

Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese answers a common question of a Christian view of politics and government: How would a biblical worldview inform us on being in the world of politics but not of it? "Dr. T" models a critical yet engaged distance in assessing the beliefs of Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.

Christian Government

During each new election season Christians ask, "What is a biblical view of government?" Does it teach Theocracy, Communism or maybe Democracy? The Old Testament does teach theocracy, which means the Priests ruled the people through the Mosaic Law. Later in its history Israel became a monarchy by its own decision under King Saul—a choice God was not very pleased with, but He accommodated Israel's demand (I Samuel 8).

The New Testament does not adopt theocracy because it applied only to the chosen nation of Israel; it gives no endorsement of any one form of government, but instead offers the Church a special role as a prophetic voice engaging any and all forms of government. There is no such thing as *Christian (civil) Government*, only *Christians in government*. Instead of creating a new system, the Church brings biblical principles to bear on all governments.^[1] This position allows the Church everywhere to be actively involved in its particular political situation through maintaining its witness to Christ.

Israel and the Church

The role of Israel and the Church are often conflated in Christian minds, especially during the political season. Many still believe that Christians should create laws or vote for candidates that will bring us closer to a "Christian America" ideal. This is a revised version of an old notion of Christendom that joins church and state going back to the Constantinian Church which espoused a Christian Roman Empire. Some of our Puritan forebears held that America was the New Jerusalem. America as a nation replaces Israel as the people of God and the Church becomes a political entity like Israel.

In approaching politics, it is essential that we keep in mind the differences between Israel and the Church. Israel was a national people with its own civil law and identity. It was closed to the rest of the world and had to live in strict separation from the Gentile nations. Their call was to isolation, to establish Theocracy and to drive the Gentiles out from Canaan, a goal they were never really successful at accomplishing (Judges 1: 19, 28, 32). Israel was one civil nation among many civil nations and it was usually at war with those neighbors.

Israel foreshadowed the Church. They prepared the world for the coming of the messiah and the Church. Their history and law serves as an example or model of instruction for the Church (Romans 15: 4 and I Corinthians 10: 6), but the Church is not obligated to adopt Israel's civil identity because this would violate her broader mission to reach all people (Acts 1: 8). The Church is called to political and cultural engagement with all systems and all people, not isolation. When the Church becomes a political or cultural system, it loses its message of grace through faith and reverts back to Law (Galatians 3). Faith cannot be legislated.

The Church could not be true to its universal calling if it was a political power like Israel because this turns its

mission into one of war and conquest, such as the Crusades in the middle ages, rather than conversion through faith (John 18: 36). Islam is a good example of a religion that does follow Israel's kind of political identity in the establishment of Sharia Law. The Church is not one nation, but one people among many nations, cultures and systems. It cannot afford to be a nation with its own civil law and government, which sets itself against other governments and other people. When the Church establishes itself as a political power it compromises its prophetic mission and loses its unique contribution to politics. Instead the Church has a more complex role in any system it finds itself in.

In The World but Not of It

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Jesus prayed that his followers will not be taken out of the world, but that they be sent into the world and kept from its evil (John 17: 15). The Apostle Paul argued similarly that we must maintain our association with people in the world, even immoral people—and not to isolate ourselves (I Corinthians 5: 9, 10). He says, “the form of this world is passing away,” an awareness that creates in us an “undistracted devotion to the Lord” in every area of life. We are to participate in the world, but not get too attached to it. We “should be as those who buy, but do not possess...and those who make use of the world as though they did not make full use of it” (I Corinthians 7: 31-35). We bring awareness of the temporal nature of the world.

The Prophetic Role of the Church

The Apostle Peter states that the Church is a unique people of God, “a people for God's own possession” or a “peculiar people” as the King James Version says, called to proclaim the truth. He exhorts Christians to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness...” and to keep our “behavior

excellent" in the world. (I Peter 2: 9- 12).

The Church lives differently in society by setting an example. As God's special people, the Church is called to witness His truth to the world, including to the government structures. This means that the Church works within various systems, something Paul accomplished effectively in his use of Roman Citizenship and with his appeal to Caesar (Matthew 17: 24-27; I Peter 2: 13-20, Romans 13: 1-7, Acts 16: 35-39; 23: 11; 24 and 25).

In preaching the Word the Church acts as prophet to "the world," the societal structures arrayed against God (Romans 12: 2). This includes all political systems under satanic control (Luke 4: 5-8). A prophet brings a timely and meaningful message of relevance. He has insight to speak to a particular situation. For example when Nathan the prophet spoke the Word of the Lord to King David in confronting David's sin of murder he held him accountable for his behavior (2 Samuel 12: 1-15). The Bible teaches us through this example that the political powers are not absolute. *The king is not God*, a radical statement in ancient times.

Prophets call people back to obedience to God. They were the conscience of the nation. Likewise, the Church acts as prophet through active participation, but with an attitude of critical distance.

Critical Distance

Critical distance does not mean isolation or withdrawal where we go live in the woods and wait for the world to die. It means involvement in everything the world offers, especially politics, but with an approach from a *different perspective*, an eternal perspective. Criticism means Christians work from within society and offer a perpetual challenge to the status quo that reflects a Christian conscience; it never arrives at a final form of society in which it is completely comfortable.

This is an important, albeit an uncomfortable, role to play. It can never endorse any system uncritically because this acceptance negates the fact of the inherent evil of the world and announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Church then is swallowed in the world's identity. This reflects what happened in the Christian Roman Empire and in the Christian America ideal, which is often the ideology behind so called "Christian Conservative" political activism. The United States is identified with Christendom as "a Christian country." Criticism in this sense does not simply entail a good word of advice, but active participation guided by an ethic of love (Matthew 5: 43-48; Romans 13: 8-10). This may manifest in working to repeal an unjust law or establishing a new law that meets certain needs in society, but especially the needs of the weakest members of society, who cannot speak for themselves and are powerless. This reflects a Christian conscience of concern for others, rather than just ourselves. Laws must protect those who need the most protection, rather than empower those who make it. Law is the enforcement of the personal morality of its makers (hence, when people say you "cannot legislate morality," that's an absurdity).

Perhaps the greatest example in recent times of the Church's prophetic voice in American politics was in bringing attention to the cause of the unborn in its efforts to stem the tide of abortion, both in its political activism and through nonpolitical work of advocating adoption as an alternative to abortion. Another good example was the American Civil Rights Movement when it spoke against racism and the unjust social structures in American society.

Just as the Old Testament prophets held the king accountable to the Law of God—*the king is not God*—so the Church reminds the world of its limitations, that its systems have flaws and must allow for improvement. *The world is not yet in the kingdom of God.* There is no perfect system any more than there

are perfect people. There is always room for growth and change. Only in the kingdom of God does change and growth cease because it is no longer necessary in the final state of perfection (Revelation 21).

Democracy offers a better system for Christians than Communism or Theocracy because it reflects an ideal of freedom, the basis of love and faith. But it has flaws, such as the tyranny of the majority (de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*). Nor is democracy “the end of history,” a popular idea after the Cold War, arguing that democracy has emerged from the ideological struggles of history to become the greatest and final system. Nothing will succeed it. The post-Cold War world has reached the end of history, or the end of struggle and the end of change. [\[2\]](#)

There is every reason to consider that democracy will perish from the earth if its people grow complacent and do not defend it or practice it and any idea to suggest that it cannot perish on the basis of a metaphysical law of history will only contribute to that complacency. There is never a final system of society in which the Church refuses to adjure and criticize toward change because that entity would then be equal to the kingdom of God.

Romney vs. Obama

We apply the same standard of *critical distance* in voting for our favorite candidate or party. Voting is often the choice of the lesser of two evils. This popular maxim expresses the same idea of critical distance as long as we understand that the choice of the lesser evil is still a far less than perfect choice. Critical distance includes self-criticism.

Most people choose a candidate who comes closest to their own position and then largely ignore their differences. Critical distance will not dismiss the differences because through it we hold ourselves accountable by seeing our blind spots and

recognizing potential problems. We show humility and responsibility through admitting the limits of our own position and choices.

Many contrasts exist between Governor Romney and President Obama, not least of which is personal religious belief. Ironically, Evangelical Christians largely ignore this issue, though each candidate's views represent a serious difference as compared to biblical Christianity. In the past, Evangelicals have stressed the importance of personal belief. After all, most people hold to a particular political and economic view because of their religious views, not despite them.

President Obama reflects Liberation Theology in his belief that government must act as champion of the people. This should be done, in his view, by elevating the condition of the disenfranchised into the middle class, mainly through economic redistribution, but also through religious pluralism, toleration of minorities, woman's rights and gay rights. Liberation Theology adapts Christianity to a socialist political agenda that uses government as a tool to free people from oppressive social structures such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy. There is a strong emphasis on social justice, radical equality and group sin, meaning the structure of a society is to blame for its problems rather than the individual, who is a victim.

Governor Romney styles himself as a stalwart defender of free enterprise informed by Mormon beliefs that reflect traditional American values of family, faith, and work ethic. Government must protect those values from its own encroachment in order to maintain the middle class. Although Mormonism is radically different from Evangelical Christianity in its doctrinal formulation, it accepts similar social values, which stress personal responsibility and initiative.

Although, no election can be reduced to one issue or to

personal beliefs, these considerations' potential impact cannot be disregarded. Behind Obama stands a Liberation Christianity that has and will continue to benefit from his re-election. A Romney victory will lift the cultural status of Mormons in America from outsiders to the mainstream. In the past, the election to the Presidency of a member from a group struggling for recognition in mainstream America received a stamp of approval at the highest level of political office that gave them increased cultural recognition and cache . The election of one of your own to the Presidency is a sign of arrival. President Kennedy's election to office brought American mainstream acceptance to Roman Catholics, just as President Carter brought it to Evangelicals and President Obama brought the full acceptance of African-Americans, so a "President Romney" will create a greater cultural awareness and acceptance of Mormons.

The contemporary political logic of the American system says put your criticism out there during the primaries, but put it away once a candidate for your party is chosen. You're supposed to fall in line behind him or her. Christians often follow the same logic and refuse to entertain criticism of our chosen candidate because it suggests a preference for the opposing side. The lack of criticism generally continues through our chosen candidate's administration. Problems and faults are usually blamed on the other side and Christians become as politically polarized as the parties. This surrenders any critical distance gained and the Church loses its unique contribution for political advantage. It's like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25: 27-34). We can in good conscience choose a candidate that we do not completely agree with *if* we retain our criticism of him. We should participate, yet with reservations.

Critical distance can tolerate voting for someone of a different faith if he is a better choice than the alternative, but it cannot live with softening its differences in order to

win an election or modifying its convictions for political gain. Evangelicals are faced with a difficult choice, not between Liberation Theology or Mormonism, but whether or not they will retain their doctrinal critique and rejection of Mormonism, when those differences threaten its economic and political interests.

Recently, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association dropped Mormonism from its cult list. And the language of “values” between Christians and Mormons grows indistinguishable, so that now “Christian values” are somehow equated with “Mormon values” and a vote for a Mormon is a vote for “biblical values.” The greatest “value” for Christians is the deity of Jesus Christ, which most Mormons do not accept. Evangelicals and Mormons share a similar political agenda in preserving the free enterprise system and in protecting the traditional American family ideal, which they both consider preferable to the creeping socialism of the Obama administration. There is no need to drop the hard and fast differences between Christianity and Mormonism; Christians can work with anyone if we effectively practice *critical distance* at the same time.

So, it comes down to retaining our prophetic role as members of Christ’s Body—not as much who we vote for, but why and how.

Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, “A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action,” *Mind Games Survival Course Manual* (Plano, Texas: Probe Ministries, 1998), www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Politics/Gov1.htm

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). The idea of the end of history here is really a Hegelian version of Christian America, just as the idea of progress, the foundation of Fukuyama’s argument, reflects a secularization of the older notion of the idea of providence that founded “Christian America.” Both identify

either Christendom or the Western World with the kingdom of God, the final form of society. One is traditionally religious in its conception and the other secular.

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