

Practically Political

Can Christians save the mess that is today's American political scene? Better yet, should we? Charisma asked two pastors to offer their unique viewpoints on the role politics plays in believers' lives.

The Church as a Prophetic Voice

by Harry R. Jackson Jr.

I am often asked why I spend so much time engaging in the moral battles of our day. My critics see my work outside the pulpit as crass political pandering or fleshly power grabs.

They often are joined by a host of folks in our culture who want to renounce the religious right. These peace-loving believers have not been able to identify with angry, self-appointed spokespersons who have historically dominated the media.

Despite the excesses of some of our forerunners, the church dare not withdraw in monklike fashion from the public square.

Christians are called to perform a "prophetic" role in modern-day culture. What does that mean? In both the Old Testament and New Testament, prophets were charged by God to deliver important messages to their contemporaries. They served as God's conscience to those they were sent to.

In addition to speaking their messages, these prophets often demonstrated them to the culture in which they lived. They were like walking, talking billboards placed at key intersections in their nation to relay God's messages.

It wasn't always a comfortable lifestyle. Isaiah went around naked. John the Baptist wore the most unusual clothes.

I'm not calling for bizarre or spooky behavior, but I am asking Christians to recognize that we all have prophetic assignments. We have been called to speak and live out the truths of God—right where we live and work.

We cannot sit by idly and watch the nation roll over a cliff. We must cry out a warning and model the Lord's priorities.

The best scriptural example of the folly of noninvolvement is seen in the book of Ezekiel. The majority of the prophets of Ezekiel's day did not get involved in the major social problems of the nation. The Lord figuratively referred to Israel's cultural problems in Ezekiel's day as "breaches in the wall."

Ezekiel 13:4-5 reveals the problem: "O Israel, your prophets are like foxes in the deserts. You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the Lord" (NKJV).

According to these verses, the spiritual protection of Jerusalem was not the responsibility of armies, presidents or governments alone. The Lord made it clear that prophetic voices, then and now, must "stand in the gap" before Him to protect their land.

In our book *Personal Faith, Public Policy*, Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, and I list the five things the church must do correctly to fulfill its prophetic role in our day:

1. Live right. The church needs to meet the standard of Scripture before it attempts to talk to the culture. We must have strong, individual, personal testimonies of victory in the areas in which we want to offer help to others. It isn't enough just to "speak" the way—we must lead the way.

2. Do right. The Christian community has a responsibility to *serve* the nation before it can credibly *confront* the

nation. We must become not just advocates for the poor, the homeless, the widows and those who are being treated unjustly, but we must also serve their needs personally and corporately.

3. Move right. We must make sure that we consider how the nation views what we do. Romans 14:16 makes an amazing declaration that applies to our service to the community. It says, "Do not let your good be spoken of as evil." Moving right means developing campaigns to overcome the stereotypes that our opposition uses to divide us.

4. Pray right. We must learn how to pray *and* forgive our enemies. The greatest example of this in the last century was the way Martin Luther King Jr. and others demonstrating for civil rights marched boldly into situations in which state troopers, police officers with dogs and angry mobs all were arrayed against them. If they had allowed bitterness to take hold in their lives, they never would have been used by God to bring the conviction of the Holy Spirit on all of America.

5. Speak right. We must succeed in speaking the truth in love. Our words to the culture must not be judgmental. They must be helpful and redemptive. This means our hearts must be filled with the desire to reach the lost and heal both the hearts of individuals and the collective soul of the nation.

Finally, let me speak to you in the spirit of Dr. King, who often drew upon either the Constitution or the Bible as an objective framework from which he took action. The Bible reminds us that we are to pray for those who are in government (see 1 Tim. 2:1-2). In addition, we must remember that the Constitution begins with the phrase, "We the people."

The ultimate authority in the U.S. is not a king or monarchy. The collective will of the people is supposed to be the final bastion of power. Therefore, Christians will have to answer to God for the decisions made by our secular society because

self-identified believers are still the numeric majority of the U.S. In this democratic context our right to vote is a sacred trust.

If we all voted with focused, strategic unity we could turn America around in just a few years. Are you ready to make history?

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The Church as an Alternative Society

By Brian Zahnd

Election season is upon us again. Let the madness begin! And in the current climate of polarized partisanship in which everything is politicized, there will be plenty of madness, anger, vitriol and a general lack of civility.

Sadly, millions of confessed followers of Christ will be swept up in this as they give vent to their anger, convinced that God is on their side. Their justification is, "We've got to take America back for God." Presumably this is to be done by the dubious means of acrimonious politics. But I'm going to ask us to take a step back and think a little more biblically. Does the church have a mandate to change the world through political means? Isn't our first task to actually be God's alternative society?

I'm afraid we've made a grave mistake concerning our mission. We're not so much tasked with "changing the world" as with being a faithful expression of the kingdom of God through following Jesus and living the Sermon on the Mount. But this mistake of confusing our mission is nothing new. It's the mistake the church has been making for 17 centuries.

Before Roman Emperor Constantine, the church was content to simply be the church—to be a city set on a hill living the alternative lifestyle that is the Jesus way. But after Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion, the church embarked on a project of running the world as a sidekick to Caesar. This project has not turned out well.

The problem with our "change the world" rhetoric is that it is too often a grasp for power and a quest for dominance that is antithetical to the way Jesus calls His disciples to live. Jesus specifically told us that we are not to emulate the way of Caesar in grasping for power and dominance but to instead choose the counterintuitive way of humility, service and sacrificial love (see Mark 10:35-45).

We should never forget that Jesus ushered in His kingdom by refusing to oppose Caesar on his terms. Thus Jesus submitted to the injustice of a state-sponsored execution by telling Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were ... My servants would fight" (John 18:36, NKJV).

The kingdom of God comes not by the sword of political power but by the cross of self-sacrificing love. We cannot fight for the kingdom of Christ in the same way the nations of the world fight. For the moment we do, we are no longer the kingdom of Christ but the kingdom of the world. A politicized mind imagines power only as political domination, but a Spirit-renewed mind imagines the more excellent way of love.

Admittedly, we live in a world where much is wrong. But what

is most wrong with the world is not our politics or who lives in the White House. It is the nature of the human heart. Greed, lust and pride in the heart are the epicenter of all that is wrong with society.

As followers of Jesus we are not called to campaign for a political solution but to demonstrate an authentic Christian alternative. This is how we are salt and light. We are to model what it means to be Christ-like in a Caesar-like world.

Instead of wanting to imitate Christ with His cross, however, we want to imitate Caesar with his sword. This approach always leads the church away from being a witness for the gospel. That the primary public witness of the American church for the last 30 years has been a political one is an absolute tragedy. The amount of hope some Christians place in politics is nothing short of astonishing!

Jesus commissioned 12 apostles, not 12 politicians. He didn't call His disciples to campaign for a new Caesar but to proclaim a new birth and demonstrate a new kingdom. Do we really think if we just get enough elephants or donkeys in Washington we will achieve righteousness?

We're not called to follow an elephant or a donkey, we're called to follow a Lamb. (And that doesn't mean we should form a Lamb political party!) This means we should first model the way of the Lamb and then make disciples of both elephants and donkeys in the way of the Lamb—the way of extending radical forgiveness and considering others in self-sacrificing love.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has correctly observed, "The church doesn't have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy." Instead of trying to force change on the wider society through legislation, we are to exemplify the alternative—the kingdom of God—*by actually living it!*

We make a terrible mistake when we tell the wider society something like: "We have the truth, so let us run society by

setting the rules.” No! Instead we should simply *be* the alternative we seek to produce. We should *be* a righteous and just society.

Christians have a complicated relationship with the state because we are a people who carry dual citizenship. But our first allegiance is to the kingdom of Christ. So whereas we are free to participate in the civic and political process of our respective nations, we must do so as those who exhibit a primary allegiance to the Jesus way. This means treating everyone—even enemies—with kindness, love and respect.

As Christians our first obligation is not to seek to transform the state by using Caesar’s means of dominance, but to simply be a faithful church and thus a living example of God’s alternative society.

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