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Christian Strategy in the Political Arena

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Introduction

There has been a welcome increase in Christian social concern evident in the last two decades. In the last few years alone, the church has spoken out on abortions, South Africa, inner cities, housing, Sunday trading and a host of other issues. As individual Christians, and the church as the institution representing the Christian point of view, become immersed in the world of politics, it is becoming imperative to define what as Christians we are trying to achieve, and the methods we may use legitimately to achieve those objectives. The word 'strategy' is used to cover these two components of objectives and methods. This article is intended as a stimulus to debate, and is intentionally provocative, rather than in any sense claiming to be a definitive view of the subject.

The Goals

The goal of Christian political action is to change society—to change its laws so that they conform more closely to Christian norms and values. However, in a democratic society it is generally not possible to change laws without changing attitudes and aspirations, so that a process of persuasion is involved to change public attitudes. This is a long-term process in most cases.

Christian political action is often seen as a piecemeal process. Attention is focussed on a specific piece of legislation, and the goal is made a specific alteration to that one piece of legislation—whether it is a bill on Sunday trading, or abortion. However, if Christians are to make an impact over the longer term, they must be able to view these specific issues in a broader framework. They need a clear vision of the society that they are trying to create. Without such a broad social vision, it will be impossible to orientate action on specific issues so that it contributes to longer-term objectives, and short-term efforts may even undermine long-term goals. So where should Christians look for their broad social vision, and how can they avoid being caught in the Left-Right divide?

Traditionally the church has sought to derive principles from scripture to articulate the basis for social involvement¹. These have been derived from creation ordinances (e.g. stewardship of resources), from the teaching of Jesus (e.g. concern for the poor) or from the Ten Commandments (Sunday legislation). The problem is

that these principles often conflict when applied to specific issues. Specifically, an emphasis on concern for the poor has tended to lead Christians towards the Left, while an emphasis on stewardship has been a characteristic of Christians from the Right. How can these principles be reconciled?

The solution is to identify a social paradigm from scripture, a paradigm being defined as a model or example which encapsulates all the different principles which should be of concern to Christians. A paradigm is not so much imitated as applied. Christopher Wright has argued that the law and history of Israel can be regarded as paradigmatic in this kind of way². It shows how the various principles interact with one another, and how the conflicts which they create with one another can be resolved. This is not to say that we can literally transpose the laws of Ancient Israel into the modern day, but rather that they can act as a model on which to base our own socio-political goals. It is in just the same way that we 'imitate Christ', not by being carpenters or wearing sandals but by modelling our lives on the principles and patterns which governed his life and actions.

What sort of social vision is painted by the law of Israel, if we go behind its specific cultural context? There is still much more to be done to explore this, but certain themes stand out. The focus of the law is that 'love'—a certain quality of relationships—should prevail (Matt. 22:21). It is relationist, rather than materialistic, in orientation, in contrast to both Capitalism and Marxism. The primary social institution is the family, defined not as the Western nuclear family but as the wider extended family. This is hardly surprising when the longest lasting and most intimate relationships that we have are with spouse, parents, children and other relatives. The structures and pattern of political and economic life of Israel is organized so as to enhance the rôle of the family rather than to undermine it. This means that constraints are placed on both the centralised power of the King and on the accumulation of economic power. There is an emphasis on family rootedness and community responsibility. All economic policy must be evaluated in terms of its impact on relationships in the wider family. This has been explored elsewhere³. It is these broad themes which provide a framework for political action aimed at short-term and specific political objectives.

If Christians' political action is about implementing the social vision of the law, what is the place of the Kingdom? A careful study of the way in which the word 'kingdom' is used in the New Testament suggests that it is used only to refer to the acknowledged rule of Christ, and in particular to the community of people who acknowledge His rule. The Kingdom is only extended, therefore, by bringing people to saving knowledge of Christ. When Marxists help the poor, they are not extending the Kingdom, for they are not bringing people to the point of serving the King, nor are they serving the King themselves.

Some may then ask this. If political action is not advancing the Kingdom of Christ, why be involved in it? Political action, within the criteria defined below, prepares the way for the Kingdom and demonstrates the presence of the Kingdom. By being salt and light, Christians ensure that the world does not throw out the message, but acknowledges from where it comes (Matt. 5:13–16). Like the preaching of John the Baptist, in reforming family and social behaviour, teaching the law awakens and sensitizes the public conscience and thus prepares the way for the preaching of the gospel (cf. Malachi 4:4). Equally, just as when Jesus healed a demon-possessed man and told the Pharisees that this was evidence of the presence of the Kingdom among them (Matt. 12:28), so political action transparently directed to helping the disadvantaged or correcting injustice and done in the name of Christ testifies to the presence of the Kingdom. Thus, it is not surprising to find Jesus saying that those who teach and obey the law will be great in the Kingdom (Matt. 5:19).

Choosing the Issues

Having stressed the importance of a broad social vision, in the British context where public opinion is informed more by the values of materialism and humanism than by scriptural teaching, it is essential to define certain limited objectives for it to be effective. Resource constraints also make targeting of issues imperative. So how should Christians, and institutional church bodies, decide which issues to tackle?

First, a caveat. The need to target effort does not mean that Christians should only be re-active to the political agenda of others. They also have a responsibility to be pro-active; to play a rôle in setting the political agenda. As Michael Ignatieff put it recently:

Inevitably, policy-making is an exercise in forming and leading opinion. Was there a groundswell in support of council-house sales before the Tories put it in their manifesto? The Conservatives are in power now because they created the preferences they are now so adept at serving. (*The Times*, 16 July, 1987, p.12).⁴

Especially given the wider social vision discussed above, there will be opportunities in commenting on legislation, or even in promoting legislation through private members' bills or through party machinery, to seek to put onto the agenda issues which otherwise would not be considered.

In terms of the types of issues which are likely to receive priority on a Christian political agenda, three stand out for comment. All three are contained in Isaiah's manifesto for a programme of social reform to precede spiritual revival:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen, to unloose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn . . . (Is. 58:6–8 N.I.V.)

The three areas of concern in this passage are issues of injustice and oppression, issues relating to the poor and weak in society, and issues concerned with the (wider) family. Both in church history and today, a large part of specifically Christian political involvement has focussed on these three areas of concern.

Within these general parameters, specific circumstances and personalities inevitably will play a part. The issues on the nation's political agenda often demand a Christian response. In 1985–86, it was not the church's desire to become politically active on the issue of Sunday trading; the issue rather was forced on them by a Government initiative. The background and interests of individuals who are in leadership positions in the churches, and in para-church organisations concerned with political action, are also going to be a determining factor.

Perhaps the choice of a specific issue is of secondary importance. Any issue fought out on moral grounds will heighten people's awareness of social responsibility and sensitise the public conscience. The issue, on this argument, should be selected by its ability to touch the hearts of people and arouse interest and passion, rather than the one which is the greatest social evil. Of course, this is a cynical view of what can be achieved in substantive terms by political action. A good example of how 'any issue' can awaken the social conscience and bring about change is the case of slavery. There is little dispute that the thirty years of debate about slavery radically altered public perception on a range of domestic policy questions about the poor. But slavery at this time was a foreign policy issue, at a time when not even one per cent of the population had ever travelled abroad or seen a slave! Clearly, there was a transfer effect as awareness of social responsibility concerning slaves was carried over into more local issues.

Two final points about choice of issues. However issues are selected, they must be presented in a positive manner. The anti-abortion lobby has changed its name, and its image, by becoming the pro-life lobby. The homosexual community shifted the focus of public debate by calling itself the 'Gay Movement'. The anti-Sunday trading lobby became the 'Keep Sunday Special Campaign', thereby transforming those opposed to total deregulation from kill-joys into liberators. Presentation of issues is more than a public relations gimmick. Names and slogans embody, and then come to reflect, attitudes and values just because they are repeated so often.

Secondly, it is of great importance that Christians avoid moralistic and self-righteous overtones. How much more humble and accurate it would have been if the term chosen for the United States movement had been the 'Immoral Majority'. Concentrating on sexual licence as the major issue can be criticised as moralistic; it only requires the middle class to point the finger in righteous indignation at low-income families which are often falling apart under a whole range of financial and other pressures. It does not threaten their own incomes or lifestyles at all to condemn deviant sexual behaviour. Costless criticism of this sort does not fit easily into salt and light categories which Jesus uses.

The Method in Persuasion

It may seem obvious today that the way by which Christians should seek to achieve change should not be through use of force, but through persuasion. Jesus himself points to this, not just by refusing to use the sword (Jn. 18:36), but by arguing that his disciples should 'teach and obey' the law in order to be great in the Kingdom. It is a matter of example and public persuasion. Given the history of church involvement in the political arena, this point needs continual emphasis.

Many Christians today are worried by the idea of using techniques of persuasion. They use the apparently unanswerable argument that Christians should not impose their views on other people. How can this be answered? First, there is a theological issue. Do Christians really know what is best for society, and do they have a right to seek to see their views implemented in social policy? Marxists have no difficulty with these questions, for their understanding of historical determinism gives them a firm belief in their right not just to state their views, but to force them on society at large. In contrast, Christians often do not seem to believe they have 'the truth', and lack the confidence to proclaim it. Surely the significance of Christ's present authority, following his victory on the Cross, is that Christians not only have access to the truth in God's revealed word, but have authority to proclaim it to the world as the arena of Christ's rightful rule. To argue that Christians should not speak out on issues of social concern is to deny the lordship of Christ over this part of human affairs.

Secondly, there is the pragmatic argument that society is not standing still. Whatever Christians decide to do, or not to do, other interest groups will have no scruples about going out to persuade 'the silent majority' round to their point of view. Whether it is the mass advertising of the multi-national promoting materialism, or the propaganda machine of the far Left undermining family values, powerful lobbies are out in the market place of ideas actively selling their wares. It is naive to ignore it, or to believe that such persuasion is ineffectual in changing people's view. Not to lobby, under these circumstances, for what is right and good is to accept the loss of Christian values in

society as a whole. It can be a sin to do nothing (Jas. 4:17).

It is public interest in political issues which makes Christian political involvement such an effective means of sensitizing the public conscience. A good example is the issue of Sunday trading. To obtain the national and regional media coverage on moral issues in general without the Sunday trading bill would have been difficult, if not impossible. By fighting the Bill, a platform was created at a relatively small cost which resulted in national media coverage over issues such as the value of family life, the importance of protecting low-income shop workers and even on occasions the importance and value of Christian worship. All of this was in the national 'secular' media.

To run a political campaign effectively, whether Christian or non-Christian, there are several ground rules. Credibility is vital, and can often be most easily established by inviting the great and the good to act as 'patrons' and thereby reassure the general public that the campaign organisers can be trusted. Research is crucial to develop the argument, and to demolish major planks in the opposition's argument. To quote 'Keep Sunday Special' again, the pro-deregulation lobby's argument that the law was widely flouted and therefore should be abolished was knocked down by a Jubilee Centre survey in forty two towns which showed that less than three per cent of shops were open illegally. Such research is crucial to winning the argument.

However good the argument, it will never be 'heard' by politicians unless they perceive that their constituents are concerned about the issue. Thus grass-roots constituency organisation is essential to having a major impact on public policy. This is where the Christian community has a great advantage, as committed and concerned Christians are to be found in every town and village of England. The problem for the campaign organisers is first to locate the activists, and then to train them. That is a formidable task, but it is arguable that the key to the defeat of the Shops Bill was the three hundred or so constituency co-ordinators who mobilised Christians at a local level, to write letters to M.P.s and to attend a local public meeting with the M.P.

Another plank in a campaign of persuasion is use of print and the media. In the Sunday campaign, the Pro-Sunday coalition led by Charlie Colchester of CARE and with backup from the Lord's Day Observance Society, a million leaflets were printed entitled 'Don't let them hijack your Sunday'. It was that leaflet with its immensely wide distribution through the churches which played a key rôle in stimulating Christians to become involved in fighting the Bill. Many larger leaflets, booklets, videos, bible-study outlines, etc., were put out by the Jubilee Centre. In addition, a regular stream of press releases was issued by the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, in conjunction with an effort to develop contacts with key people in the

press wherever possible. But there is even more to it than this. Effective campaigning involves professionalism, a thorough grasp of the background and situation of those to be influenced and detailed planning of strategy initiatives. Such planning requires an enormous amount of time in thinking through the implications of every step, every word, every action. This is the basis on which firms of public relations consultants earn substantial fees. It can be studied⁵, but is best obtained the expensive way from professional advice, or the hard way in the rough and tumble of direct involvement in campaigns. There are no short cuts. To campaign effectively is a formidable undertaking.

The Rôle of the Institutional Church

Inevitably as individual Christians take up social issues in the political arena, they look for support from the church in its institutional capacity. In Britain each major denomination has a 'Board of Social Responsibility' or equivalent department to take up issues of social policy and help the church as a body to reflect on the issues and to take initiatives where appropriate. Generally, these departments are of such high standing within the denomination that a commitment by them to a cause is felt to be a commitment by the denomination as a whole.

The size of, and degree of commitment commanded by, church denominations is substantial so that the political power which can be brought to bear should not be under-estimated. It is still true that more people attend church on Sunday than attend football matches on Saturday. Nearly 1 in 5 of the population claim to go to church once a month, and 2 out of 3 in the population claim Christian belief. Thus the stand adopted by church bodies on political issues needs careful scrutiny.

Churches find themselves in a cleft stick with regard to involvement on political issues. On the one hand they often cannot remain silent, because issues such as poverty, deprivation and injustice are so clearly on the Bible's agenda. To remain silent is to express to the wider public that the issues are neither of relevance nor of importance to the church. Thus, much of the mainstream issues of life are placed outside the remit of the church's ministry. In the words of Os Guinness, 'privatization means that the grand, global umbrella of faith has shrunk to the size of a plastic rainhat'⁶. On the other hand, deep political involvement often antagonizes those whose views differ from the stand adopted by the church, so that their ability to proclaim the gospel—the central message of the church—is impaired by the church's political stance. What way is there out of this dilemma?

Perhaps one way out is for the church to maintain a clear distinction between articulation of goals and pursuit of policies. Few would quarrel that the church's rôle must include the task of highlighting areas of injustice and need which require the attention of public policy. Whether the injustice is related to South Africa, inner

cities, the Palestinian problem, abortion legislation or families in debt, the church has a prophetic task in drawing attention to these social evils, for it stands in the tradition of the prophets (Matt. 5:11). It is where the church crosses over into pursuit of policies that controversy begins. This is because policies are always imperfect tools to engineer change. If lucky, a policy will take you two steps forward towards your objective and one step back; if unlucky one step forward and two back. And always there is the uncertainty about what impact a policy will have as accurate statistical assessment is generally unobtainable in advance.

Thus when the church supports sanctions, some Christians agree and others disagree. The debate rages both inside and outside the church, and the focus of debate is removed from the area of moral decision, where the church can speak with authority, to the area of economic analysis where the church has no special or unique competence. So, too, on the issue of the inner cities. If the *Faith in the City* report had simply highlighted the extent of the problem, and pointed out alternative ways forward but without committing itself to any particular policy prescription, it would have been hard for any political group to attack it. It was the report's support for particular policy prescriptions, involving a large increase in government spending, which was a significant factor in arousing government anger and opposition to the report.

The dividing line between goals and policies is a narrow one, and there is not space here to explore it fully.⁷ However, a few additional comments are in order. If the church's position is based on a set of principles, it has a basis on which to evaluate any particular policy put forward. It can thus endorse a policy as a satisfactory way forward, a way of achieving its particular stated objective, or it may categorically reject a policy as opposed to the goal it is espousing, (e.g. the Shops Bill 1985 with respect to the character of Sunday). However, in putting forward proposals to handle the rapid growth of personal debt in Britain, it is better to highlight the problem—a moral issue, but go no further than point out a range of policy options as to how it could be handled so as to answer the view—'yes we agree it's terrible but there's no way to prevent it'. If the churches were to back one specific policy, or policy package, to solve the problem, they would shift the debate from the moral issues raised by growing indebtedness and onto the pragmatic issues raised by the economic incidence of the particular option pursued.

There will be exceptions to this general position. A pastor in Soweto said that he felt compelled on one occasion to sanction a particular policy of resistance to the regime—the burning of buses. However, this was only to prevent students from killing passengers to express their frustration with the situation. There may often be 'lesser of two evils' situations where church leaders may feel that they have

little option but to support a specific policy, rather than just to focus attention on the social evil. Those in more comfortable and less violent environments should hesitate to criticise their brothers and sisters without a thorough knowledge of the circumstances in which such decisions are made.

Mobilizing Resources

A final section on Christian strategy is needed to examine the problem of mobilizing resources. To be effective in the political arena involves enormous mobilization of resources in order to pay for the organisation, publicity, research and public relations. The nature of the political process also makes partial or inadequate resource mobilization almost wasteful, for without a critical minimum effort, Christians will not achieve their objective for the piece of legislation being promoted or opposed. So how are adequate resources to be mobilized, when Christian resources are already over-stretched in many cases? A few lessons learnt so far are recorded below.

First, it is crucially important to identify and mobilize co-belligerents. Interest groups exist in Britain for almost every concern under the sun. Each has its own publications, contacts with M.P.s and others in government, networks in constituencies and ways to influence local and national political leaders. The problem is first to identify how legislative proposals will affect particular interest groups, and then to identify common ground on which to work together on any specific proposal. This is the stuff of politics, and Christians to be effective in the political arena must learn to practise the art of politics in ways which are both honourable and sophisticated. This may sometimes mean submerging a specific Christian emphasis for the sake of obtaining such greater good. The Christian testimony of the church group will not be altogether lost under any circumstances. It is sometimes right to use the same Christian emphasis to achieve a legislative goal because involvement in the political arena is not primarily intended as a contribution to the process of political dialogue, but first and foremost in order to achieve change in the law for the benefit of disadvantaged groups or family and social relations.

A second way to increase resource availability is by developing local and constituency networks. Often resources can be mobilized locally, from branches of national companies for example, which would not be available at a national level. Local 'fighting funds', then, can play an important rôle in overall resource availability, as they do for political parties at the time of a general election.

Even with co-belligerents and local funding, there is still no way to avoid the necessity of mobilizing people and cash from the Christian public. Secondments of staff from large organisations, and also students coming to work for a year before or after University, can reduce cash needs, but will not obviate them completely. Finance for

printing, telephones, office space, and salaries of key staff are still essential. It is at this point that the support of a much wider Christian public is going to be of crucial importance if Christian involvement in the political arena is to become an effective agent in changing the law of the land. Paul reminds us that in the final analysis 'the weapons we fight with are not weapons of the world' (2 Cor. 10:4), for the battle for Christian values in society is not merely a clash of human interest groups. The dramatic end to the Sunday trading bill in April 1986 followed a Sunday when churches up and down the country committed the outcome into the hands of God. Prayer is stimulated by active participation and involvement. But its importance needs to be constantly re-emphasised, and its vision expanded to include not just the immediate goals of specific campaigns, but the earnest seeking after a national revival, which we are promised if we tackle the issues of injustice in our society (Isaiah 58:6-13).

Conclusion

Where should Christians begin in order to achieve social reform? Many believe we should begin with evangelism. Unregenerate influences will only be swamped when there are enough Christians—in sheer numbers—to overwhelm them. However, a careful study of scripture suggests that often the process works in reverse. It is only when Christians address the social issues which surround them, personally and in legislation, that their prayers for revival are heard (e.g. Is. 58:6-9). It is a social reform movement, and addressing our responsibility to family and neighbour, which will pave the way for a return to personal faith and commitment in society at large.

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NOTES

- 1 For example, see William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, Penguin Books, London, 1942.
- 2 Christopher J. Wright, *Living as the People of God*, I.V.P., Nottingham, 1985.
- 3 Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family: From Biblical Norms to Public Policy in Britain*, Jubilee Centre Paper No.1, Cambridge, 1986.
- 4 For a provocative analysis of the need for a new language for social policy, see Michael Ingatlieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1984, pp.135-142.
- 5 See for example, Des Wilson, *Pressure: The A to Z of Campaigning in Britain*, Heinemann, London, 1984.
- 6 Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1983, p.81.
- 7 For a discussion of the distinction between goals and policies, see Michael Schluter, 'The Role of the Church in Political Campaigns' (unpublished paper obtainable from the Jubilee Centre).