

## This Election: Don't Vote for Christians!

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OK, hopefully I got your attention with the headline. 'What's wrong with voting for Christians?' you ask. Nothing, as long as the person you vote for is competent to represent the electorate.

I don't watch Australian Idol, but last year many of us received emails that urged people to vote for Guy Sebastian because Australia needed a good Christian as an idol! (The irony of this didn't escape me completely.) In some circles there was great excitement and whilst I was pleased to see a young man who was not ashamed of his faith be recognised for his abilities, I have to confess that I was disgusted by the sentiment that said "vote for him, he's a Christian."

Well, that's just not good enough, and I'm sure Guy Sebastian would agree with me. The show is about talent. If you were going to vote for someone on Australian idol you should have voted for the best performer on the show. Anything else would have been compromising ethical standards that I believe the Bible endorses.

If you take that sort of thinking to the Olympics, we would give a Gold Medal to the person who came last simply because of what they believed or how they behaved. Maybe there is a Biblical precedent for that, but it would decimate sporting endeavours as we know them!

Now, what about politics?

Often you hear a commendation of a politician because the person is a professed Christian. Now, that may be great, but is that all the person brings to the political arena? If it is then if they have the ability to hear God's voice and directions on a daily basis, it could be a good choice. If not, I'm sorry the witness they may give for Christianity will be sadly lacking.

Of course we need more Christians in politics, but we don't just need Christians, we need people of integrity whose integrity is not only motivated by their Christian faith but also evidenced by their actions.

Politics is a dirty business. Ever heard that expression before? It should be an honoured profession where dignity and respect for high office is maintained, but a few moments in the bear pits of our parliaments quickly shakes the idealism of any schoolchild, let alone a person of voting age.

In my opinion, the dirty business of politics comes down to one word "expediency" - possibly the one word that most challenges the integrity of any politician of any persuasion.

Look in your dictionary and you will find there are various definitions of the word. Generally they range from 'Appropriateness to the purpose at hand' to 'a means to an end' and finally 'Adherence to self-serving means: an ambitious politician, guided by expediency rather than principle.'

Of the last, my Macquarie Dictionary says: 'a regard for what is politic or advantageous rather than for what is right or just; a sense of self-interest'.

Now we remember the expediency of the crucifixion. In various translations we have the High Priest Caiaphas saying something that equates to 'it is expedient for one man to die for the sake of the people.' (AV)

He was right. For the sake of controlling the crowds, giving them a scapegoat, appeasing the Roman authorities, establishing their power base, of course it was expedient for Jesus to be tortured and killed.

But was it right? Was it just? Of course it wasn't. From a human perspective he was an innocent man condemned to suffer. The trial was probably unlawful and there was no opportunity for proper defence. Even the judge, Pilate, wanted to let him go but it was a political decision that was esteemed expedient for the purposes of the religious leaders.

It was however, expedient, in another sense of the word, for God. To redeem mankind, the sacrifice of His Son was just. The lamb sent to the slaughter, the innocent victim to take the place of the guilty, made it right. God's expediency and man's are two very different concepts.

So what can we learn from this politically? Well, we need to remember that the people we elect to parliament will be confronted with decisions that weigh heavily the commitments they make to the common good.

This is why I say don't just elect Christians but ensure the people you vote for are people of integrity, and the best people for the job. They may also be Christians and if so, that's a bonus.

Let's look again at the Macquarie Dictionary expediency quote: 'a regard for what is politic or advantageous rather than for what is right or just; a sense of self-interest'.

The difference between the expediency of God and the expediency of Caiaphas lies in this definition. Caiaphas statement is self-serving and is in no way right or just. God's expediency is totally different as it is in His purpose in the crucifixion which is for a righteousness that is above human standards. It is the ultimate justice built upon sacrifice and forgiveness.

When our political leaders make expedient decisions they can be measured by this standard. If it really is for the common good, it will also be right and just. It will not be self-serving either for the politician or his or her party. It may involve sacrifice and a personal cost to the politician or the party.

When George W Bush set his world at war with terrorists it was an expedient decision following 9/11. To be honest, most American Presidents would have taken similar action – it would be expected of them. When you are hit, you hit back. Any box office Hollywood movie will tell you that, but is that man's expediency or God's?

What would have happened, for example, had Bush stood up and said that the events of September 11 2001 were horrible and the terrorists guilty, but that America should not retaliate but 'forgive our enemies'? This would have been an expediency of a different kind.

Back to the expediency of our own political system.

Here lies the rub, as Shakespeare might say. Expediency is part of our democracy. Our major parties require their members to tow the party line – either vote with the party, or if they are to abstain from voting at least abstain from sharing their views on the issues where they cannot agree with policy.

When you and I consider who we will vote for at the next election this is something that we should keep in mind. My personal opinion is that I wonder how a politician, Christian or otherwise, can actually be a member of a major party because of the fact that it will be, from time to time, expedient for them to keep to themselves views they hold which are counter to the party's views. That might involve personal sacrifice on their behalf – it may hurt their conscience - but will their silence be for the common good.

Let me cite one example. On issues relating to our treatment of refugees, it was expedient no doubt for Australia to act powerfully in sending a chilling message to people smugglers and others, but was it right and just? Was it God's expediency or ours? Who is God most concerned with: the people smugglers or the refugees fleeing to our country in leaky boats? No matter what party is in power, if you were a member of that party and disagreed with the decisions being made, would you remain silent for the Party's sake, or speak up for your beliefs? At one time, decisions regarding refugees were vote winners. This was expedient. Now perhaps a different expediency is being seen.

We have some good value Christian politicians in parliaments around Australia today. Some of those are in the major parties. How do good men and women in the major parties live with their consciences when issues arise where they are moved to speak but are silenced by the Party rule?

I am not a politician so perhaps one of our Christian politicians will help me understand the answer to this question, because it does trouble me.

Some would say the answer is to provide Christian parties, but then how do you define "Christian"? Are we talking evangelical, Pentecostal, Catholic, Liberal or otherwise? If the party has a clear "Christian" mandate, how will it deal with diversity on key issues? Let's face it, the issues facing the Uniting Church for example over ordination of homosexuals has raised emotive and intellectual passions of people who profess to be Christian but view these issues from different sides of the question.

The worry for a Christian party is that it too, one day, will face the same problem as the major parties – that it will need to silence its members so that views held by the majority, or the most powerful, remain.

There are a lot of issues to be considered. On the whole, I believe that our parliamentarians are generally good people of principle who are seeking to make a contribution for each of us. They need our prayerful support, and they need encouragement. It's a tough job.

We need, however, not to be glassy eyed about politics. In the lead up to the Iraq War I petitioned politicians and friends with an alternate view to the War on Terror. A Christian friend wrote to me that he was concerned that I was doing this when the Bible urges us to 'pray for and trust our leaders'. My response to him was to say, 'Pray for, yes, Trust, no'. The Bible doesn't tell us we must trust our leaders, otherwise we would have no right to disagree with the views of any leader whether they be of the calibre of Ghandi or Mussolini.

So, in the next election, or in fact, in any election, don't just vote for someone because you know them to be Christian. Be sure that the person you are electing is the best man or woman for the job and that they have something to offer to government in our country that you believe is good for us.

Much is made of the economy in the western world. We want financial stability for our governments – we want to see a surplus (a profit if you like) from the books each year – but which is more important, the financial economy or the social economy?

In voting for parties there are a number of issues to be considered. Integrity I believe is key to which boxes we should tick. For me, the major parties continue to disappoint me because of political 'expediency'. I know that decisions will be made on a regular basis because of what is best for the Party and not necessarily as regards what is best for the people. Our leading politicians would argue against this, but do they earn our trust by their actions and not their words?

Political expediency is part of life. Can it be any other way? Somehow I like to dream that is possible. Remember, it is vitally important for the Government to remain in Government and it is just as important for the Opposition to win Government. Both of them see expediency – a means to the desired end – as par for their course. We see this time and time again in the banter of our leaders, jibing at each other and the policies each proposes and disposes.

At the end of the day, it will be expedient for me to vote. My vote needs to be cast for a Party that says it is expedient for each member to speak to his conscience and where possible vote with the Party. My vote will be for a Party or group who put Australia first and not the Party. My vote will be for expediency that reflects decisions that are just and right not only for the powerful, but the powerless.

Finding the party and candidates that fit that is quite a task.

Finally, let's remember that as Christians our democratic responsibility doesn't end at the ballot box. We should vote prayerfully and carefully for candidates, pray for whoever is elected, and ensure that our voice is heard not only on issues of morality but on social justice too. When the people remain silent and leave Government to elected representatives then we only have ourselves to blame when our Government fails us, or as Aristotle said:

if liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.