

2012

John MacArthur- The Gospel and Politics

Evangelical Advocacy: A Response to Global Poverty

Follow this and additional works at: <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/engaginggovernmentpapers>

Recommended Citation

Evangelical Advocacy: A Response to Global Poverty, "John MacArthur- The Gospel and Politics" (2012). *Papers, PDF Files, and Presentations*. Book 7.

<http://place.asburyseminary.edu/engaginggovernmentpapers/7>

This Sound Recording is brought to you for free and open access by the Christians Engaging Government at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers, PDF Files, and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. For more information, please contact thad.horner@asburyseminary.edu.

<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/gospelpolitics.html>

The Gospel and Politics

by John MacArthur

For us, as Christians in the United States, it's easy to get caught up in all the political fervor. It can even be tempting to think that legislation is the key to solving the moral problems that plague American society. But is that a right perspective? John MacArthur addresses this important issue and underscores a biblical response.

There was a time (in the days of our Puritan forefathers), when almost every soul in America acknowledged the Ten Commandments as the cornerstone of ethics and morality. Today most Americans can't even name three of the Ten.

There was also a time (not so long ago) when Americans universally disapproved of homosexuality, adultery, and divorce; they believed sexual promiscuity is absolutely wrong; they regarded obscene language as inappropriate; they saw abortion as unthinkable; and they held public officials to high moral and ethical standards. Nowadays, most of the behavior society once deemed immoral is defended as an inalienable civil right.

How times and the culture have changed! The strong Christian influence and scriptural standards that shaped Western culture and American society through the end of the nineteenth century have given way to practical atheism and moral relativism. The few vestiges of Christianity in our culture are at best weak and compromising, and to an increasingly pagan society they are cultic and bizarre.

In less than fifty years' time, our nation's political leaders, legislative bodies, and courts have adopted a distinctly anti-Christian attitude and agenda. The country has swept away the Christian worldview and its principles in the name of equal rights, political correctness, tolerance, and strict separation of church and state. Gross immorality—including homosexuality, abortion, pornography, and other evils—has been sanctioned not only by society in general but in effect by the government as well. A portion of our tax dollars are now used to fund programs and government agencies that actively engage in blatant advocacy of various immoral practices.

What are Christians to do about it?

Many think this is a political problem that will not be solved without a political strategy. During the past twenty-five years, well-meaning Christians have founded a number of evangelical activist organizations and sunk millions of dollars into them in an effort to use the apparatus of politics—lobbying, legislation, demonstration, and boycott—to counteract the moral decline of American culture. They pour their energy and other resources into efforts to drum up a “Christian” political movement that will fight back against the prevailing anti-Christian culture.

But is that a proper perspective? I believe not. America's moral decline is a spiritual problem, not a political one, and its solution is the gospel, not partisan politics.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

This is a lesson evangelicals ought to know from church history. Whenever the church has focused on evangelism and preaching the gospel, her influence has increased. When she has sought power by political, cultural, or military activism, she has damaged or spoiled her testimony.

The Crusades during the Middle Ages were waged for the purpose of regaining Christian control of the Holy Lands. Few believers today would argue that those efforts were fruitful. Even when the crusaders enjoyed military success, the church grew spiritually weaker and more worldly. Other religious wars and campaigns tinged with political motivation (such as the Thirty Years' War in Europe, Cromwell's revolution in England, and other skirmishes during the Reformation era) are all viewed with disapproval, or at best curiosity, by Christians today. And rightly so. The military and political ambitions of some of the Reformers turned out to be a weakness, and ultimately an impediment to the Reformation. On the other hand, the strength of the Reformation, and its enduring legacy, was derived from the fact that Reformation theology shone a bright spotlight on the way of salvation and brought clarity to the gospel.

Throughout Protestant history, those segments of the visible church that have turned their attention to social and political issues have also compromised sound doctrine and quickly declined in influence. Early modernists, for example, explicitly argued that social work and moral reform were more important than doctrinal precision, and their movement soon abandoned any semblance of Christianity whatsoever.

Today's evangelical political activists seem to be unaware of how much their methodology parallels that of liberal Christians at the start of the twentieth century. Like those misguided idealists, contemporary evangelicals have become enamored with temporal issues at the expense of eternal values. Evangelical activists in essence are simply preaching a politically conservative version of the old social gospel, emphasizing social and cultural concerns above spiritual ones.

That kind of thinking fosters the view that government is either our ally (if it supports our special agenda) or our enemy (if it remains opposed or unresponsive to our voice). The political strategy becomes the focus of everything, as if the spiritual fortunes of God's people rise or fall depending on who is in office. But the truth is that no human government can ultimately do anything either to advance or to thwart God's kingdom. And the worst, most despotic worldly government in the end cannot halt the power of the Holy Spirit or the spread of God's Word.

To gain a thoroughly biblical and Christian perspective on political involvement, we should take to heart the words of the British theologian Robert L. Ottley, delivered at Oxford University more than one hundred years ago:

The Old Testament may be studied. . .as an instructor in social righteousness. It exhibits the moral government of God as attested in his dealings with nations rather than with individuals; and it was their consciousness of the action and presence of God in history that made the prophets preachers, not merely to their countrymen, but to the world at large. . . .There is indeed significance in the fact that in spite of their ardent zeal for social reform they did not as a rule

take part in political life or demand political reforms. They desired. . .not better institutions but better men. (*Aspects of the Old Testament*. The Bampton Lectures, 1897 [London: Longmans, 1898], 430-31)

LESSONS FROM SCRIPTURE

My point is not that Christians should remain totally uninvolved in politics or civic activities and causes. They ought to express their political beliefs in the voting booth, and it is appropriate to support legitimate measures designed to correct a glaring social or political wrong. Complete noninvolvement would be contrary to what God's Word says about doing good in society: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10; cf. Titus 3:1-2). It would also display a lack of gratitude for whatever amount of religious freedom the government allows us to enjoy. Furthermore, such pious apathy toward government and politics would reveal a lack of appreciation for the many appropriate legal remedies believers in democracies have for maintaining or improving the civil order. A certain amount of healthy and balanced concern with current trends in government and the community is acceptable, as long as we realize that that interest is not vital to our spiritual growth, our righteous testimony, or the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. Above all, the believer's political involvement should never displace the priority of preaching and teaching the gospel.

There is certainly no prohibition on believers being directly involved in government as civil servants, as some notable examples in the Old and New Testaments illustrate. Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon are two excellent models of servants God used in top governmental positions to further His kingdom. The centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5-13), Zaccheus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10), and Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10) all continued in public service even after they experienced the healing or saving power of Christ. (As far as we know, the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus also remained in office after he was converted [Acts 13:4-12].)

The issue again is one of priority. The greatest temporal good we can accomplish through political involvement cannot compare to what the Lord can accomplish through us in the eternal work of His kingdom. Just as God called ancient Israel (Ex. 19:6), He has called the church to be a kingdom of priests, not a kingdom of political activists. The apostle Peter instructs us, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

Jesus, as we would expect, perfectly maintained His Father's perspective on these matters even though He lived in a society that was every bit as pagan and corrupt as today's culture. In many ways it was much worse than any of us in Western nations has ever faced. Cruel tyrants and dictators ruled throughout the region, the institution of slavery was firmly entrenched—everything was the antithesis of democracy. King Herod, the Idumean vassal of Rome who ruled Samaria and Judea, epitomized the godless kind of autocratic rule: "Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men [concerning the whereabouts of the baby Jesus], was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under" (Matt. 2:16).

Few of us have experienced the sort of economic and legal oppression that the Romans applied to the Jews of Jesus' day. Tax rates were exorbitant and additional government-sanctioned abuses by the tax collectors exacerbated the financial burden on the people. The Jews in Palestine were afforded almost no civil rights and were treated as an underprivileged minority that could not make an appeal against legal injustices. As a result, some Jews were in constant outward rebellion against Rome.

Fanatical nationalists, known as Zealots, ignored their tax obligations and violently opposed the government. They believed that even recognizing a Gentile ruler was wrong (see Deuteronomy 17:15, "You may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother"). Many Zealots became assassins, performing acts of terrorism and violence against both the Romans and other Jews whom they viewed as traitors.

It is also true that the Roman social system was built on slavery. The reality of serious abuses of slaves is part of the historical record. Yet neither Jesus nor any of the apostles attempted to abolish slavery. Instead, they commanded slaves to be obedient and used slavery as a metaphor for believers who were to submit to their Lord and Master.

Jesus' earthly ministry took place right in the midst of that difficult social and political atmosphere. Many of His followers, including the Twelve, to varying degrees expected Him to free them from Rome's oppressive rule. But our Lord did not come as a political deliverer or social reformer. He never issued a call for such changes, even by peaceful means. Unlike many late twentieth-century evangelicals, Jesus did not rally supporters to some grandiose attempt to "capture the culture" for biblical morality or greater political and religious freedoms.

Christ, however, was not devoid of care and concern for the daily pain and hardships people endured in their personal lives. The Gospels record His great empathy and compassion for sinners. He applied those attitudes in a tangible, practical way by healing thousands of people of every kind of disease and affliction, often at great personal sacrifice to Himself.

Still, as beneficial and appreciated as His ministry to others' physical needs was, it was not Jesus' first priority. His divine calling was to speak to the hearts and souls of individual men and women. He proclaimed the good news of redemption that could reconcile them to the Father and grant them eternal life. That message far surpasses any agenda for political, social, or economic reform that can preoccupy us. Christ did *not* come to promote some new social agenda or establish a new moral order. He *did* come to establish a new spiritual order, the body of believers from throughout the ages that constitutes His church. He did not come to earth to make the old creation moral through social and governmental reform, but to make new creatures holy through the saving power of the gospel and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. And our Lord and Savior has commanded us to continue His ministry, with His supreme priorities in view, with the goal that we might advance His kingdom: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

In the truest sense, the moral, social, and political state of a people is irrelevant to the advance of the gospel. Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36).

THE REAL BATTLE

We can't protect or expand the cause of Christ by human political and social activism, no matter how great or sincere the efforts. Ours is a spiritual battle waged against worldly ideologies and dogmas arrayed against God, and we achieve victory over them only with the weapon of Scripture. The apostle Paul writes: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

We must reject all that is ungodly and false and never compromise God's standards of righteousness. We can do that in part by desiring the improvement of society's moral standards and by approving of measures that would conform government more toward righteousness. We do grieve over the rampant indecency, vulgarity, lack of courtesy and respect for others, deceitfulness, self-indulgent materialism, and violence that is corroding society. But in our efforts to support what is good and wholesome, reject what is evil and corrupt, and make a profoundly positive impact on our culture, we must use God's methods and maintain scriptural priorities.

God is not calling us to wage a culture war that would seek to transform our countries into "Christian nations." To devote all, or even most, of our time, energy, money, and strategy to putting a façade of morality on the world or over our governmental and political institutions is to badly misunderstand our roles as Christians in a spiritually lost world.

God has above all else called the church to bring sinful people to salvation through Jesus Christ. Even as the apostle Paul described his mission to unbelievers, so it is the primary task of all Christians to reach out to the lost "to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me [Christ]" (Acts 26:18; cf. Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). If we do not evangelize the lost and make disciples of new converts, nothing else we do for people—no matter how beneficial it seems—is of any eternal consequence. Whether a person is an atheist or a theist, a criminal or a model citizen, sexually promiscuous and perverse or strictly moral and virtuous, a greedy materialist or a gracious philanthropist—if he does not have a saving relationship to Christ, he is going to hell. It makes no difference if an unsaved person is for or against abortion, a political liberal or a conservative, a prostitute or a police officer, he will spend eternity apart from God unless he repents and believes the gospel.

When the church takes a stance that emphasizes political activism and social moralizing, it always diverts energy and resources away from evangelization. Such an antagonistic position toward the established secular culture invariably leads believers to feel hostile not only to unsaved government leaders with whom they disagree, but also antagonistic toward the unsaved residents of that culture—neighbors and fellow citizens they ought to love, pray for, and share

the gospel with. To me it is unthinkable that we become enemies of the very people we seek to win to Christ, our potential brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Author John Seel pens words that apply in principle to Christians everywhere and summarize well the believer's perspective on political involvement:

A politicized faith not only blurs our priorities, but weakens our loyalties. Our primary citizenship is not on earth but in heaven. ... Though few evangelicals would deny this truth in theory, the language of our spiritual citizenship frequently gets wrapped in the red, white and blue. Rather than acting as resident aliens of a heavenly kingdom, too often we sound [and act] like resident apologists for a Christian America. ... Unless we reject the false reliance on the illusion of Christian America, evangelicalism will continue to distort the gospel and thwart a genuine biblical identity.....

American evangelicalism is now covered by layers and layers of historically shaped attitudes that obscure our original biblical core. (*The Evangelical Pulpit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 106-7)

By means of faithful preaching and godly living, believers are to be the conscience of whatever nation they reside in. You can confront the culture not with the political and social activism of man's wisdom, but with the spiritual power of God's Word. Using temporal methods to promote legislative and judicial change, and resorting to external efforts of lobbying and intimidation to achieve some sort of "Christian morality" in society is not our calling—and has no eternal value. Only the gospel rescues sinners from sin, death, and hell.