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# Christianity and the State: Towards a Liberal Politics

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## **Abstract**

*The basic argument of this paper runs as follows: Using a combination of the doctrine of free will as found in Milton's Areopagitica and the Biblical doctrine of Grace as a Christian philosophical basis, Christianity is shown to support freedom, rather than prohibition, both in terms of temporal and eternal results that such political action might achieve. The primary role of the Church is one of caring for the spiritual need in people, by facilitating salvation. The secondary role is caring for the physical needs of people, through concern for their physical welfare. These two concerns may be symbolised in Jesus' injunction to Christians to be Light and Salt respectively.*

*Some current Christian political action (as exemplified in the activities of the New Right in the U.S.A. and similar attitudes in South Africa), in terms of the aforementioned Biblical-Philosophical basis, is not justifiable, and actually harmful to the Christian cause. It creates damaging impressions of Christians on society, as well by diverting attention, manpower, prayer and finance away from more important issues. Christian political activity is very necessary, but should not be linked to the often irrelevant and non-scriptural agendas of the political Right. Rather, it should be focused on issues of Liberty, Social Welfare, and most importantly, salvation of as many souls as possible, in line with the doctrines of Grace and Free Will.*

## **Introduction**

Recently, while talking to a non-Christian acquaintance, I realised something that disturbed me. I realised that, due to the role that the vocal evangelical church (of which I count myself a member) in politics, many people have received a distorted view of what Christianity is. Not least, are the Christians, who for some reason are allied to the political Right, who undertake actions and have a philosophy which, I will show, is non-scriptural. It is not that the whole church, or all Believers fall into this category, but the perception is there. Philip Yancey, author of *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, puts it this way:

*"Recently I have been asking a question of strangers for example, seatmates on an airplane when I strike up a conversation. "When I say the words 'evangelical Christian' what comes to mind?" In reply, mostly I hear political descriptions: of strident pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents, or proposals for censoring the*

*Internet. I hear references to the Moral Majority, an organisation disbanded years ago. Not once - not once - have I heard a description redolent of grace. Apparently that is not the aroma Christians give off in the world." (Yancey, 1997, p.30).*

It is important, both for the possible salvation of non-Christians on the political left, as well as for the sake of doing what is right in God's eyes, that we examine whether the negative stereotypical image under which the church currently suffers is the result of the wickedness of the godless, or the incorrect attitude of the Children of God.

In the course of our conversation, my acquaintance said that he was still looking for a purpose for his life, that he had not found one yet. Looking for the answer to his quest for meaning, he had allied himself with many good causes, and had given himself wholeheartedly to Environmentalism and Anti-capitalism. He had embraced the "Alternative" musical subculture as the most free and accepting of youth cultures, read extensively in the field of sociology and devoted a large amount of his time and money to environmental and social outreach programmes. Yet, he had still not discovered a cause that was perfectly satisfying. When I asked him if he had ever considered Christianity, it was his response that was disturbing, if not actually surprising.

"Christianity?" was his incredulous response, obviously disappointed that someone he had assumed was a like-thinking individual was actually an arch-conservative and a book-burner. He said that he could never be a Christian, as he opposed the right-wing narrow-mindedness that Christianity demanded. My attempts at disputing his concept of Christianity were met with a list of examples of actions of the "Christian Right" in the United States, ranging from actual book-burnings to the assassination of abortion doctors, and some actions of South African Christian groups as well. That, he said, was what Christianity stood for. He said that it did not fit his politics and that its spirit was contrary to everything he believed to be good. He ended the conversation an ironic cry of "*Family Values.*"

I believe that my friend's understanding of Christianity is wrong. He is not, however, alone in his misconception. And who can blame him? No-one has ever bothered to explain the grace of God, the love of Christ or the need for salvation to him. I do realise that this is partly the fault of incorrect, and frankly heretical doctrine being espoused in many churches. Many people have a misconception of what Christianity is, simply due to this fact. I will therefore deal shortly with what Christianity is, under the heading *Christianity*. But, there are enough churches, across the denominational spectrum, teaching enough of the biblical Gospel, for heresy not to be an insuperable problem, or even the main cause of incorrect ideas.

There are many people today whose picture of Christianity is coloured by what they see on the news, involving the A.W.B. (and similar pseudo-Christian extremist right-wing parties) and their frightening blend of misquoted scripture and racism. This is easy enough for most to disregard as irrational ultra-conservatism, and I will not deal with such extremist groups in this paper, as I believe them, for the large part to be politically irrelevant.

It is this fact that I wish to expand on and argue for here. This paper is both an attack on (although that sounds misleadingly aggressive - perhaps *argument against* is better) the increasingly popular idea within the Protestant church's most vocal sector, namely the Evangelicals, that Christianity is synonymous with political conservatism, and it is also a kind of (though, by no means exhaustive) apology to the political left.

My intention is not to present a point by point explanation of how secular liberal theory and Christian thought concur. This would be of little value, and it is impossible. Christianity is a faith, not an ideology. Its prime purpose is not political. I do believe, however, and will argue here, that Christians are called to political action, and will briefly examine the nature of past political involvement by the church, as well as some current trends in Christian political thinking.

I will show why, but more importantly, *how* Christians should be involved in politics, by looking at the philosophical flaws in how they are involved today. Again, I do not claim that the entire Church is in fact involved in incorrect political practise, but that these practises are the most striking picture of Christian involvement in politics that many people see, and many Christians, those who are involved and those who are not, have never even questioned their propriety. Finally, I will discuss the possibility of a Christian state, and on what general principles it might run, and how it would differ from our present situation.

Governing my examination of all these issues is not a blind adherence to liberal doctrine, which is, for the Christian, severely limited in the good it can achieve, but rather the system of thought of the Bible and the teachings of Christ, the Saviour. The principle I will identify as exemplifying Christ's general will for His followers' involvement in politics is found in Jesus' injunction to his followers to be "Salt and Light". It is this analogy, though, by no means only this part of scripture, that I believe should inform all Christian political action, and that I view as being compatible in several ways, with liberal politics, rather than with the New Right.

## Christianity

Central to this discussion is obviously our definition of Christianity. What is at issue in this paper is not *What is a Christian?*, but to avoid the possible objection that what I will later put forward as the Christian duty is not disputed on the grounds of "Christians don't have to do that" or the like. Thus, let us broadly define what makes a person a Christian. The general parameters within which I will be working are shared, generally, by most evangelical churches, and many of the more traditional ones as well. I believe them to be true to the Biblical definition of Christianity, but, more crucial to the current issue, is the general definition of what Christianity is that is accepted by the church-groups with whom I will take issue. The main thrust of my argument being directed at them, it is important that we share a basis for discussion. Political shortcomings of groups that are not Christian in the Biblical sense, are not of prime interest to me here.

## Salvation

Shortly, a Christian is someone who, to borrow a concept from Kierkegaard, has put himself in the correct *relationship with the absolute*, namely with God. The Christian is the individual who, of his or her own free will, has decided to accept that Jesus Christ died for his or her sins and has put his or her faith in Jesus as Lord of his or her life. There are many other details, but this is the essence. The Christian is the believer in, and follower of Christ. This is the essence of the concept of salvation, which is central to Christianity. It is salvation that is the ultimate point and most important element of Christianity.

A Christian, in the sense that I will use the term, is something different from the Gentile. A Christian is not simply someone who is not Jewish. This view, though not that common as an articulated belief anymore, is sometimes found amongst people for whom the term Christian is purely cultural or social. This cultural concept of Christianity is arguably more detrimental to the Faith than outright attacks on it, as it equates the concept of a living, worshipful relationship with God, with the concept of western cultural practice. This is simply not true, and an evaluation of western society as it is now, would show nothing particularly Christian in its character at all (Schaeffer, 1990, 1972).

The essence of the word "Christian" as I will use it, is the part reading "Christ". Jesus Christ must be at the center of any system using this name. That which is not Jewish (or Islamic, or Hindu for that matter) is not necessarily Christian.

Neither is a person involved in the church, no matter how deeply, necessarily a Christian. The church, as an institution rather than the body of believers, is merely an organisation, of no more spiritual significance than the Rotary club. Thus, when I refer to the church, I will refer to it in the sense of the Body of Christ, i.e., collectively, those, from across denominations, organisations, even political affiliations, who believe in Jesus. But, as any of the preachers of the New Right will tell you, regular attendance at a church building does not make one a Christian. What does make one a Christian is the acceptance of the grace of God.

Although I draw extensively on his thought for my paper, I must dispute some claims that Jacques Ellul makes in *Anarchy and Christianity*, with specific reference to the issues of all people's need for salvation, and his primarily social and political understanding of Christianity. In his introduction, he writes that he is not trying to convert anarchists to Christianity, that he has "no proselytising aim," because conversion "does not relate so much to salvation" (1991, p.4). This, I believe, is a mistake. Ellul himself admits that there are scriptures that link salvation and conversion, but claims that they are taken out of context.

I would argue, however, that there is little that can be taken out of context in what Jesus says about the need for 'conversion' in John 3: 3 : "In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" The phrase "born again" might also be expressed as 'being saved', 'committing your life to God', Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith', or one of many other terms denoting an acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour.

They are all merely different ways of expressing that which Jesus describes as being "born again". It is interesting and enlightening to note that another translation of that phrase is "born from above", which captures more explicitly the supernatural essence of Christianity, namely salvation. This is what must be our most important consideration when dealing with the unsaved on a personal level, and I hold that it should be the Body of Christ's focus politically as well. Thus, I believe Ellul is simply wrong, when he disregards this most essential part of Christian teaching in relation to social action.

Another reason I argue this, is that if one's salvation is automatically granted, as Ellul suggests, without a person being given the choice not to accept it, it would not only violate the principle of free will, that I will discuss later, but no-one could possibly go to Hell. Though this is a politically incorrect concept to propound, and should bring no joy to anyone; it is scriptural, and as such should be taken seriously. There are seven mentions made of Hell in

Matthew alone, three in Mark, two in Luke and one in 2 Peter, and that is only where it is referred to by name (Goodrick & Kohlenberger, 1990, p.519). It is not a concept that can be reconciled with the idea that we have no choice in our salvation. The "Great Commission" to make disciples of all men is also relevant to this question. And, finally, Jesus Himself said: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Thus, the Christianity within which I am discussing political action, has, as one of its principles, the belief that people need to accept Jesus Christ if they are not to perish in the fire. This fact should be foremost in our minds whenever we undertake public or personal action, and is dealt with under *Light in the section of this paper dealing with Salt and Light*. There is another key concept that we need to discuss here.

## **Grace**

Grace is a major theological/philosophical concept which is central to my discussion of Christian politics, and should be central to Christian *anything*. It is the biblical doctrine that states that man can do nothing to save himself from damnation, but that Christ paid the full penalty. Because of this, once one accepts this grace, there is no sin or failure that can disqualify a person from God's forgiveness through Christ. Also, there is no good work that someone who has not accepted God's grace can do that will gain them salvation. Thus, the only real issue, as far as salvation goes, is whether or not an individual is saved / is born again / is a believer / has given his or her life to the Lord / etc. For the Christian, because of Christ, individual sins are an irrelevant issue. Yet, the Church seems obsessed with them.

There are naturally those who still contest the idea of grace as a spiritual reality, and it is a difficult concept to accept, since it seems to be contrary to all our human desires for justice. But, like the disgruntled workers in one of the parables Jesus tells to illustrate the concept of grace (Matthew 20:1-16), our concept of justice is not always in accordance with that of our merciful God.

Max Lucado shortly explains the parable like this: "A certain landowner needs workers. At six o'clock the morning he picks his crew, they agree on a wage, and he puts them to work. At nine o'clock he is back at the unemployment agency and picks a few more. At noon he is back, and at three o'clock in the afternoon he is back, and at five o'clock, you guessed it. He's back again. Now, the punchline of the story is the anger the twelve-hour labourers felt when the other men received the same wage." (1992, p.17).

This is the essence of grace, a freely given, totally unearned gift from God that we can do nothing to affect.

The parable illustrates the way that God grants mercy even to those who do not deserve it. It is difficult to accept, but if we are to contest the issue, I will take sides with both Jesus and Paul. The letters of Paul are full of admonitions to live in grace by the Spirit, rather than according to Law, because, due to Christ's sacrifice, we are no longer under Law. We, as Christians, are no longer under a system in which our sins are held against us. If we suggest that Paul is promoting heresy, going against Jesus' teaching (which he is not, as we can see in the passage from Matthew), we must then radically reconsider allying ourselves to the Biblical Christian Church, which has its doctrinal foundation on the validity of Scripture. If we are to uphold the validity of the bible, we must accept the concept, however difficult it may seem, of grace. To cries of: "It doesn't make any sense!" or "It is not fair," that some Christians will sin greatly and still go to heaven with those who do not, I reply as the master in Jesus' parable did: "'Friend, I am not being unfair to you... I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am so generous?'"

Charles Swindoll, whose book, *The Grace Awakening* is most enlightening on this subject, addresses objections thus: "By now, some of you may be thinking, the reason you are emphasising grace so much is because you're from California." (1990, p.39) But as we have seen, grace is a scriptural concept. If you are thinking that the reason for my emphasis on grace is due to my obviously "liberal" political standpoint, you are similarly mistaken.

Where then, one may ask, is the place for the equally scriptural concept of holiness? Holiness, as a term referring to living a righteous life (more than the automatic holiness we attain through Christ's forgiveness) is necessary and desirable, but only for the Christian, and it is not an issue that can threaten salvation. Working towards holiness, for the non-Christian, is more difficult, as he does not have the help of the Holy Spirit, and also, to adapt a biblical saying: what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world's moral uprightness, but loses his soul?

But then, is the Christian to just run amok, sinning as much as he pleases? No. Out of my love for God, and my gratitude to Him, I will want to please Him, living a holy life for Him. But, I will fail. I will sin. And there is no limit, no specific chalk-mark that, once the level of my accumulated sin reaches it, disqualifies me from salvation. Because, in God's eyes, *I have no sin*. That is what Forgiveness means.

Is this concept of grace not at risk for possible abuse? Swindoll answers that it is, and that that is the proof that it is the true gospel of biblical grace. To quote Martyn Lloyd Jones, pastor of Westminster Chapel for several decades, in his final sermon at Westminster:

*"The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this," and later, "It is the charge that formal, dead Christianity... has always brought against this startling, staggering message, that God 'justifies the ungodly...' "(1990, pp.41-42).*

The risk of abuse is, in a sense, the evidence of the validity of grace. But what about the unsaved? Are we to just let them persist in their sin, just because they are not Christians? My answer is a qualified yes. If a sin harms another human being, it should be stopped, but our current legislation, for the most part, deals with it. The liberal view that an individual has freedom to do whatever he wants, as long as it does not infringe on the rights of others is, in general, an acceptable guideline if we, out of love, wish, like salt, to preserve the physical well-being of our neighbours.

But there are other, less invasive sins, that do not affect anyone except those who commit them, that the church still seems intent on eradicating. This fact is the reason why we can speak of a sinful person who might well be living within the parameters of the law, or a sinful society that is well-policed and orderly. There is nothing constructive that the Church can achieve by trying to eradicate these sins. I do not advocate inaction by the Church because of this, but rather more effective action, that might actually do some good, rather than simply restrain the lost.

In as much as we can help those who have rejected, or have yet to receive the Gospel, not to damage themselves, while still respecting their right to make their own choices for their lives, we should intervene. But not with force. Our love for our neighbour should give us concern for his well-being. This should inform our political agenda. But, we can not legislate against this sin. Not for Christians or the unsaved. It achieves nothing: the Christian still receives eternal life, no matter what, the non-Christian still does not. Grace means that certain "moral" legislation is faulty in its utility. The concept of Free Will, that we will consider now, means that it is also faulty in its aims.

## **Free Will**

Christianity rests on the assumption that man is given free will by God, the ability to choose between doing good and doing evil. The story of the fall of



man in Eden is essentially the story of free will, and how man, in his fallen, unredeemed state, most often exercises it. It is not a story that ends with God removing man's ability to choose and forcing him to obey, but a story that ends with God himself rectifying man's incorrect choices by Himself dying for those sins.

If God has given man the freedom to choose to do the wrong thing, if God has realised that man has misused this freedom and still lets him have it, does the church truly have a right to try to take man's freedom away? I hold, as did Milton in his *Areopagitica* (Maxwell-Mahon & Titlestad, 1992, pp.4-8), that it does not. If grace means that limiting people's freedom to do wrong essentially achieves nothing, then free will means that the attempt to do so is actually wrong in God's eyes.

The *Areopagitica* was written by John Milton, as a Christian argument against censorship. Though I believe it is very relevant today to Christians who support censorship, it also has wider applications to all attempts at prohibitory legislation by the Church. Because God has given us free will, which is all that gives meaning to the terms 'good' and 'evil', it is wrong for Christians to try to limit that freedom, in any way more than that which would, out of love and concern for humanity, protect people from the harm that the free actions of others might inflict upon them.

Though Milton, writing in 1644, was arguing against the censorship of political writings, one could easily put it in a late twentieth-century context, relating it to anything from *Hustler* magazine, to the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which we will consider later. In fact, the argument can be extended to any form of moral prohibitory action undertaken by Christians, be it the New Right in present-day America, or the days of prohibition and temperance movements of the past.

Milton's argument runs as follows:

*"Many there be that complain of Divine Providence for suffering Adam to transgress; foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, He gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience or love or gift which is of force: God therefore left him free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence."(Maxwell-Mahon & Titlestad, 1992, p.5)*

Milton says that he does not respect a virtue or obedience to God in a person if it is forced. One who does not commit a sin that was never open to him is

not more virtuous because of that fact. He shows that although God commands us to follow lives of "temperance, justice, continence...", He still provides us with a world full of temptation and minds that eagerly submit to this temptation.

In Milton's words: "Why should we then affect a rigour contrary to the manner of God...?" (Maxwell-Mahon, 1992, pp.4-8) Such an attitude would, in the beginning in Eden, have God put a forty-foot electric fence and guard-dogs around the tree of knowledge. It would have Him silence the snake, and then pat Adam on the head, saying 'Good boy, Adam. You have righteously resisted temptation!' This is not the attitude of God, and neither should it be the attitude of Christianity. Grace shows that the large-scale effects of such action are an exercise in futility, but that is not a necessary reason not to perform a possibly righteous act, if, in its commission it is righteous (in and of itself, regardless of outcome). However, Milton's argument shows that a purely 'moral' limiting of freedom is not such an action.

Thus, the Christianity I refer to in this paper contains, within its philosophical bounds, three concepts that are very relevant to Christian involvement in politics, namely: grace, free-will, and, the entire point of Christianity, the need of all people for forgiveness and salvation. I believe that this is an accurate picture of Christianity, and true in its essence. The rest of the paper has more to do with interpretation and philosophical application of Christian principles to politics.

## **The Importance of Political Action**

We live in a Godless age, in a Godless society. Evil is evident everywhere, existing in the localised form of children beating a toddler to death, and in the wider form of oppressive regimes, like that of Hitler's Third Reich or Apartheid South Africa. The world is not as it should be. Hunger and poverty abound, oppression makes one man a dog and another a god, and people can work hard their whole lives and end up with nothing. This sounds like a quote from Ecclesiastes and it is unfortunately the truth. How is the Church to respond to a world like this, and how is it to address the physical and spiritual needs of the people who make up this world?

Is the most desirable response one of inaction? In a personal capacity, if a Christian meets a neighbour who is in need of salvation, he will witness to his neighbour. Similarly, if a Christian sees a fellow human being starving, is the correct response just to say 'I'll pray for you, brother,' and then return to his or her isolated world of inert piety? Naturally not. We are not just called to

spiritual action, but to concrete acts of love as well. Why, then, when confronted with the physical hunger and spiritual thirst we see *en masse* all around us, that Christians are reluctant to meet those needs in a similarly corporate way?

Obviously, there is some concern that the gross mistakes of the past, such as the Inquisition or Crusades are not repeated, but as we will see in the next section of this paper, not all corporate political action by Christians has been of this nature. If, by standing together and letting our collective voice be heard, we can achieve some good, in terms both of salvation and welfare of our neighbours, why is it not desirable to do so? Why should we not enter the political arena, where far-reaching decisions that affect the lives of millions are made? It is my position that the Body of Christ should stand and be counted, both corporately and in our individual capacities.

James E. Wood Jr. shows how Jesus himself opposed social injustice in his time, in *Religion and Politics* (1983, ppl-18), which he also edited. He shows that that involvement was one of the principle ways that Jesus angered the religious and political establishment of his day, and which resulted in his crucifixion. Christians, if they are to follow his example on earth, can not opt for political non-involvement. As Wood explains: "The church, as the body of Christ, is the continuing historical expression of Christ in the world" (1983, p.3). Because "Authentic biblical faith has always meant change for the individual and for one's environment... To be authentic, biblical faith cannot remain internalised or privatised" (1983, p.2)

Because, as Wood shows, and as Jesus' life exemplifies, Christians are called to take eternal salvation and earthly comfort to the world, "Christian Faith cannot be just a private matter and, therefore, is necessarily involved in political society" (1983, p.3). However, many people would argue that the separation of church and state (which I deal with later) disallows political involvement by the church, and as such protects the state from manipulation, but more importantly, protects the church from becoming corrupted by being too much in the world. I would agree that such a separation is necessary for those very reasons, but I do not believe that that principle is violated by Christian involvement in politics.

The church should tread very carefully when it comes to partisan politics and should beware of becoming secularised or having its ideals tainted by greed or lust for power, but just because there are dangers and temptations, as Milton points out, does not mean that we should not take the risk of becoming involved. Thus, "The church can neither withdraw from the world nor live in conformity with the world, but it must ever live out its mission in

creative tension with political society and with the power-structures of this world." (Wood, 1983, p.10)

In *Religion And Politics In The Context Of Biblical Faith And A Free Society* (Wood, 1983, pp.113-126), Barry Bailey addresses this issue of Church and state in a different way, suggesting that "church and state need to be separated from each other, but that they need also to remain on speaking terms." (1983, p.114) In his paper, he proposes the idea of a consulting, rather than formally integrated relationship between church and state. For him the role of the church is of instructing the state, but, unfortunately, much of the church today would either shy away from even this type of involvement, or would simply instruct badly. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that we rectify that.

Contrary to Bailey's view, there is no reason to assume that the state, in a multicultural society, would listen to one particular group (in this case, one religion) and its point of view on what constitutes "the good life" in a clamour of voices (Taylor, 1994, p.61). Thus, the Christian church, having lost its privileged place as official instructor and moral guide to western democracy, must engage in political activity, just like every other religion and belief system, without special advantage.

I do not see Bailey (or any of the authors I refer to in this paper) as an accepted representative of church policy, but I do see his attitude, and those of other authors quoted in this paper, as characteristic of a certain approach enjoying support within the body of Christian thought. Bailey's attitude, is symptomatic of the weak wish not to meddle in the business of politics, preferring to take a back seat that itself will not even be granted to the church. A possible reason why Bailey does not believe that political action is crucial is that he does not believe in the Biblical articulation of the concept of salvation.

His attitude is common in the "secularised" church, and is exemplified in the words: "I suppose, to some degree, an afterlife is important to the individual, but is it the main concern of the church?" (Wood, 1983, p.115). If it is not, the church is little more than a do-gooders club, with a violent history and no spiritual significance. If it is not, then Jesus was a liar. A lack of understanding of, or belief in the principle of salvation would account for the lack of concern for the urgency of our current situation, that we find in so many churches. It explains both the idea that political inaction is acceptable, as well as the skewed focus (i.e. only on social welfare, or on irrelevant attempts at various forms of moral prohibition) of political action that we have seen in the church's past and that we see currently.

If we believe that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that they need to be redeemed, and if we accept that there are people whose poverty is great and who are oppressed, then we must find any and all means at our disposal to accomplish our duty to mankind. If politics might be an effective tool for protecting the innocent and alleviating poverty further than mere individual charity; and if through politics we can safeguard the right of Christians to witness and of religious freedom in general, then we must engage in it.

Another argument against Christian political involvement is that it is contrary to Christianity's nature, as a personal relationship between the believer and God. This concept of Christianity is accurate, as the Christian is in a personal relationship with God, for which, no one but himself can take responsibility. This is something to remember when considering those laws that Christians try to pass through legislature that are concerned, essentially, with the spiritual lives of others. While the church should never condone sin and should speak out concerning it, because of the personal nature both of spiritual life and salvation, it cannot force people to do good (as we have already seen in the section concerning the principles of Christianity). However, Christianity is not exclusively personal. Personal change affects those around us. As we have seen, we have a responsibility both to witness about salvation and to protect those who can not protect themselves, and politics is the arena in which we can do this.

A major criticism might be levelled at my argument here. It is obvious that legally, the church has no right to prescribe morality to citizens of a free state. It does have the right, however, as a free-association of citizens, to *attempt* to pursue the collective goals of those individuals. But we are discussing whether the church has any right, within its own principles and philosophy, to pursue certain goals.

If the church has no philosophical foundation nor spiritual right to prohibit people from doing things that are sinful but not socially dangerous, why is it acceptable for the church to attempt to prescribe social welfare and protection, or to oppose oppression? Why is it acceptable on moral grounds to make laws against rape or murder? Is this not an anti-scriptural limiting of freedom? No. The reason being, that while it is useless and wrong to force morality, we are not called to apathy and maintaining the status quo either (This fact is explained and defended at length by Jacques Ellul in *Anarchy And Christianity (1991)*, and is one of my main arguments for Christianity's liberal rather than conservative character).

An individual Christian noticing a rape taking place, cannot spiritually justify not intervening if he or she is in any way able to do so. The 'Golden Rule' of love upholds this, since if we ourselves were at risk we would want protection. If I have Christian love for my neighbour, I will do all that is in my power to protect my neighbour from harm. So it is with the church and society, concerning protective laws and human rights. Here, the New Right no doubt will shout me down and ask 'What about protecting society's morality?' But we must remember that morality (in the form concerning sin that does not infringe on the human rights of others) is a spiritual matter, whereas the protection I advocate is physical. In spiritual matters, as we have already discussed, because of grace, all that is at issue is salvation.

Thus, if we wish to look after the spiritual interests of society, we must, in accordance with people's free will, give opportunities to hear, understand, and receive the gospel. We must not force useless moral regulations on people, saved or unsaved, the personal nature of salvation does not leave the liberal character of Christianity open to attack, and it does not justify inaction.

Paul Rowntree Clifford (1984), in his book concerning the philosophical bases for Christian political involvement and social welfare in the British situation, *Politics And The Christian Vision*, shows that the fact that Christians are called to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, and that they are not only individually addressed, but collectively addressed as the body of Christ, shows: "the assumption that Christianity has nothing to do with politics because it is solely concerned with an individual's relationship to God is fundamentally mistaken," (1984, p.7).

Political action, while necessary and necessarily radical, should never be out of character with biblical teaching. It must, therefore be practised in love. Violence of any kind is out of the question. So, while I do not consider the purpose of Jesus' coming or the gospel to be purely political, I do believe that if we are to fulfil our duty to God and to man, we should, without resorting to violence or anything else that would compromise our standards, use any means at our disposal to do so. In western democracy, politics is one of those means. Bullimore puts it succinctly: "There are ways of doing legal things which a Christian can and should support, because of his faith and understanding of how things are and ought to be, and there are ways he is bound to oppose"(1979, p.10).

The need for Christians, and not just those with conservative agendas but all Christians, to arise and take part in politics, governed by faith and love, is encapsulated in a quote by Walter Rauschenbusch: "Ascetic

Christianity called the world evil and left it. Humanity is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity to change it."(Wood,1983, p.16).

## **Historical Christian Involvement In Politics**

In order for us to rid ourselves of the myth that Christianity is naturally the partner of conservatism and prohibitionist politics, we need to examine the attitude of Christians and the church in history. The lesson that we learn is that, while the church has been behind many heinous acts of cruelty perpetrated against humanity, which should be lessons for us, these acts were rarely perpetrated with a religious motive. A fair part of Christian history has been more in line with the aspects of Salt and Light that I suggest we return to in this paper, and thus we can be sure that such political involvement as I suggest is not necessarily unacceptable and without precedent. Thus we should learn from the good and the bad in the history of Christian politics, and see what we can glean from it.

The world acknowledges that the Christian church, both Catholic and Protestant, has committed some serious crimes, and has often been involved in aggressive violent politics. This is one of the general areas of Christian political involvement we should look at to inform our current practice, as, for many years, Christianity has been linked to war, and if we are not to take up arms in our politics today, we must understand why it would not be in line with Christian principles, just as it was not in line with them in previous times.

Jacques Ellul (1991, pp.11-45), from whom I have quoted before, argues that most of these 'Christian' wars were purely political, rather than an expression (albeit faulty) of spiritual principles. Ellul points out that the wars that were waged by the Christian emperors of Rome of the 4th century were not a direct expression of Christian faith, but were purely political, motivated by greed and lust for power, than by some desire to please God. These wars were in defence of imperial frontiers, rather than a set of Christian principles, but the concept of the 'holy war', that followed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century after the disintegration of the empire, cannot be dismissed from our discussion quite as easily. Unlike purely political conflicts, holy wars had an inherently religious quality, and thus are relevant to this discussion of how Christian principles should translate into politics. Ellul's view is that "the holy wars of Christianity were in imitation of what Islam had been doing already for a century or so" and were "a means to win new territories for Christianity and to force pagan people to become Christian," (1991, p.25). These wars, although no less embarrassing to Christianity than Constantine's wars and more repugnant, fall under what we are discussing here, because they were fought with at least some religious motive. But was it correct?

The obvious answer is no, for two reasons. Firstly, because Christians are called to love and forgiveness, not war; and secondly, it violates the principle of free will that is essential to grace and salvation. Though I don't believe that many churches in the West would actually advocate violence, it is worth shortly examining why war is unacceptable as an expression of Christian truth.

The model that has been used to justify such wars has been the *herem* that was sometimes declared against an enemy of the Jewish people in the Bible. A *herem* involved the complete destruction of this hostile people, including the slaughter of men, women, children, and livestock. What we must keep in mind is that such wars were ordained by God. We may find it difficult to understand, but the point is that the Israelites were called specifically by God to destroy a specific enemy. It cannot be arbitrarily generalised, and apart from that, even if one claimed that it should be generalised, it could only legitimately applied to one's own situation if you happened to be a member of God's chosen people, threatened by a hostile force, and called explicitly and undeniably by God to do so. Too often, when a country goes to war, the churches within that country pray for their state's victory, as if they were living in a holy Jerusalem, and they were God's chosen.

Otherwise, the struggle is depicted as being of Apocalyptic proportions, with one's own country (naturally) being on the side of righteousness, and the enemy conceived as the Enemy, who is the enemy of God. It is fairly obvious that, if we are to conceive of ourselves in biblical terms, our countries are more akin to Babylon than Jerusalem. There exists no real Christian state that might be justified in identifying itself with the Israelites, and if it did exist, I still deny that violence could be sanctioned without specific instructions from God [*with* specific instructions from God, according to Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, it would have to be acceptable). But, these are not the very last days, and we are not on the plain of Armageddon. Neither were the 'holy wars' of the past. We can not see them as an example to follow.

The Crusades, the conflict between Protestant and Catholics, and the colonial wars were all similarly unjustifiable, falling either into the category of non-religious, as in Constantine's wars, or into the category of unjustifiable, as with other 'Christian' wars. Ellul points out that most of these wars simply used Christianity as an ideological justification for imperialist greed, oppression and violence, and thus they should be condemned. Critics of Christianity are correct to abhor these actions, but not to judge Christianity as a faith because of them, as they were not true expressions of Christianity's beliefs. Because of this, the church itself should also acknowledge the mistakes of the past, and attempt to avoid similar mistakes in future. Politics is



the arena within which we must now be careful not to make the same mistakes as the past.

Historical political action on the part of Christians does exist, however, and often needs to be sharply criticised for many of the same reasons that the holy wars of yesterday and the church today does. Much of this ignominious political involvement took place during the alliance of 'throne and altar', where the church can be seen as being guilty of collusion with the state in a truly unholy alliance (I will deal with the need for separation of church and state when examining Christianity's liberal character).

From the time of Constantine, the church enjoyed the protection of the state, while the state gained from the legitimacy and credibility lent to it by the church. By supporting the state, and opposing rebellion, the church was given important subsidies, its cultic sites were protected, and the clergy were granted great privileges. This is why there were no theological voices crying out against 'religious wars' of the state. In this period of history, while not seeming actually evil, the church seems far more self-serving than it ought to be. Its unhealthy relationship with the state meant that it was unable to protect those whom the state was oppressing and was, in its principles, weakened too much to guide and direct the state.

Similar unhealthy relationships have existed throughout history, the church thriving under, and in turn supporting: Napoleon and the Republican French government, oppressive monarchy and then equally oppressive 'Communism' in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Stalin (by the Orthodox Church in Russia), and Hitler (by the Catholic Church in Germany). In each case, not only was the church guilty of collusion with the state, which could be argued away by means of 'submission to authorities' philosophies, but it actually altered its own theology to suit the system of government it was legitimising (Ellul, 1991, pp.23-45).

In this respect, the New Right is at least better than older Christian political philosophies, as it is not too afraid to oppose a government it believes is being unrighteous. I only argue that their method of opposition and their political agenda in general are incorrect. I will discuss the issue of opposition to the state in my discussion of Christianity's specifically liberal character.

The government of Apartheid South Africa not only enjoyed the support of many churches, but actually claimed that its policies were based on biblical principles. In return, the churches were granted Christian education in schools and a privileged position in broadcasting and censorship. The legacy of that

unholy alliance is still with us in the form of nominal Christians who, in their millions, can fill in their religious denomination on official forms, but cannot claim to be saved, or even practising Christians. The power granted to the church can often be seen to have corrupted both the institution and its theology. But, more important to our discussion is what the church did with the power it had. Plainly ridiculous limitations on freedom, such as extensive 'moral' censorship and Sabbath protection legislation were symptomatic of a church establishment which, apart from figuratively having made a pact with the Devil, had completely missed the point of its role in society and the implication of its basic philosophical principles. (Now that it is safe to do so, many churches have finally made their position clear as being opposed to racism and oppression, but they have still not repented of their essentially pointless focus in politics).

Ellul shows how the church was given help in return for its allegiance to the state: "Thus the state aided it in forcing people to become 'Christians'" (1991, p.28). This was often at the threat of violence, or another means of coercion, and like wars or colonising initiatives, it must be strongly criticised. Not only is it wrong because it does not act in love, or in accordance with the God-given right of free will, but it achieves nought, as conversion at sword-point is probably not terribly sincere. It is easy to see our lesson here. These spiritual-political acts of the past were wrong in that they attempted to use force in matters of conscience, but at least they were emphasising salvation. Lobbying for 'moral' legislation is also limiting individuals' freedom, but without the benefit of a correct focus. Even if it could work, it would still achieve nothing.

This current political focus of evangelicals is by no means the only political activity undertaken by Christians, or even by the church, but it is the loudest. More people notice it, and more people are affected by the legislation it lobbies for, than any other branch of Christian political activity. It is important that this activity, therefore, has the correct focus, so that, if it is attacked it is not due to its own fault. An understanding of the history of this movement's political influence is helpful in order to see how its focus has changed.

Richard V. Pierard, in Wood (1983), shows how Protestant involvement in politics in the countries of the North Atlantic grew out of the pietistic movements of the eighteenth century and focused on concerns for education, the needs of the poor, and the slave trade. Among their achievements were: active confrontation of the evils of the industrial system; the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and America; raising the status of women and assisting the poor and needy in the growing cities. (This is the church that I like to see!)

Fulfilling its role as Salt in the world, protecting and assisting the needy and downtrodden and even confronting powerful social evils, Social Gospel movements showed real love for their neighbours, not only in their individual capacities, but in their more powerful corporate bodies. The church here is shown, not as necessarily theologically weak and secular, but not a lackey of conservatism either. This is an historical precedent for a politically liberal church, working for social change and challenging the social order. My own modifications would be that this attitude be combined with a willingness to engage in pure political action and an emphasis on facilitating conversions.

Unfortunately, this assistance and concern for "the victims of the existing economic and social order" (Pierard in: Wood, 1983, pp.59-82) was to pass, in favour of a more conservative, less loving, political church. The crucial factor in the evangelical retreat from this approach was the growing identification of such social Christianity with theological liberalism. I see this as extremely unfortunate, as such an approach, though it has in the past and even today been associated with it, is in no way the natural outcome of "soft" theology. As I have shown, it is completely compatible with a strong, extremely scriptural Christianity, and it is a great pity that such socially conscious religion has been tied to, and perceived as being the outcome of, overly relativist and unscriptural theology.

It is my belief that Jesus preached a gospel that was at the same time morally uncompromising and compassionate. As Pierard points out: "Earlier evangelicals had seen social programs as complementary outgrowths of the regenerating work of Christ in saving souls. Good works naturally followed one's repentance from sin and turning to God" (Wood, 1983,p.61). This conception of good works is completely compatible with the biblical grace-oriented view of works, as found in James 2:14-26, where the bible shows that faith without works is dead, and that works themselves can not justify a man.

Unfortunately, the emphasis of these socially conscious Christian groups gradually shifted just to the 'works' aspect of the gospel, and faith in Christ began to be portrayed as irrelevant unless it was related to deeds. Compassion had become divorced from steadfastness in truth. Fundamentalists rightly saw this as a problem, but instead of simply correcting the shift in focus, they chose a more legalistically oriented approach, distancing from the good as well as the bad aspects of the social church. Pierard writes: "Fundamentalists remained social activists, but on behalf of conservatism and the implementation of moral values they regard as important." (Wood, 1983, p.61) .

Richard Carwardine's *Evangelicals and Politics in Ante-bellum America* (1993), chronicles this influence in great detail in the same period of American history, preceding the Civil War. Evangelicals, though for much of their history having followed a policy of political non-involvement, became, in the 1840s, pressured to let their voice be heard, both from within the church and without in society. The social climate of the day was so politically charged that even shops and bars were divided along party lines. In such a society, the church would have been swimming against a very strong tide by refusing to become involved. Such was the pressure from without to become involved, not just socially, but politically.

The pressure from within the church resulted from the fact that, "most ante-bellum evangelicals - especially, but by no means exclusively, Calvinists of the Reformed tradition, ... remained profoundly influenced by the Puritan conception of the state as a moral being..." (Carwardine, 1993, p.9). Thus, evangelicals in the United States of America became involved in politics to keep their state moral. I believe that the point made above about the difference between human political regimes and a nation chosen and organised by God is of relevance to the motivation of the ante-bellum evangelicals.

If God will bring a form of biblical judgement on a wicked nation today, then it would be expedient for Christians to try to change the nation's character to avoid disaster. Since the Hebrew nation was a nation, not in the modern sense of sharing a common geographical area, but in the sense of being marked by God, we must differentiate between God's people and a country with a significant Christian population. Pagan cities and towns in the Bible were not destroyed because of God's wrath (since they would not know they were sinning, and would have no Law to sin against), but because of his Plan for the prosperity of His people. The threats of wrathful judgement on cities and nations are addressed to God's people who have turned away from Him. Since Christians are made, not born, they can only turn from God individually, and even if they do so corporately, this is hardly the fault of the heathens in whose countries all Christians today live 'in exile'.

Thus, I believe that if Christians fear the biblical wrath of God, they should look more to the conduct of the church itself, rather than godless society. However, if my understanding of such wrath is unacceptable, the question still remains whether it will achieve anything at all to legally force society to obey God's laws. The New and Old Testament are filled with important verses relating to God's emphasis on the inner relationship with Him, rather than outward obedience.

The doctrine of salvation means that the only way that one can be without sin in God's sight is through forgiveness by the blood of Jesus. Thus, even if we could force non-Christian society around us to obey God's Law (which, anyway, we ourselves are no longer under in Christ) and to live perfect biblical lives in order to escape His wrath, God would still see our society as sinful, and thus would still have to destroy it. Even in the hypothetical, the attempt is useless.

Some ante-bellum Christians understood this well. Carwardine quotes Cornelius Cuyler as saying that he was "not a believer in the absurdity of making men religious by law," and Methodist theologians, involved in politics but obviously in a more correct way, as attacking the impropriety of supporting the "sway [of] the sceptre over conscience," (1993, p.20). However, even among these politicians and theologians, there was "widespread agreement that government should be administered *on Christian principles*, and with Christian ends in view," (1993, p.20). While this would be wonderful, I agree (aside from the unavoidable lack of consensus as to what those ends are), there is no reason to assume that secular political society should accept this. What reason could we possibly give that they would accept?

Thus, even this aim, without the threat of coercion, is naive, and would today result in such politics being dismissed as irrelevant. A better approach, that would be both more effective and more in keeping with the spiritual principles I put forward at the beginning of this paper, would be to assert the right of Christians as citizens to air their collective voice as a segment of society on political issues, pressing and lobbying for political decisions that might help both the cause of Christianity, and the suffering people around them.

Nevertheless, ante-bellum evangelicals insisted that human law should mirror the Divine law, supporting state laws against blasphemy, opposing government allowance of rail-travel and mail service on Sundays, and ardently campaigning to ban the sale and production of alcohol. This was not done quietly from the pulpit, or even through letters to congressmen or papers, but through using revivalist techniques in the service of openly political ends. Christian groups were later predictably to blame for the Prohibition period in United States history, which was, ironically, the beginning of their long history of organised crime.

## Modern Political Action

We have seen that there has been a precedent set for a politically liberal church, but that a trend surfaced of Christians and church movements moved away from the Salt and Light model of Christian politics, motivated by genuine religious concerns, turning instead to legalism and political conservatism that is contrary to the teachings and spirit of the Bible, as well as impractical and unable to achieve anything of lasting value. I believe this to be the current danger.

The Conservative political activism described above continued well into the post-World War II years, and even gained in intensity in the 1950s and 1960s, being formally aligned to several right-wing and anti-Communist movements, such as Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, and Christian Crusade (Pierard in: Wood, 1983, p.63). I find it strange that the doctrine of Christianity, that has such a strong message of care for the poor and downtrodden underclass of society could have been made to seem the antithetical opposite of a political system that shared many of its concerns in Communism.

I am in no way claiming that communism, as conceived by its architects or misguided practitioners, is completely compatible with Christianity, or even calling it a righteous political system, but I do not believe that Conservatism holds this privileged position either. At least in the area of care for the downtrodden, Communism and affiliated left-wing groups can intuitively be seen as having similar objectives to those of Christianity. On the other hand, one's intuitive response to the attitude of conservative Christians in the following quote from Pierard is far more negative: "Conservative evangelicals generally rejected liberal stances on racial questions, the Vietnam war, ...and poverty, and were critical of church leaders who spoke out on these issues. (Wood, 1983, p.64)

Rather than establish links with leftist groups whose social objectives are more congruent with a love and concern for humanity and for the protection of the right to free will, the principle political organisations of the New Right (historically best know for its representatives: the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and the National Christian Action Coalition) established links, on their inception, with organisations such as National Conservative Political Action Committee and Conservative Caucus. These organisations, to which the evangelical church was tying itself, had political platforms that included stances such as being anti-gun control and anti-ERA. (ERA is the Equal Rights Amendment, a proposed constitutional amendment stating that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or

any state on account of sex." [World Book Encyclopaedia Dictionary, 1983.] Even by conservative Christians, it must be admitted that these stances have very little, if any, support from scripture, and if not admitted, their "Christian" character is at least debatable.

The political problem that faces the Body of Christ today is not one of possible abuses resulting from an alliance of throne and altar. It is not the possibility of a Christian state waging war against an infidel state. The prime problem, as I see it, is that Christianity, through its links with conservative organisations and conservative ideologies, has become confused with conservatism itself.

Evidence of this can be found in an example of serious political stands taken by evangelical Christian organisations, Christian Voice and the Christian Voters Victory Fund (a subsidiary of the National Christian Action Council). Both these groups distributed indexes for Christian voters to help them choose the most moral candidate in their constituency. These indexes judged (and I use the word in its form most open to spiritual rebuke) whether or not a candidate was moral, according, supposedly, on his or her voting on moral issues. "In reality these indexes rated them on conservatism, so that it was possible for convicted Abscam defendants to score highly on the morality scale, while some proponents of combating world hunger, certainly a moral issue if there ever was one, could receive a zero in morality," (Pierard, 1983).

The Moral Majority and similar organisations of the New Right, claiming to be the voice of biblical evangelical Christianity, under the banner of family values and morality, have attempted to use Christian resources for what are essentially non-Christian occupations. Moral prohibitory politics would like to limit or deny the free will that we have through God's creation of man as a sentient moral being, and the freedom we have, by grace, from the consequences of our sin if we are saved. Conservative political preservation of the status quo, working against social reform and upliftment, runs contrary to the actions of Jesus in His feeding the poor, healing the sick and love for the 'dregs' of humanity, as well as to the command to Christians to practise charity in these forms. Neither of these approaches to politics can, I believe, be reconciled with Christian faith. Thus, as I will explain later, I believe that Christianity has, politically, more in common with liberalism than conservatism.

Incorrect, and essentially unscriptural approaches to politics and political action abound in the church, and are still popular, not only with isolated ignorant individuals, but with powerful Christian organisations. A possible way to correct this is to encourage Christians to consider the philosophical

implications of their faith, as Pope John Paul II has suggested in his latest Encyclical (New York Times, 1998), and to apply those principles to their political involvement. A more important way, I believe, is to break the church's increasingly traditional link with the political right, not to establish a similarly sycophantic relationship with the left, but to ally itself only with causes that are compatible with its essential spiritual philosophy. This need is important because the more powerful rightist Christian groups get, the more unsaved people are given the incorrect picture of an uncaring, book-burning church, and the more they are put in eternal peril because of their aversion to it.

It is easy to write the Moral Majority and its successors off as being on the lunatic fringe, especially when we consider ridiculous incidents such as when its Maryland chapter had attempted to ban the sale of gingerbread cookies, shaped as naked men and women in 1981, but we should remember that it was also the lunatic "Christian" fringe that planted the Oklahoma city bomb, that murders doctors that perform abortions, and that makes up the membership of organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan and A.W.B. Already, in 1981, a new Christian conservative coalition, called the Council for National Policy, had a budget of 250,000 dollars, and, as Richard Pierard, after much study of the group then concluded, new incarnations mean that it may have a greater impact on politics than ever before.

While I do oppose many of the motives and practises of the conservative church, I do not wish to demonise them here. They are, just like Christian groups closer to my own political views, made up of Christians who are trying to make a difference in the world for God. Much of what they do, including public demonstrations of faith in Christ at rallies, the funding of Christian resource organisations such as Focus on the Family, and their support of large-scale witness initiatives are a wonderful example to the Christian left. I simply hold that, if they were to hold their activities up to the light of the theological-philosophical principles of the Bible, they might realise that a lot of the calls to action by their groups are calls either to ineffectual (if perhaps effective) or incorrect action.

This being said, we must not assume that the problem is limited to the U.S.A. South Africa's evangelical community, getting almost all its literature, videos, music and inspiration from North American evangelicals, has taken on its attitude to politics as well. This is, in some ways, a good thing. It means that the church in this country is being made aware of its responsibility not only to pray for our country, but to act corporately in the political and social arena to affect its destiny. Unfortunately, along with this concern, evangelicals in this country have imitated their American counterparts by entering into lobbying the government on issues that do not warrant their involvement.



Prohibitionist politics has not died in South Africa with the death of state religion. It is back, and it has the new-found support of the growing evangelical and charismatic Christian movement in this country.

The current political involvement of the Body of Christ in this country is disappointing, not only because of right-wing and prohibitionist tendencies inherent in much of the action, but also due to the pettiness of that action in the face of the fact of Christian inaction in areas of need in South Africa, primarily the areas of welfare and the Lost.

Fairly recently, a local distributor of the American music label, Interscope, which has been much in the news in the U.S.A. because of pressure to censor the company, is rumoured to have burned a large number of videos by the controversial artist Marilyn Manson. BMG, the South African distributor for Interscope records, had been lobbied and threatened by Christian groups in this country who demanded that the video not be released for sale. (My source for this information is someone closely involved with and working in the South African music industry, who for professional reasons must remain anonymous). The point that concerns me, however, is not whether the record company acquiesced to demands, but that Christians made such demands at all.

This example is not an isolated one. Although there is no real way to gauge how much activity attempting to limit individual freedom is being advocated by Christian groups, I can comment on what I have personally experienced in this regard. I have been disappointed, at my own church, a small upper middle-class Baptist congregation, to have been presented on several occasions with petitions of various sorts. Petitions in themselves can be an acceptable way of demonstrating public opinion, and should, I believe, not be removed from the armoury of 'weapons' or tools available to the church. However, we must be careful not to use them in defence of unacceptable positions. Often, these tools are used in the correct way, but increasingly more often, they are not.

I have explained above why it is against the attitude of God in His creation of man with free will, to limit freedom. Men must be free to sin, because that is how God created them, and that is the condition for there being any meaning in the concept of either good or evil. All that matters, according to the doctrine of grace, is being born again, the works of an individual, whether saved or unsaved, are of no eternal consequence. And yet the church still tries to combat evil by limiting the freedom of men. It is to no avail. Not only is a prohibitionist approach to genuinely dangerous evil the wrong one, but the church is often caught up in spiritual irrelevancies. More

often than not, they are not combating heresies with importance for the salvation of the citizens of their country, but being puritanically focused on the affairs of their neighbours.

With special regard to attempts to censor pornography, to oppose the building of casinos, and social problems like prostitution, the church has a not entirely unfair reputation as being more of a prudish Mother Grundy than the Body of a mighty God. By, for example, stopping the sale of pornographic magazines, what will we achieve? Admittedly, it would make the world more palatable for us to live in, but are we called to make the world comfortable for the church? No, we are not. Whether or not a person sees sexually explicit images of naked human beings, or wastes their time at a casino or is tempted to sin with a prostitute, makes absolutely no difference to the important issue in life, namely, whether or not they are going to Heaven.

Could the time, money and manpower employed to rid the world of everything that we the saved find distasteful not be better employed in protecting, and reaching those prostitutes with the gospel? Is the most important issue regarding pornography not that it shows a warped image of what the sexuality that God intended for love can be, and is our duty then, not to inform people of the better alternative of respect for our bodies and real relationships based on love? Should we not be providing people with a better alternative to a life focused on material well-being and greed, that would lead them to waste their lives in the casino?

The basic truth is that it is the church who is to blame for the sinful, and more importantly, self-destructive lives that people are living. It is our responsibility to tell people the truth, and it is disappointing and embarrassing to see the church attacking the world simply because it is worldly. If we, as God's instrument on this planet, do not make ourselves available to be used in the way that we are called to be, then it is we who are to blame for the fad that is central to most worldly sin: most people do not even realise there is a better way.

An argument that might be put forward is that, if salvation is the most important issue in Christianity, then censorship is very necessary to make sure that people hear only the truth. I would agree. But this is the domain of the church, not the world. The world has no responsibility to tell people Christian truth, so why should we expect it? Would it not be more mature to accept that the world has no such responsibility and for once take seriously our own? If people do not know, have not heard, or have not had explained clearly and diligently to them the truth about Jesus, we should not react in self-righteous attempts to stop the world from being so bad. We should hang our own heads

in shame at having let so many souls slip through this world unreached. The church's attitude in trying to censor the world's religious beliefs is ridiculous and counter-productive if it is not doing *everything* in its power to ensure that every member of society understands the true gospel.

But I do not deny the danger of heresy. In the church, it is the most dangerous thing there is. Outside the church, it is dangerous, but only because we have let it be so. If people were clear on what the church believed about Jesus, it would be easier for them to identify heresy as hearsay, understanding that it has no more authority than the arbitrary pronouncement of any human mind. This would be a large step towards combating the growing religious relativism that the Pope talks about in his recent encyclical (New York Times, 1998). What Christians should consider is what would happen if they got their wish in this regard. If nothing could, by law, be said about Jesus except what the church approved as authoritative, there would be no choice. No dissent means no real possibility of assent. If we did not allow people to believe otherwise, how could we know with any assurance that those professing faith in Christ were really saved? Heresy within the church should be combated so that people might know the truth.

This is why I do not understand the uproar a film like *The Last Temptation of Christ* causes, since people who see it, even if they are at the sensitive point of making a religious decision when they see it, do not suppose that this is an authoritative interpretation of Jesus' life (or at least they wouldn't, if the church bothered to show more people its own Jesus film). Such an outcry about this film I find incongruous, not only because it is, to my knowledge, if properly understood, not nearly as blasphemous as it is made out to be, but because thousands of churches across South Africa and the world are currently preaching more subtle and more dangerous heresy, and people are believing it, because it comes from the church. I am speaking of the heresy that was already being spread in Paul's time in the church, that of salvation by works rather than grace. If a church had made *The Last Temptation*, there would be a problem.

I have no time here to address the issue of whether the film is in fact harmful or that far removed from the spirit of the bible, though from what I know of it, I believe it is not. All I will tell is the story of a friend of mine, who has now been a committed Christian for a year and a half. She saw the film, and because, by her report, of its positive influence, one week later she gave her life to the Lord. Would Satan be happy with a film that had that effect? Why then does the church ally him with it? The question concerning this paper is not whether or not such a film, or a hypothetical film that was more obviously blasphemous and scripturally inaccurate. Rather, we are concerned

with what the church' response should be. I am convinced that a response such as this one, which I received in tract form in a church bulletin is incorrect:

*Please Circulate This As Widely As Possible*

*Dear Christian friend*

*'The Last Temptation of Christ'*

*On Friday, 9 October 1998, I was invited to attend a preview of the film 'The Last Temptation of Christ' in the conference room of the Film and Publications Board. I was shocked, angered and disgusted by the audacity of the film makers who portray our Lord Jesus Christ as an immoral man.*

*(here follows a list of scriptural inaccuracies and blasphemies from the film) This is shocking, not so? We must stop this defiled, degrading and blasphemous film from being distributed in South Africa. Please inform all Christians that you know what the enemy is trying to do, and then please send letters and faxes of protest and complaints to:*

*Mr Iyavar Chetty*

*(full address and fax/phone numbers)*

*Thank you for taking this matter seriously and making a stand for righteousness, truth, and for your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

*"Who will rise up for me against the wicked?"*

*"Who will take a stand against evildoers?" Psalm 94:16*

*Yours in Christ*

*Rev Kenneth Meshoe MP (Leader of the ACDP)*

What would such action achieve? I understand that Mr Meshoe and his party have good intentions, wishing to take a stand for Christ. I believe this is the wrong way to go about it. As I have already (ad nauseum) explained about prohibitionist action limiting God-given necessary spiritual freedom, let me simply say in that regard, that this instance is no exception. What we can consider is the specific concrete results that would be achieved.

First and foremost, I think Mr Chetty would be annoyed. I know absolutely nothing about his spiritual status, but if he is not a Christian, his chances of ever taking the gospel seriously as something that might apply to his life would probably be reduced by being addressed as the servant of the Anti-Christ, as some over-zealous believers conceivably did. That is one soul possibly lost forever, because the church, in its self-righteous pride, has insulted him, allying him with the scripturally wicked. Plus, while any corporate action that is meaningful is in danger of being perceived by our society as extremist and probably intolerant, in this case they would be right. Because the banning of such a film would achieve less than nothing. The money spent on printing these tracts, the effort of writing to the Publications Board and probably the newspapers, the collective indignant rage would all have been

wasted because they have forgotten to consider one thing: making sure no-one sees an inaccurate portrayal of Jesus does not mean that anyone has been saved. If, however, the film had been shown nation-wide, and many people had seen it, what an incredible opportunity that would be for the church to tell the nation the Truth about Jesus. And at none of the cost of making its own film! Such a controversial film would obviously spark debate, turning the focus, momentarily in this spiritually apathetic world, on Jesus.

Talk-shows on radio and television, similar phone-in shows, readers forums in magazines and newspapers, discussions in a social context, in bars, at the dinner table, on the street, would all, for a while, have their attention turned to the question: Who was this Jesus?

How often does this happen? How could the church, through its own machinations, create such a situation? When would the church have the opportunity to tell people who would otherwise be indifferent to matters of religion the exact pure and authoritative truth about Jesus Christ, and have a willing and interested audience?

Obviously, the opportunity to say something would not necessarily convince people of its truth. Free will means that people must decide for themselves whether or not they accept God into their lives. The role of the church is to facilitate that they come to the point where they can make an informed decision, based on true information. The nation-wide discussion I describe would allow the church to explain why what it has to say about the historical Jesus is accurate and authoritative. It would enable people to have two sets of information about Jesus put before them and a choice required of them. The church could ask why anyone would believe a fictional representation by an artist as objective truth, even applaud his artistry as fiction, and then explain the history and existence of the gospels as we know them.

The point is that even a negative or inaccurate picture of the a biblical issue that sparks debate would create an opportunity for Christians to present the truth to their nation. Instead, we have just affirmed our reputation as Mother Grundies, too afraid of and threatened by competition to allow it to exist. If that is a real fear, then the money and mobilised believers could be better mobilised by showing their own *Jesus* film, renting out the same cinema on the night following the premiere of a blasphemous film, harnessing current interest. If we are afraid of people being *mised*, why are we not *leading* them?

I believe that mistakes such as the ones detailed above could be avoided if we moved towards a more politically liberal Christianity.

## Christian Political Action, a Prescriptive: Liberalism and Christianity

It has been my contention throughout this paper that Christianity has more in common with a liberal politics than with conservatism. My reasons are simple, As I have argued, based on the basic philosophical principles of Christianity, Christianity supports individual free choice, freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and freedom to decide one's own moral destiny in general. 'Liberal', in its original form, is inherently concerned with freedom, and Christianity, in its political outlook (and I speak prescriptively rather than descriptively of current political action) not only tolerates but encourages such freedom. Another issue that, while not contained in the meaning of the liberal label, has always been a liberal concern, has been a concern for the underprivileged of society, and the oppressed.

Christianity is completely compatible with 'setting the captives free' and should be seen as such. However, critics of a liberal Christian view often quote scripture as giving examples that support a more totalitarian and conservative approach to liberty and welfare. Having not the time to address this here, I will say that I could not possibly do a better job of proving them wrong than Jacques Ellul has already done in *Anarchy and Christianity* under the chapter with the title: The Bible as a Source of Anarchy (1991, pp.45-86) In it he quotes from both Old and New Testaments, extensive and thoroughly examined examples of the biblical attitude to oppressive power, which is not positive.

That there is a 'holy nation' of God's children, united by their belief in Christ, and called to act in the world, is true, as the churches of the American New Right and similar South African churches will tell you. But it is important that we choose carefully what biblical example we model ourselves on. Although there are many other biblical examples that we could go through, because of our situation today, and its parallels with his own, I would propose Daniel as our hero and role-model, as opposed to King Josiah.

Josiah, in 2 Kings 23:1-30, has an attitude similar to the politically active church of today. He sees that the nation he is supposed to be leading has turned away from God, and he wants to do something about it. He does this by disallowing his people to do what is detestable in God's sight. Not only does he cleanse the temple, he tears down all the shrines to other gods. He slaughters all the priests of the cults of the stars and high place, desecrating their altars. Josiah got rid of the mediums, the spiritists and all religious things and people that were not of the God of Israel. He was not the first to do so, or to be commanded by the Lord to do so, and he was not the last. But we cannot take him as our example. The reason I say this is because of the

difference between the biblical nation of Israel, and God's children now. We are not in power as Josiah was. It is not our country and does not even to pretend to be spiritually homogeneous. Our context is completely different, and that is why we are not spiritually justified in killing evildoers, or even attempting to forbid them to do anything "unchristian".

Instead, we might look to Daniel as our hero, because we, like he was, are in exile in a nation that is hostile to God, and hostile to us. We are waiting for God's Kingdom, but this is not it, so we should not treat it as such. We are not in Jerusalem, we are in Babylon. Daniel did not obey laws that were contrary to what God required of him, but he also did not try to force the king, the first day that he was there, to destroy the idols in the land and to obey God's law. That would have been foolish. Daniel made far more of a stand against evil by refusing to take part in it, and refusing to be either hateful or frightened of it, than he would have by telling those he had no authority over what they should do. This attitude did not betray a lack of commitment to God, as he was more than willing to die for what he believed. Daniel understood that we cannot force good on people, but that we must still tell them the truth.

In the New Testament, the principle is illustrated by Paul, where he says that Christians should not associate with sexually immoral people. He points out that he is obviously not referring to the people of the world, but to Christians who are immoral, saying that if we were to judge the world by our standards, we would have to leave the world. He finishes off, asserting, with the rhetorical question: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?" (1 Corinthians 5:9-13) that the moral lives of non-Christians are not the business of Christians. Thus, we can move towards a Christian liberal politics. Liberal in this sense, does not mean something identical with secular liberalism, nor does it mean permissive or theologically weak, but rather, supporting the notion of freedom, and the need for political action to protect the weak, old, and downtrodden. This, I believe, is in keeping with Jesus' injunction to believers to be Salt and Light to the world.

## **Salt and Light**

Although I am not convinced that it was purely intended as such, I believe that Jesus' injunction to his followers to be salt and light to the world supports the concept of a church that is both Liberal and Evangelical. I will explain the analogy. Salt, as it functioned in Jesus' day, was not merely a spice to enhance the taste of food. Salt was what preserved food, what protected it from decay and ultimate destruction by bacteria. We can see this as an

analogy for Christian political action. As I have already pointed out, the church has a social responsibility to protect, feed, heal, and look out for the welfare of those members of society who cannot do so themselves. Christians, if they love their neighbours, will want to protect them from tyranny and oppression, and the best way to achieve all these things in our society is through politics.

Christians, like salt preserving food, must preserve and protect people in any way they can. In their political involvement, however, they should not forget their motivation for their acts of kindness, as they, as Rev. Meshoe quotes, "take a stand against evildoers, " who would enslave, harm and oppress people. In this way, just as salt that has lost its salty flavour is useless, Christian political involvement that has lost its Christian 'flavour' is similarly useless. Christians in politics should always be honourable and loving in their actions, never losing sight of the fact that spiritual matters are still the most important. Christian politics can never be identical to secular leftist politics, because it is not only supposed to be salt, but also light.

Light, in this analogy, obviously refers to the duty of Christians to share the good news and spiritual truth about the grace of God in the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Just as we must use whatever political influence the church might have in order to achieve social good, so we must use that influence in any way that might help or allow us to spread the gospel and witness to people with a view to conversion. We must also not hide this light under a bushel, never neglecting to tell people, in any way that they will understand, about the gospel of salvation.

The Salt and Light approach to politics must be practical. If it is not, we might as well revert to political non-involvement, or remain in the paradigm of prohibitionist Christian movements that can achieve nothing of lasting value except a nice world for Christians to live in. I believe that the basic philosophical propositions of the Christian faith demand that we make a difference in this world, in this social sphere. I do not think that Jacques Ellul's ideal situation, of Christians living in a marginal Christian-anarchist community, separate from society is what we are called to do (1991, p.8). I believe this, not because I disagree with Ellul's many defences of an extreme Christian leftist approach to politics, but because it is all Salt, and no Light. Christians cannot be effective witnesses if they are not in the world.

So, what of practical applications of "Salt and Light Politics"? What would it mean in practice? Because it is based on the three biblical principles of grace, salvation and free will, there would be several differences between such a politics and the more conservative politics that is more obviously



practised now. It would involve an element of inaction, as well as one of action. Such a politics would oppose, rather than support censorship, both of doctrinally relevant and irrelevant material. That would be an example of Christian political inaction. Correspondingly, the *action* would be to give a public Christian view of such traditionally censored material, be it through official statements, or informative letters to the press, etc.

Moral-social issues such as prostitution, would also be viewed differently. Rather than viewing prostitutes as a vermin population on our streets who should be arrested or permanently removed from society, such a politics would acknowledge that not only can we not do anything about the existence of temptations to sin, but we *should* not, for reasons I have already articulated.

Christian action would be to treat this example as a symptom of a society, and therefore support initiatives or political views that would attempt to reform laws so that there would be no need for young men and women to degrade themselves in this way and put themselves in serious danger in order to survive. A more short term approach might be to use the church's lobbying power to institute laws that would give more adequate protection to prostitutes from rape, murder and abuse. This is in keeping with what should be the Christian attitude of love for all human beings, and a desire for the best for them. In this example, we should also consider the spiritual, "Light" dimension of the question. Attention must also be given to the personal salvation of individual prostitutes and outreach programmes facilitated.

Thus, politics, under a Salt and Light approach, would be very similar to the liberal system that we have now, where individual liberties, as long as they did not infringe on those of other citizens, would either be fought for or protected, depending on the specific case. This liberal emphasis on freedom would not, however, be coupled with a secular liberal 'relativism of the truth' (to refer once more to Pope John Paul's encyclical, as found in the New York Times, 1998) but rather with a strong emphasis on witness and evangelism and the corresponding religious liberties that would also be fought for.

Basically, any political action that runs contrary to the doctrines of salvation, free will and grace, must be rejected because it is simply not useful. However, what if Christian political activity is given a boost? What should we do if we are given more power over our secular state?

## A Possible Christian State?

There is a scenario, a 'best case scenario', if you will, in which Christians gain control of the government. How it could happen is not important, but let us suppose that the whole of parliament is converted by a revivalist working in the cafeteria, or perhaps due to a revival in the country, Christians are voted in. How should such a government conduct itself?

A Christian state, occurring before the advent of the actual kingdom of God, would, just like Christian politics, have to be organised around liberal principles. The laws and ordinances would also have to follow this pattern, basically being an implementation of the principles behind initiatives that Christian politics would attempt. But what about a state religion?

I believe that, in this case, of an earthly Christian state, it is dangerous to establish a 'Kingdom of God' without Him. I would tentatively say that the state could take the general form of our own state today, ensuring extensive religious liberty. For this reason, as well as the purely biblical one mentioned above, an actual Christian State will be impossible if brought about by man. There would be nothing particularly Christian about this state, because one would have to beware of infringing on the free will of citizens. As Ellul points out: "Christian faith can be grasped, heard, and received, only in and by faith. But faith cannot be forced," (1991, p.26) Any attempt to force Christianity on people, even by instituting a state religion, might not only limit freedom of choice, but actually endanger the chance of salvation. However, in the end, the question is irrelevant, as such a situation is, both logically and prophetically, very near to impossible.

## Conclusion

Thus, according to philosophical principles and examples found in the Bible itself, current inaction on behalf of Christians, as well as much action by Christians that is allied to the political Right, is unhelpful and unrighteous. The church has earned its reputation for both irrelevance and oppressive attitudes. It is time for a change. It is time for the church to examine its own basic principles and engage in politics according to them.

I do not, by any means propose a church that is weak and morally complacent, afraid to confront the world in case it offends it. Rather, I propose a church that is continually speaking out, both in telling people about the important choice they must make with regards to eternity, and in passionately denouncing all forms of oppression. The church's voice should be heard on

issues of social welfare, working politically to achieve a better life for all people in its society, and it should be constantly reminding them of the fact that the popular moral 'relativism of the truth' that is incorrectly defended in the name of tolerance, is not the only and correct way of viewing our world and existence.

The money, time, organisation and prayer that goes into much political action on the part of the church today is frankly wasted. If it were to be channelled into action that is based on the principles of Salt and Light as I have explained them above, infinitely more could be achieved, both temporally and eternally. A church whose actions do not contradict its basic philosophical principles, but rather make people constantly aware of these principles would be more effective in its role as facilitator for salvation, both because it would be intellectually more respectable, and because if these principles are followed, the only kind of antagonism towards Christianity they cause is the *right* kind of antagonism, more like persecution than irritation. Persecution is something the church might reasonably expect if it is doing its job, but being on the *receiving end of* righteous indignation is not.

I hope that, as the situation at the turn of the century becomes more and more desperate, we will see a church that is salt and light to the world, showing it where true hope comes from.

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[Pope John Paul II's 1998 Encyclical, *Fides Et Ratio* is read as quoted by: Alessandra Stanley; Michael Novak and New York Times Researchers, in *The New York Times*. October 16, 1 998]