

HOW TO VOTE CHRISTIANLY!

by John Dickson

INTRODUCTION: MIXING RELIGION AND POLITICS

“He who says politics and religion do not mix understands neither one” (Mahatma Gandhi).

I am the true ‘swinging voter’. In the six federal elections of my electoral life (beginning July 1987), my personal votes have been evenly split between Labor and Liberals (or Coalition). I can honestly say that as I write I have absolutely no idea whom I’ll vote for on October 9 2004. In what follows, then, I have no hidden agenda whatsoever. The last thing on my mind is to influence which party you vote for.

I do, however, want to insist that Christian faith should inform your vote, whichever way you end up going. While Christianity is not *party* political, it is *political* in the broader sense. At a fundamental level our faith concerns *life in a society*—the word ‘politics’ comes from the Greek πολιτεύω (*politeuo*) meaning *to live as a citizen*. Everyone who is concerned with the life of our wider community (as every Christian must be) is ‘political’ in the best sense of the word.

In essence, what I want to do in this short article is to urge you to apply some of your most basic Christian beliefs to the decision you make in the build up to October 9. Whichever way we vote, surely we will want to vote *Christianly*.

A) HOW NOT TO VOTE

1. Precedent: ‘how we always vote’

Voting patterns are sometimes based on nothing more than family heritage (“We always voted that way.”) or geographical location (“Most people vote that way where I live.”). I want to suggest that voting by personal or demographic precedent is not a thoughtful or Christian vote. Something so important as the way, and by whom, we are governed must be approached with seriousness and due reflection. We must also resist the temptation, born of cynicism, to disengage from our responsibilities as voters and citizens (a particular temptation for me, I must admit).

2. Christian favouritism

Secondly, and perhaps a little controversially, voting for a candidate simply because s/he is a *Christian* is, I believe, morally suspect. The Bible would call this ‘favouritism’, and Romans 2:9 teaches us that God has no favourites (see also Colossians 3:25). Having Christians in parliament is no guarantee—or even indicator—that our nation will be marked by peace, justice, compassion, truth and so on.

By all means, vote for Christian candidates who *also* have a track record for diligence, leadership and justice, but please do not favour men and women simply because they are known as ‘Christians’, attend churches, or frequent prayer breakfasts and the like. Theologically speaking, good government is not the preserve of believers. Romans 13 reminds us that even the pagan governments of Rome are to be thought of as “established by God.” Indeed, secular, non-Christian rulers are described by the apostle Paul as “God’s servants.”

3. Economic prosperity

Thirdly, the main parties and most of the major media make 'economic prosperity' a central election issue. This is a window into the soul of our country. However, an obsession with the 'bottom line' will be seriously questioned by Christians. In a society such as ours, one devoid of deep faith, economic prosperity may be the only measurable form of success. The follower of Christ knows better.

Sure! If you sincerely believe that national prosperity happens also to be the best way to achieve other, more important, benefits for the country, by all means, vote with this in mind. However, please do not simply follow the mantra of our culture in elevating a goal which is given short shrift in the Bible:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:10).

If precedent, favouritism and prosperity are faulty grounds upon which to base our decision come October 9, what factors should inform our political choices?

B) HOW TO VOTE

1. Vote for others

Firstly and, I think, most importantly, a Christian vote is a vote *for others*, not yourself. It is fundamental to the Christian outlook that our lives be devoted to the good of others before ourselves:

Honour one another above yourselves (Rom 12:10).

In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).¹

In the political realm Christians should use what influence they have to contribute to others, to 'consider others better' than themselves. This is a foreign concept in the current climate. Typically, the small business operator decides to vote for the party that promises to do more for small business. Corporations with staffing issues tend to support the party offering the most flexible industrial relations policy. Aspirational voters likewise favour the party they think will best help them to climb the 'ladder of opportunity'. Such voting considerations may not be wrong but they are inadequate for the Christian. Those who follow the One who gave himself up for us all will endeavour to put their private interests aside and seek instead to serve the wider community.

In short, in thinking through the policies of the Government, the Opposition and the minor parties, don't think only of yourself—your family, your industry, your way of life. Think instead of the wider public good. In your vote 'consider others better than yourselves.'

¹ The NIV translation reads "not *only* to your own interests, but *also* to the interests of others" but neither 'only' nor 'also' appear in the original Greek text.

2. Vote for the moral health of the community

Secondly, the moral health of our community provides another motivation for the Christian's vote. Personally, I think the church has no right to seek to impose a Christian way of life on a largely secular society. Having said that, as citizens who believe that a society's health depends (in part) on living as the Creator designed, Christians will want to ponder: which party and/or policies will promote the values applauded by the Creator, the values of justice, harmony (nationally and internationally), sexual restraint, honesty, family and mercy. In this regard, we will want to think through such issues as abortion, stem-cell research, treatment of asylum seekers and so on, and then factor our conclusions into our voting patterns. For the Christian, moral health far exceeds economic prosperity as an honorable goal for society. As the book of Proverbs says:

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people (Proverbs 14:34).²

This moral concern of the Christian will invite the description of us (by some) as 'right-wing' or 'conservative'. The tag is not entirely inaccurate, though in other respects the Christian stance will appear 'left-wing' and 'liberal'. One of the problems with our secular media (and with society at large) is its inability to recognise nuance. It would not know what to do with a 'right-wing liberal' or a 'left-wing conservative'—Jesus, of course, was both, and more.

3. Vote for the poor and weak

Thirdly, in voting for the 'other' the Christian will principally have in mind the poor and powerless. The mandate for this throughout Scripture is overwhelming:

Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.
Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked (Psalm 82:3-4).

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God (Proverbs 14:31).

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27).

Voting for the underprivileged in Australian society has traditionally been seen as a vote for the Labour Party—this is certainly how that party has historically understood itself. Others, however, argue that the most effective way of helping the poor and weak is to increase prosperity at the 'top' of society so that wealth can trickle down, as it were, to those who need it most. This has traditionally been conceived as an endorsement for the conservative side of Australian politics. I don't want to make a judgment about either model. I simply want to insist, in the strongest terms, that a Christian vote is one sincerely motivated by a concern to see the disadvantaged cared for—whether they be the elderly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the unemployed, the homeless, or drought affected farmers. Whatever socio-economic model you believe in, please make sure you vote for those who need your vote more than you do.

² Any number of Old Testament passages directed towards Israel could illustrate the importance of societal moral health. However, we cannot assume that the warnings/blessings of the covenant between God and Israel apply to every nation. The book of Proverbs, however, is a book of general, 'creation' wisdom. This text, in particular, is deliberately general in its outlook.

Government support of existing welfare agencies is a related consideration, as is a government's proposed contributions to overseas aid and development (OAD). I have no idea which party plans to assign more to OAD but I intend to find out, and factor this into my vote.

4. Vote for the gospel

Fourthly, almost by definition, Christians are to live for the salvation of others (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Concern for the advancement of the gospel throughout Australia, therefore, will potentially play a part in a Christian's voting patterns.

Is one party better for the gospel than another? As things stand, I doubt it. Hence, I raise this purely as a 'hypothetical' issue. One day, though, a particular policy may (humanly speaking) work against our freedom to proclaim Christ. For instance, a major (or minor) party may propose banning voluntary Scripture lessons in state schools. This would be a tragedy for hundreds of thousands of school children, and Christians would be right to seek to use their citizenly privilege—the vote—to block this policy. Such an issue would probably not be determinative for the Christian's vote—since, ultimately, the gospel cannot be hindered, and the other factors mentioned above must also be given their due weight—but it would provide a point for consideration. Praise God that we live in a country where neither major political party shows any intention of hindering the message of Christ!

5. Vote prayerfully

Finally, a Christian vote is a prayerful one. The Scriptures urge us to pray for leaders and for governments. And, ultimately, this has to be seen as even more important than our vote.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

The connection between these sentences is subtle and fascinating. God's people are urged to pray for those in power (vv.1-2a) with the result that 'we' (the church) can get on with the business of living peaceful and godly lives (v.2b). Moreover, this outcome somehow works to the pleasure of the God who wants all people to be saved (vv.3-4). In other words, good government enables the church to be godly and God's missionary desires to be fulfilled. This comes about not through the vote—as important as that is—but through prayer.

Conclusion

I am not sure which way these five Christian principles will take me on October 9. We are blessed in Australia knowing that, whatever the outcome, we will almost certainly enjoy stable government for years to come. Nevertheless, since our faith is to influence our entire existence, biblical themes such as those discussed above ought to have their due effect on our political thought and choices. Politics is yet another dimension of life to which the apostle Paul's words are relevant:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is (Romans 12:2).