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Why Vote

Jeff Taylor

Dordt College, jeff.taylor@dordt.edu

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Why Vote

Abstract

"Voting makes a statement—whether I am on the winning side or losing side—about truth and justice, even though it is only a small statement."

Posting about exercising the right and privilege to vote from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/why-vote-2/>

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in things

November 6, 2018

Why Vote

Jeff Taylor

When the nation is so polarized between Blue States and Red States, between *Make America Great Again* and *Never Trump*, and between “He Said” / “She Said,” Christians may be alienated by the acrimony that is contemporary politics. Paraphrasing Tertullian, we may wonder, “What has Jerusalem to do with Washington?” “Or with Des Moines, IA?” – when we think about politics at the state and local levels.

Does politics have anything to do with faith? It does. The terminology of Christianity is inherently political: Kingdom, Lord, Messiah/Christ (anointed one), Almighty, Prince of Peace, our citizenship is in Heaven, ambassadors for Christ, and so on. There is a reason that Christ was viewed by Roman officials and Jewish collaborators as a rival of Caesar. Of course, this is not the whole story. Jesus is not only Lord but also Teacher and Savior. Yet the political dimension remains, with its emphasis on power and authority.

Christianity is more than just obtaining a ticket to Heaven and then telling others how to get their tickets. The Kingdom of God is a political concept. When we talk about the Kingdom of God or Christ’s Kingdom, we may not understand the significance of biblical truth because the word *kingdom* seems archaic or fairytale-ish. In an American context, it might make sense to say that we are called to serve in the Government of God or the Jesus Administration. We know from Scripture that the Church will reign with Christ when his Kingdom comes in its fullness, in power and glory. But this is not just something in the future—in heaven after we die or on earth when Christ returns. God’s Kingdom is here in partial form and we have been blessed with the opportunity to be ambassadors and to advance the principles of Christ in all areas of life, including politics.

When Jesus prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” he meant, among other things, God’s will for government and society. How amazing that we are able to help fulfill, in some measure, the Lord’s Prayer. We do so even as we also pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

How do we apply Kingdom values in a fallen world? In the political realm, we can start with recognition that power is necessary but dangerous. Power is at the heart of politics. This fact is obscured in democracies like the United States where our rulers prefer to call themselves “public servants.” More often than not, this euphemism does not reflect the reality of the situation, but it does pay homage to an important ideal. In contrast to the worldly norm, the Kingdom of God has an alternate principle of servanthood instead of oppressive or self-serving rule (Luke 22).

Referring to the doctrine of papal infallibility, and also referring to secular monarchs, in 1887, Lord Acton wrote, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Acton was a Christian and he was expressing a scriptural truth. This warning is a central message of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. There are dangers that come from the concentration of power in both government *and* business, from centralization of control in both public power *and* private power.

Recognizing the coercive nature of the state—intended to wield the sword to punish wrongdoers (Romans 13)—there have been attempts by Christianity over the years to place limits on the power of the state so that it does not exceed its legitimate role in society. In the late nineteenth century, this emphasis on limited government, decentralized power, and a multiplicity of divinely-sanctioned social institutions was bolstered by Christian theories of subsidiarity (Pope Leo XIII) and **sphere sovereignty** (Abraham Kuyper). Kuyper recognized that different spheres of society—including family, church, school, and vocation—each possesses its own sovereignty by the grace of God. During his Princeton Theological Seminary lecture, in 1898, he said, “The State may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life. It must occupy its own place, on its own root, among all the other trees of the forest, and thus it has to honor and maintain every form of life which grows independently in its own sacred autonomy.”

Electoral politics is not the only way to be civically engaged or to make a difference in the world. Sometimes it is not the best way. There is something to be said for direct action, for social movements, and for serving as a witness and helping others through one’s daily life.

At the same time, politics can be an important way we engage culture and advance the Kingdom. Politics is not the only sphere of society, or vocation in life, in which Kingdom values can be applied but it is a key part of our mission. Yes, “Power corrupts,” but to invoke another cliché, we also know that “Nature abhors a vacuum.” If we combine the dictums of Acton and Aristotle, we can conclude that power is going to be wielded by *someone*—for good or evil or both. Since power is inevitable and we are blessed as citizens in the United States to have an opportunity to affect who wields that power and how that power is distributed, it makes sense to be involved.

Biblically, we are obligated as Christians to obey our government (unless its rules violate the higher law of God). Biblically, we are not obligated to vote. It is not a sin to abstain from voting. Sometimes there may be good reasons to reject all of the candidates on the ballot for a particular office and to sit out that election. Personally, I vote on a consistent basis because I

want to have an impact on politics. It is the least I can do. It is certainly not the most I can do, however, especially at the national level of government. In a presidential electorate of 130 million, my one vote is like a drop in the ocean. It is not going to make any difference to the outcome, one way or the other. But it is my vote and it matters to me. It is important not because soldiers died to give me that freedom. That is not what war is about. It is important because it is a manifestation of gifts bestowed by God. Voting is a little token of free will and human liberty, and of equal value in the eyes of God.

Voting makes a statement—whether I am on the winning side or losing side—about truth and justice, even though it is only a small statement. In the aggregate, my vote goes unnoticed as it is swallowed up in anonymity. In the end, most politicians only care about the bottom line of gaining votes. They do not care how enthusiastic or reluctant we are in casting them; motive is of no concern to them. But God notices my vote. When it comes to voting, I think God cares less about *whom* and more about *why*. I also think it is possible that my modest contribution at the ballot box may make a statement to spiritual powers and principalities of the world. As Christians we are called to speak truth to power . . . and to speak on behalf of the powerless. Our one vote is not going to change the world but we are called to be faithful in small things. We are called to follow our conscience, to be guided by the Holy Spirit, and to have the mind of Christ.

Voting is not everything but it is something. I think it is something worth doing. If so, it is worth doing right. We should be wise voters, going into the process with our eyes wide open. As Jesus sent his disciples out to preach and heal, he told them that they should be “as innocent as doves and as wise as serpents” (Matthew 10). In other words, morally pure but politically savvy. The temptation among politically-engaged Christians is to be the exact opposite: worldly but naive, spiritually compromised yet politically gullible. That is the worst possible combination. As we participate in government, we should try to be grounded in Scripture and in tune with the Spirit even as we have an accurate understanding of the political lay of the land.

If we want to understand how politics and government really work, we need to stop listening to the flattery of politicians who want our vote and instead read Machiavelli. In *The Prince*, he describes how power actually works. Nothing much has changed during the past 500 years because human nature has not changed. For example, deception is an attendant of worldly power—lies, intrigue, self-interest, manipulation, false choices, red herrings. This should not surprise us since we live in a fallen world that prefers satanic principles. But the seamy underside of politics should not discourage us from being involved. The presence of widespread darkness only increases the need for light and only accentuates the effect of light (even a little light).

Neither of the major political parties in the United States is specifically Christian. Each has some elements of the Christian ethic but overall their origins and aims are secular. Does the Republican Party truly serve the needs and fulfill the aspirations of evangelical, Bible-believing Christians? Of course not. Does the Democratic Party? Obviously not. (Neither party does a very good job when it comes to needs and aspirations in relation to Americans in general, even aside

from the Christian dimension.) Yet each party has something commendable about it, in theory if not always in practice, and it is possible for a Christian to use either party, or a third party, as a vehicle to advance important things like moral values, applied wisdom, social justice, and world peace. As individuals and as blocs, we can maximize our influence within the political process by voting, donating, and working during the primary season to improve the quality of choices in the general election.

The Kingdom of God transcends earthly ideologies and parties. The Kingdom is beyond Left and Right, and beyond the Center, too. It transcends the political spectrum altogether, just as eternity is outside of time. It is our mission to bring Kingdom principles down to earth and apply them in a way that both glorifies God and makes a practical difference. That is a high calling. Voting is one little way we can fulfill that calling. Voting is a start not a finish, the least not the most we can do. There are many additional things we can do: pray for officeholders, give money to worthy candidates, volunteer for a campaign, join an interest group, get involved in our local community, and, most importantly, try to provide a daily personal example of truth, morality, justice, mercy, and community.

Nowadays, political campaigns tend to be slick, cynical things making use of messianic and apocalyptic language. The language pushes our buttons of hope and fear. We can vote and engage in the political process without buying into such save-the-world, sky-is-falling nonsense. Put in proper perspective, and done with good intent, voting can be a God-glorifying, community-serving activity.