

Politics and Religion

Nearly everywhere you go, it seems, you hear statements like, “You can’t legislate morality,” or “Christians shouldn’t try to legislate their morality.” Like dandelions, they pop up out of nowhere and sow seeds of deception in the fertile, secular soil of our society.

Unfortunately, I have also heard these cliches repeated in many churches. Even Christians seem confused about how they are to communicate a biblical view of issues to a secular world.

Part of the confusion stems from blurring the distinctions between law and human behavior. When a person says, “You can’t legislate morality,” he or she might mean simply that you can’t make people good through legislation. In that instance, Christians can agree.

The law (whether biblical law or civil law) does not by itself transform human behavior. The apostle Paul makes that clear in his epistle to the Romans. English jurists for the last few centuries have also agreed that the function of the law is not to make humans good but to control criminal behavior.

But if you understand the question in its normal formulation, then Christians can and should legislate morality. At the more basic level, law and public policy is an attempt to legislate morality. The more relevant question is not whether we should legislate morality but what kind of morality we should legislate.

Much of the confusion stems from our country’s misunderstanding of democratic pluralism. Our founders wisely established a country that protected individual personal beliefs with constitutional guarantees of speech, assembly, and religion. But undergirding this pluralism was a legal foundation that presupposed a Judeo-Christian system of ethics.

Thus, in the area of personal ethics, people are free to think and believe anything they want. Moreover, they are free to practice a high degree of ethical pluralism in their personal life. To use a common phrase, they are free “to do their own thing.” But that doesn’t imply total ethical anarchy. Not everyone can “do his own thing” in every arena of life, so government must set some limits to human behavior.

This is the domain of social ethics. To use an oft-repeated phrase, “a person’s right to freely swing his or her arms, stops at the end of your nose.” When one person’s actions begin to affect another person, we have moved from personal ethics to social ethics and often have to place some limits on human behavior.

Government is to bear the sword (Rom. 13:4) and thus must legislate some minimum level of morality when there is a threat to life, liberty, or property. An arsonist is not free “to do his own thing” nor is a rapist or a murderer. At that point, government must step in to protect the rights of citizens.

Perhaps the most visible clash between different perceptions of ethics can be seen in the abortion controversy. Pro-choice groups generally see the abortion issue as an area of personal morality. On the other hand, pro-life advocates respond that the fetus is human life, so something else is involved besides just personal choice. Thus, government should protect the life of the unborn child.

Promoting Christian Values

Christians must consider how to communicate biblical morality effectively to a secular culture. Here

are a few principles.

First, we must interpret Scripture properly. Too often, Christians have passed off their sociological preferences (on issues like abortion or homosexual behavior) instead of doing proper biblical exegesis. The result has often been *a priori* conclusions buttressed with improper proof-texting.

In areas where the Bible clearly speaks, we should exercise our prophetic voice as we seek to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). In other areas, concessions should be allowed.

The apostle Paul recognized that the first priority of Christians is to preach the gospel. He refused to allow various distinctions to hamper his effectiveness and tried to “become all things to all men” that he might save some (1 Cor. 9:22). Christians must stand firm for biblical truth, yet also recognize the greater need for the unsaved person to hear a loving presentation of the gospel.

Second, Christians should carefully develop biblical principles which can be applied to contemporary social and medical issues. Christians often jump immediately from biblical passages into political and social programs. They wrongly neglect the important intermediate step of applying biblical principles within a particular social and cultural situation.

In recent years, there has been a dangerous tendency for certain Christians to identify their message with a particular political party or philosophy of government. Christians must be more careful to articulate the connection between biblical principles and specific programs. While Christians may agree about the goal, they may reasonably disagree about which program might best achieve that goal. In these non-moral areas, a spirit of freedom may be necessary.

Third, Christians should articulate the moral teachings of Scripture in ways that are meaningful in a pluralistic society. Philosophical principles like the “right to life” or “the dangers of promiscuity” can be appealed to as part of common grace. Scientific, social, legal, and ethical considerations can be useful in arguing for biblical principles in a secular culture.

Christians can argue in a public arena against abortion on the basis of scientific and legal evidence. Medical advances in embryology and fetology show that human life exists in the womb. A legal analysis of the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision shows the justices violated a standard principle of jurisprudence. The burden of proof is placed on the life-taker and the benefit of the doubt is given to the life-saver. Since the Court never determined when life begins, they erroneously ruled that states could not prohibit first trimester abortions.

Likewise, Christians can argue against the depravity of homosexuality on the basis of the dangers of sexual promiscuity in an age of AIDS. Epidemiological and sociological data can provide a convincing case for public health measures that will prevent the spread of AIDS.

This does not mean we should sublimate the biblical message. But our effectiveness in the public arena will be improved if we elaborate the scientific, social, legal, and ethical aspects of a particular issue instead of trying to articulate our case on Scripture alone.

In conclusion, Christians should develop effective ways to communicate biblical morality to our secular culture. Law and public policy should be based upon biblical morality which results from an accurate interpretation of Scripture and a careful application to society.

Role of Religion in Politics

What should be the role of religion in politics? A number of years ago I participated in a panel representing a Baskin-Robbins variety of religious opinion that considered this controversial

question. The scenario we were to consider was that of “a candidate running for office who comes from the far religious right and uses his religious beliefs as a major part of his political credentials.”

I was intrigued by the addition of the adjective “far,” especially since the moderator, Hodding Carter, served in the administration of an evangelical president. Jimmy Carter—hardly considered a member of the “far” religious right—became the only Democrat to win a presidential election in the last twenty years because he successfully used his “born-again” beliefs to influence voters.

Moreover, how plausible is the scenario? Pat Robertson withdrew from the 1988 presidential primaries with few delegates. Jerry Falwell has withdrawn from his previous active role in the Moral Majority. And many surveys suggest that American voters still have some misgivings about mixing politics and evangelical Christianity.

The Williamsburg Charter Survey on Religion and Public Life (taken a number of years ago) showed that while only 8 percent of Americans would refuse to vote for a Roman Catholic on the basis of religion, 13 percent would refuse to vote for a “born-again Baptist” and 21 percent wouldn’t vote for a candidate who has been a minister of a church.

Nevertheless, two ministerial candidates did campaign for the presidency in 1988, perhaps hoping that voters who shared their convictions would overlook their lack of experience in public office. Although they both achieved some minor success, the delegate counts confirmed American voters’ wariness of ministers in public office.

Is it possible too much is being made of the religious factor in elections? While it may make great copy for ACLU or PAW fund raising letters warning of “religious ayatollahs” taking over the government, the reality is that the American electorate may be looking more for competence than convictions.

Two notable evangelicals in Congress in the last few years have been Senator Bill Armstrong and Senator Mark Hatfield. Both come from states geographically removed from the Bible Belt, suggesting that they are elected for more than just their religious convictions.

Certainly the evangelical vote has played a factor in past presidential elections. Jimmy Carter won one of the closest elections in American history because of the “born-again” vote and lost it four years later when many of those voters abandoned him for Ronald Reagan. American voters, perhaps because of the Carter experience, seem less inclined to use religious conviction as the litmus test for public office.

If anything, the Williamsburg Charter Survey seems to show that Americans are applying an inverse religious test. The Constitution prohibits a religious test for public office, but the voters may be reversing that idea and really wanting someone who doesn’t take his faith too seriously.

This is indeed unfortunate because religious ideals should undergird this republic. Yet voters seem willing to settle for a president with nothing more than a lukewarm Christian faith.

Thirty years ago, President Eisenhower declared a national day of prayer and then used the day to go golfing. Later revelations from the Reagan White House suggest the president spent more time consulting the stars than praying to the Creator of those stars. Perhaps nothing has changed. If so, then the hypothetical scenario we were asked to consider on the panel will remain hypothetical.

Pluralism in this Country

This country was founded on the idea of a tempered pluralism that allowed for a civil debate among

the citizens. Although we take this pluralism for granted, it is instructive to remember how radical this concept was in the history of political philosophy. In the past, secular political philosophers argued that a legitimate state could not tolerate much freedom and diversity. After all, how would the dictator or monarch rule effectively if that much dissent were allowed?

Foundational to this idea is the belief that government should not be the final arbiter of truth. It should not be an institution that settles by force the truthfulness of an issue. This is why the framers of the Constitution specifically provided freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion. Government should not have power to impose its version of truth by force.

Christians should be strong supporters of this idea. We believe that God governs this world by His grace. His final judgment awaits, and we should not take His judgment into our hands. Overly anxious Christians often want to pull up the tares in the field instead of allowing the wheat and the tares to grow together.

Tyranny results when an authoritarian leader comes along who wants to impose his brand of truth on others. It is wrong for secularists to try to remove religion from the public sphere, and it is equally wrong for religious leaders to impose religion on others by force. In either case the political arena becomes a religious battleground.

What we should develop is a civil debate where Christians are allowed to promote biblical morality without imposing it. This has been made more difficult by the current anti-religious climate in our society.

Richard John Neuhaus talks of the “naked public square,” where religious values have been stripped from the public arenas of discourse. In this case, the tempered pluralism of the framers has been replaced by a radical pluralism which assumes that all values are relative. Public moral judgments, therefore, seem out of place. In recent years, we have seen a great deal of prejudice against such pronouncements simply because they are rooted in biblical morality.

So, the “naked public square,” where religious values are excluded, is wrong. Likewise, the “sacred public square,” which seeks to impose religious values, is also wrong. What Christians should be arguing for is a “civil public square” that allows an open, civil debate to take place. In such an arena, controversial ideas can be discussed and debated in a civil manner.

This form of pluralism must be more than just window dressing. Christians and non-Christians alike must be dedicated to maintaining a pluralism that allows vigorous interchange and debate. Unfortunately, there is some indication that many in our society see pluralism as merely a means to an end. English historian E. R. Norman believed that “pluralism is a name society gives itself when it is in the process of changing from one orthodoxy to another.”

If this is what secularists really want, then pluralism is in trouble. When religion is excluded in the name of pluralism, then pluralism no longer exists.

Biblical Principles

Christians should first develop a comprehensive program of social involvement. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is not a temporary, issue-oriented crusade. Christians are not merely to march against injustice and then cease their involvement. They have an on-going responsibility to build positive alternatives to existing evil.

Second, social and political involvement based upon biblical absolutes must be realistic. We should

not fall prey to utopian political philosophies but squarely face the sinful nature of man and the important place government has in God's creation. Because of a general cynicism about the role of government, Christians are often guilty of neglecting their role in society.

As Christians we must remember that although the times are evil, God's common grace restrains sin. Even though perfect justice cannot be achieved until Christ returns, we are nevertheless responsible for doing what we can. If we co-labor with God, we can have a measure of success in achieving a better society.

Third, Christians should focus attention not only on individual change but on societal change. Changing lives is fundamental but not completely sufficient to change society. Revival must lead to reformation. Christians should not merely be content with Christians thinking biblically about the issues of life. They must also be acting biblically and building institutions with a Christian framework. A Christian world view implies a Christian world order.

Christian obedience goes beyond calling for spiritual renewal. We have often failed to ask the question, What do we do if hearts are not changed? Because government is ordained of God, we need to consider ways to legitimately use governmental power. Christians have a high stake in making sure government acts justly and makes decisions that provide maximum freedom for the furtherance of the gospel.

In situations in which governmental redress is not available, civil disobedience becomes an option. When such conditions exist, Christians might have to suffer the consequences as did their first-century counterparts in a hostile Roman culture.

We are to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29) when civil government and civil law violate God's commands and law. Christians therefore were correct when they hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Hitler's Germany did not have the right to take innocent life or persecute the Jews.

Finally, the major focus of social involvement should be through the local church. Social action in the church is best called *social service*, since it attempts to move from the theoretical area of social ethics to the practical level of serving others in need. While evangelicals are to be commended for giving to the poor and others faced with adversity, our duty does not stop there. A much neglected area is personal involvement with people who need help.

The local church is the best place to begin to meet many social needs of a society. In the New Testament, the local church was the training ground for social involvement and provided a context by which the needy were shown compassion. Christians, therefore, should begin their outreach to society from the church and work together to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.