

# OUT OF THE GHETTO:

## Why Christians need to be politically involved

### INTRODUCTION

This is a plea for Christians to be politically involved in a gracious and effective manner, which makes a real difference. Secularism is having an increasing influence in Europe. There are worrying trends in some countries of restrictions on freedom of expression for people of faith. The European institutions are also under pressure from secularists. A notable example was when some national governments refused to allow the contribution of Christianity to Europe's development to be recognised in the draft Constitutional treaty and in the eventual Treaty of Lisbon. From an historical perspective, this made no sense at all but it effectively communicated a message that European Christians dare not ignore. It says that, from the perspective of key European leaders, our continent is now predominantly secular. At the level of local communities, in many parts of Europe, that is clearly not true. Christian churches remain alive and active and new ones are coming to life. The same is also true of other faith communities, especially the Muslims. However, at the levels of the nation state and the European Union, amongst politicians and policy makers, journalists and broadcasters, Christian presence and influence is usually weak or even non-existent.

This essay argues that this is not how it should be for believers who take the Bible seriously. Of course, the Bible is not a political manifesto but what it teaches about human responsibility and the transformational influence Christians should seek to have in society, calls us to work to reverse the direction in which Europe is moving. The Bible tells us that believers all have a dual citizenship: we are citizens of heaven and we are citizens of the nation in which we live, which also includes a duty to the European Union if our nation is a member state. So, if Europe is rejecting the Gospel, it is the duty of its Christian citizens to act to persuade our continent to think again. We should be working not only to remind the European institutions of the benefits that Christianity has brought to Europe in the past, but also to demonstrate what Christians wish to contribute to the continent's future.

We all agree that proclaiming the Gospel and leading Europeans to faith in Jesus Christ is the most important way to do that but this paper argues that it is not the only thing we can do to reverse the drift. Evangelism brings *individuals* to a saving faith but on its own, it will not reverse the secular drift. We have also to act on our faith and seek to influence the laws and policies that shape our societies. That is why so much of the first five books of the Bible are concerned with law and how God's people were to behave towards one another.

Please prayerfully study what follows and consider how we Christians could reverse the drift to the secularisation of our nations and continent by being politically

involved to influence the choices and decisions made by our governments and policy makers

## **WHY CHRISTIANS NEED TO BE POLITICALLY INVOLVED**

### **1. THE IMPACT OF SECULARISATION**

During the passage of the 1998 Human Rights Bill through the British Parliament, churches campaigned for the freedom to appoint only practising Christians to teaching appointments in church schools. Whilst this seemed a reasonable requirement to them, a number of MPs could not see the point and felt that it constituted a potential diminution of someone's human rights. In Holland, an atheist took the Salvation Army to court for refusing to interview him for a teaching post in one of their Bible Colleges. Both incidents illustrate the impact of secularisation on societies whose cultures were previously shaped by Christian values.

Secularisation has been driven by many forces, economic, social and political as well as anti-Christian ideas. However, one factor, which is frequently overlooked, is the detachment of Christians from active involvement in politics and the media. Politics and the media are two of the key engine rooms of social change in a society. The lack of a strong Christian presence and leadership in them, in Britain and many other European societies, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has helped to bring about the marginalisation of Christian influence in the public arena.

In biblical language, this came about because of the lack of 'Christian salt and light'. Jesus used the salt and light metaphors in the Sermon on the Mount<sup>1</sup> to explain the sort of influence he expected his disciples to have in society. Salt was a preservative, a disinfectant, gave flavour and may have been used as a fertiliser. John Stott, the British evangelist and writer, has highlighted the practical implications of these metaphors<sup>2</sup>.

First, Christians should be socially and politically involved, penetrating society like salt rubbed into meat to retard decay, in the times before refrigerators... Salt that stays in the saltcellar has no impact; neither do Christians who live in a spiritual ghetto.

Second, Jesus assumes that we can make a difference through our involvement. Salt does slow down decay. It does not prevent it forever; nor can Christians comprehensively defeat evil by our own efforts. Only Christ will do that but this is not a reason for doing nothing. The old saying that *all it takes for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing* remains valid.

Third, Christians need to be different from the world to make a difference in it. Biblical history is a continuing account of how God calls people to be holy, that is different from the world in order to be effective agents for change. Furthermore, this distinctiveness has to be maintained. The salt, which loses its saltiness, loses its impact, something also demonstrated in biblical history by the likes of King Solomon.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:13-16

<sup>2</sup> In "The Message of the Sermon on the Mount" (in the Bible Speaks Today series) IVP

European examples of Christian salt and light at work include Jan Amos Comenius, the last Bishop of Moravia. He was the founder of modern pedagogy, and was driven by the desire to change the way children were taught so that they would come to believe in the truth. He believed that intellectual, spiritual and emotional development are interconnected and advocated the formal education of women, something that was unheard of in his day. His educational thought was influential across Northern Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Our continent needs to be influenced by the likes of Comenius today so that secular thinking, that wishes to eliminate religious education from the curriculum, is not allowed to dominate our children's education.

The Norwegian, Hans Hauge, is another example worthy of celebration. After a dramatic encounter with God, he travelled his country preaching the Gospel and at the same time spreading news of the latest agricultural methods, setting up Christian mills, mines and factories and encouraging Christians to enter politics and business. Norway was a poor Swedish colony at this time (18<sup>th</sup> century) and Hauge sought to relate God's word to all of life and taught, "We should neither idolise the world nor despise it". His mission was not without cost, however, for he was imprisoned several times and his health was damaged as a result.

The leader of the cooperative movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, is yet another example of Christian salt and light. After an agricultural crisis in 1846-7, he came to the conclusion that what was most needed was credit to help people recover from the crisis. He used his own limited resources to start a system of rural credit cooperatives and banks. He encouraged people to help each other and set up local cooperatives to help small independent farmers with long-term loans. The borrowers and the lenders were members of the same communities. There was no limited liability so all shared the risk. This relational approach reflected biblical Christian teaching about loving one's neighbour. This model has been replicated in many developing nations in recent times and also in the UK's Citylife project.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. COMPROMISE AND CORRUPTION**

One reason sometimes given by Christians for non-involvement in politics is that it is a dirty business and they do not want to become contaminated by it. Of course, it is true that politics can be dirty. It is about the acquisition and exercise of power and that does seem to have a corrupting influence on many of us. It regularly involves compromises and quite often means choosing between the lesser of two evils but that is a consequence of living in a fallen world, with which we need to come to terms.

Take the example of abortion in the UK. Before the 1967 Abortion Act, there were approximately 6,100 legal abortions per year. In the first year after the Act, that number rose to 24,000. By 1973, it was 167,000 and ten years later 184,000. In the first 25 years after the Act was passed almost 5 million pre-born human beings were killed. Attempts by Christian MPs during this period to modify the law were frustrated by the attitude amongst campaigners that there must be no compromise. The Abortion Act must be totally repealed. Because that was politically

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<sup>3</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the advice and assistance of Julia Doxat-Purser in identifying these examples.

unachievable, the abortions went on. It was not until the nineties that realism began to creep in and attempts were made to lower the time period after which an abortion could not be done. All abortions, save, arguably, those to genuinely save the life of the mother, are morally objectionable but would it not have been better to have prevented some of them by compromising sooner?

And whilst politics can be dirty, is it not less likely to be dirty if virtuous people are actively involved? Christian politicians, living in submission to the Lord and in real fellowship with their local churches should surely be better protected against the corrupting influences of power than the secular relativist. If there is dirt, there is a need for cleansing agents and Christian salt and light is one of them.

There are good examples of this from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Methodism, not only preached the Gospel but has also been seen as a prophet of social righteousness. One historian has noted “the Evangelical revival did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populous than any other movement British history can record”.<sup>4</sup> This was one of the reasons why the contemporary European revolutionary movement had so little influence in Britain.

Nor was Wesley’s influence limited to his own time. William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect owed much to his example. Their campaign to abolish the slave trade, settle freed slaves and stop slave smuggling is well known but their political involvement went well beyond this agenda. E. M. Howse has described how they met regularly to discuss “the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country, and the battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness”.<sup>5</sup> They organised themselves into a serious Parliamentary force to tackle issues as diverse as penal reform, popular education, factory legislation, colonial policy and parliamentary reform.

Their heir was Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, whose Christian impact in Britain can still be seen in the existence of organisations, which he founded 150 years ago. Again, the breadth of his concerns, to which he applied his Christian values, is impressive. “He concerned himself successively with the plight of lunatics, child workers in the factories and mills, climbing boys or chimney sweeps, women and children in the mines, and the children of the slums, more than 30,000 of whom in London were without a home, and more than a million in the whole country were without schooling”.<sup>6</sup> A biographer has said of Shaftesbury, “no man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery or to add to the sum total of human happiness”.<sup>7</sup> Even if we question this assessment of Lord Shaftesbury and the Clapham sect, their example remains a powerful one.

Nor are the examples of Christian salt and light in politics all in the last century. There are certainly a number active Christians in the European Parliament today and in many of the national Parliaments across the continent. In the British Parliament, for example, there are more than 30 MPs in the present House of Commons, who

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<sup>4</sup> J.W. Bready; “England: Before and After Wesley”, Hodder and Stoughton (1939) p327

<sup>5</sup> E.M. Howse; “Saints in Politics – the Clapham Sect and the growth of freedom”, Allen and Unwin (1953) p26

<sup>6</sup> J.R.W. Stott; “Issues Facing Christians Today” Marshall & Pickering 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (1999) p6

<sup>7</sup> Georgina Battiscombe, quoted in Stott, *ibid* p6

share a conviction that they have been called by God to be there. They are found in each of the major parties. They are all loyal to their parties but they also affirm that their Christian commitment comes first.

### **3. SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS**

This will surprise many people and not a few Christians who believe that politics and religion should be kept in separate compartments. It has to be acknowledged that they have sometimes been uncomfortable partners. The history of religious wars, the example of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan or Iran, and British experience in Northern Ireland, are all cited as grounds for keeping the two separate.

The sacred/secular divide goes back to Augustine who thought in terms of two Kingdoms: the kingdom of God, which is the church's responsibility, and the kingdoms of the world, which are the sphere of Kings and Emperors. Martin Luther was also attracted to this distinction as a way of countering the corruption of the Church after Constantine. The American Constitution established a separation of Church and State, and in some States it is enforced to the extent that a nativity tableaux may not be displayed in public buildings at Christmas and Christian students are not allowed to hold prayer meetings on their University campus. Lord Hailsham, the former Conservative Lord Chancellor, is a recent British politician who advocated a sacred/secular dichotomy.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with this perspective is that it is at odds with Jesus' teaching. He told his disciples that they were not to be withdrawn from the world but to remain and work to transform it. It is God's world even if a majority ignore or deny the fact. He calls us to act justly and responsibly in it rather than withdraw into a Christian ghetto. Salt that remains in the saltcellar preserves nothing.

### **4. CHRISTIAN PRIORITIES**

A third reason given for Christians staying out of political activity is that they see it as a distraction from their proper priorities. By this, they mean evangelism and other church activities. The difficulty with this is that it sees evangelism and social responsibility as alternatives. The Gospel can be proclaimed by deed as well as by word. Indeed, if proclamation is only by word and there are no deeds, is it truly biblical? The relationship between the two is best seen as like the two faces of a coin or the two blades of a pair of scissors – inexorably linked. Moreover, Christian politicians do share their faith in situations which most of us will never reach.

### **5. COMPLEXITY**

Probably the most influential reason why Christians stay out of politics is that the issues are often complex and relating our biblical worldview to them is difficult.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, his essay in "Christianity and Conservatism", eds M.Allison MP & D.L. Edwards, Hodder & Stoughton (1990) chapter 2.

Government is a huge concern involving millions of lives and billions of pounds of expenditure. Many of the issues facing us are intractable. We have no easy solutions for them. Admittedly, this excuse is preferable to involvement based on simplistic solutions but, given the state of Europe today, neither is acceptable.

When we see the statistics for people trafficking, drug abuse and associated criminality; when we observe what long-term unemployment and grinding poverty have done to people; when we step over people sleeping on our streets and hear tragic stories of lonely, elderly people and abused children; when we see the state of the planet and the effects of climate change; and when we note the moral and spiritual drift in our culture, how can Christians not want to work for change?

Some think that the only thing we can do that will make a real difference is evangelism. Whilst evangelism is *unquestionably a very important part of the answer*, it can never be the complete answer because personal sin is not the only problem. To lead a prostitute to faith in Christ should certainly change her life for the better but until the reasons why she became a prostitute and the facets of our society, which sustain a demand for prostitutes, have been addressed, one has not properly dealt with the situation.

There is evil in the very structures of our society beyond the personal sins of the individuals involved in them. Evangelism tackles the latter but not the former. Examples include the way money and market forces are treated as idols in our society, and the false views of humanness, which are sometimes promoted by the media and used by policy makers. Both help to undermine families so they need to be tackled by political action and possibly spiritual warfare.

Moreover, to shun politics whilst caring about people who are hungry or homeless is inconsistent. It is good that Christians are often in the forefront of philanthropy. So why not go on to tackle the causes and not just the symptoms. Being kind to slaves was not enough. Wilberforce and his friends in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had to abolish slavery. What motivated them through a hard, thirty-year campaign was the conviction that they had a biblical mandate for what they were doing.<sup>9</sup> The Bible still gives Christians a strong basis for political involvement, provided we seek to be consistently Christian in both content and conduct.

## 6. THE BIBLE AND POLITICS

Those who hold the Bible in high regard have a duty to interpret and apply it with care and humility. We must not manipulate it in support of our political prejudices or to give a veneer of respectability to non-Christian ideas. To avoid this we should pay close attention to the various contexts in which particular passages of the Bible belong – literary, historical and cultural. A helpful approach is to use the four-fold historical schema, which John Stott employed in his book “Issues Facing Christians Today”<sup>10</sup> This approach draws from the whole of Scripture rather than looking only at particular passages selected because they say what we are looking for them to say. It involves examining what the Bible has to say about anything from the perspectives of

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<sup>9</sup> See “Wilberforce – the nation’s conscience” P. Cormack, Pickering (1983); “Abolition”, J. Pollock, Day One Publications, 2007; “Hannah More”, J & M Collingwood, Lion (1990).

<sup>10</sup> Stott, *ibid* Chapter 2.

the creation, the fall, the redemptive work of Jesus and of the end times when he returns to consummate his Kingdom.

- CREATION

The creation passages portray human beings as social beings with social as well as personal responsibilities. “*The Lord God said, ‘it is not good for the man to be alone..’*” (Genesis 2:18) In Genesis 1, we find that man and woman together bear the image of God. Men and women are different and yet made for each other. The pattern this gives us is one of unity within diversity. Differences are basic to creation yet they are supposed to be a source of strength, not weakness. All are of equal value before God. However, if our differences give rise to conflicts of value or interest, how do we resolve them so as to preserve our creation unity?

Before pursuing the implications of that, it is worth noting that humankind is given responsibility for ruling over God’s creation. “*Fill the earth and subdue it...rule over every living creature*”. However, it is clear that we do this as God’s stewards or caretakers. We are accountable to him for how we do this.

- FALL

The fall has spoiled the outworking of the creation pattern. Our rebellion against God distorted the divine image in us; distorted our relationship with God, with the land, with each other and with ourselves. How do we resolve differences of value and interest when our sin gets in the way? Which values shape our society, God’s or some other? Which interests do we serve, our own or our neighbour’s? How do we resolve disagreements about values and interests when personal jealousy, pride and envy, or class and national superiority intrude and produce deception, conspiracy, and even war? The Babel incident (Genesis 11) offers an early example of this problem and the history books are full of others.

St Paul saw the constraining hand of Government as part of the answer to this problem.

*“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority. Then do what is right. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”*

This passage from Romans 13 must be read in context. Paul was under no illusions about the Roman authorities who eventually put him to death. This is no justification of totalitarian government. We are to obey Government because it is God’s agent; when it systematically acts contrary to the revealed will of God we are no longer obliged to obey it. Nevertheless, Paul’s point is that God gave us government as part of his providential care for us, to keep us from experiencing the full potential of human sin.

We all know that Governments can go badly wrong, as in Cambodia under Pol Pot, Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Russia. We need Godly people in government who understand about sin and corruption but also have access to God in prayer, the help

and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and Christian friends to keep our feet planted firmly in reality.

- **REDEMPTION**

Jesus was not a politician but strands of his teaching have obvious political implications. The salt and light metaphors of Matthew 5:13-16 have already been mentioned. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us of our social responsibilities and that Christians are not to be concerned only with our own interests but 'to love our neighbour as ourselves'. Contemporary examples include SS Bosnia, a Christian project working to improve conditions in Bosnian orphanages. There are also a number of Christian drug and alcohol projects in Spain helping drug addicts to break their drug dependence and come to faith in Jesus. These are brilliant examples of 'neighbour love' but we also need to be looking at the social pressures and/or public policies that have helped to create these problems.

Luke 20:25 is another affirmation that we do have duties in the political sphere, giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. These are not two spheres because God is sovereign over all. Thus what we give to Caesar must also be worthy of being given to God, whose agent Caesar is. Christians who never bother to vote in local or national elections should ponder this teaching.

- **END TIMES**

Matthew 25:31-46 gives us a picture of the final judgement. The sheep will be separated from the goats based on what each has done for the least of "my brothers". This is not suggesting that we can earn a place in heaven by socio-political activity but if we are to work out the implications of our salvation by living a life worthy of the gospel, this will surely include care and concern for those in real need. St John reminds us that love should not be merely something about which we talk.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst there is much we can do through our political endeavour to tackle particular sins, we can never by our efforts eliminate sin altogether. Only Jesus can do this when he returns. It was the Marxist heresy that human beings are capable of perfection in this life, through education and socialisation. We should not be seduced by such utopianism. However, we know that when Jesus triumphs over evil, we shall all have to give account for what we have done with our opportunities.

This brief summary is far from exhaustive. No reference has been made to the Old Testament Law, to the prophets or to the Covenant. Yet the Law required Israel to act justly in its social life as well as at the personal level. The prophets similarly speak against Israel and its government for not following God's values. Nor should we overlook the examples of Joseph, Daniel and Mordecai, biblical heroes, all of whom were politically involved. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Bible supports the notion that Christians should be involved in politics. But what forms should this involvement take?

## **7. CHURCH OR INDIVIDUAL?**

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<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:18: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

The first qualification concerns the respective roles of churches, para-church groups and individuals. In his celebrated Reith Lectures in 1978, the British academic, Dr Edward Norman, took a strong line against church involvement in politics. He perceived a tendency for political involvement to displace the church's proper concern with personal redemption and sanctification. Too often, he saw the church sanctifying secular idealism and losing its distinctiveness. He also found the church's social comment embarrassingly amateurish. Fourthly, he identified a tendency for the church to be naïve about human sin. To these objections can be added a fifth; that when the church takes sides in politics, it runs the risk of alienating those on the other side from the Gospel.

One cannot deny that there is some truth in these observations but it is not necessary to follow Norman all the way to his conclusion that the church should eschew all involvement in politics. It can make four important contributions.

The first is to exercise a prophetic ministry in society. As Kenneth Kaunda, the former President of Zambia, suggests, "what a nation needs more than anything else is not a Christian ruler in the palace but a Christian prophet within earshot".<sup>12</sup> A similar point was made by Sir Brian Mawhinney, the British Christian MP, in his memoirs.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, it is crucial that when the church seeks to speak prophetically, that it is not seen to be grinding a partisan axe against the Government of the day, as sometimes happened in Britain in the 1980's. Nevertheless, there is a biblical model for the church to enter the political arena to speak prophetically about some action or lack of it by the Government or one of the other political players. Recent examples have included European Directives and national legislation, which undermined marriage, family life and gave legitimacy to the homosexual life-style.

A second role for the church is to serve as an agent of reconciliation in a divided society. One of the characteristics of Jesus' life was that he brought together people like Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, who were virtually enemies. He not only reconciled people to God, he also reconciled them to each other. All Christians have a reconciliation role in their personal relationships but at the community level, the church can have an influence that individuals cannot. Politics frequently involves division and conflicts of interest. As a body that cares for people on all sides of a dispute, the church can use its neutrality to bring the parties together and find a basis for compromise and reconciliation.

Thirdly, the church can spearhead a ministry of prayer for the nation. Again, we should all be praying individually but it is important and biblical that there should also be corporate intercession for the nation in our churches. This is something that most churches do very infrequently and half-heartedly. There is no excuse for this because both the European Evangelical Alliance and CARE put out prayer material relating to current political developments and controversies within the European institutions and many national Evangelical Alliances do the same for national issues.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Kaunda, "Kaunda on Violence" Collins (1980) p45- 46

<sup>13</sup> Rt. Hon Sir Brian Mawhinney, "In the Firing Line – politics, faith, power and forgiveness", Harper Collins (1999)

<sup>14</sup> See [www.europeanea.org](http://www.europeanea.org) and [www.careforeurope.org](http://www.careforeurope.org). Contact your national Evangelical Alliance for prayer information relating to your own country.

Finally, the church has a prime responsibility to teach its members and this should include our duties as citizens of the nation as well as of the Kingdom of God. If churches pay little attention to this aspect of Christian discipleship, is it any wonder that Christian influences in politics and government are limited and society is becoming increasingly secularised. Moreover, the tendency for churches to hold many meetings during the week make it very unlikely that their members will engage in politics. It is said that the doors of the churches in Calvin's Geneva were locked on Sunday night and remained locked until the following Sunday morning. The proper place for the faithful was in the world, being salt and light.

Whilst the political role of the church is best limited to these four activities, there need be no such constraints on Christian individuals and campaigning groups provided they participate in a manner consistent with their Christian faith and identity. Obviously, we do not all have the same depth of interest in politics and all the other areas of church life continue to need people to attend to them. At the same time, there are various levels of political involvement and we do not all have to engage at the same level.

## **8. LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT**

Imagine society as a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid, there are a limited number of opportunities for people to compete for and win elections to their national or regional assemblies or their town councils. Within this relatively small group there is an even smaller number of Ministers and others holding executive office. Below them in the pyramid come the local councillors and those elected or appointed to offices in organisations providing public services. At the highest levels, these people are career politicians, involved on a full-time basis. It is important that Christians are active in this category but most of us have no ambition to join them.

Further down the pyramid are the activists for whom politics is an important but part-time activity. This includes party activists who aspire to become office holders but have not yet succeeded, as well as enthusiasts with no ambition to go any higher. Alongside them are single-issue campaigners, including supporters of Christian causes such as the pro-life groups, anti-poverty campaigners and those committed to third world debt cancellation or environmental responsibility. This is a much larger group and the depth of involvement varies from fairly passive, financial support to vigorous participation in marches, letter-writing and other forms of protest.

At the bottom of the pyramid are the vast majority of citizens whose level of involvement is to vote and to take a sufficient level of interest in current affairs to do this intelligently. The thrust of the foregoing argument is that all Christians ought, at the very least, to be in this category. We enjoy the privileges of citizenship; we ought also to fulfil the responsibilities. Sadly, in some European countries, too many people do not bother to vote at all. The right for all adults to vote and for those votes to mean anything was in most European countries the result of a long struggle. In such countries as the Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Portugal, France, Spain, Ireland and the UK voter turnout "is not as high as democratic activists would like, and there are

some signs that electors are less likely to vote today than they were a generation ago”<sup>15</sup>.

## **9. VOCATION**

The concept of calling is popular amongst Christians. It is important that just as some are called to be pastors and missionaries, vocations to strategic occupations such as teaching, broadcasting and politics are also recognised and encouraged in the churches. Until they are there is unlikely to be sufficient suitably gifted Christians choosing these careers to arrest the forces of secularisation. Moreover, given the pressures and temptations that they will face, those who go into politics and seek office will need all the prayer and pastoral support the church can muster.

## **10. SPIRITUAL SALTINESS**

We noted when discussing the salt and light metaphors that “if the salt loses its saltiness, it is no longer good for anything”. There are many ways in which Christians can lose their distinctiveness as they are involved in politics and community life. They can take on too much and either do it badly or burn out. They can fail in their duties to their families. Tiredness can lead to spiritual weakness. They can lose their sense of proportion and confuse means and ends. Christian integrity and brotherly or sisterly love can suffer under the pressures of party loyalty or partisan rivalry. Moreover, behind these human temptations, we glimpse a deeper spiritual battle.

The answer is not to hide in a spiritual ghetto. It is to don the whole armour of God and to enter the fray with the support of the whole church and to leave the fiercest parts of the battle to those with the greatest spiritual maturity.

This is a plea for more Christians to take seriously our responsibilities to our nations, local communities and, where appropriate, to our country’s membership of the European Union. Political involvement is not the only way to do this but it is an important one that is regularly disregarded or misunderstood by the present generation of Christians. We cannot simultaneously complain about the moral and spiritual condition of our country and continent and play no part in the processes by which it might be changed. To do that is simply to contribute to the secularisation process. It is also to ignore the biblical teaching summarised above.

It is crucial, though, when we do become involved to do so in a manner that is likely to make a difference. British politicians say that they can often identify when a letter they receive is from an evangelical Christian because they are amongst the rudest of their correspondents. Christian convictions and courtesy are not incompatible!

Another common failing amongst Christians, which is evidence of political inexperience, is to quote the Bible as if that settles everything. Of course, God’s Word is the ultimate authority on all moral and spiritual issues for Christians but we achieve nothing by assaulting non-believers with bits of it. Nor does it honour the

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<sup>15</sup> “Voter Turnout in Western Europe since 1945”, International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance 2002, Chapter 2, Richard Rose.

Scriptures and the One who inspired them, to suggest that a complex, contemporary problem can be solved by taking a verse out of context. As we have suggested above, the Bible does have a role in our political thinking but a lot of thought and prayer is required to transpose its God-given insights to our time and culture.

Finally, we have to recognise that because Europe's Christian heritage has been seriously eroded by secularisation, we have to persuade our politicians of the merits of our Christian points of view. Some believers still communicate with their MPs as though Europe was still a Christian continent, as it was thought to be in past centuries. We can be grateful that elements of this heritage survive, nurtured in traditions and institutions not yet swamped by the tide of secularisation. Nevertheless, we are more likely to conserve and build on them if we seek humbly to persuade others of the merits of our Christian perspectives, like the good democrats we need to be.

## 11. CAN WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

This is a fair and reasonable question. If secularism is already making major inroads into our national cultures, is it too late to reverse the tide? If Christian influence in politics and the media is weak, how can we expect to make a real difference? There are three answers to these questions. The first is that God has called his people to be salt and light, or yeast in the dough and he equips and empowers those he calls, like he equipped Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Daniel and his friends to take on what must have seemed like 'mission impossible' in their day. In the same way, secondly, the Christians cited above as more modern examples of Christian salt and light, Comenius, Hauge, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Raiffeisen, also faced opposition, persevered, and overcame it. The third answer is to describe ways in which some European evangelicals are making a difference today.<sup>16</sup>

- The first comes from Spain, where evangelical Christians have been a persecuted minority for centuries. Two years ago, the Spanish Evangelical Alliance set up a working group to study how it could achieve influence in the public arena. This is how Jaume Llenas describes how they went about it.

“One of our new initiatives is what we call the Independent Civic Observatory. Its goal is to study how much politicians fulfil their party manifesto and to suggest ways politicians could take more notice of civil society.”

They talked to the parties and the politicians, asked what had been said in election manifestos and what was actually done, by both the Government and the Opposition. They also asked how various faith groups perceived the reality. The outcome was a report, launched at a press conference attended by every press agency, the biggest newspapers and the most relevant radio stations. The Alliance report was featured in most major newspapers and on the radio stations. In 2007, the Independent Civic Observatory has been working on a second report, focussed on “the Health System in Spain”.

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<sup>16</sup> These examples are all drawn from the EEA's “Impact in the Public Arena: stories from the nations” compiled by Julia Doxat-Purser in October 2007 with information from the Alliances involved.

Spanish Evangelicals are a small minority with limited resources but they are working prayerfully together to help democracy in their country to mature. They are being salt and light.

- So too are the Czech Alliance. Two years ago, the Alliance decided to organise a National Marriage Week around Valentines Day. It is a simple, inexpensive media campaign to promote marriage, which can unite Christian and secular groups who believe that marriage is good for society. A national launch, with key speakers from politics, academia and the churches, was matched by parallel initiatives in 20 cities. The media responded enthusiastically, including television and radio as well as the newspapers. Politicians, including the Minister for Social Affairs, responded positively. The campaign will be repeated in 2008 and is to be launched in the national Parliament building. Evangelicals received lots of good publicity around a positive news story.
- The German Evangelical Alliance seeks to promote Christian values in politics and a meeting between its Board members and the German Chancellor is a good way to do this. At the meeting, the Alliance members expressed their concerns about family policy, and the right to life. The discussion was held in an open and friendly atmosphere and it was seen as a first step in a gaining a regular hearing with the government.
- The Roma people are a significant minority group in Hungary, constituting 8-10% of the population. They are for the most part a disadvantaged minority and the Hungarian Alliance has sought to create a network of churches to work with the Roma, bringing together representatives of the historic churches and the smaller denominations. The Alliance Roma Network has four objectives: evangelism and church planting among the Roma people, mentoring Roma leaders, sharing best practice in Roma ministry, and job creation for Roma people. The network seems to be working well.
- Despite their history of evangelical involvement in public affairs, Dutch Evangelicals reacted to the rise of 'social gospel' and liberal teaching by withdrawing from socio-political involvement. However, the Dutch EA recognised that it is possible to be committed to evangelism *and* to witness through engagement in socio-political action. They studied the Scripture and introduced political topics into prayer events and slowly the balance between the two dimensions returned. An Evangelical political party is now part of the national government, which creates new opportunities for Evangelicals to be actively involved in demonstrating Kingdom values.
- The Evangelical Alliance in the Republic of Ireland has only existed for a few years but it has already given a lead to Irish Christians by compiling a booklet to help them reflect biblically on politics and policies before the national elections last May. "Vote Wisely" was well received by Alliance members but was also read by non-Evangelicals. A national newspaper described it as "perhaps the most interesting piece of election literature produced".

- The human rights and religious freedom of Christians is a major issue in Turkey and the Alliance of Protestant Churches has been monitoring media coverage of Christians and correcting disinformation. Its legal committee has begun assembling an archive of media reports and of the problems experienced by churches and individual Christians. When the Irish EA visited the Turkish Embassy in Dublin they went equipped with examples from this archive. Later the Turkish Interior Ministry asked governors in their country to take special measures to protect Christians and promote tolerance because of concerns expressed abroad.

After the murder of the three Christians in Malatya, the Spanish EA organised silent prayer vigils outside the Turkish Embassy in Madrid and in 33 towns across Spain to show their love and solidarity for their Turkish brothers and sisters. In so doing, they both encouraged Turkish Christians and reminded the Turkish Government that public opinion in the EU is concerned about the treatment of Turkish Christians.
- Religious liberty is also an issue for Italian Evangelicals. The Italian EA prepared a manifesto explaining its concerns about a draft law on religious freedom and in June 2007, a thousand Evangelicals came together in the centre of Rome to stress the need for a balanced separation between Church and State and to protest about the media attaching the 'sect' label to all religious minorities. They sought religious freedom and equal opportunities for all, not privilege for themselves. Several politicians and the evangelical footballer, Nicola Legrottaglie, supported them.

As a result, the Parliamentary Commission accepted a few amendments to the draft law and EA personnel were invited to speak at another high profile event organised by a major national newspaper. These actions have helped Italian Evangelicals to express their concerns publicly and have raised the profile of Evangelicals in Italy.

These eight examples are not the only ones but they are sufficient to demonstrate that some Evangelicals in Europe are seeking to make a difference in the socio-political sphere of life. Moreover, they are doing this in obedience to Jesus' teaching about being salt and light in the world, without compromising their Christian witness or giving up proclaiming the Gospel, evangelising and church planting. In time one hopes to see Evangelicals in every European nation following these examples, prayerfully and intelligently contributing a biblical perspective to national debates on important social and political issues. With experience, we will learn to communicate these perspectives in ways that are intelligible to non-believers, without losing the essence of the biblical teaching. In time, too, Evangelicals in every part of Europe will recognise believers who have a calling and the gifts to seek election to public office, and support them in prayer as they grapple with complex policy issues and the need to negotiate compromises between conflicting interests and values without betraying their own Christian values. As this movement for change gains momentum across the continent and more Evangelicals come out of the ghetto, the influence of secularism will be challenged. It should come as no surprise that secularism is not making the world a better place. Ignoring the Maker's instructions does not work but if the people of the Bible play no part in society and politics, the damage done is, at least in part, our fault. Europe needs God's people to be the salt and light that Jesus told us to be.

## **12. HOW DO WE GET STARTED? Some practical steps towards political involvement.**

- Develop a biblical perspective on politics.
- Increase our knowledge of how the political system works.
- Get to grips with at least one issue (contact specialist organisations.)
- Work with other evangelical Christians to develop a biblical perspective on this issue.
- Pray for the party leaders and politicians involved with your preferred issue.
- Encourage your church to pray regularly for both these politicians and issues.
- Develop relationships with those who represent you at all levels and pray for them.
- Write to them about the issues which concern you (every letter is important).
- Visit them in their local offices to discuss these issues.
- Invite them to speak about their work at a suitable church event.
- Encourage those whom you perceive to have a calling to be more involved in politics. Support them in prayer.
- For more ideas, resources or training on any of these steps, please contact EEA's Socio-political Representative, Julia Doxat-Purser, [eea@community-house.co.uk](mailto:eea@community-house.co.uk)
- For information about the EU institutions please contact Christel Ngnambi: [christel.ngnambi@gmail.com](mailto:christel.ngnambi@gmail.com)

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