

This article, published by the FIEC's Care and Recognition Team, offers advice and suggestions in respect of some of the issues which churches and individual Christians will face in connection with the forthcoming General Election.

EVANGELICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE GENERAL ELECTION

The General Election is fast approaching, and within a very short time, Britain will have a new government.

For evangelical Christians and churches in 2010, the idea of becoming significantly involved in the democratic process, by which the new government will be elected, is not currently an attractive one.

Some Christians will feel that their main focus should be on the Great Commission, and that they should not allow themselves or their churches to be side-tracked by lesser, more transient matters.

In addition, public esteem for politicians of all shades appears to have reached a new low. The so-called "expenses scandal" which hit the headlines last year showed that a surprisingly large number of MPs had demonstrated an attitude of personal greed, rather than public-spiritedness. There are fears that this "scandal" will have made some voters reluctant to support any of the main parties, or even to vote at all.

As if this was not enough, party manifestos appear increasingly to be in conflict with biblical principles, as less and less account is taken of the country's Christian and biblical heritage. In fact, it seems that policies are no longer even rooted in the fundamental values which gave the parties their original identity and drive. The political ideals and philosophies of former times, whether they were right or not, are simply no longer there. Instead, the differences between the main parties relate more to management style and public image, than to fundamental beliefs or principles.

Why engage?

In spite of all this, our democracy is precious and must be treasured and supported. While all the recent exposures could easily persuade us to become cynical and wash our hands of the whole political process, we must overcome this temptation. Engaging with the political life of the nation has a sound biblical precedent. We strongly believe in the concept of an orderly society, after the pattern of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. The world's history has shown that a democratic process involving universal suffrage is the most effective way of bringing this about. Even flawed government is considerably better than no government at all.

As a result of God's common grace to us, we still have a democracy. By that same grace we still have hundreds of MPs who have not made themselves rich at the expense of the taxpayer, in spite of the opportunity, which was equally available to all of them, to do so. Despite all the imperfections, we also have scores of institutions, agencies and departments of government which respect people, are providing public services which are needed by individuals or by the population as a whole, or are working for an aspect of the common good, without any selfish or totalitarian agenda.

By involving ourselves in the processes by which Members of Parliament and governments are elected, we are contributing salt and light to the debate about the country's future and its needs. If evangelical Christians play a part, the election will be significantly more about principles and values than it will be if they don't.

Although they spoke to an entirely different context, the words "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you ... pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7) were nonetheless said to the people of God about their attitude to a city and culture with which they could not wholly identify.

We are urged to pray for “all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:2). There is no better context in which to pray for these outcomes than that of an involvement in the process which determines outcomes.

Above all, engaging with the political process gives evangelical Christians and churches the opportunity to exercise a prophetic voice. There will be opportunities, during the campaign:

- To declare righteousness. This will involve giving positive support to policies consistent with the Bible, and contending, courteously but cogently, against policies which are not.
- To show the relevance of God’s wisdom to the issues of the day. One example is to champion the importance of strengthening family life, on the basis of God’s wise commandment to “honour your father and mother.” How wise of God to strengthen the family by making it a loving obligation. There are many family issues within society which flow from this and can be supported and argued for by Christians.
- To remind those aspiring to serve in Parliament of the fact that all those seeking to rule are themselves subject to a higher governance
- To influence debates, events and outcomes

Being involved during the campaign also gives Christians the moral right to hold accountable those who are elected.

How to engage?

There are various ways in which churches and individuals can influence the political process:

Churches can:

- Ensure that the preaching during this period includes the application of biblical principles to issues which the forthcoming Election has brought to public attention
- Arrange for the Election to feature strongly as a subject for prayer in the church
- Engage with candidates, particularly challenging them over any stance which they or their parties have taken which are contrary to what pleases God. Some churches in the past have invited all the candidates to a public meeting under an independent chairman to give the opportunity for Christians to put questions on matters which are of concern to them
- Encourage Christians to vote
- Use issues raised in the Election as the themes of printed tracts or web site articles through which the gospel can be presented. Have on your church website a *General Election* quick link, leading to a section which gives details of sermon subjects for particular Sundays, any special meetings the church is arranging, and any articles covering biblical perspectives on election issues being raised nationally or locally, or which the church wants to be proactive in promoting.
- Include on its own website links to other helpful sites, such as those of the Christian Institute and the Jubilee Centre.

Individuals can:

- Offer themselves as candidates for election
- Make sure that they themselves vote in the Election
- Write letters to the local newspaper or participate in one of the many radio phone-ins, seeking to put a Christian perspective on an Election-related issue
- Ask and challenge candidates about their views on selected topics

Churches, however, must be aware that there are restrictions imposed on them by charity law. While churches are allowed to express support for a particular public policy, their status as a charity does not permit them to express support for a particular political party or candidate. People must be left to work out for themselves which candidates support any policy which the church may be publicly advocating.

If churches decide to host a public meeting, and to invite the candidates to participate, they have to invite all the candidates, unless one or more of them stands for purposes or policies which are fundamentally incompatible with the church's principles and aims. Any candidate judged to be incompatible on this basis may lawfully be denied an invitation to participate.

Quite apart from general charity rules, a church's own trust deed may prohibit it from allowing political meetings to take place on its premises. If this is the case, a church wanting to host a public meeting would have to arrange for it to be held at another venue.

How should we view the present system of party political democracy?

In the UK, the political landscape in the past 200 years has been dominated by three mainstream parties. More recently there has been a growth in the number of small minority parties, some of them characterised by a single issue.

We should be realistic about the inadequacies of the party system:

- The winning party always claims that it has an electoral mandate for every policy in its manifesto, whereas the voters are mostly only voting for the party which on balance seems to tick more boxes for them. Very few voters read the manifestos, let alone approve of every policy set out in them.
- To varying extents, most political parties, whether mainstream, regional (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) or single-issue, will have policies at odds with biblical principles.
- Since there is so much at stake, there will, in the course of the campaign, be many instances of spin and misrepresentation, and possibly some of dishonesty and insincerity.
- The downside of our freedom of expression is that anyone can put up as candidates, either as independents or by creating a minority party in order to promote controversial policies. There may be a minority party, for instance, whose policies we may feel are unjust, intimidating or socially-divisive. If such a party is fielding a candidate in your constituency, churches are at liberty to oppose specific policies as strongly as they wish, but charity rules make it unlawful for a charity to denounce parties by name. In its guidance on charities and elections, for instance, the Charity Commission states: *Charities must not support or oppose a political party or candidate. Charities must not donate funds to political parties.*

Christians never need to view the world through rose-tinted spectacles. Since our dependency is upon a sovereign God, and not upon political success, we can be objective and rational about all the weaknesses of our present system of democracy. None of its flaws preclude God from using it as a means by which he accomplishes his purposes. Support for it by Christians not only makes the nation safer, since it contributes to the preservation of democracy, but makes the democratic process better in moral tone and integrity than it otherwise would be. The involvement of Christians also helps towards the delivery of better outcomes, through the influence they will have had, at different levels, over policies, priorities and people.

What issues should particularly occupy our attention?

Christians are not merely interested in issues which have a specifically Christian moral aspect. They will be concerned about all people-related issues, and sometimes these can coincidentally support biblical principles without the parties advocating them having any kind of Christian motive or perspective. Christians can wholeheartedly support such policies.

Christians may wish to consider what policies are being advocated during the election which have a bearing on any of the following:

- The impact of public policy on people – we need to reclaim humanity, with its implications for the care of those in need, freedom of action and genuine diversity, as vital ingredients of a healthy society;

- The principle that people are not economic beings, but spiritual beings made in the image of God;
- The issues of life and death, and the importance of marriage as the essential glue of a stable society

What principles should govern our approach?

- In engaging in debate, be rational and fair.

If challenging or commenting privately or publicly, base the substance of your challenge on what a party says about itself, not on what other people have said, or on its public, press or media image.

Different newspapers, radio and television media have their own slants and stances, and to judge a party by the information available from only a single press or media source will not be either objective or fair. Beware also of what politicians say about their opponents – such statements are notoriously unreliable.

However, anything in a party manifesto, on its own printed literature or on its own web site can certainly be relied upon as an expression of the party's actual views and policies, as the parties intended their publication. You are on safe ground in challenging anything you find there.

- In considering how to vote, think about adopting one or other of the following options:

(a) bearing in mind that most parties have some unbiblical policies, look for the party or candidate whose policies seem best to reflect biblical values and the long-term good of society. Don't decide not to vote for a party simply on the basis that you think it hasn't a chance of winning – the number of votes gained by losing candidates is a matter of permanent record and significance, and those worthy of support are just as worthy of support whether they win or lose;

(b) irrespective of party label, vote for an individual, if there is one standing in your constituency, who is personally an evangelical Christian or in whose record there is clear evidence of support for biblical principles. Five years is a fairly lengthy period in which an individual MP can every day be a very great influence for good, locally and in Parliament. If elected, the opportunity to exercise that influence is largely the same, whichever the party the candidate represents, and irrespective of whether it is the government or an opposition party.

As 1 Timothy 2:1-4 suggests, action taken by evangelicals to enhance the quality of civil government has implications for the bigger picture. Good government helps to create the kind of stable social environment in which churches can focus in an untroubled and undistracted way on the work of the gospel.

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