

# **The Church and Society**

## ***Purpose***

The purpose of this short document is to provide a quick examination of the role of the Church in today's society. This is because there is much confusion, both within and without evangelical ranks, regarding the relationship of the Church and society, specifically in the realm of politics.

One further note: when we speak of the Church in this short paper, we are speaking of the invisible body of Christ, made up of all true believers. Although the invisible body is made visible in local assemblies of believers, the New Testament teachings regarding the Church are best interpreted as referring to the invisible body. However, what is true of the invisible body is true of the visible, and if the invisible body is to be involved in some action, the same will hold true of the visible body.

## ***The Present Situation***

Anyone who has lived through the late 1970's and 1980's is well aware of the movement called the Moral Majority. For the first time in American Politics, the evangelical church took the charge against the liberal movements in U.S. Politics and in 1980 helped to elect an "evangelical" to the Presidency. The early 1980's were a heyday in conservative evangelical circles, and as a result a significant change occurred in the way most Christians viewed their role in society. Three of these changes are outlined below, although given time many more could be identified.

### **1. The Politicalization of the Church**

The period in question saw the church become more interested in political agendas and politics than in the proclamation of the Gospel. Many liberal churches, already having bought into the social gospel, became even more radical in their view of politics. But beyond this, evangelical churches that would never have considered becoming involved in the political process found themselves drawn into the arena. Somehow the church felt that its mission was to conform society to a Judeo-Christian ethic, and that failure to do so was to run up the white flag and surrender to the forces of evil. Massive letter writing campaigns, spearheaded by the Moral Majority and others, swamped Washington lawmakers. Pat Robertson even stepped down as the head of CBN to become a presidential candidate with the promise that he would "clean up government" if elected. The fallout of all of this was to identify Bible-believing Christians as Republicans, and if not Republicans, they were viewed as just another political action group clamoring for the attention of government.<sup>1</sup> Part of the backlash of this is that in 1992, after the defeat of the Republican party in the national elections, there was a call from within the party to distance itself from the "religious right."

### **2. The Prostitution of the Message**

Because of the politicalization of the church, the message of the Gospel was diluted, replaced by messages aimed at political agendas, and sometimes even omitted for political exigency. Those outside the church, who knew nothing of the claims of Jesus Christ or the message of the Gospel, began to reject Christianity, not because they rejected the Gospel, but because they rejected the political views of the Republicans or the Moral Majority. Messages that used to call men to repentance now berated and condemned politicians and anti-family movements. In fact, Jerry Falwell, the pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, became so embroiled in the political process that he became virtually identified with the "religious right." Whereas he once preached the Gospel, he now preached sermons dealing with the problems in Washington. Unfortunately, Jerry Falwell's

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<sup>1</sup> In February of 1990, Pat Robertson spoke after a prayer breakfast in Washington D.C. to form a "Christian Anti-Defamation League." This organization's goal is to point out the bigotry that our society has against Christians. This sounds more like a call to holy-war than a call to be salt and light in society.

lasting legacy will probably not be that of a preacher of the Gospel, but a political activist that identified evangelical Christianity as just another political action group.

### 3. The Proliferation of Ministries

Thirdly, during this time we saw a proliferation of ministries aimed at political goals rather than kingdom goals. Ministries grew up to deal with removing gay rights from laws, overturning abortion, supporting family issues, and many other “Christian” political goals.<sup>2</sup> Much energy was burned by the Church in the pursuit of political goals which would have been better spent in the proclamation of the Gospel.

## ***The Purpose of the Church***

A good place to start in getting a handle on what the Church should be doing in society is to examine the New Testament teachings on the role of the Church. After all, it is the New Testament that gives the Church its historical charter, and it is here we should go to find out exactly what God intended the Church to be. We will look at five distinct purposes of the Church as found in the New Testament.

### 1. A Preservative

First, the Church is to be a preservative. In Matthew 5:13 Christ tells us that we are the “salt of the earth.” Although there are many possible interpretations of this statement, the best is to understand salt in its preservative aspect. As the Church embodies holy living and purity of life, it acts as a preservative in a decaying society. When, however, the Church loses its distinctiveness by becoming like the world, it will lose its saltiness and be good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of men.

### 2. A Proclaimer of the Gospel

Secondly, the Church is to be the proclaimer of the Gospel. In Matthew 5:14 Christ tells us that we are the “light of the world,” and in Matthew 28:18-20 the Church is given the great commission, which is to “make disciples.” Making disciples is a multi-step process which involves evangelization, baptism, and teaching. This is the reason for the Church’s existence, the proclamation of the Gospel which results in new believers who are then made disciples. Christ’s call was to disciple-making, not cultural transformation.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. A Pillar of the Truth

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul calls the Church, “the pillar and support of the truth.” This refers to the Church’s role in guarding and preserving the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This truth is in distinction to all that is false. The Church is not to accommodate the message to the world, but to boldly proclaim the truth of God to an unbelieving world regardless of the costs. When the Church becomes politicized, it must of necessity compromise. However, the truth of God is not something that we can compromise. Only God’s word is true, everything else is less.

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<sup>2</sup> Some notable organizations are *Concerned Women for America*, *The Moral Majority*, *The Ohio Roundtable*, *Operation Rescue*, and the *Christian Broadcasting Network*.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, on at least one occasion the crowds wanted to make Christ King (John 6:15). Instead of acquiescing to the crowds, Christ slipped away into the mountains since His ministry was not to become a political force, but the Saviour of the world. When confronted by Pilate in John 18:36 Christ said that His kingdom was not of this world. The mere fact that Pilate found no fault in Christ, especially since Christ was accused of insurrection, proves that the early Christian movement was no political threat to the established Roman government.

#### 4. A Pilgrim in the World

Fourthly, the Church is not to consider itself a permanent part of this world.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Peter, the Apostle Peter is writing to a persecuted Church who at that time was suffering under the Roman dictator Nero. In 1 Peter 1:1 he writes to the “strangers scattered,” and in 1 Peter 2:11 he calls us “strangers and pilgrims.” One of the great dangers of the politicalization of the Church is that we lose our focus on Heaven, our eternal home, and substitute this world which is passing away. The Church must see itself as alien to this world. When the Church becomes comfortable in the world, it loses its saltiness and becomes good for nothing.

#### 5. A Place of Instruction

Finally, the Church is to be a place of instruction and edification whereby believers are built up by gifted men for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16). The Church is never to become a forum for political speeches, social action campaigns, petition drives, and launching pads for socio-political action.<sup>5</sup> The Church is a place whereby believers come to be instructed from the Word of God and taught how to apply the Word to their own lives. The message of the Church is spiritual, not political.

### ***The Priorities of the Church***

Having seen the purpose of the Church, what is the Church called to do in society? Again, we look to the New Testament for the answers.

#### 1. Proclaim the Gospel

First, we are called to proclaim the Gospel. In Acts 5:29 Peter and the other Apostles tell the Jewish leaders, “we ought to obey God rather than men.”<sup>6</sup> This was said when they were being told to keep silent and stop preaching the Gospel. It is interesting to note that the early Church did not see its mission as that of conforming society to God’s laws, but rather to call out men for salvation. It was not that of transforming society, but transforming the hearts of men through the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that as the Church has become more politicized, the teachings of Post-Millennialism have made a comeback. Two aspects of this resurgence can be found in Christian Reconstructionism and Dominion Theology. In these theologies, there is no rapture, but only a belief that somehow the Church will take over and transform society and thus usher in the Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> When this happens, the message of the Word of God becomes mixed with politics and thereby becomes diluted and compromised. People then reject the truth of the Word of God, not because they know the truth, but because they reject the political viewpoint with which it is mixed.

<sup>6</sup> Many want to use this verse to justify political action. Some turn to this verse to justify the actions of groups such as *Operation Rescue*, which blatantly violate the law to protest abortion. However, a couple of points need to be made in this regard. First of all, Peter and the Apostles used this verse to reply to those who would have them disobey a direct commandment of Christ, that of proclaiming the Gospel. Christians are not being told today that *they* must have an abortion, only that abortion is legal for others who seek it. In other words, this verse cannot be used to support illegal actions on the part of Christians aimed at protesting anti-biblical activities which are allowed by the government. This verse can only be used to support illegal actions on the part of Christians when they are told to disobey what the Bible teaches. Secondly, there is no justification for protest in this verse. Peter and the Apostles did not protest the demands of the rulers, rather they refused to obey the command to stop preaching the Gospel and readied themselves to pay whatever penalty the rulers assessed. This is evidenced throughout the books of Acts.

<sup>7</sup> After all, what does it matter which side of the abortion or homosexuality debate one is on if they are not a believer? Without Christ, all go to the same place, pro-abortion, anti-abortion, pro-gay rights, and anti-gay rights.

2. Pray for our Leaders

Secondly, in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we are told to pray for our leaders, specifically for their salvation. When Paul wrote these words, the emperor Nero was just beginning his reign of terror. Instead of fomenting rebellion against the Roman authorities and the godlessness of the civic leaders, Paul told Timothy, and us, to pray for our leaders.<sup>8</sup> I wonder what the impact would be on our senators, congressmen, and other leaders if every Christian wrote them a letter and told them that prayer was being offered on their behalf?

3. Pay our Taxes

In Romans 13:6 we are told to pay our taxes. Note that we are not told to pay our taxes as long as we agree with what is being done with them. In Paul's time, the taxes were used for anything but good purposes. However, what the government does with our taxes is not the issue. We are to exhibit to our society that our interests are not focused down here, but up above. We are to model citizens of our society, and one such duty we have is to pay our taxes without complaint. We are to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's (Matthew 22:21).

4. Pay Honor to our Leaders

In Romans 13:1-5 we are told to honor our leaders. In fact, we are told that when we rebel against our leaders, we are rebelling against God himself, for he is the one who put those leaders in power. Nowhere in Scripture is it permissible for a believer to disobey the government unless the government specifically commands the believer to disobey God's word. Then, and only then, do we have the right and responsibility to disobey.

5. Pursue Peace with all Men

Finally, we are to pursue peace with all men (Hebrews 12:14). In 1 Peter 4:15, Peter admonishes his readers to not suffer as a murder, thief, evildoer, or troublesome meddler. The world translated "troublesome meddler" was used in ancient times to refer to political agitators, thorns in the sides of civic leaders. The Church is not to be identified as a political agitator, but as a model of civic submission and obedience to those in authority. When the Church becomes identified as a group of political agitators, the message of the Gospel is diluted, the testimony of the Church is tarnished, and the Word of God is blasphemed because of the way the Church behaves.

### ***Potential Objections***

In spite of what the New Testament says about the mandate and function of the Church, there are those that raise objections when told that the Church is to distance itself from the political arena. Some of these objections are listed below along with a brief response.

1. "But the Church isn't told not to be involved in politics!"

Some would argue that although there is no example of the early Church being involved in the political process, there is also no injunction in the New Testament which prohibits the Church from being involved. This argument appears strong, but after a little investigation is found to fall woefully short of mandating the Church's involvement in political action.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. When we resort to protest and political activism, we are fighting the battle the world's ways, and unfortunately, the world is better at fighting those kinds of battles.

First of all, we need to make the emphatic point that in all of the New Testament the Church is never told to become involved in politics. It would seem that if the Church was supposed to be involved, then somewhere along the way we would have been told. On the other hand, as we have listed above, there is a lot of information as to what the Church is to avoid, and most of what the Church is to avoid can be found in the political arena.

Secondly, if one really thinks about it, the Church is also not forbidden to do a lot of things. However, just because we are not forbidden, does not mean that we can therefore throw Biblical principles to the wind and do whatever we like. The Church is not forbidden to open a travel agency, health spa, or restaurant, but I doubt whether many Christians would see that as a viable ministry of the Church.

Thirdly, whenever the Church becomes embroiled in politics, there must of necessity be some compromise. After all, compromise is the language of politics. However, as we have pointed out above, the Church cannot compromise the truth of the Word of God, and since the Church cannot compromise, it cannot play the political game according to the rules.

Finally, whenever the Church becomes politicized, there is a big danger of the Church's theology being replaced by an ideology, and even more specifically, a particular ideology such as Democratic or Republican.<sup>9</sup> Christianity is not based on a political ideology, it is based on theology, a theology revealed in the Word of God. Whenever theology and ideology are mixed, theology is compromised and ultimately destroyed on the altar of ideology.

2. "But isn't the Church to impact it's culture?"

A second common argument is that the Church is to impact it's culture. At first glance, this sounds like a good idea, however, it is not found among any of the New Testament charges to the Church. The Church is not to impact culture, but to transform lives. Culture is impacted as a result of the transformation of lives, not as a means to transform lives. The notion that the Church has as its mission cultural impact and transformation is foreign to the New Testament.

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<sup>9</sup> Note the election of 1992 in which many said that it was a sin to vote for the Democratic Party as though to vote Republican was a vote for God.

3. “But doesn’t the Christian have a responsibility to be part of the political process?”

Many use this argument to push the Church into the political arena, however, this is an unjustified leap of logic. In our form of government it is the responsibility of every citizen to be an informed voter and to make their voice heard at the ballot box. However, what we have the freedom to do as individuals under our particular form of government does not necessarily translate to the Church. As an individual I have a responsibility to vote according to my conscience, but the Church does not have the responsibility to tell others how to vote. The Church must remain outside of the political process.

4. “But if the Church does not become politically involved it may lose its rights and therefore its ability to proclaim the Gospel. The whole Kingdom program may be in jeopardy!”

On the surface this sounds like a strong argument. However, at its basis is a total denial of the sovereignty of God and the power of the Gospel to change lives. A good example of this is China. For well over fifty years the Chinese government has actively opposed and persecuted Christians. What has been the result of this, a growth in the number of Christians from around 50,000 to 50,000,000. All of the efforts expended by the Chinese government has not slowed the growth of the Church one bit. Christ said that He would build His Church. The growth of the Church does not depend on the political climate or our innovations, but on the sovereign power of God.

5. “But when the government begins to meddle with moral issues it is the responsibility of the Church to go on the offensive.”

As the other objections, this one sounds very good. After all, is not the Church to be salt, and as salt preserve the decay of society by speaking against moral corruption? What about the early church, how did they handle the corruption of their society?

The answer to his objection is both a yes and a no. We do speak against sin and moral evil, but not in such a way so as to appear as political agitators. It is one thing to speak against sin, it is another to organize protests and make oneself a nuisance to society. As we look at the early church, we do not see an organization bent on changing the socio-political climate of the day. As anyone who has studied history knows, the Roman Empire was significantly more decadent than the United States. Abortion, murder, stealing, high taxes, high crime rates, government corruption, and every other moral evil was common in the Roman Empire. However, the early Church avoided political involvement realizing that their mission was different. One will search the New Testament in vain to find one verse to support the notion that the Church is to be a political change-agent in society.

## **Conclusion**

In this short paper we have looked at the purpose and priorities of the Church. It is easy to lose sight of the reason for our existence, as Satan would have us do anything but that to which we are called.

Let us faithfully proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. May we set our affections on things above and not on things on the earth seeing that all these things will be dissolved someday. May we avoid becoming entangled in the political process so that our testimony is tarnished and even ruined.

May we do the King’s business so that when He comes, we will not be ashamed.