

## BEYOND WORDS TO ACTION<sup>1</sup>

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### Organizing Christian politics

Christians can be great organizers. We know how to organize homes, churches, schools, evangelistic campaigns, businesses, and countless other activities. Why then have we been unable to organize our efforts in the field of politics with the same success we have had in other areas of life? Why this blind spot? One of the principles of our faith is that Christ is Lord of all. All of life is to be submitted to His rule, and certainly life encompasses politics. And certainly politics is more than words. Research is essential, but it is not the goal in organizing Christian politics. Conferences, seminars, workshops, and publications must all be carried forward, but not as ends in themselves. Politics is action and action requires organizing. How do we get a handle on organizing Christian politics?

We may consider this problem of "organizing Christian politics" by looking at each word in turn. But since our hesitancy and lack of success in organizing as Christians really begins with our reservations about politics itself, let's take the third word first and work backwards.

### Politics

Are Christians still too isolationist with respect to the public sector of life? Do we hold our faith in one hand and politics in the other - as far apart as possible - trying to live in two different worlds? Or is it because we are still too individualistic, unable or unwilling to build Christian community together? Perhaps our problem with politics stems from divisions within the household of faith. For some of us, Christianity is primarily "sound doctrine". Doctrinalists locate the center of gravity for Christian living in the clear understanding' of biblical truths, in the maintenance of doctrinal purity and orthodox faith. Others are "pietists" who stress sincere, heartfelt communion with God and the exercise of

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certain habits of devotion and personal conduct. Another group of Christians might be called the "worldviewers", those who are driven by an impulse to see what can be done to serve Christ's kingdom in all areas of life. Politics may be viewed so differently from these three perspectives that Christians cannot even find one another, much less organize together, in the political arena.

### *Basic Biblical guidelines*

To approach this issue of "politics", we have to understand certain basic biblical guidelines, the first of which is that our whole life should be an exercise of Christian faith. What some Christians have called "the cultural mandate" holds for politics as well as for plowing the land, teaching a class, keeping house, doing business, building bridges, painting pictures, and whatever else we do. Politics too is part of the mandate which the Lord has laid upon us by virtue of creation. This is one of the guidelines, it seems to me, on which we ought to agree.

Secondly, we are called to live the life of faith in the midst of the world. Not on some isolated island, but at the crossroads of civilization where the Lord has placed us. The earth is the Lord's, not ours. And we must be active in it. Otherwise, how can we be salt or light?

The third biblical guideline is that our life in this world should demonstrate something of the unity of life in Christ. We are the body of Jesus Christ, not separate members who have no relationship one to another. That unity is not constituted by sitting in the pew for an hour or two on Sunday. Christ did not say, "You are the lights of the world", but rather, "You are the *light*" - in the singular - like on mighty generation station. "You are the salt of the earth", not as tiny discrete grains, but *together we are* the salt. "You are a city built on a hill". A good city has a certain cohesion to it; it has an organization, a program, a policy, a constitution.

These are some of the guidelines provided by the Scriptures which must be kept clearly in mind if we are to honor our political calling. For politics too is an office which the Lord has entrusted to our care, an office as real as that of parent, or teacher, or preacher, or farmer. We must recognize that as *political* office its authority is God-given. Like all authority, it comes from above. Remember when Pilate asked the mute Jesus, "Won't you say anything? Don't

you know I have the power, the authority to set you free or to keep you in bondage?" Jesus replied, "You would have no authority at all if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:10-11). That holds for every form of authority in life, including the authority which God has entrusted to us as Christian citizens. With that authority comes a certain responsibility or answerability. Authority always brings with it stewardship. As the Scriptures say, every steward is called, sooner or later, to give an account of his stewardship. So we are called to be guardians of the political authority which the Lord has entrusted to our care. Every kind of authority must be used for service. Political authority is perverted when placed in the service of interest-group or class struggles, which are as real in a capitalist as in a socialist society. Political authority exists for blessing, for service, for the exercise of justice that benefits others.

### **Christian**

Next, what about the adjective "Christian" in this phrase, "organizing Christian politics"? Remember Abraham Kuyper's statement that "there is not a single square inch of the entire universe of which Christ does not say, "This is mine"". The Christian community should honor that claim and press it wherever possible. Christian politics is not to be understood, however, in the way that medieval Christians understood the *Corpus Christianum*. They believed that Christianity should be imposed, by force if necessary, upon all subjects of the realm. Many people still assume, mistakenly of course, that when Christians begin talking about Christian politics they want to recreate the medieval society.

A friend of mine, for instance, studying at Berkeley a dozen years ago during the height of the counter-culture "revolution", tells about a discussion of politics in which he became involved. Very quickly the others detected in his ideas a different perspective. They challenged him, "Who are you anyway?" "I'm a Christian, he replied. "A Christian! You Christians have had your chance since 313. Now it's our turn". They were referring to this long-lived assumption that society *as a whole* could be Christianized, and that Christianity could be imposed by the sword or by papal edict upon all people. That is not what we ought to mean by Christian politics.

### **A totalitarian claim**

Christian politics must respect the honest religious pluralism which is present in our society. The only sword at our disposal is the sword of the Spirit which is the

persuasive power of God's Word. In this conviction we must go our way motivated by a sheer sense of obedience. We need not be success-oriented in the spirit of American jumbo politics, with its commitment to winning at all costs. Christians must seek the kind of political presence and voice and witness which finds its reason for existence not in its number of victories, but in its willingness to stand up and be counted. We must dare to be different, dare to work out an alternative, even while running the risk of being misunderstood and misrepresented.

Christian politics comes down to recognizing the totalitarian claim that Jesus made in those climatic words of Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 28:18-20), where he took the long series of great commissions he had been giving all along and pulled them together in concentrated form. His final mandate to "go into all the world" is bigger than missions and evangelism. It also includes home life, school life, political life, all of life, as a redemptively updated restatement of the cultural mandate which the Father had given in the beginning. In so doing, Christ first laid upon us all his totalitarian claim, his unlimited claim to all authority. He then presented his unlimited challenge: "Go into all the world" - the world of the kitchen, of the academy, of downtown business, of law, of medicine, of politics - "teaching people to observe all that I have commanded". This unlimited task is backed up by Christ's promise of His unlimited presence: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world".

### **Organizing**

I have spoken briefly, first about *politics*, secondly about *Christian politics*. The verb in our phrase is the hardest of all to discuss: *organizing* Christian politics. Can the vision I have sketched - of a perspective on politics based on biblical principles and a biblical mandate - be organized?

### **Not "how" but "what"**

Big claims are made these days for organization. One can claim too much for it, but one can also claim too little. The question of *how* to organize a movement is not actually the first question to be asked. The first question is, *what* to do? Then we must seek an organized way of doing it. The method must grow out of the message. The way one does it must somehow grow naturally out of what ought to be done. Methods of organizing things are not religiously neutral. They must be developed in ways that are consistent with the foundations upon which they are

based. One of our difficulties, of course, in developing models for doing Christian politics is that we have no existing models on this continent to which we can point. Most Christians have never seen a Christian political model in operation, and therefore can hardly conceive of the possibility of working one out.

How one addresses the question of organized Christian politics depends on what one means by organization. If the idea of organization is limited exclusively to party formation, then I suspect we're not ready for organization. Perhaps we will never be ready for that. Perhaps we shouldn't even strive for the goal of a Christian party. It is possible that the party system as it has developed in the United States may be growing obsolete. It certainly seems to be moving into a phase of reduced importance. Organizing Christians does not necessarily mean entering the fray of American party politics as it now operates.

But if party politics need not determine the shape of our political action, what principles of political organization ought we to follow? Politics for many people means the hoopla of the election process itself: running candidates, campaigning, following results on television. But politics is more than elections. What is that "more"? Let me list a number of points, all reflecting a certain line of development, for further consideration.

### ***Basic guidelines***

1. We must focus once again on kingdom preaching. Something has to happen in the organized church if we are to be serious about organizing Christian politics. How can we as people of God be the salt of the world if the church as an institution has itself lost its salt? How can we be a leaven in the world if the church no longer carries the leaven within itself? How can we be a light out there if the light is dim inside? Something has to happen within the organized church if the stimulus to organize Christian politics is to flow from it. We must have our priorities straight in the pulpit and in the pew if we mean to move toward some form of creative and effective organized Christian politics.

2. Our Christian educational institutions must also keep clearly before them a biblical perspective on life. Too often we judge our success by enrollments or by coming out at year's end in the black. Sometimes we define the goals of Christian education in terms of self-perpetuation. In our educational institution we need to open our eyes to the grand strategy of the kingdom, asking "Why are we

teaching and in what direction are we seeking to move the younger generation?" Maybe it is time to develop a pool of financial resources so that we can take some of these talented, dedicated young graduates and place them in strategic positions, economically, socially, politically, in our society where they can exercise their talents.

3. We will have to make the strongest possible pitch for the youth. I know that everybody else is pitching for them too. Every crosswind of contrary doctrine in our world is blowing their way. Their course of action, however, really comes down to choosing one of three alternatives. They may choose to go "secular", that is, to accept the state of affairs pretty much as it is and seek to accommodate themselves to it. Or they may choose to retreat, that is, to size up the world and evil and try to keep themselves uncontaminated by it. Or they may take the third avenue, a real alternative, and follow the Bible's strategy of reforming engagement in the world. I remember hearing Carl Henry say a few years ago that we've got to help our younger generation march under the banner of Jesus Christ or else assuredly they will be marching before long under other banners.

### **Our calling as Christians involved in politics**

These basic ideas hold for the Christian community as a whole in the various dimensions of life. We must now go on to spell out more concretely our calling with respect to organized political action. Consider the following points:

1. We must support and sustain present organizations such as the Association for Public Justice, and await God's time. We must be alert to the time when God's people see the crucial nature of our cultural crises and sense, intuitively perhaps, the acute need for some sort of alternative. We must keep APJ alive so that we can be ready to serve when such a time comes. In the meantime, we continue to knock at the doors of the Christian community to let them know we are still here.

2. For the time being, organized Christian politics will have to continue, as APJ is doing, to develop issues around which to rally the principled commitment of the Christian community. We must find ways of structuring our leadership, perhaps by setting up research centers, certainly by encouraging a new climate of commitment and reflection within the Christian community. As a prerequisite for explicit forms of organization, we must continue both to articulate biblical

principles and to develop them in terms of political insight, hoping thereby to serve the Christian community with directives for our political task in the world.

3. We must of course continue to organize in smaller groups around the country, reading, discussing, praying together in order to strengthen bonds among Christians as they seek to understand their political commitments.

4. We must also become thoroughly acquainted with the legislative, executive, and judicial processes. How do things get done politically in our world? Present systems need not be normative guides for the future, but we've got to know what is going on in the sphere of politics in order to ask what the reformation of politics requires. Practicing politicians must be consulted. We should talk with them about their struggles and difficulties, or lack of them, with the existing situation.

5. Groups of politically minded Christians should develop further contact with other similarly interested Christians. Enough organized cohesion needs to exist among groups so that, for instance, when hearings are held in an area, Christians can respond by submitting briefs, and then assist Christians in other localities to do the same.

6. We must be serious about maintaining a biblical vision and identity. We should not become confessionally nondescript and colorless. Development of a clear alternative demands that we take a clear stand and represent a distinct position.

7. We must resist the temptation to become a single-issue movement which tends to gravitate toward vested interest. Rather, guided by what biblical obedience means in the whole political arena, we must look toward a long-range program that works from principles to policies to specific actions, remaining sensitive to whatever new issues may arise.

8. Nevertheless, in organizing our efforts we probably ought to emphasize what Bob Goudzwaard calls "crystallization points". We must identify certain crucial issues upon which we can focus the attention of the Christian community and use those issues, not as ends in themselves, but as means by which to develop a solid program.

9. We must recognize that this course of action will take us farther than some people are willing to go. Taking organized Christian politics seriously will take us all the way to the inner sanctum of Washington, D.C. If we are really serious about an Association for Public Justice, then we must recognize that much in our present political system is unjust and must be challenged. Not all our efforts will be welcomed by other Christians.

But act, we must. The Lord's call to us requires more than words, more than assent, more than confession. It opens the way to bearing fruit, the good fruit of God's new life in Christ: the fruit of peace, justice, reconciliation, and mercy.

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