

THE CHRISTIAN AND POLITICS

By Pastor Justin Erickson

Last week, Christian Coalition President and 700 Club Host Pat Robertson sent shockwaves through the mainstream media when he called for the overthrow of the passionately anti-American, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, even suggesting such means as assassination. This is what he said on August 22, 2005:

“There was a popular coup that overthrew him [Chavez]. And what did the United States State Department do about it? Virtually nothing. And as a result, within about 48 hours that coup was broken; Chavez was back in power, but we had a chance to move in. He has destroyed the Venezuelan economy, and he's going to make that a launching pad for communist infiltration and Muslim extremism all over the continent.

You know, I don't know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we're trying to assassinate him, I think that we really ought to go ahead and do it. It's a whole lot cheaper than starting a war. And I don't think any oil shipments will stop. But this man is a terrific danger and the United ... This is in our sphere of influence, so we can't let this happen. We have the Monroe Doctrine, we have other doctrines that we have announced. And without question, this is a dangerous enemy to our south, controlling a huge pool of oil, that could hurt us very badly. We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don't need another \$200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator. It's a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with.

Many conservative leaders were quick to distance themselves from Robertson after his highly controversial remarks, which he later denied as having been taken out of context:

“I didn't say ‘assassination.’ I said our special forces should ‘take him out.’ And ‘take him out’ can be a number of things, including kidnapping; there are a number of ways to take out a dictator from power besides killing him. I was misinterpreted by the AP [Associated Press], but that happens all the time.”

And then he half-way retracted, followed by the moral and ethical frustration he felt over the dilemma behind wars and tyrants:

“Is it right to call for assassination? No, and I apologize for that statement. I spoke in frustration that we should accommodate the man who thinks the U.S. is out to kill him.”

Robertson's comments were the top story for days and received international attention with extreme reaction from both conservatives and liberals. This situation however, drew the American news spotlight onto the ever intensifying issue of conservative political activism, mainly by Christians. Feature articles on last week's news blogs centered on the strong movement among evangelicals to storm the steps of Washington DC and claim America for Jesus.

This turn of events has caused me some concern, which I hope to share in a call for discernment, lest somehow we become distracted from our main focus as a church. It is an issue we must think through as believers, especially in our church, which is in a swing state that determined the last Presidential election. Should we fund major para-church organizations that emerge to organize and defeat liberal political agendas in our country? Should we forward those chain emails that arrive in our inboxes asking for signatures on petitions? What should we do with the books that are being written to fuel a political fire to establish America as a Christian nation? Are there any dangers with politicians courting evangelicals?

Let me first say that I am highly patriotic and politically conservative. I love the fact that we have a Christian President, whom I admire more than I could say. I applaud those Christians in positions of leadership within our government who are making a difference, especially because I believe they are in one of the most significant and strategic places in the world, and where the strategies of Satan might be most evident. I love and applaud our military. I think their cause is right and just – even Biblical.

However, from what I have seen recently in the past couple of years among certain evangelicals reveals a trend that, as in the case of the Robertson situation, reveals an imbalanced emphasis on politics that we must avoid. Therefore, I hope to offer some principles from Scripture to govern our thinking and sharpen our discernment:

1. **The Scripture provides many wonderful examples of believers who were involved in politics or political associations.** These examples prove that a Christian can and should have a role in society and government, to the glory of God. Such notables include:
 - Joseph in Egypt as prince (**Genesis 47-50**)
 - Daniel in Babylon (**Daniel 1-6**)
 - The centurion’s servant (**Matthew 8:5-13**)
 - Zacchaeus the tax collector (**Luke 19:1-10**)
 - Cornelius the centurion (**Acts 10**)
 - When the Roman soldiers came to John the Baptist and asked what repentance for them required, he did not tell them to give up their role, but to faithfully and judiciously fulfill their role (**Luke 3:14**).
2. **The majority of the Scriptures were written in a time when the people of God were oppressed under a tyrannical and wicked government, and are *never* commanded to take over.** The one case where the people of God were called to “take over” was the mandate to claim and cleanse the Promised Land in obedience to a specific command given to the nation of Israel. In America, though we are founded on principles of Judeo-Christian ethic, we must not forget that we do not have any covenant status as a nation before God, with any promises or privileges, like those given to the nation Israel. Many of those who have sought to justify certain political actions cite Scriptures specifically given to the nation of Israel as proof-texts, but which are forced out of their context.

Furthermore, when pagan, godless rulers exercised authority over God’s people, the exhortation to the people of God is as follows:

Romans 13:1-6, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. "

Moreover, Jesus spoke of the nature of His domain as Lord when He said in **John 18:36**, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting...”** In other words, Pilate wanted to know if the charges trumped up against Jesus were true, and whether he as a civil official had to worry about a religious uprising taking over. Jesus explained such activity would be expected if His kingdom were of this world; but as it is, His kingdom would not come this way. To seek to overturn the world’s governments is not Jesus’ agenda for us; it is His agenda when He comes again (**Revelation 19:11-19**).

3. **The moralism that politics achieves has many deadly dangers, which we must avoid.** While moral restraint is good and beneficial to any society, being one responsibility of civil government (**1 Peter 2:13-15**), creating morality among people merely suppresses human depravity. In other words, the only moral change that can happen will be external, without the Gospel. Therefore, if our aim as believers is to legislate morality, while that does have a place, we must take care lest we try to cause unbelievers to act like Christians without the one thing, or Person, they need in order to do that – Christ. Unbelievers cannot do this (**Romans 8:7-8**). This task is impossible:

Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin Or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good Who are accustomed to doing evil.”

Jeremiah 17:9-10, “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds.”

Matthew 7:18, “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.”

Romans 3:10-12, “There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.”

If we do not emphasize the Gospel properly, we will have a big problem when we attempt to evangelize the people of society, because they will not see their need for a Savior, being so morally upright, from a human vantage point. Imagine the contradiction that occurs in the mind of the unsaved if we work hard to conform them to a moral standard, only to declare that they are not moral before God. We have taught them that morality is about outward conformity, not internal purity. That is not only inconsistent, but it sends mixed signals that make evangelism and the hearts of men harder. This is a danger.

Furthermore, the only example we have in Scripture of moralism, as opposed to true spirituality, is that of the Pharisees. Of them Jesus spoke in:

Matthew 5:20, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 23:27-28, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Contrast that with the kind of heart change that man requires, found only in the Gospel:

Romans 6:17, “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed.”

Romans 6:21-23, “Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

In other words, if a person has not experienced true, inward, spiritual transformation and become a new creature in Christ, morality is not a hope and he or she will still die in his or her sins. To speak frankly, a moral America will still go to hell without the Gospel.

4. **Only the Gospel can transform hearts and bring lasting change, not politics.** The only true and permanent change that can ever come to our society is from the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself, one converted sinner at a time. That alone is the source of power. Consider the priority of the Gospel in Paul’s writings:

Romans 1:16-17, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’ ”

1 Corinthians 2:1-8, “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

The Gospel is where the true battle for men’s hearts and morality lies:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”

Additionally, consider the logic of Scripture. *The reason that the wrath of God is on a sinful society is not because it is immoral. The reason that a society is immoral is because the wrath of God is on it.* In other words, a society that has lost its moral restraint **IS** the judgment of God.

Romans 1:18-31, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored

among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; "

Notice Paul’s rationale – those who have rejected the truth of God, which inwardly they know to be correct, are receiving the wrath of God (notice the present tense of the phrase, **“the wrath of God is revealed”**, meaning that it is currently beginning to pour). They have abandoned God, and God is abandoning them, by giving them over to what their hearts desire. And notice that the very things they are given over to do are the very same things legislation is written to address: homosexuality, lesbianism (same sex marriages), lewd sexual behavior, funding for the research of cures for sexually transmitted diseases, murder, disobedience to parents, greed (casinos), wickedness, evil, envy (which leads to stealing, adulterous affairs, etc.), deceit (perjury), strife (domestic abuse) etc. *Therefore, what our society needs most is to bring men and women out from under the wrath of God, through the Gospel. That is the only cure for the wickedness of men.*

Now, please consider one of the gravest dangers we must guard against in political activism: how we partner with other people who may be *moral*, but *unbelievers* with like political convictions, who do not share our religious convictions. This is a serious threat to our cause, because we will potentially face one of two compromises: 1) partner with unbelievers in the spread of the Gospel (which alone can transform a person) and violate **2 Corinthians 6:14-17**; or 2) compromise the Gospel.

Many Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahai’s, Jews, etc. share our moral concern for society, but do not have the same solution. When we enter into the political arena, we must be extremely cautious, because we either have to define and agree on what men and women truly need (the Gospel), or we have to set the Gospel aside in order to work together.

The best of scenarios might go like this: suppose you stood in an abortion picket line out of righteous love for your unborn neighbor, next to a Catholic on one side and a Mormon on the other. As you fulfilled a civil and Biblical responsibility, you would need great grace from God to make sure that you didn’t communicate to either of them that you were cooperating together to do God’s work in Jesus’ name. Rather, you could fulfill your civil duty alongside them, while turning to the event into an opportunity to share the Gospel. Your fellow activist will have a hard time believing he needs the Gospel because

he is doing something to promote morality out of religious conviction, but therein the battle rages.

5. **To focus on politics over the Gospel is to become distracted from the mission of the church.** The mission of the church is to make disciples (**Matthew 29:18-20**). To engage in politics is a needed and vital part of any society’s health. To ignore it would be to misunderstand God’s wonderful design for government (**Romans 13:1-6**). But we have to understand that Jesus left us with one responsibility – to engage a hostile world with the Gospel, so that men and women come under His Lordship as Sovereign King, before the day comes when every knee bows to Him (**Philippians 2:9-11**). Therefore any role we have in politics must not obscure, confuse, eclipse, or detract from that mission. We must keep things in balance.
6. **If our system of government allows us to participate in decision-making, we should avail ourselves of the opportunity, but in a way that is submissive and quiet.** Scripture says it like this:

1 Timothy 2:1-4, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

1 Peter 2:13-17, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.”

So then, if the civil authorities established by God, allow us the privileges to be involved in the institution of government, we should take advantage of that opportunity. But according to the Word, we are to do it in a way that is submissive and quiet, tranquil and honoring, prayerful and gracious. The opposite is rebellious and boisterous, agitated and disrespectful, fleshly and harsh. Our submission to governing authorities is submission to God (**Romans 13:1-6**), unless they ask us to sin (**Acts 5:29**).

CONCLUSION

In the end, I think the person who got it right was the politically involved but not absorbed, Evangelist Billy Graham. His simplicity and integrity have won him a place of significant influence in our country and even our world. Though we might not agree with all of his methodologies and some of his alliances, his observations of what we need as a church and as a world are noteworthy.

On one occasion he said, “The great hope we have as a nation is not what laws are passed, or who govern us or what great things we do as a people. Our hope is in the power of God working through the hearts of people. That’s where our hope is in this country. That’s where our hope is in life.” He is absolutely right! The greatest need we have as a nation, and the greatest hope that we can offer it is the power of God working in the hearts of people.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

John MacArthur, *Can God Bless America* (Nashville: Word Publishing), 2002.

John MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You* (Nashville: Word Publishing), 2000.