

SHAPING THE NATION:

Ten Words on How Christians Can Influence Politics

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What should Christians do to be heard in the public square? I present my own suggestions in the form of a Decalogue.

First, Christians should pray

For Christians prayer is all-powerful. Accordingly, all Christian endeavour in the political realm should be guided and aided by prayer.

Second, Christians have a right – and a duty - to be heard in the public square.

The Christian voice is as valid as any other in the public square. In a democracy, all citizens have the right – indeed, the responsibility – to voice their thoughts in the polity. Given the underlying Christian basis for much of western civilisation, Christians have a duty to engage in public debate. Those who argue that Christians – and people of religious belief generally – should confine themselves to religious *fora* conveniently ignore the genesis of our civilisation.

Western civilisation flourished because of Judeo-Christian values. This is not to say that other values have not been important, but it is to remind ourselves that Christianity was not at the periphery of our progress: it was at the core.

It is my belief that a society cannot long survive without a shared or common morality which includes a conviction in its own destiny and worth. History teaches us that where a society is at war with itself about its values, it loses the vitality necessary to prosper. It also is weakened against outside enemies, which, in this global age, may have an internal presence. Christianity can survive without western democracy. It is doubtful that western democracy can prosper in the absence of the Christian values that underpin it.

Third, Christians should adopt a principled approach to public affairs

Christianity professes a set of values about how we should live together. Love of neighbour, charity, respect, toleration, and justice are central to Christianity. Christians should respect those values in any political campaign in which they are engaged, otherwise their actions betray the very civilisation they seek to foster. From time-to-time, we hear of threats being made to politicians as part of a campaign. This is unacceptable, not just because it is un-Christian, but it is usually counter-productive.

This does not imply lack of criticism, plain-speaking, or muted responses to topical issues. It does mean that policies rather than personalities should be the focus of attention. Moreover, Christians should remind public officials that their role in public life is to empower others, not to accumulate and exercise power over them. Wherever possible, their actions should seek to enhance the dignity

of the individual and his or her liberty. Of necessity, empowering the individual limits government, without forgetting that the protection of the poor and the vulnerable are pivotal political challenges.

Fourth, Christians should affirm public office as a noble calling.

This is not to say that public officials always act nobly. But it is to recognise that public office is a service to the community which involves stewardship of the commonwealth of the nation. I have the sense on occasions that some Christians regard politics as unclean or unsavoury, and therefore to be shunned: Better to proclaim the Christian message with purity than engage in the untidy, often chaotic world of politics.

Many of us have probably seen the movie, *Amazing Grace*, which was released to mark the bicentenary of the 1807 vote in the House of Commons to abolish the slave trade. It depicts the struggle for over 20 years by the abolitionists, led by William Wilberforce, to overcome this evil.

After being elected to Parliament in his early 20s, Wilberforce was recruited by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and became their Parliamentary leader. The film depicts a tension in the mind of Wilberforce between serving his religious cause and serving the nation through Parliament. Without Wilberforce's Parliamentary leadership, the slave trade would have continued.

Good leadership acknowledges that virtue is of intrinsic interest to secular society, without which we are incapable of enjoying the cohesion required for stable and civilised communities.

Fifth, Christians should understand the political system

If Christians wish to influence political outcomes, rather than be prophetic voices, they must understand how the political system works. I never cease to be amazed, for example, by the number of organisations that make submissions in the weeks and days before the annual Budget, when, in fact, the process commences the previous year and is largely finalised a month before the accounts are delivered.

We must remember that the destiny of any politician in a democracy is bound-up with the interests of his or her constituents. Christians who wish their voice to be heard need to raise their interests with politicians. The most effective way of doing this is in person, yet few do so. In order of impact, a visit to a Member of Parliament far outweighs a letter. It involves a personal commitment of time and energy which is recognised. Equally, a hand-written letter has more impact than an email, which can be easily generated and distributed widely.

A regular visit to an MP builds a rapport, even if the MP doesn't (initially) share your views. It forces him or her to listen, and to explain his or her own position. If a few people visit, it reinforces the impression that many more people share the same concerns.

It also builds a persistent presence which is effective. The most effective lobbyists, in my experience, are those who make an effort to visit me regularly. What they are doing is building a relationship and educating me about their cause. These visits are usually short – often no more than 10 minutes – but they leave me with a page or two summarising their views about ongoing interests.

In my experience of almost two decades in public life, very few Christians have visited me, and very few congregations or churches have lobbied me about issues. If your voice is not being raised directly with your MP, somebody else's is.

Members of Parliament are human beings and appreciate the same affirmation and encouragement that other people do. In my experience, few people ever express their gratitude when a Member of Parliament has voted for a measure they for which they have lobbied about.

Sixth, Christians should know what they want to achieve

Politics is about actions. Indeed, it is the fate of public officials to be judged by outcomes, not intentions. Christians need to know what they want to achieve. This may sound obvious, but I have observed over the years that many groups have only vague ideas of what they want, without precise goals. You need to know what "success" looks like.

Knowing what you want to achieve involves knowing what you wish to defend, and what you wish to change. It involves looking ahead to the issues which might arise, and putting in place strategies to address them.

Seventh, Christians need to be well-researched and relevant to be persuasive

There is an old saying that good politics involves good policy. Sir Robert Menzies was quoted as saying that if you get the policy right, the politics will generally follow. We can all think of examples of poor policy resulting in poor politics.

This means that Christians need to be engaged in the policy debates. However, they need to employ the appropriate expertise. Religious leaders can appeal to moral and ethical reasons for certain behaviours and courses of action. That is their expertise. However, if they wish to be engaged in the policy detail, they need to use the expertise of the particular subject matter. A particular rate of taxation, for example, or a level of interest rates, or a model of welfare, most often involves economic arguments. If the issue is economic, then economic discussion needs to be engaged. Otherwise, the Christian voice will be ignored. This is not to say that economic discussion should not be informed by Christian principles.

Eighth, Christians should use effective political measures

On almost every day that the National Parliament is sitting, there is a rally on the lawns at the front of the building. Sometimes there is more than one. Yet most Members of Parliament would not know that the rallies were happening. If the purpose of the rally is to build camaraderie amongst the supporters for a cause, it might be successful. If it is to influence public policy, most are futile.

An effective political campaign needs to use appropriate language, arguments and measures. What will move votes is the ultimate question. The answer is quite simple: a significantly large number of constituents making their views known directly to their Members of Parliament. This means that Christians need to be organised if they are to have an impact.

They also need to be involved in the political system. In a western democracy like Australia, that means joining a political party. I often hear Christians complain to me about the policy or direction of political parties, but when I inquire as to whether they are a member of a party, most answer 'no'.

Political parties are more or less democratic entities. In the end, their policies and their candidates for office reflect the views of their members. Yet less than 100,000 Australians are members of a political party.

Ninth, Christians need to be collaborative

There is an old expression in politics that 'disunity is death'. It applies equally to political campaigns. Disunity involves the loss of a common goal. Often it is motivated by self-interest and power. It will always be exploited by opponents. It undermines morale, blunts a message, and creates a sense of confusion. Confidence is sapped amongst supporters and those you wish to persuade to your cause. Disunity is one of the most powerful corrosives in the polity.

Conversely, collaboration can be affirming and effective. Building coalitions of supporters is a central task in most political campaigns. It doesn't mean that real differences, in belief for example, should be put aside. They need to be recognised and named in any effective coalition-building exercise. But common causes can be developed from open, frank and trusting conversations.

In this regard, I use the US example of the Richard John Neuhaus, who died in January 2009. Neuhaus was influential in debates about religion and public life in all their forms, particularly with respect to policy formulation on major issues such as stem-cell research and same-sex marriage. Initiatives along these lines, of which there are some in Australia, can play a similar role. They need to be created, expanded and supported.

Tenth, Christians need to persevere

I mentioned William Wilberforce earlier. His battle to abolish the slave trade lasted a political lifetime with many setbacks along the way. An effective voice requires perseverance. As Winston Churchill famously said: "Never, ever, ever, ever give up".

Because politics is the art of the possible, it often involves incremental change. Indeed, the greatest force in politics is inertia. For some, incremental change can be problematic. In bioethics, some people have argued that an improvement to what they regard as bad legislation is unethical, as the harm, although diminished, still exists. Not only do I disagree with this attitude, it is usually self-defeating, as change usually is only achieved incrementally.

If Christians wish to achieve outcomes in the public square, they also need to support those public officials who stand-up for Christian values. In a world of political spin, it is easy to claim Christian values. The test of whether a person supports Christian principles is how they vote.

Politicians who have had the courage to voice the concerns of Christians in the public square require practical support, such as joining a political party and/or assisting with campaigns, to take a topical example. Most candidates for office struggle to find enough people to do simple things like hand out 'How to vote' cards on polling day. Practical assistance for the politicians you support is affirming, encouraging and necessary.

Conclusion

Christians need to have a voice in the public square if Christian values are to be reflected in the policies of elected governments. This requires a clear vision, a plan of action, commitment, organisation, perseverance, and collaboration. It requires engagement with the political system. Most of all, it requires a belief that our way of life and our society has been enhanced by Christianity and will continue to be so in the future.

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