C. The Church and Politics

What role is the church to play in society? How politically involved should Christians be? Is political involvement the same for the church as for the individual Christian?

Three Institutions – Three Different Roles

In the Bible, we find God established three institutions around which society is organized: The Family, the Government and the Church. Each “God-ordained” institution has a different role to play.

Family

The family is the foundation upon which civilized society stands. It is the primary place for socialization – where children learn the disciplines which enable them to become contributing and supportive members of society. History and sociology have clearly established the first indicator of a society's decline is the break up of the family. For this reason, the Bible places great importance on the family and the responsibilities of parents to “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6). One key principle to be learned in the family is respect for authority (1 Peter 2:13), toward parents (Ephesians 6:2), government (Romans 13:1-7) and the church (Hebrews 13:7,17). When children are not taught to respect authority in the home, they will not respect it in government or the church. Social order depends on respect for those in authority, and parents are to be the primary authority in the home.

Government

The second institution identified in the Bible is government. The Bible does not identify any particular form of government. Rather, it simply declares men are to be governed and government is to be benevolent. The primary role of the government is the restraint of evil (Romans 13:4,5) and to do its citizens no harm. Law-making, police and judicial authority has been given to the government.

Church

Lastly, there is the church. The primary role of the church is the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18). In terms of worldly power, the church is to be the weakest of the three institutions. Her strength and weaponry is to be spiritual, not human or carnal (2 Corinthians 10:4; 12:9; John 18:36; Zechariah 4:6). The church is to submit to the laws of the land (Romans 13:1), as long as those laws do not violate the commands of God (Acts 4:19). In affairs of doctrine and practice, the church is to be outside the control of government (Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 2:13). The church is to declare and demonstrate the standards by which individuals and governments are to govern and judge themselves and ultimately the standards by which God will judge us all.

Throughout most of our nation's history, there has been an emphasis on the differing roles of the church and government. The "separation clause" of the Constitution was designed to protect the church from government intrusion, not the other way around. The church was viewed by the founding fathers as a necessary influence for good, a moral ally, since good government, especially in a democracy, depends on the orderly behavior and moral character of its people.

Confusion Of Roles

Over the last few decades, all three institutions have experienced serious decline. The family has become shattered through divorce, illegitimacy, abuse and moral decline. Television has taken over as the primary source of socialization, parents have abdicated their leadership roles in the home and children have become increasingly amoral. The result has been a rapid decline in social order.

In an effort to solve social problems, government has intruded into every area of society. It has gone beyond its biblical mandate, seeking to become both parent and moral leader to the nation. This has further eroded the family by undermining parental authority and imposing arbitrary moral values on young people. Government social solutions have only increased and complicated the problems.

Likewise, the church has become impotent in society and apathetic about evangelism and discipleship, replacing it with social and political activity. This has resulted in a "famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). The church is quickly losing its moral authority as she becomes "salt without savor" (Matthew 5:13).

Strange Bedfellows?

Trying to remedy the situation, many Christians have sought political solutions. Everything from theologies that claim the church is called to govern the nation and the world, to conservative political action groups bearing the name "Christian" have arisen. They have demanded churches allow them to openly promote political agendas.

When a church allows its pulpit to be usurped by any political agenda, it is endangering its role as the "voice of God" to a society. The church becomes identified as just another political interest group, with a narrow and selfishly defined agenda.

What is most troubling is that many so-called "Christian" political organizations use the same techniques and approaches as their secular adversaries. The requirement for membership is often a conservative political orientation, not faith in Christ.

Suggested Guidelines For Political Involvement

1. **Good Citizens:** Christians should be informed and involved in the issues of the day, exercising their right to vote and hold political office. They should seek to be the best citizens possible, as a witness to the integrity of Christ and His gospel.
2. **Church vs. Christian:** The role of the Christian as an individual citizen and the role of church as a corporate entity need to be distinguished. Although Paul used his rights of citizenship when needed (Acts 22:25-28; 16:27), none of the church leaders became political leaders, nor did they use their pulpits for political purposes (2 Timothy 2:4). Rather, they prayed for those in leadership to bring peace to the church and provide opportunity for their salvation (1 Timothy 2:1-4). They focused on their role as spiritual leaders (Acts 6:2; Ephesians 4:11) and did not compromise their ministry influence by becoming identified with any political ideology (Luke 12:14).
3. **May the Best Man Win:** I once took my car to a mechanic because I heard he was a Christian. He was a great fellow but not a very good mechanic. Another time, the Christian mechanic was a crook. Just because a politician is a Christian, that does not make him or her the best candidate. We need to judge candidates and issues by their character and record, not just their public profession.
4. **Missionaries to the Root, not the Branches:** Godly nations come from godly citizens, who come from godly families, led by godly parents. Here is where the church can do its greatest work — focusing on the redemption of individuals and their families. Godly laws are important. They set an external standard by which men can measure morality.

However, godly laws and godly leaders are only a part of the answer. If citizens are unwilling to submit to godly laws or to follow godly leaders, the nation's moral foundations will deteriorate. What is needed is godly hearts. Only God can give a man or woman a godly heart. That is why Jesus declared, "You must be born again!"

5. **The Ultimate Agenda:** Jesus declared the Church's higher purpose when He told Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36, NIV). Hebrews 11:13-16 states that Christians are to see themselves as "aliens and strangers on earth" and "longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

Balance!

This does not mean Christians are to divorce themselves from society, becoming "so heavenly minded they are no earthly good." Just the opposite is true. It is only when we become driven by heaven's agenda we feel the freedom to serve others sacrificially and not only ourselves. That is why most of the world's great humanitarian and social movements have had their initial impetus from Christian conviction and calling.

When we discuss politics, we must make a distinction between the role of the church and the role of individual believers. Believers must involve themselves in the political issues of our society — this is our right and responsibility as citizens. But the church as an institution has a higher calling. The church is not to be drawn into the pettiness of candidates and issues unless a clear, compelling moral principle is at stake.

Is there ever a point at which the church should step into the political arena? Yes. When governments engage in or condone clear violations of morality such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, etc., then the church must speak out. But this should also come as the churches teach the “whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). Also, when governments seek to hinder the mission of the church, then the church cannot submit (Act 4:18-20).