

Why You Should Be Involved

A Biblical Case for Social and
Political Involvement



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Family Research Council

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A Biblical Case for Social and Political Involvement

BY JOHN ELDREDGE

Numerous books have been written, sermons preached and seminars held seeking to provide Christians with an apology for involvement in social issues. I have tried to distill the essence of the historical Christian perspective into the following five points, seeking to answer from the Scriptures this question:

Why should Christians be socially and politically involved?

I. A Christian View of Love and Compassion Compels Us.

We have a tendency to forget that the statistics we read in our newspapers and the reports we hear on the nightly news represent the lives of real people. Numbers like 1.2 million abortions every year can be overwhelming. For many of us, figures like these are too much to comprehend. Perhaps we can relate to one woman and one child whose life is in question.

Rachel was 17 when she learned that she was pregnant. Her high school guidance counselor suggested that she have an abortion and recommended a particular abortion clinic. No other alternatives

On the following pages, author and speaker **John Eldredge** presents a biblical basis for Christian social involvement. John is a former professor at the Focus on the Family Institute. He also served as a director within Focus on the Family's Public Policy division.

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were discussed. Rachel was afraid to tell her parents that she had become pregnant. Unaware of any alternatives, she consented to the abortion. Several days later she developed some flu-like symptoms in her chest. She went to her family doctor, but did not tell him about the abortion because she did not think the symptoms were related.

Sometime later, Rachel became so sick her father took her to a local hospital. The next morning she was found in a comatose condition. Subsequently, it was discovered that she had developed bacterial endocarditis—a condition directly attributable to a



post-abortion surgical infection. The bacterial endocarditis had caused blood clots to develop and become lodged in the vascular system of her brain, causing a stroke. When Rachel recovered from her coma, she was left permanently wheelchair-bound. Why was it not required by law that her parents know before the abortion ever happened?

Rachel's story is not uncommon, although the consequences for her were particularly extreme. But consider also the millions of women and girls who undergo deep physical and emotional distress as a result of abortion; and think of all those children

who would have been starting kindergarten this year, or playing on the varsity team, or going off to college, but were never given a chance.

Pornography and the issue of censorship is another example of a concern that typically strikes believers as peripheral to the Christian life. But consider Brian. This 12-year-old boy spent two hours in his pastor's study one summer day, repeatedly calling telephone dial-a-porn services. He was exposed to a variety of sexual activities, including intercourse between fathers and daughters and sexual activities between children. Two weeks after listening to dial-a-porn, Brian assaulted a 4-year-old neighbor girl. Tragic as it is, Brian is not an isolated case. Why is pornography so readily available to minors?

Then there is the story of Oliver. Oliver's wife, Helga, fell into a coma as a result of a heart attack. Because she was elderly and showing no signs of improvement, the hospital where Helga was staying went to court to force Oliver to keep her off life-sustaining equipment. Oliver knew this would not be Helga's desire, and he fought for his wife's life. Imagine the plight of this elderly man when the medical establishment tried to get a court to rule him incompetent to make decisions for his wife. Oliver won the case, and Helga died months later of natural causes. In subsequent cases, other vulnerable patients have not been so fortunate.

Because we are talking about real people, human beings made in the image of God, the question of the second greatest commandment is immediately raised. How do we "love our neighbor as ourselves" when it comes to social issues? What are we to do for all the Rachels, Brians and Helgas of our world? We know that Christ calls us to compassion for those in distress, but what exactly is meant by compassion? Is it merely feeling bad for the person?

B.B. Warfield, in his book, *The Person and the Work of Christ*, points us to the story of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus to broaden our understanding of compassion.¹ The setting is familiar to us. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, has died. These were close friends of Jesus, and Christ now comes down to Bethany where the two sisters are mourning. What is His reaction to this event (cf. John 11:33-36)?

Jesus has two reactions here: One is sorrow. (He wept). The other is described by the phrase “deeply moved,” used twice in this account of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. Warfield points out that the English translation doesn’t fully convey the sense of the Greek word *embrimaomai*. The root of this word means to “snort in spirit.” It was used by Greek playwrights to describe stallions before battle, rearing up on their hind legs, pawing at the air and snorting before they charged.

Jesus enters His Father’s world, a place that should have been full of beauty, order and, above all, life. Instead He finds ugliness, disarray and death. Christ is not only moved with sorrow here, He is outraged. He figuratively snorts in spirit. That gives us a fuller understanding of the biblical meaning of compassion. This is an appropriate reaction to issues like abortion, pornography and euthanasia—a reaction that should be encouraged in our churches.

Outrage may be an appropriate place to start, but we know that outrage is not enough. A biblical sense of compassion demands action on our part. We are all familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Both the priest and the Levite could see that an injustice had been done to the man in the ditch, but the Samaritan did something about it. Biblical compassion is

not sentimental wish-wash. A sense of outrage in the face of an injustice must result in action on our neighbor’s behalf. When you hear a story like Rachel’s or Brian’s, you must do something.

Why should Christians be socially and politically involved?

II. A Christian View of Human Beings Assumes It.

The late Francis Schaeffer used to say that “man is not just a soul to be saved.” Throughout his published works, Schaeffer placed a great emphasis on the biblical model of humanity, and for good



reason. We understand from Scripture that people have physical needs that God is concerned with; we have emotional needs and social needs that God is concerned with as well. British theologian John Stott says, “Therefore if we truly love our neighbors, and because of their worth desire to save them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the well-being of the soul, their body and the community. And our concern shall lead to practical programs . . .”²

The evangelical church in particular has lost this balance. Its focus on evangelism has all but excluded social action. People are not just souls to be saved. Take a careful look at the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. This sobering passage reveals that Christ is very concerned about our life here and now, not just in the hereafter. What have the sheep done, that they are welcomed into eternal life? They have engaged in practical ministry to people's physical and emotional needs. In contrast, the goats are condemned for failing to meet those needs. There is no mention of evangelism here; no Four Laws, no altar calls. In many places elsewhere in Scripture, Christ makes it clear we are to be very concerned for our neighbor's eter-



nal destiny (Matthew 28:18-20), but never to the exclusion of their physical and emotional needs.

Shortly after World War II, a young theologian wrote a small book that exploded like a bomb in the peaceful world of conservative Christianity. The writer, Carl Henry, chastised fundamentalism for its narrow emphasis on personal salvation and its lack of concern for problems facing society. Until Christians became serious about dealing

with social problems, they could never be the salt and light that Scripture commands them to be. Henry's book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, helped launch the modern evangelical Christian movement. But 45 years later, Henry's message is still calling for the church to impact the culture. It is a message that has been slow to sink in.

Compassion demands action, and the biblical model of man requires that we take action not only to save souls, but for the temporal welfare of those souls as well. Frankly, when our Christianity fails to address all aspects of life, it appears to the world too trivial to be true. Perhaps it would be best to consider, at this point, the relationship between social action and evangelism.

Why should Christians be socially and politically involved?

III. The Effectiveness of Our Evangelism Depends On It.

The relationship of social action to evangelism is a question that has kept the Christian community in tension for the better part of a century. In 1982, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism and the World Evangelical Fellowship sponsored a conference in Grand Rapids, Mich., to draft a report bringing social action and evangelism into biblical balance. The report concluded that these two areas of Christian concern are "like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird."³ The conference delineated three ways in which social responsibility and evangelism are related:

- 1) "Social activity is a consequence of evangelism." That is, our salvation should result in social responsibility. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6 that

“faith works through love.” James 2:18 says, “I will show you my faith by my works.” Titus 2:14 tells us that Christ came not only to “redeem us from all iniquity,” but also “to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” Similarly, Ephesians 2:10 teaches that Christians are “created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Thus, the writers of the Grand Rapids report noted that “good works cannot save, but they are an indispensable evidence of salvation . . . Social responsibility, like evangelism, should therefore be included in the teaching ministry of the church.”⁴



2) “Social activity can be a bridge to evangelism. It can break down prejudice and suspicion, open closed doors, and gain a hearing for the gospel . . . If we turn a blind eye to the suffering, the social oppression, the alienation and loneliness of people, let us not be surprised if they turn a deaf ear to our message of eternal salvation.”⁵

3) “Social activity not only follows evangelism as its consequence and aim, and precedes it as a bridge, but also accompanies it as its partner.” In His own ministry, Jesus went about “teaching and preaching” and also “doing good

and healing. Both were expressions of His compassion for people, and both should be ours . . . Thus evangelism and social responsibility, while distinct from one another, are integrally related in our proclamation of and obedience to the gospel. The partnership is, in reality, a marriage.”⁶

So far, most Christians would agree with what’s been said. We know we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves, and we know that love must have practical ramifications. Where the tension usually arises is when the issues are controversial. Feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless—there is little debate that the church should do these things. The church grows reluctant when an issue becomes “political.” The Grand Rapids Report is helpful in this regard as well. The drafters included the following table to clarify the difference between social service and social action:

Social Service	Social Action
• Relieving human need	• Removing the causes of human need
• Philanthropic activity	• Political/economic activity
• Seeking to minister to individuals and families	• Seeking to transform the structures of society
• Works of mercy	• The quest for justice

The column on the left is an area of comfort, where the church can remain free from controversy. The column on the right represents activity often derisively labeled “political,” and by implication off-limits for the Christian. While these distinctions are helpful, they also are artificial. It is not practical or possible to get involved in one column without the other. Stott uses slavery as an example. The harsh treatment of slaves might be ameliorated

through social service, but you will continue to have the problem unless you abolish slavery through social action. Or if accidents keep occurring at an unregulated intersection, then what is needed is not more ambulances but a traffic light. “So if we truly love our neighbors and want to serve them, our service may oblige us to take . . . political action on their behalf,” notes Stott.

Why should we be socially and politically involved?
IV. A Christian View of Government Requires It.

Politics is defined as “the art or science of government.” Given the respect the Bible accords to government, why has the church shied away from politics? There are many reasons, but foremost among them is the confusion surrounding the New Testament teaching on civil government. One



scholar who has looked deeply into the relationship of Christians to the state is British theologian C.E.B. Cranfield. He makes these observations from the following passages:

Mark 12:13-17

The Herodians, trying to trap Jesus, ask Him if it is proper to pay taxes to the Roman government. At Christ’s request, one of them produces a Roman

coin and Christ says, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” The word “render” carries a sense of duty or obligation. Christ commands His hearers to do their duty to civil government, and in the United States that means participation in the political process. Those of us who live in a democratic republic are Caesar.

But why this sense of obligation? The fact that the Jewish questioners produce a Roman coin is essential in the story. Those taking advantage of the amenities of Caesar’s rule are obligated to help pay for them. As citizens of our country, we benefit from its economic prosperity, its political order, its public safety, transportation, educational opportunities, and so forth. We are obligated to our government.

Romans 13:1-4

God has established government, and service to the state is part of our debt of gratitude. Romans 13 does not appear in a vacuum. It is merely a continuation of an exhortation that starts with chapter 12, an exuberant call for us to love, to give, to bless and to serve others. Why? This attitude of service wells up out of a deep sense of gratitude for all that God has done and is doing for us, His people (chapters 1-11). Further, God’s purpose in establishing government is very limited and very specific: to reward good behavior and punish evil. Magnificent light is shed on this in 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

When government restrains chaos, conditions are best for preaching the gospel, and God desires that all people be given the opportunity to repent and be saved. This is why government is essential. What stronger motivation could there possibly be for the Christian to ensure that government works well?

Unfortunately, a superficial reading of Romans 13 has led many Christians to conclude that we must accept whatever form of government we have and submit to whatever actions our rulers take. Scriptural examples abound where God's people opposed authority when their human leaders violated the law of God.

Acts 5:29

The principle set forth in this passage is quite clear: When government violates the will of God, it is our duty to oppose it. Part of the act of submission is to hold our government accountable to a higher law, the law of God. Remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3)? Or Rahab (Joshua 2)? Or the Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1)? They are all examples of limited submission.⁷

It is interesting to note that Charles Finney, the great 19th-century evangelist still revered today for his work in revival, taught his followers that Christians have a moral duty to oppose government when government fails to do the will of God.⁸ Many of Finney's converts were instrumental in the abolition of slavery. The state is not supreme, and it is the role of the church to hold the state to a higher standard. This brings us to our fifth reason for social involvement.

Why should Christians be socially and politically involved?

V. The Character of God and the Lordship of Christ Requires It.

Many Christians view the God they serve as Lord of their own lives and of His church, but not much else. A biblical view of His dominion is much broader. In his work on social involvement, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, John Stott points to three elements of God's nature that have been neglected by the church:

- God is the God of the sacred and the secular. Christians tend to view God as concerned only with religious things, but God is the God of all creation and His concern extends even to the smallest sparrow.

Stott believes our concept of God is too religious. "We imagine that He is chiefly interested in religion, in religious buildings, religious activities and religious books. Of course He is concerned about these things, but only if they are related to the whole of life. According to the Old Testament prophets and the teaching of Jesus, God is very critical of 'religion,' if by that is meant religious services divorced from real life, loving service, and the moral obedience of the heart."⁹



Francis Schaeffer spent a great deal of his life helping the church to broaden its understanding of the Lordship of Christ. As he wrote in *A Christian Manifesto*, "A platonic concept of spirituality which does not include all of life is not true biblical spirituality. True spirituality touches all of life, including things of government and law, and not just 'religious things.'"¹⁰ There is no part of life that is secular if that means God is not concerned about it.

- God is the God of the nations as well as of His covenant people. You recall in the book of Daniel how Nebuchadnezzar is humbled to the point of grazing on grass. He had to learn the hard way that “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.” The Israelites were often guilty of reducing God to a petty tribal deity—Yahweh, the God of the Jews. Amos is sent by God to remind them that just as He brought Israel up from Egypt, so He brought the Philistines from Crete and the Arameans from Kir. The self-interest of Christians today reflects the same error the Israelites made. God raises up His people to be a “blessing to all nations.”



- God is the God of justice as well as of justification. We serve a compassionate God who abounds in mercy, but not to the exclusion of justice (Psalm 146:7-9). Again, God is not only concerned with justice among His people, but among all nations. In the first two chapters of Amos, God indicts other nations for their brutal practices. Syria is condemned for savage cruelty, Philistia for selling whole communities into slavery, Tyre for breaking a treaty of brother-

hood, Edom for pitiless hostility toward Israel, Ammon for atrocities in warfare, and Moab for desecrating the bones of a neighboring king. Sodom and Gomorrah are well aware that God is concerned with injustice wherever He finds it.

Stott sums up these three points: “Here then is the God of the Bible. His concerns are all-embracing—not only the ‘sacred’ but the secular, . . . not only His covenant people but all people, not only justification but social justice in every community, not only His gospel but His law. So we must not attempt to narrow down His interests. Moreover, ours must be as broad as His.”¹¹

There is so much more to be said but, hopefully, this will suffice to set forth a biblical case for social involvement. Perhaps it would be helpful to present the study in outline form:

Why should Christians be socially and politically involved?

I. A Christian View of Love and Compassion

Compels Us.

- Matthew 22:39 - We must love our neighbors as ourselves.
- John 11:33-38 - Love involves a sense of outrage in the face of evil.
- Luke 10:25-37 - Love requires that we take action.

II. A Christian View of Human Beings Assumes It

- Matthew 25:31-46 - We must take seriously man’s physical, emotional and social needs.

III. The Effectiveness of Our Evangelism Depends On It.

- Galatians 5:6, Titus 2:14 - Good works are a consequence of evangelism.
- Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 5:16 - Good works are a bridge to evangelism.

IV. A Christian View of Government Requires It.

- Mark 12:13-17 - We have a duty to government, including participation.
- Romans 13:1-4 - Government is ordained by God to reward good and punish evil.
- 1 Timothy 2:1-4 - Government maintains the social order so that the gospel may go forth.
- Acts 5:29 - Our submission to government is limited; we must hold it accountable to a higher standard.

V. The Character of God and the Lordship of Christ Require It.

- Isaiah 58 - God is the God of the secular as well as the sacred—critical of superficial religion.
- Daniel 4:32 - God is the Lord over all nations.
- Psalm 146:7-9 - God is the concerned with justice as well as mercy.

Conclusion

I trust this booklet provides a compelling case for Christian social and political involvement. If so, several questions naturally follow: What shall I do? How do I get involved? Where do I turn for help? Focus on the Family has developed a number of resources and avenues for involvement. A good place to begin is at our Public Policy Web site, www.Citizenlink.com.

Information is also available at the Family Research Council website, www.frc.org.

FOOTNOTES

1. B.B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian, 1970, pp. 110-115.
2. John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990, pp. 110-115.
3. *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*, The Grand Rapids Report, Paternoster, 1982, p. 23.
4. Grand Rapids Report, p. 22.
5. Grand Rapids Report, p. 22.
6. Grand Rapids Report, p. 23
7. C.E.B. Cranfield, "The Christian's Political Responsibility According to the New Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15, 1962, pp. 176-192.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981, p. 87.
9. Stott, p. 15.
10. Schaeffer, p. 124.
11. Stott, pp. 17-18.

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