

The Truth About Westminster

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In the nineteenth century . . . Christians saw slavery abolished, the hours and conditions of work for women and children transformed, employment exchanges introduced, orphanages and leper colonies built and staffed. We can and we must do it again!' Clive Calver (1949-)

'Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.' J.K. Galbraith (1908-)

Is one party more Christian than another? That was the emotive question raised by Tony Blair in a newspaper article which described how his own Christian faith had led him to the Labour Party. Howls of protest erupted from Conservative MPs, horrified at the suggestion that their party was any less Christian than his. Some went further. Harry wrote in the local press that his own faith had made him a strong Conservative supporter.

The reality is that a large number of MPs would say that they are Christians, and many go to church regularly. The total number could exceed eighty named individuals, according to informal reports from those with long experience of Westminster. 245 Examples include Alistair Burt, Brian Mawhinney, Simon Hughes, David Alton, David Porter, Robert Key and

Tony Blair. While a number of MPs may be wary about being labelled, there are also problems of definition. Christian faith stretches across all party lines and the Parliamentary Prayer Group is an active source of encouragement and support.

Each of these Parliamentarians would no doubt vigorously defend the reasons why their choice of party is consistent with the faith that they have, but does this mean that any attempt to define 'Christian' political values is doomed to failure? Are there any general principles to which most could agree? And is it 'safe' for an MP to risk being labelled 'Christian' - and then 'hypocrite' when it is realised that he or she is all too human. Christians fail too, and the stronger the moral position taken, the more the sense of outrage and condemnation of any fall. The public is often lacking in mercy.

There are other more fundamental questions such as: Is it right for Christians to be involved in politics

at all? In the last century there was a very active involvement in politics, with well-known figures William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury as well as many others. Wilberforce campaigned for the abolition of slavery for almost the entire length of his political life. They left a legacy which is still felt in our society today. However most church historians would agree that over the following decades there was a gradual withdrawal by some parts of the church from the political process, particularly among Evangelicals.

At the same time, the mandate for social action was also subdued among Evangelicals, who became suspicious of what they labelled 'the social gospel'. As they saw it, the more liberal wing of the church had lost a clear message and was instead focusing on good works. As a reaction, Evangelicals placed most of their energy into evangelism. There is more balance today, with a growing social conscience, but still only an elementary political awareness. Political action, by such groups as CARE, Evangelical Alliance, the Jubilee Centre, Life and SPUC, has often been based on single-issue campaigning on matters such as euthanasia, abortion, divorce law reform or Sunday trading. This is hardly a substitute for a broad manifesto. While support from some parts of the church has been huge, other believers have felt alienated by the virulence of the campaigning. The abortion issue more than any other has tended to polarise the church.

While it is possible that the majority of churchgoers in the country may well advocate tighter laws regarding late abortion, there are a variety of views about the exact status and value of - say - a fertilised egg, or a pre-implantation ball of cells, or of an eight-week fetus. Many Catholics and Evangelicals may share a strictly pro-life position, but others may not. There is however a far greater degree of consensus over euthanasia, which perhaps helps explain why efforts to legalise it have failed. On many campaigning issues there have been differences in approach between different groups, and sometimes, perhaps, conflicts of interest, where a position taken on one issue could affect other areas.

A Christian view of government (Return to Index)

There are many faiths represented in multi-cultural Britain, and I have no doubt that followers of these will have perspectives to bring to help Parliament recover a reputation for integrity.

However, the major religion in Britain is still Christianity So what is a Christian view of government?

Jesus himself taught his disciples to respect authority even if, as was generally perceived then, it was corrupt or morally deficient or lacking in spiritual understanding. The disciples were told to pay taxes and to 'render unto Caesar what is due to Caesar and unto God what is due to God'. 246 While he challenged religious hypocrisy and corruption, and was very outspoken, he did nothing to suggest that his disciples should ignore the government of the day.

Jesus was prepared however to commit an act of angry violence against property as part of a wider protest against corruption, when he overturned the tables of the moneylenders in the Temple courts. He was also prepared to act aggressively towards individuals, threatening them with violence, for the same reason. We are told that he made a whip out of some cords and began threatening them with it in such a way that they fled from the area. 247

Jesus was abrasive and 'rude' in the language he used against religious leaders (Pharisees), and used collective language so strong that in today's culture it would verge on the libellous if printed in reference to prominent national religious leaders.

'You have neglected the more important matters of the law justice, mercy and faithfulness ... Blind guides ... hypocrites ... full of greed and self-indulgence . . . blind ... snakes, brood of vipers ... how will you escape being condemned ... I am sending you prophets and wise men ... some of them you will kill, others crucify ... you make [people] twice as much sons of hell as you are.' This is extremely inflammatory language to say the least, bordering on accusing certain people of being murderous as well as being morally corrupt.

Scarcely a generation later, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, suffering under a tyrannical dictatorship and severely persecuted, that authority in all its forms was God given and to be respected. 'It is necessary to submit to the authorities,' and later, 'If you owe taxes, pay taxes. 248 However, Peter committed an act of civil disobedience when he refused a court order to stop preaching in public places, and was arrested for it. 249 Even afterwards he again defied a court ban. 250

The picture then is one of great respect for government as it God-ordained expression of his authority, part of the structure of a healthy society, and of a healthy church, with disobedience as a last resort in extreme circumstances where a 'higher authority' is being violated (abuse of the Temple area, ban on preaching).

Participation in secular government (Return to Index)

Then there is the question of whether Christians should get involved in a governmental process that denies or ignores the truths of the Christian faith. Are Christians called to speak in from outside the system, or to step in?

The book of Genesis shows how Joseph was sold into slavery, landed up in prison but found

favour with the national leader (Pharaoh). He was offered a post effectively as Prime Minister of Egypt at a time of imminent national crisis. Over a number of years he took control of agricultural production and distribution, and prevented widespread deaths from famine. 251

Daniel likewise was talent-spotted from a Jewish community which was in exile after being herded in large numbers from their own country to one around 1,000 miles away. He was promoted and gained great influence at governmental level. 252

Nehemiah was also someone who was drawn into the most senior levels of the government machine, from a community in exile serving a regime which had an entirely different faith and worldview. This influence was later used by him to obtain a massive government grant to rebuild the wrecked City of Jerusalem. There was no suggestion that all the money should have come from the Jewish community themselves. He raised funds aggressively, presented his case effectively to the highest authority in the land, and was given huge state backing as well as guarantees of safe conduct. 253

There is therefore great biblical precedent for the deepest involvement in national government, for the good of the people. Doors opened in a remarkable way and the opportunities to exercise power in a benevolent way were grasped.

Jesus himself taught that his followers were to be salt and light, salting a whole dish, lighting up the whole area. 254 He also used a picture of yeast: a small amount having a transforming effect on the whole loaf. 255 This implies that he expected that his disciples would, as they grew in number, not only preach a message of good news, with some responding, but would bring a wider impact to the whole of society.

Jesus also challenged injustice, spoke of mercy and compassion, and said that we were to love those around us as much as we cared about ourselves. 256 Since many injustices and other problems in society can be made easier or worse by good or bad government, it seems inevitable that as soon as a Christian community thinks seriously about society as a whole, it is confronted by the need to get involved in exercising power through involvement in government.

Christian policies - can they be defined? (Return to Index)

However, once a Christian is in Parliament, or in office, there are other urgent questions. The complexities of modern life are so great, and change so rapidly, that a policy hammered out today may become irrelevant tomorrow.

At the most basic level governments raise money through taxes or borrowing, and spend money on public services or on reallocation of wealth through benefits and rebates of various kinds. The areas of controversy are therefore:

1. How taxes are raised.
2. How much is borrowed.

3. How the 'cake' is sliced in expenditure between Departments

4. How efficiency and effectiveness are maintained.

The fiercest and most bitter of arguments can be over these four things. However, it can be hard to justify one approach over another in terms of Christian values. In almost every case the debate is not over an absolute, but over subtle differences.

For example, what proportion of the nation's wealth should be taxed and spent by government? What proportion should be income tax or other taxes? What should be the level of 'social taxes' such as a tax on fuel, petrol or alcohol? How much should a government raise through borrowing, risking pressure on exchange rates and interest rate changes, affecting the whole economy?

If more is spent on education and health than can be raised in taxes or borrowing, what government funded jobs in other areas are axed in order to do it? The most vexing questions of all are related to the economy: do we grow a large, low tax economy or a small high tax economy? What will be the effect of - say - a one point cut in interest rates, or of cutting back on road building to pay more teachers?

Efficiency and effectiveness are values that all would support, but how do we achieve them? There are many ways of running a state health service. There are many ways of managing local schools, or of providing other public services. At the end of the day, while we can define certain principles which are Christian, it is not easy to define detailed policy from the Bible or from the historic teachings of the church. The reality is that in an imperfect world every option can have problems attached to it, and there may be no 'ideal' solution that is practical in the foreseeable future.

One may argue that such things as extremes of wealth and poverty are incompatible with Christian values. But how do you define poverty? Until recently, poverty was defined as having an income less than a quarter of the national average, but that definition means that exactly the same level of poverty will always be with us, however affluent or poor our society becomes.

Should poverty be defined in cross-national terms? Is my neighbour a peasant farmer in a small tribal community with no running water? To whom is my lot to be compared in the 'need' stakes? The Christian community may be able perhaps to find a greater degree of consensus over issues such as Sunday trading, but even then there is debate and uncertainty.

Christian principles - a guiding factor (Return to Index)

Those in politics face these sorts of issues every day. A secondary position to take is that because it is impossible to write a 'Christian Manifesto' for every aspect of government action, one should rely more on underlying Christian principles, about which most if not all Christians are in agreement. These principles might be such things as respect for the individual, respect for human life, basic human rights, personal responsibility, fairness, justice, compassion, mercy, tolerance of others' views, good stewardship of the earth's resources.

We have already seen a set of principles governing personal conduct in politics, in the previous chapter. These are based very largely on Christian values such as integrity, honesty, loving not only our neighbour but also our enemies 257, judging others as we ourselves would want to be judged 258, caring about others as we would want to be cared for if we were in a similar situation. 259

A Christian party? (Return to Index)

The word 'Christian' is already a part of the political process in Europe, and the Christian Democratic tradition is well established. Formed after the Second World War, it has thrived in many other countries, but has never had much support in Britain until now.

In the UK the word 'Christian' is quite emotive, and conjures up all kinds of images in politics, some of which are very negative in the public mind. The continued sectarian problems in Northern Ireland have not helped.

If a party is labelled as Christian then two dangers could result: first there is a danger that those supporting the party will appear to be wanting to occupy the moral high ground, giving the impression that those in other parties may be less Christian in their politics. Secondly, there is a danger that the Christian faith and the mission of the church will be judged by how party members conduct themselves, and by the policies they espouse. It is all too easy to see the 'Christian' label becoming one of abuse - 'Call yourself Christian? How can you if you agree with that?' In fact the label was not one used by the earliest disciples. They were known as 'believers' 260 and not Christians until later. 261

The same fate following labelling can befall any MP who has a high profile Christian faith, but the pressures on those in a so-called Christian party could be even greater. I am not suggesting that people in politics should hide their faith, but it is likely that a self-confessed Christian party may invite hostile media attention, and may auto-destruct at the first whiff of scandal.

There are other issues too: how do you define the word Christian? Do MPs or all party members have to sign some kind of declaration of faith, or merely assent to a manifesto? Who agrees the manifesto? Who writes the declaration of faith? Are declarations worth the paper they are written on? How can you enforce faith? What happens to those who as part of the pilgrimage of life find that their personal faith is challenged? What happens over issues of personal morality - are these also to become part of some statement of intent? These are all important questions that would have to be addressed. It is quite possible that agreement could only be reached on some of these things by alienating a large number within the Christian community - whether one goes down the 'exclusive' path or within the 'broad stream of sympathisers'.

The Christian Democratic movement in Europe could hardly be said to be enthusiastically Christian and there are no statements of faith as such, yet there is a strong Christian influence which has continued over several decades. But if such a new party were not strongly and unmistakably Christian, what would be the advantage in calling it Christian at all?

While all these issues may seem rather hypothetical in today's two-party system, they could rapidly become very urgent if a referendum on electoral reform voted for proportional representation. At the time of writing, the nearest there is to a Christian political party is the Movement for Christian Democracy, only a few years old yet growing fast with a newspaper whose readership probably exceeds 40,000. But this is a movement supported by members of all political persuasions and is unlikely to turn into a new party.

Practical policies for a Christian party (Return to Index)

The simplest way forward for a new party wishing to be a Christian political influence would be to work through consensus. Otherwise, there is a real danger that such a party would become known for little more than a rag bag of single issues on which 'extreme' positions are taken, say over abortion. It is true that proportional representation does allow for the election of small numbers of people backed by minority views, but it is no substitute for a coherent political framework. The consensus route would mean that on most matters, the policies supported would be those that the majority of the country (and probably also the majority of Christians) would agree over. There would be no embarrassment whatever about appearing to compete with New Labour or the Conservatives for the middle ground. If good government is by the people, for the people, then middle-of-the-road consensus is the only route to it, providing the great majority of voters with what they feel is right.

Such a party would find that there were some positions that seemed more Labour than Conservative, or vice versa. For example, a Christian party would without doubt be strongly pro-family and would place a high value on human life as part of a manifesto, yet would also be strongly in favour of measures to help the disadvantaged, oppressed and marginalised - not forgetting the developing world. In old left-right terms it might appear more right wing in morality and left wing in care and compassion.

A new movement (Return to Index)

In all we have seen throughout this book it has become obvious that radical change is needed, and that a deeper transformation of political life will require a change of hearts rather than a code of practice.

Either those already in the system change their values, or others with different values need to take up the challenge, become involved and bring a secondary transformation. Unless proportional representation is introduced in a way which breaks two-party domination, all those wishing to make an impact will be forced to choose between one of the three main parties, or indeed between just two parties if they aim to play a part in government.

I am convinced that it would not take more than sixty-five new MPs with charisma, energy, unshakeable values, unflinching integrity, courage and vision for the future, to change the whole atmosphere in Westminster.

There is little doubt in my mind that it will happen in time. There is already a momentum under way, with new faces taking their first tentative steps into the political process, ranging from

canvassing on doorsteps, to standing as local councillors or as parliamentary candidates. They will bring a wind of fresh air, as part of a new political movement that sees leadership, authority and power as a means to serve others, a calling to be held with humility rather than arrogance. Such a group could become a focus for longer-term change beyond the millennium, a rallying point around which many others could gather, backed by tens of thousands of supporters across the UK.

I have no doubt that a significant number of these new faces will be people motivated by a strong faith, drawn from every part of the church. It seems likely that an increasing number will be Evangelicals, who now constitute around half of all Protestants and are a rapidly growing religious force in Britain. The Evangelical Alliance already represents around 1.3 million believers, a potent force. Their press office deals with up to seventy calls a week, with 2,849 churches, 57,600 personal members increasing at 10,000 a year, their member societies number over 735, including major care agencies such as TEAR Fund (UK's fifth largest development agency) with a mailing list of 140,000, the Shaftesbury Society and some branches of the Salvation Army. Another evangelical campaigning group, CARE, has a mailing list of 80,000. 262

The evangelical community is growing rapidly as some other parts of the church are in decline. Over 100,000 adults attended a fifteen-week enquirers' course all over the country in 1995 (Alpha). Each year around 70,000 church members spend a week of their annual leave at a national Christian residential conference (Spring Harvest), so vast that it has to be repeated several times at up to three different sites in order to pack everyone in. Churches like Kensington Temple in London have grown from around 500 to 6,000 in the last twelve years, planting 100 new congregations across London in the process. In June 1994 70,000 people took part in a prayer march across London, praying for change in society and in national political life. This London-based initiative started originally with 2,500 people in 1987, but by 1994 it had spawned simultaneous prayer marches by 12 million people in almost 100 other nations. 263

There is a vitality and vibrancy in the evangelical movement which crosses every denominational label and cultural barrier. The Archbishop of Canterbury retains his evangelical persuasion and it is shared by the majority of newly ordained Anglican clergy. The significance of these changes will be long term and should not be underestimated. There is a new sense of confidence as it becomes fashionable in some circles to admit that you too have been 'born again'. At least one Member of Parliament has so indicated in the last couple of years alone. 264

The national Prayer Breakfasts held at Westminster each year are packed to overflowing with around 1,000 national leaders from every walk of life. One organiser told me recently that he thought there were probably in excess of 3,000 people who would like to attend each year. Places have to be rationed, with most people not permitted to be there for two years in succession. Members of both Houses are heavily represented. A similar prayer breakfast in the City attracts several hundred annually. Both these initiatives are relatively recent and heavily influenced by Evangelicals.

These changes in the British church scene need to be placed in the context of a global spiritual awakening. Every month more people are adopting the Christian faith than has ever happened in any month in the whole of recorded history. The world population continues to grow rapidly at around 1.7 per cent per year, yet the global Christian community is already 1.7 billion in size and growing far faster at 2.3 per cent per year, while Evangelicals are growing at 4.5 per cent per year. 265

This movement has been frustrated in Britain by the lack of progress on a number of single-issue campaigns. Surely this frustration will now be channelled into a more established political process.

Clive Calver, Director of the Evangelical Alliance, recently wrote this : 266

"Politics is the art of the possible - God is the author of the impossible. Therefore those two world views will always collide. Rather than disengage from the political world, we need to re-engage with it by carrying the truth within us that God gives, and the hope provides for the possible to be transformed through the life and ministry of his people.

Our world needs to be different, and if we are truly to act as 'salt and light' then we must be active in the political arena. Let us pray for all those who seek to serve God in politics, and also take the opportunities that we are given through our communities and national involvement that God alone can provide.

In the nineteenth century Evangelical Christians saw slavery abolished, the hours and conditions of work for women and children transformed, employment exchanges introduced, orphanages and leper colonies built and staffed. We can and we must do it again!"

If between now and 2010 just one in a hundred of more than 6 million regular churchgoers in Britain (11 per cent of the population) were to become in some way involved in the political process, then 60,000 people would become involved, most for the first time. It would only take one in a thousand of these to end up in Parliament to make a very significant impact in the future.

How can I get involved? (Return to Index)

1. Vote at elections and encourage others to do so.
2. Write to your MP regularly about your concerns, and go and visit if necessary. Your opinion will be listened to and does have an influence.
3. Join a party.
4. Visit Parliament while in session. See what goes on. This is a public right. There is rarely a queue for the Lords but the Commons can be very busy, so contact your MP first and ask for a pass, or go later in the evening.
5. If you are a church-goer, you might like to consider joining a denominational group that has a political wing, or interdenominational groups that have a voice. Examples might include

Evangelical Alliance, the Diocesan Board for Social Action, the Christian Medical Fellowship, CARE, the Jubilee Centre, or the Movement for Christian Democracy. By joining you are adding the weight of your own voice to the organisation, and informing yourself too.

6. Create or support a local constituency group, perhaps working with other groups such as local churches. For example CARE tries to ensure that all candidates in every area are asked to meetings with churchgoers so that they can be asked where they stand on particular issues.

7. Support with practical help and pray for those already in local or national government. Life can be very tough and lonely, especially for spouses and children.

8. Take opportunities to speak about political issues.

9. Get involved in government, whether at the level of such things as school governing bodies, or local government or national government, perhaps by helping as part of an administration or campaign team, or by standing for Parliament - somebody has to, so why not you?

10. Invite an MP to speak in your church or at a celebration event or ecumenical gathering of some kind.

11. Include political issues in your publications.

12. Keep an open attitude to others with different views.

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