

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

By John M. Hitchen, BA, BD, PhD.
Formerly Principal of CLTC, PNG and National Principal of BCNZ.

For some the political arena is still seen as part of the ‘world’ they are to shun. For others it is a stage to commandeer for a public evangelistic testimony to the nation. Others appear to regard politics as the scene in which to work as reactionaries to bring in a Christian theocracy in which legislated morality will overcome all the woes of modern society - assuming political coercion can change the human heart. Others who see political involvement as a human responsibility they share with all their fellow-citizens, are at odds about the way to develop economic, educational or welfare policies. As one commentator noted, ‘we need a theology and philosophy of the political realm’.¹

This paper offers a few starting points for developing such a theology of politics by suggesting answers to the foundational question, ‘Why be involved in the political system at all?’²

1. Become politically involved because God is already involved

God the Father instituted and oversees the political realm as much as every other part of creation. His nature and his role as the active ruler of our universe provide the basic reasons for our political involvement. We must be involved in the political issues of our day because we share the life of the Living God who is Himself just, and who seeks justice among humans.

God the Father, *...executes justice for the oppressed; (He) gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;...the Lord watches over the sojourners, He upholds the widow and the fatherless...* (Psalm 146: 7-9). God the Father expects his children to be involved in political action like this because He is so involved.

God the Son, during His earthly life, did not hesitate to challenge the national political leaders of His day. His running battle with the oppressive views of the Pharisees and Sadducees are well known. It's no surprise that Peter, after living in Jesus' shadow for so long, writes in one paragraph, ‘For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every institution, whether of the emperor as supreme or of governors ... Fear God, honour the emperor.’ Then, in the very next paragraph he goes on to say,

¹. Harold W. Turner, in Paul Trebilco (ed.), *Considering Orthodoxy: Foundations for Faith Today*, Orewa, NZ: ColCom Press, 1995, p44.

². This paper has grown from earlier papers prepared for the Papua New Guinea scene in the late 1970s, and papers written to stimulate social involvement in New Zealand in 1987 and 1995. It was hastily brought together as a working document to be abridged and popularised by others for circulation to churches before the 1996 elections by the Evangelical Fellowship of New Zealand. It was revised for publication in New Zealand in The Vision New Zealand Congress 1997 report published by Vision New Zealand and then had some slight modifications made for use by the Australian Evangelical Alliance in 2004.

‘...to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps’ (1 Peter 2:13-14, 17, 21). As the central theme of his earthly teaching ministry, Jesus announced he had come to inaugurate the ‘reign of God’ (Mk 1:14-15; Lk 17:20-21). Although his kingdom is not ‘of’ this world (Jn 19:36), it is not less than this world. His kingly rule embraces and influences every realm of human life, politics included. He is indeed, ‘Lord of all’. Our political task involves demonstrating to our modern world with all its political forces what it means to represent the One whose lordship embraces all the powers at work in the universe.

The Holy Spirit is into upholding righteousness in the world. There is a direct parallel between the work of the Spirit in the world as outlined in John 16:7-8 and the work of governments as set out in Romans 13. The Holy Spirit is God's power at work convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgement. God delegates to governments power to approve what is good, and to judge the wrong. When the Spirit is leading us, then, we will do what He is doing in the world - caring about right, wrong and justice in society. That means being involved in politics, sensitively, discerningly, cooperating in the Spirit's ongoing task:

It is therefore the Spirit who gives his people a tender social conscience, and impels them to immerse themselves in humanitarian relief, development and the search for justice.³

Our concern about politics is rooted in the character of our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Since He cares about truth, honesty, justice, and equity so must we.

As Christians we understand that all power belongs ultimately to God. Political power is but one delegated area of authority in a universe ordered by our living, active God. Like the Psalmist, the Christian can say, ‘More than once I have heard God say that power belongs to him’ (Ps 62:11). Our understanding of God determines our understanding of the government. The Living God is the God of power and the God of order. These two facts undergird the Christian understanding of government, and are at the base of our obligation to be politically involved.

The true God is ‘The Supreme Power’ (Heb. 1:3); ‘The only Ruler, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords’ (1Tim. 6:15). The risen Son of God makes as his final claim before his ascension, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth’ (Matt. 28:18). Therefore all other power, lordship or authority comes from and depends upon God.

The true God is also a God of order. From the very creation of the universe he has worked to bring order out of chaos. He distributes and controls his power in an orderly way. He is the God of ‘law’ who puts things in their proper relationship and expects that ‘law’ and order be maintained.

The New Testament offers a wide range of words to describe the powers controlling and operating in our world; e.g. spiritual powers (thrones); lords (dominions); rulers (principalities); authorities; spiritual rulers; cosmic powers of this dark age; ruling spirits of the universe (elemental spirits of the universe); or angelic rulers and powers. [See Col 1:16; 2:10; Eph 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Rom 8:38-39.]

The biblical writers saw the power of the State as one of these many kinds of powers, along with various other secondary authorities with delegated powers, such as families (Eph 3:15; 5:23). The Christian Good News is that in heaven, ‘Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers and lords; he has a title superior to all titles of authority in this world and in the next. God

³. ‘Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment’, *Lausanne Occasional Papers* No.21, p.18

put all things under Christ's feet and gave him to the Church as supreme Lord over all things' (Eph 1:21-22 cf., Col 2:10; 1 Pet 3:22). Christ controls and rules over all these kinds of power both by his work as their Creator (Col 1:16) and by his work as Redeemer (Col 1:20). In his death Christ overcame the powers which had rebelled against God. They are already subject to him even though their final overthrow will not be complete until he consummates his kingdom in all its fullness at his return (Col 2:15; 1 Cor 15:23-28).

This confidence that Christ is in control of even the evil governing authorities enabled the early Christians to accept persecution and even martyrdom. Nothing could separate them from the victorious love of God they enjoyed in Christ (Rom 8:37-39). We need to recapture this same confidence as we face fresh opportunities for being part of the processes of government in our own society.

We start from this reality: since God is so deeply into politics we can be sure he expects us, as his people on earth, to be similarly involved.

2. Accept our political responsibility because Jesus requires us to do so

Jesus was often surrounded by active members of the political parties of his day, particularly in the incident recorded in Mark 12:13-17. The Pharisees, with their strong nationalistic fervour, and general dislike of the Roman overlordship, on this occasion joined forces with some Herodians - collaborators who depended on the Roman presence to keep the family of Herod in power. Luke notes that the scribes and Chief Priests, who were mostly Sadducees, were also behind this interrogation of Jesus. The Chief Priests administered daily political power under the watchful eye of their Roman rulers. So Jesus is facing a strange coalition of normally antagonistic political groups. Their introductory comments smack of common political cant, 'Teacher, we know you are right in what you say and teach...' But Jesus is not taken in by their crafty question, 'Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?' They expected to catch him out whichever way he answered. They could either accuse him to the Roman powers as a rebel, or condemn him before the people as a traitor to the Jewish nation. But Jesus acted deftly in this political environment. He recognised and showed up their hypocrisy. They only caught themselves in their trap. Jesus' answer was unanswerable. They couldn't use it against him in any way.

Jesus' response to this question sets out the basic answer to all such questions about our duty to government:

*'Give back to the Emperor what rightly belongs to him **AND** give to God what rightly belongs to Him.'*

For Jesus, the Christian has a duty *both* to government *and* to God. We are to repay what we owe the government for the services it provides. But at the same time we are to honour God as our true King and true Lord.

Jesus was not teaching that political responsibility and our duty to God are two distinct areas of duty to keep separate from each other. One part of our life does not belong to God and a different part belong to the government. Nor was Jesus simply saying that obeying the state is one small part of our greater duty to obey God. That may be true but that is not the point Jesus was making. Rather, for Jesus, obeying God and fulfilling political responsibilities are two inter-related duties which we must always hold together. These two are woven together in every part of our lives. We are to fulfil our obligations to the government in such a way that at the same time we also continue to obey God.

Christ's response to this question about the tax money indicates three Christian political duties. We need to hold all three together and in balance.

First, discern clearly what is our duty to God and what is our duty to Government in each practical situation we face. Make responsible decisions about where the government's rights begin and end, and about what obeying God means in each particular setting.

Second, give back to each what is their proper due - to God what belongs to him and to the government what is its due.

Third, remind the government of the limits of its power and refuse to go beyond those limits. Like the prophets of old, we remind the government its powers are not totalitarian. God alone can demand the worship of his creatures.

Jesus demonstrated the impact of this basic attitude to governing authorities during his own trial.

He respected their authority as God-Given. The amazing thing about the trial of Jesus is the quiet respect Jesus showed towards those who condemned him. He quickly stopped the disciples when they attacked those who came to arrest him (Matt 26:50-52). He quietly and clearly referred to the injustice of what they were doing. But as he did so he also showed clear respect for these rulers and their positions (Matt 26:55; John 18:19-23). John 19:11 explains the reasons for this respect: 'You have authority over me only because it was given you by God'. Like David before Him (1 Sam 24:6), Jesus saw the rulers of his day as people with a responsibility under God for what they were doing. This respect for the rulers as persons accountable to God led to the second part of Christ's attitude.

Jesus meekly submitted to the unjust condemnation of the political leaders of his day. At each point, from the arrest in Gethsemane; before the Jewish Council; before Pilate; before Herod; and in the hands of the soldiers, Jesus submitted without fighting back. As Peter summed it up, 'He committed no sin, and no one ever heard a lie come from his lips. When he was insulted he did not answer back with an insult; when he suffered he did not threaten, but placed his hopes in God the righteous Judge' (1 Peter 2:22-23).

But this was not weakness. Christ was not afraid of those to whom he submitted. Christ was in control of each situation. In the Garden, the soldiers are afraid, not Jesus (John 18:3-8). When being questioned Christ controls the direction of the conversations and chooses whether he will answer or not. Pilate is afraid of him and of the implications of condemning him (Matt 23:4, 13-25). Christ is in full control of himself and of his own power and refuses to use it against these ruling authorities. He is indeed giving himself up to death (cf., John 10:17-18). His understanding of what is happening gives this humble submission.

Jesus realized that higher powers were at work over and through these human rulers. Jesus understood the situation in a way which enabled him to accept and submit to the injustice and the shame of the situation without hitting back. His prayer from the cross sums this up clearly, 'Forgive them Father! They don't know what they are doing' (Luke 23:24).

This different understanding of the situation centred on Jesus' belief that both satanic forces and the will and power of God were at work in and through these decisions and actions of the rulers of his day. As he prepared for this confrontation in Jerusalem, Jesus said, 'Now is the time for this world to be judged; now the ruler of this world will be overthrown.' As he went to his trial he knew the Evil One was both active in the workings of the trial and was on trial himself. Jesus recognised evil powers at work through these government authorities: 'I was with you in the Temple every day, and you did not try to arrest me. But this is your hour to act, when the power of darkness rules' (Luke 22:53).

Jesus also knew that his Father God was fully in control of all that was happening. He turns to his Father for strength and help. His submission to the earthly rulers is the direct result of his earlier submission to his Father's will (Mark 14:32-42). At each point Jesus knows the declared will of God as set out in the Scriptures is really controlling the events (Matt. 26:54, 56, etc.).

In their early preaching the apostles were quick to point out that neither the rulers themselves nor the people as a whole understood this deeper involvement of the will of God and the forces of evil in the events of the Cross. See Acts 3:17. In fact Paul is so bold as to imply that even the evil spirit powers themselves did not understand the deeper significance of what they were doing (1 Cor 2:8).

In summary, then, Jesus' relationship to the ruling authorities at his death was marked by these three attitudes:

- Respect for their authority as God-given
- Meekness despite their injustice, and
- Recognition that spiritual forces were working in and through these government actions.

Translating these principles into our political situation not only means we should pay our taxes. We live in a political situation where each citizen has both the right and duty to vote responsibly at elections. Christ's basic command to render to government its dues will, for us, include our duty to vote. Not to exercise this right will, for Christians, be as irresponsible as refusing to pay taxes. Moreover, in our situation in New Zealand and Australia today, the whole political process depends on citizens accepting their democratic responsibilities. Each citizen shares the duty to ensure good government. Christ's command requires us to fulfil that duty. This surely means being active in the whole political process. In our democratic system each citizen has the opportunity to influence the kind and content of legislation our parliamentarians enact. We are free to lobby our members of parliament. We are responsible to convey to them clearly our opinions about the kind of laws and society we desire. Grasping this right to lobby and influence legislation is one way of 'giving to government its due'. Likewise, creating and supporting political parties are fundamental rights of citizens in our democratic system. So we have a further Christian duty to ensure the right kind of parties and potential members of parliament are contesting the elections. In New Zealand we could perhaps have been excused for being cynical about our influence under the old 'first past the post' system. But MMP (multi-member proportional voting) brings both a new opportunity and a new responsibility. In a fresh way each citizen has the duty to determine the mix and composition of parliament. Our political duty has been significantly extended. We are just as responsible to use both our votes as we are to pay our taxes. We need to grasp this significant new political duty with both hands.

3. Keep our God-ward duty clear as we become involved

Jesus' basic teachings take us further. Seeing the difference between what belongs to the government and what belongs to God is foundational in New Testament teaching about the Christian attitude to the State. Christians always seem to have had problems with this. We all too easily lose our powers of discernment in the heady atmosphere of politics. We need parliamentarians, and political parties, who are strong on astute discernment.

Other New Testament examples of the way the church worked out Christ's teachings can help us here.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8 At Corinth Christians were taking each other to the local government courts to sort out their differences and arguments. The Apostle Paul says shame on the Christians for

going to a non-Christian court to sort out their problems. Paul was not teaching, as Oscar Cullman suggests, that, 'Everywhere the Christian can dispense with the State without threatening its existence, he should do so'.⁴ Rather, the Christians had confused their responsibilities in this situation. They were not judging correctly what belongs to God and what belongs to government. The government was not responsible for social order in the church. Social order and discipline in the church belong to the head of the church, Jesus Christ. Christians should turn first to him to solve their disagreements. We are wrong to take what belongs to Christ and expect the government to sort it out.

Acts 19:21-41 The Ephesian local government officer reminded the rioting citizenry very clearly about proper government responsibility. The Ephesians had wrongly taken into their own hands what belonged in the power of the properly constituted legal authorities. Reminding the crowd of the right place to handle law and order problems protected the early Christians at that time. Upholding the rule of law and expecting fellow citizens to respect government procedures and authority is still fundamental for Christians today.

Romans 12:17 - 13:14 The problem here was the issue of 'pay-back' or retribution for wrong done. Christians are never to take revenge into their own hands, for only God can give proper retribution (Rom 12:19). But in the very next verses (13:1-4) God delegates this work of 'bearing the sword' or 'carrying out God's wrath' to the government. Again we are required to judge properly about who has the responsibility for the political task of retribution and then to give that responsibility to the proper authority. Don't confuse things by retaining in our own hands what God has put in the government's hands. The government is God's servant entrusted to fulfil this particular work.

Acts 4:19-20 and 5:29 When Peter and John are taken before the Council the issue is clear for them. Human courts do not have jurisdiction to decide whether or not we should proclaim God's Word. God himself has given clear commands about this and therefore we must obey him. The government has no control over when, where or how God's Gospel is to be shared with others. We are accountable directly to God to obey his commands to preach regardless of what the government says. Reminding government authorities of the limits of their power is part of our Christian duty.

Acts 18:12-17 Here, too, the Roman Governor of Greece is commended because he knew and upheld the limits of governmental authority. The Roman government had no right or concern to enter into judgements on religious questions. Paul was working out the principle we see in the words of our Lord.

Each of these examples warns us not to be politically naive. We need politicians who are not merely power hungry, but who respect the limits of proper political power. Ability to discern is one of the prime requirements for a politician. Reminding government of the limits to its authority is still a Christian duty. Speaking to New Zealand business people in 1995 on trends in politics today, Paul Johnson concluded with these words:

The best way to ensure that we get the politics we want and need is to make certain that politics as such impinge only on a limited part of our lives. For public policy to be right, we must work to preserve the strength, integrity, and extent of the private sphere. Whoever is in office ... we must make sure the individual citizen remains in power over his or her life, and that the great majority of the key decisions which affect it are taken according to his or her own interests and conscience. ... For what the great majority of people want today, and have

⁴. Oscar Cullman, *The State in the New Testament*, New York: Scribners, 1956, p61.

probably always wanted, is for politics to be kept in their place, and for government to be efficient, honest, practical - and tame.⁵

These examples suggest some distinctly Christian questions to ask of parties and potential candidates today. How well can they discern the beginning and end of political responsibility? Where do they draw the line between religious freedom and loyalty to government policy? Do they treat Christian citizens, schools, welfare agencies and other community services - yes, even Bible Colleges - on the same basis as they treat other comparable persons or agencies? Do all tax payers have comparable access and rights to the government dollar, or are religious groups precluded regardless of the quality of their services? What is the member's, or party's, policy on minority groups? Do all have the same opportunities and protections, even when they are challenging the current policies of the party? The biblical emphases would give these often neglected issues an important place in party policy.

4. Be involved because we share a common humanity

The next reason 'Why' we should be salt and light in the political arena is because we follow the example of him who came, 'not to be served, but to serve...' (Mark 10:45). We have accepted our God-given duty to 'do good to all' (Galatians 6:10).

We should be involved in politics as Christians primarily because we share common human responsibilities along with all our fellow citizens. Christians should not be in politics because we want to be over against other citizens, but because we want to be more responsible citizens. Our political duties are basically the same as those of every other citizen. Our Christian obligations may, and do, heighten and confirm these duties, but they do not make our duties radically different. To put it another way. Our duty politically arises primarily from our common humanity, as men and women created in the image of God, rather than from the fact of our salvation in Christ. Certainly our salvation has alerted us to the importance of this involvement, but it is our common duty as humans and citizens which is the basis for our political service.

Good government, and valid political and societal concerns all derive ultimately from God. But he gives his gifts without partiality. Christians do not have a monopoly on political commonsense. Other people have sound moral judgement. Many well meaning people are involved politically because they have valid insights into the needs of our community. Christians in politics will be quick to recognize and acknowledge the validity and insights of others, and to work with them for the common good.

Christians in politics will seek to bridge the differences between different sections of the community. While there are issues against which we must take a stand, a merely combative mentality will ensure Christians are marginalized in the political arena. We need to become known for what we are for, rather than for what we are against. Several key New Testament passages dealing with societal and political involvement stress 'peacemaking' rather than a belligerent approach for followers of the Prince of Peace. The 'salt and light' passage immediately follows blessings upon the meek, the merciful and those who make peace (Mat 5:1-16). The commands to submit to government authorities are preceded by strong pleas to, 'Do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge...' (Rom 12:14-13:7). Or in Peter's teachings, '...by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people ... live as servants of God. Show proper respect for everyone ...' (1 Pet 2:13-23).

⁵. Paul Johnson, *Paul Johnson in New Zealand*, Wellington: New Zealand Business Roundtable, 1995, p62.

Just as our Lord ‘went about doing good’ in every sphere of his life (Acts 10:38), so as ordinary citizens we, too, will seek to do good for the welfare of society as well as for his glory.

5. We become involved because we recognize a widespread awareness of the appropriateness of basic virtues.

God has declared in his Word fundamental values and virtues which are good for humanity as a whole. We also see a widespread recognition that these values are fitting for our society. Many have imbibed the commonsense virtues and values of the ten commandments and the social teachings of Christ as of fundamental importance for societal well-being. Thoughtful men and women across a wide spectrum of our community, regardless of their religious affiliations or the lack of them, still accept the importance of these basic moral guidelines for society as a whole.

As Christians, we can account for this widespread agreement about basic morals on three grounds.⁶

An inborn awareness of right and wrong. Romans 2:14-15 speaks of people without any access to God's written word showing, ‘that what the law requires is written on their hearts’. This basic knowledge of good and evil, or conscience, is part of human nature, or of God's image in humans. The moral sense which goes with this can be understood as part of humanity's residual awareness of the original image of God in humankind. Theologians of earlier generations made much of this ‘original law of obedience given to man’ which, they claimed, ‘was a law, not only to the first man, but to the whole human race’.⁷ Thus Richard Watson, the Wesleyan theologian and influential missionary spokesperson writing in the 1820's about non-Christian nations across the globe could say: ‘...even the Heathen have always been under a moral government. The laws of God have never been quite obliterated, though their practice has ever been below their knowledge...’⁸

We, too, can recognize and respect this widespread awareness of basic moral values as evidence that, ‘In the Word was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’ (John 1:4-5). Or again, we can recognize this awareness as part of the general work of the Holy Spirit in the world convincing all peoples of righteousness and restraining evil (John 16:8-10; 2 Thess. 2:6-7).

The Reasonableness of God's moral principles for humankind. A wide spectrum of thinking men and women endorse the creation ordinances and their moral value because they make common sense. Practical human insight, observation of the way societies tick and certainly the lessons of history show that healthy moral standards are good for any society.

We can readily show the importance of speaking and writing the truth as basic for communal trust and business confidence. Ephesians 4:25 hints at just such a natural communal reasonableness as the motive for honesty in speech: ‘Let every one speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another’.⁹

^{6.} For discussion of these issues, and the whole of this section, see A.N. Triton, *Whose World?* London: InterVarsity Press, 1970 pp80-103.

^{7.} Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, London: John Mason, 3rd Edition, 1829, Vol I, p491.

^{8.} *Ibid.*, Vol. I:54. For a discussion of the way such ideas were basic to missionary thinking in the nineteenth century see, J.M. Hitchen, *Training Tamate: Formation of the Nineteenth Century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers*, University of Aberdeen, Ph.D Thesis, 1984, pp350-363.

^{9.} c.f., A.N. Triton, *Whose World*, London: IVP, 1970, pp82-83.

Paul appeals to the thinking person's awareness of the 'unnaturalness' of homosexual relations as part of his evidence that godless societies had rejected an adequate basis for their moral behaviour (Romans 1:26-28). When warning of the danger of prostitution, Paul appeals both to the original intention of sexual union and the 'natural' argument that the sexually immoral person is threatening the well-being of his or her own personality (1 Corinthians 6:16-18). Thoughtful people today with an awareness of the part fear, shame, unresolved guilt and lack of self-respect due to sexual immorality play in contributing to emotional instability and inability to communicate in marriage, will endorse Paul's argument. We don't need the threat of AIDS to confirm the basic sense of the biblical moral values.

This basic rationality or commonsense reflected in the creation ordinances and ten commandments wins the respect of a wide range of morally responsible thinkers today.

An acceptance of the worth of the ethical teaching of Jesus Christ. Despite the general rejection of the theological and spiritual roots from which Christ's ethics grow, there is still an interest in retaining the fruits of his teaching. Once a society has been exposed to the teaching of Christ - as Western society has over a long period of time - it can never wholly forget the challenge and the appeal of his teachings. 'Love your neighbour as yourself'; 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you'; 'Turn the other cheek'; and other popular, though partial, distillations of Christ-centred behaviour, still win acclaim in our community. We all suffer a gap between our ideal and our actual when it comes to standards, and many in our society will still pay lip service to the validity of Christian standards as the most worthy ideal.

So, recognizing these three factors of an inborn awareness of right and wrong; the reasonableness of God's moral principles, and the continuing attraction of Jesus as an ethical teacher, we will respect and build on the widespread community awareness of the appropriateness of basic Christian moral virtues. This should spur us on to political involvement and to speak up on moral issues.

This reason also suggests some aspects of 'how' to be involved on moral issues. We do not need to keep telling everyone who expresses a right moral judgement, 'There you are, you have an inborn moral awareness of God's original commands given to the first human pair.' Many of our hearers would not be impressed. But, in talking about our concerns about morality, we should appeal to that awareness, that sense of conscience, in our friends. We should appeal to their sense of what is 'reasonable', 'sensible' and 'fitting' in regard to truth, honesty, moral uprightness, marital fidelity, etc. Let us build on the common ground. And by all means, appeal to their respect for the standards and example of Jesus.

6. We become involved because we respect and seek to uphold the personal rights and responsibilities of all humanity - including minority groups.

We agree with J.N.D. Anderson's dictum that Christians 'must accord to others that liberty of conscience which they claim for themselves'.¹⁰

In calling for the proper community respect for moral standards we will keep people at the centre of our political concern. Where minorities - even kinky minorities - are discriminated against, we will, like Christ, take our stand with them against their oppressors.

¹⁰. J.N.D. Anderson, *Into the Word: The Need and Limits of Christian Involvement*, London: Falcon Books, 1968, p48.

Our distinctly Christian ethic has taught us that all the parties in social relationships have both rights and responsibilities (see Col.3:18-4:1). In taking our stand on public issues, then, we will see our duty both to stand up for the underprivileged and the underdog - and at the same time to call on them to, 'acknowledge the duty which accompanies every right'.¹¹

7. We become involved because we believe in the 'power of the prophet' and the priority of public opinion over legislation on moral issues.

Our final reason for seeking to be salt and light in our community arises from lessons from biblical history. Legislation is inadequate to give moral guidance to society. The frailty of human nature and the fickle changes of public opinion hinder the effectiveness of legislation. We know that the 'Power of the Prophet',¹² although seldom respected and often opposed, is of more lasting value than the might of the sword or the legislation of the state. Thus, we recognize the importance of influencing public opinion on moral questions. Where the law no longer reflects public opinion the law lapses.

As comparatively insignificant minor prophets we know that the Good News we gossip to our neighbour about right living before Christ Jesus, contains the dynamic to transform both individuals and, through them, communities.

Thus we recognize our Christian responsibility to lobby politicians and other opinion formers to ensure they understand a well-presented Christian position on the issues before parliament. Hence also, our concern to ensure humble, discerning and widely respected Christians are elected to parliament. We want their presence and words to continue to inform, to challenge and to guide opinion by contributing positively to public moral awareness and good political sense.

We confess that too often we have said too little, and that too late, so that we have only ourselves to blame if Christians are regarded as reactionary traditionalists rather than astute moral leaders.

8. Towards a political platform

The Scriptures give us a set of fundamental reasons for fulfilling our political responsibilities in a constructive, positive way. We have a view of God, his world and our human significance which we know is true for, and applies to, all men and women. We want to share these views for the common good of our society. We do not want to be in politics just so that we can oppose what we see as the wrong views of others, nor merely to fight for the religious rights of Christians.

We believe the Maker's instructions for human welfare apply universally. As the Creator of mankind, our God has declared what is best for His creatures. We seek to uphold these insights in our political involvement, and can summarize their importance in statements such as these:

- Our God is the living Lord of the whole creation. This is his world first and foremost. He has not abdicated his sovereign rule. We do not believe that the Enemy is the true ruler of our world.
- Women and men are all created in the image of God with the spiritual capacity to know God and the moral capacity to know right from wrong as part of the expression of their

¹¹. As the motto of the Y.M.C.A. Y's Men's Clubs, puts it.

¹². To borrow M.C.V. Jeffries' essay title in, *Beyond Neutrality*, Manchester: Pitmans, 1953; a penetrating application of this point in the area of educational theory.

nature as human beings. Though damaged by the Fall, this 'image of God' has not been obliterated and still constitutes our common nature as humans.

- God has entrusted this planet to us as humans as a trust to be enjoyed and managed for the good of our fellow creatures of both this and future generations, and for the glory of God.
- God has structured and ordered our world so that moral principles are recognised by human conscience as it is informed by God's testimony to himself, even apart from the special revelation of Scripture. The lessons of creation, the light of 'natural law' and conscience are available to all humans even without a commitment to knowing the Scriptures. The Eternal Word has not left himself without witness in any society. The Holy Spirit, likewise, is doing his restraining, convicting work amongst all humankind, not only amongst Christians.
- God sends his gifts and mercies upon all humans, whether they acknowledge him or not. Moreover, he gives and respects their personal right to choose whether or not to respond to him. He does not withhold his gifts of life, understanding, intelligence, moral judgement, inter-personal concern and the like from people just because they refuse to own him as Lord.
- God controls and rules history. The migratory movements of peoples, their ethnic heritage, their social and political experiences are all known and superintended by our Lord God. He appoints times and seasons politically as well as in nature. Thus we need to come to grips with present realities like the modern pluralistic society. It is inappropriate to simply wish or work for its reversal or to hope for a reactionary return to the monolithic realities of Christendom. Simply to fight against pluralistic society may be to fight against the ongoing purposes of God, if he is offering this political and intellectual environment as an opportunity for a new kind of societal experience.
- All truth is God's truth, wherever it is found. All valid insights into human life and behaviour are part of the God-given resources we are to utilise for the glory of God and the good of all our fellow human beings, as 1 Corinthians 3:18-23 suggests.
- All humans carry in their persons the biases, stains and effects of their inherent sinfulness. We are not gullible, nor naive about the lust for power, the self-serving motives and the potential for deceit, corruption and dishonesty in the corridors of power. Thus we recognise the importance of a prophetic upholding of public virtues and standards of righteousness in a nation, ever mindful of the need for personal integrity and transparent moral purity on the part of would-be politicians.

We particularly note the global applicability of the ten commandments as a firm basis for political involvement with eight key principles to keep to the fore:

- Respect for worship and for the public use of God's name
- Respect for human life
- Respect for parents and family life
- Respect for sex and marriage
- Respect for work and for the products of human creativity
- Provision for healthy recreation, leisure and adequate weekly rest
- Respect for truth in speech and communication
- Guarding against the social cancers of theft and greed

We do not expect all our fellow citizens to recognise these basic moral responsibilities as part of their Maker's revelation for their welfare. But we believe, nevertheless, the values enshrined in these ordinances are fundamental to wholesome community life. This puts us under obligation to work for the widest possible recognition of these basic values - in short - to be involved in politics!

Conclusion:

We offer these comments as a basis for shaping our approach to the political task. We have not presented a pragmatic list of expectations or practical obligations as ‘the Christian’ approach in present-day politics. In fact, as we conclude, we need to sound a number of warnings.

While we can expect to come to agreement on basic principles about political involvement, such as those we have outlined above, we should expect different Christians to choose a range of ways of working out these principles.

Only a few of us are likely to be called into a full-time career in politics. Even amongst these we need to beware of assuming that the ‘right’ thing is for them to express their calling through membership in an overtly Christian party. There is good reason for some to work for the respect and support of existing mainline parties, while others may see advantages in working for a party based unashamedly on Christian principles.

This need to respect alternative Christian views on any political issue is of prime importance. The media, and other political groups, can all too easily marginalize Christian views if they are inadequately or inappropriately presented, or if Christians can be shown to be at loggerheads amongst themselves on the issue. This highlights the importance of clear thinking as to whether or not any grouping of Christians should overtly use ‘Christian’ in the title of their political party or lobby group. We need always to be careful about claiming that we represent ‘the’ Christian position on a political issue. Richard Neuhaus, in a significant article on our topic, quotes Reinhold Niebuhr's warnings that ‘we must never declare our politics to be ‘Christian politics’, thereby implicitly excommunicating those Christians who disagree with us’.¹³ Peter Mackenzie, writing in the run up to the 1996 elections, quoted C.S.Lewis' similar warnings on the dangers of claiming to be, or of being thought of as, ‘the Christian party’.¹⁴ Neuhaus says pointedly,

‘Christians engaged in politics will bring personal integrity and devotion to the common good. But that does not make their engagement ‘Christian politics’. It is still just politics. A Christian engineer who builds a really good bridge has not built a ‘Christian bridge.’ The merit of the project depends upon qualities pertinent to the ‘bridginess’ of the thing, although we may believe that these qualities are well served by the Christian conviction and integrity of the builder.’¹⁵

Christ-like humility will surely characterize any Christian involvement in politics, so one-eyed dogmatism and/or proud triumphalistic approaches will therefore be excluded for the Christian. To quote Neuhaus again, ‘Christians are called to walk not the road to political victory but the way of the cross.’¹⁶

We need to be careful, too, not to assume that putting effort into fostering a Christianly based party is the only way to be involved in our political scene today. Creating public awareness of Christian viewpoints on a wider front may be just as significant. We need a range of lobby groups speaking into the full range of political issues in such a way that all political parties will take note of their opinions. Some of us may see such opinion forming as more strategic than working for a single

¹³. Richard John Neuhaus, in *First Things*, No 63, May 1996, pp72-74, cited by Harold Turner in, *New Slant*, No 12, October 1996, p4.

¹⁴. Peter Mackenzie, 'Should there be a Christian Party', in *Reality* No 15, June-July 1996, pp12-14.

¹⁵. Neuhaus, *op.cit.*

¹⁶. *Ibid.*

political party. Likewise some of us may see local school or local body politics, rather than national party politics, as the sphere in which our personal political efforts should have their major focus.

In summary, then, the way we work out the obligations we have outlined above will need to be sensitive, flexible and diverse. But the theological principles we have set out as reasons for our involvement will also inform whatever practical approach we may choose. We cannot ignore our political duties as Christians. We will recognise both the potential and the limitations of all our political effort. As citizens of a higher world we will not be deceived by the allure and dangers of merely earthly political power. Nor will we hesitate to exercise such power humbly and responsibly before Christ if we are entrusted with it. As servants of the coming King we will be alert to the weaknesses of all politics this side of the eternal Kingdom - especially those championed by our own friends and fellow-believers. But with our eyes wide open to our own as well as other people's political shortcomings we shall still work for the kind of quiet, peaceable, godly, dignified and truth-honouring society for which we are obliged to pray (1 Tim 2:1-4). As those entrusted with the pastoral care of our fellow-citizens we will particularly look for ways to bring pastoral encouragement to all who are called into politics. We know that those who serve through politics share all our own frailty and spiritual need and that as our national leaders they stand in special need of our prayer. This prayer duty reminds us that we will be called to give an account of our personal political involvement on that last day - when in the fullness of Christ's kingdom we shall also discover first-hand what politics were always meant to be.