



THE PROPHETIC CHURCH (PART 6)

The prophetic church and worldly power

MAIN CHALLENGE

Should Christians and the Church be involved in worldly politics? This question has been vitally relevant since the 4th century. We can do a power of good, but we can also be sucked into an horrific compromise of our very prophetic identity. If we do get involved, what is important is that we do not compromise the truth of our message in order to achieve our political objectives; that we maintain a true understanding of what "the world" is and what our relationship is with it; and that we do not prioritise worldly power over the way of the cross by seeking it as an end in itself. What is your highest priority: seeking the Kingdom of God, or seeking to make society more "Christian"?

We are examining the nature and purpose of the Church from the standpoint of the key Scripture found in Joel 2:28-29 and Ac. 2:16ff, namely that we are called to be a prophetic people. This means we are fundamentally a people endowed with the personal presence of the Spirit of God, called to speak God's word into the darkness and ignorance of a world without God and required to live lives consistent with the message and example of Jesus, so that people will recognise that we are those who have "been with Jesus".

In the last message, we looked at the model the historic Church adopted for around 1600 years when it was one of the central pillars of western society, a model which is still pursued by many in the Church today. We saw that, even though this model offers certain surface advantages to believers and the cause of Christ, nevertheless, it is completely antithetical to the prophetic calling of the Church. This raises an obvious question that is vitally relevant today: should the Church get involved in worldly society (particularly in politics)? If so, how and why? These questions will be discussed in this message.

The Church and political power

The Christian Church has a particularly mixed history when it comes to involvement in worldly politics. I will not recount the details of the dark history of the Middle Ages, where the Church was overtly and explicitly involved in the Crusades, the Inquisition, the persecution of heretics and unbelievers, and wars against fellow believers who shared a different theology. These things all happened with scarcely even a *question* being asked by so-called "believers" as to whether or not they were God's plan – a truly remarkable fact that shows how easily misled even the most pious of people can be. Those events, which surely give us a stark warning about what can happen when we get involved in worldly politics, needs to be placed firmly on the negative side of the scales.

On the other hand, there are undoubtedly some examples where Christians have banded together and used political power to do good in society, and to bring change that might otherwise not have happened. The most notable examples involved the abolition of the slave trade in Great Britain and her Empire around 1800 under the inspiration of William Wilberforce, and later the fight for the abolition of slavery in America prior to the Civil



War. These situations show what a power for good the example and efforts of godly men and women can be.

On another hand, we also need to face the fact that the involvement of godly people with godly motives is not sufficient to ensure a godly outcome; great wisdom and discernment are also needed. A case in point is the well-intentioned push for the abolition of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages in late 19th and early 20th century America, which was ultimately successful through the constitutional amendment known as Prohibition (in-force from 1920 to 1933); nevertheless, although the motives behind Prohibition were no doubt sincere, as a political effort it did not achieve its objectives (indeed, it fostered the rise of organised crime in America and has therefore indirectly led to a lot of violence right through to the present day) and can hardly be considered a success.

So what do these examples show us? What lessons should we draw from them? As citizens in a democracy, we are as entitled as any other group to "have our say", but how should we do that? What role should we seek to have in a modern secular society?

"The world"

At the centre of this issue is an important theological issue that we need to explore and understand: what exactly is God's attitude to "the world", and what does he expect our attitude to be towards it?

When we ask that question, we find that the New Testament has two sides to this question that seem to be poles apart. Firstly, in Jn 3:16, we read of God's great love for "the world", and how this love motivated his offer of Jesus on the cross. Thus, from this text there is no doubt that we are called to love the world (as God does), to involve ourselves in human society (as Jesus did), and do everything in our power to save as many people as possible.

However, this needs to be balanced by 1 Jn 2:15 (coincidentally, from exactly the same author) where we read the following uncompromising warning: *"Do not love the world, or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in them."* How does this reconcile with Jn 3:16?

A similar problem emerges when we ask the question of who exactly is in control of "the world". In Ps. 24:1, we read that "the earth is the LORD's, and everything in it", and this is confirmed in the New Testament when we read that "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given to the exalted Messiah Jesus (Mt. 28:18), and this is pretty clear evidence that God and his Messiah are in charge. In that case, why does Jesus himself refer to Satan as the "prince" of this world (Jn 12:31) whom he was going to drive out by his death, and why does John, in spite of this saying, say that "the whole world is (still) under the control of the evil one" (1 Jn 5:19)?

So who is really in charge here on earth – God or Satan?

To reconcile this paradox, we need to understand the difference between theoretical control and practical control. The verses that talk about God being in charge all talk in



terms of him (and his delegate, the exalted Messiah) as the *rightful authority*. He owns the world by virtue of creation, and doubly so because of redemption. His authority is the theoretical control of the earth and all that is in it. But we know that, since the first sin in the Garden of Eden, mankind has been in rebellion against God's rule, and we have been unwilling to submit to his rightful authority. This has placed the *practical control* of the earth in the hands of Satan, God's enemy.

In 1 Jn 3:8, we read that "the one who does what is sinful is of the devil", and this is something we need to be brutally aware of, since we know that we all still sin. There is no such thing as an unimportant sin; yes, our sins have been forgiven by the grace of God, but every time we do something contrary to the will of God for us (which is what sin is), we undermine God's legitimate rule on the earth and give power to the enemy.

This is surely the explanation also of why "the world" that Jesus came to save is at the same time so opposed to God that we cannot "love" it. For the "world" we are meant to love is *the people in the world* that Jesus came to save, and the world we are meant to hate and avoid is the *system of worldly affairs* that a sinful society has set up to govern itself – which is steeped in sin, and therefore completely under the control of the devil.

Let us be practical: the "world" that we are called to hate is the human society that "works" precisely because people are selfish and greedy, pre-occupied with their own agendas and totally opposed to the Kingdom of God that requires us to lay down our lives for our fellow men and women. It is an economic agenda that says it is acceptable to take advantage of the weak and vulnerable so long as we don't break the law; it is a social agenda that says that some sins are acceptable and others are not; it is a political agenda that supports our fears, our hates and our prejudices, because the objects of our fear and hatred and prejudice are "outsiders" who are not part of "us". All these are manifestations of "the world" in the sense of the society that selfish and greedy people have set up to justify the way they are.

As Christians, we are called to "hate" this world, and to live lives so radically different to it that the world will hate us for our example. However, there is another side to our prophetic role: we are also called to give ourselves in love to everyone in the world – especially those whom the world as a social and political system has forgotten or left behind – in order to save them. In other words, we need to be present in the world; just as Jesus was incarnate in the world, with a purpose of salvation. We can only do this to the extent that we are free from the motivations behind the world's systems – its selfishness, its greed, its pride, and its hatreds, prejudices and fears – so free that we can see through it and therefore live beyond its influence. We need to be free from its influence so that we can live within the world without fear of being polluted by it. And we need to live *in* the world so that we can save people *out of* it.

Ultimately, this is what "the Church" actually is. The word "church" in Greek is *ek-klesia*, which literally means "called out". At the centre of our identity is the idea that we are called to have such a renewed mind that we can live in the world without compromising our inner identity, and therefore go into the darkest corners of our world to save "sinners" out of this world's system and into the Kingdom of God. This idea is encapsulated by the simple phrase, "in the world, but not of the world"; however, the tragedy is that too many Christians live lives that are the complete opposite of this ideal.



Unable to free themselves from worldly motivations and appetites, they live their lives in fear of the power of sin to entice or entrap them, creating a “holy enclave” in the church to protect them from the sinful world “out there”. Such people often put on an outward show of piety, but ultimately they are out of the world (instead of being embedded in it), because in their heart they are still of it.

Practical implications

Where does this leave us? Essentially, the theological and pastoral issues in the previous section lead us to some immensely practical outworkings for the way the Church can and should be involved in worldly affairs.

1. It is essential that our involvement does not compromise our spiritual identity to be separate from the world.

Our primary role in human society is our prophetic witness, not our political involvement. If we can be involved politically without compromising our prophetic identity, well and good! But, if not, we need to step out of the way and leave the world in God’s hands.

Human politics is all about compromise: I join with you in a faction or a party on the basis that I will support X (which I don’t agree with, but which is important to you) if you will support Y (important to me, but not to you). Without such compromise, nothing would be achieved among selfish human beings who are not motivated by the will of God. This means, if a Christian (or even the Church as a whole) is to be involved in worldly politics, we need to compromise: the question is, compromise *what*?

It is reasonable to support one political change over another, even if both are godly, if the one is perceived to be more urgent, or more achievable. But what is not acceptable is for the individual Christian (or worse still, the Church as a whole) to endorse the sin not being prioritised in order to achieve the outcome that is being pursued. You can say that you will not campaign against corporate greed in order to win support for another more achievable objective; what you cannot do is compromise and say that corporate greed is good – or even “not too bad”.

God cannot, and does not, support sin in any form. There are no “acceptable” sins in human society. Just because certain sins have always been tolerated, that does not mean they are acceptable to God. For example, many Christians seem to turn a blind eye to corporate greed and selfishness but advocate passionately against gay marriage, seeing the second as a “Christian” issue and the first not. But the only reason we would ever think this is that past generations of “Christian” society treated these sins with this double standard. We need to pray for God to release us from such unbiblical and damaging double standards.



2. There are limits to what we can achieve in the world, so we need to set limited agendas.

This is a very practical (and, at times, heart-breaking) issue. This world, as a system, is unsavable; Jesus himself warns us that only a small minority will ever walk the way of salvation, and the rest (the vast majority) will continue to walk the way of destruction (Lk 13:22-25). This means that what we can achieve is severely limited. We may have a “win” in terms of controlling abortions, but abortion will still take place; we may make greedy corporations more legally accountable, but we will never stop the powerful exploiting the weak. And, for every new initiative we are able to implement, people will find a hundred ways to get around it.

This does not mean we should stop trying, of course; but it does mean we should be realistic about what we can achieve, and not expect God to work miracles if those miracles would involve overriding human free will. If God were able and willing to do that, the cross would not have been necessary. So we must set limited agendas that (in faith) are realistically attainable, be patient, and do not allow ourselves to be discouraged.

3. Wisdom is just as important as pure motives; since we are dealing with a society composed of sinful and people, there will always be negative outcomes from even well-intentioned activity, and we need to face this issue and deal with it prayerfully.

This is an extension of the previous point; there are many pitfalls in seeking to reform sinful society, and prayerful wisdom is necessary to avoid unforeseen outcomes. Here are a few things I have learnt that seem to me to be important:

- *God does not view a people as “righteous” if they have godly laws, unless they also keep those godly laws (see Rom. 2:17-29) – all too often, I hear Christians justifying a particular piece of legislative reform on the basis that “righteousness exalts a nation” (Prov. 14:34), as if the mere fact of having a Bible-based law will achieve this outcome. But this is not the case; God responds to the laws we keep from the heart, not the laws we have on our statute books; so, if we want our nation to be more righteous, we need to consider the vexing question of how people in our society will respond to our proposed legislation (humble submission or rebellion?) once it is enacted. Remember Prohibition, which is an object lesson in enforcing legislation on people who don’t want it!*
- *Changed behaviour can come from both the carrot and the stick, and sometimes both approaches are needed. How do you protect teenagers from sexually transmitted infections: handing out free condoms (“the carrot”), or educating them about abstinence (“the stick”)? The former may be more practically effective but seems to condone promiscuity; the latter sends a better theoretical message, but runs hard against the practical problems of human nature. The truth is, neither approach is perfect due to*



human sin and brokenness, and a multi-pronged approach is surely needed to have a long-term impact. This same principle applies to each and every issue.

- *Try to understand to the real issue, and don't just react to the immediate "problem".* Most Christians would agree that abortion as a means of contraception or family planning¹ is a terrible thing, but how many have given much thought to exactly *why* so many people choose this option? As well as the moral aspect of the decision, there are aspects of health and education, poverty and family breakup, and many other similar issues. The easiest way to reduce the number of abortions is not to make it illegal, but to take practical steps to alleviate the demand for abortion services – but that doesn't mean that a legislative approach cannot achieve some positive outcomes as well. Again, this principle applies to every other issue Christians might want to be involved in.

4. Since no "fully righteous" outcome can ultimately be achieved in this world, we need to be tolerant and charitable to those who advocate for a different solution.

This issue has two dimensions to it. Firstly, at the practical level – since there is no perfect way to solve this world's problems, we need to listen to the perspective of others if we are to find the most viable solution, especially if they are trying to achieve a similar end to us but by a different means. It is only arrogance that insists that our way is the only way of achieving a godly outcome. And secondly, there is the moral dimension that, if we cannot deal with our political "enemies" with godly gentleness and kindness, then we have surely sacrificed too much for our political goal.

I must say this frankly, it breaks my heart to see the Christian involvement in politics in America; so much hatred, demonising of one's enemies, slander and the propagation of lies and half-truths about those with a different agenda. The end does not justify the means; and such tactics must inevitably result in a far worse outcome than if Christians had never got involved at all in the first place.

5. God has no plan for a "Christian" society; this is a total myth that is opposed to God's stated plans. All our hopes and dreams for "a better world" need to align with what God is trying to achieve, and not what we would like to see.

Ultimately, this is one of the main reasons why certain moral issues "push the buttons" of some Christians: it started with allowing shops to trade on Sunday, from there it proceeded to the liberalisation of divorce and homosexuality laws, and has now progressed to gay marriage and abortion on demand. These issues are a reminder to us Christians that the Church no longer wields the power it used

¹ I make this qualification about this extremely contentious topic to avoid being drawn into the more nuanced debate about whether abortion is ever justified on medical grounds. To be specific, nobody should read anything either way into my views on this topic, from my use of this example!



to in our society. By advocating passionately for these issues, many Christians are yearning for the return of a more "Christian" society. This is what I would respond to such yearnings:

- a) God never promises us a "Christian" society, so learn to trust what he has promised, not what he hasn't;
- b) Just because past generations of Christians focused on certain sins (usually sexual sins) over other sins, that does not mean this was ever God's priority, or that it is currently his priority;
- c) There is a difference between what is acceptable in the world, and what the Church should accept for itself. The Apostle Paul was very tolerant on sin in the world – basically, he expected sinners to be sinners! (see 1 Cor. 5:9ff) – but it was a different matter entirely when dealing with sin in the Church. He accepted sinners as they were so as not to hinder evangelism. We need to adopt the same open-minded attitude.

The ultimate temptation: bowing down to Satan

"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

Jesus said to him, Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."'" (Mt. 4:8-10)

What was really going on in this passage? For a long time, I thought it ludicrous that Jesus would ever be tempted to bow down and worship Satan. But then I learnt (quite recently) that the word "worship" involves submitting to someone's objectives and means; and that Satan, when he comes to us, does not usually advertise who he is, but comes disguised as "an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14).

Putting these facts together, I believe that the temptation Jesus was undergoing was the temptation *to seek worldly power and to use worldly methods and to achieve a godly objective*. It was the temptation to be a worldly king, the sort of Messiah that many Jews of the 1st century longed for. And it must have been (at the human level) a very powerful temptation indeed.

Think about how much good Jesus could have achieved if he had used his anointing and his wisdom as a worldly ruler! How much sin and injustice could he have eradicated? How many wrongs could he have righted? How many of the "poor and needy" that he was sent to "save" could he have impacted for good? Given how kind and loving Jesus was in all his dealings, this must have been the most powerful temptation he faced.

But it was still a temptation, and it came from the devil, not from God. For being a worldly king in a sinful world would inevitably have resulted in Jesus having to adopt



Satan's methods – for, as his life later showed, God's methods in this world, when followed uncompromisingly, lead you to the cross, not the palace. There is too much sin in the world, Satan's influence is too pervasive, and his grip on human minds through selfishness, greed and pride is too powerful. Jesus could have achieved worldly power, or he could have saved us from sin – *but he could never do both.*

By rejecting this temptation, Jesus set his eyes inexorably on Calvary; and he exhorted his disciples to do exactly the same thing (Mt. 16:21-27). Unfortunately, this is precisely the temptation that caught the 4th century church out: *the temptation to seek out worldly power.* It was no sin for the Church to welcome the conversion of the Emperor Constantine; it may even have been a "God event" as they all believed. However, there was a sting in the tail: once those erstwhile-persecuted Christians got a taste of being allied with worldly power, they became addicted to it, intoxicated by it; *and they pursued it as an end in itself.* This is where they chose a different path to Jesus.

Doubtless, they told themselves that, by accepting a seat at the emperor's table, they could do a power of good. Doubtless, they thought about their power to evangelise in hitherto undreamed-of ways. But the end did not justify the means; the Medieval Church with its Crusades and Inquisitions was the inevitable result of that fateful decision. The result was still that the Roman Empire changed the Church into its image, not the other way round. And that is always the way when we pursue worldly power rather than walking the way of the cross.

There is nothing wrong with Christians having worldly power, if God should so bless you with that. If your calling is to be a politician, then follow that calling with all your might. But do not seek out such worldly power, and do not compromise your prophetic identity in order to achieve it.

Another huge lie that controls us when we seek worldly power is that we confuse what is good for us with what is good for the Kingdom of God. Many Christians support ungodly politicians on the grounds that "he supports Christianity". This is doubtless the reason 4th century Christians gave for not calling out the sins of Constantine – "at least he's on our side". If you have bought this argument, I have news for you: God is not at all interested in what is "good for the Church" – only what is consistent with the life and Kingdom of Jesus. And he has consistently told us that this will involve persecution and worldly trouble, not "friendly" political allies.

One could say the same thing about worldly wealth, as well as worldly political power; for in this world, wealth is power. There is nothing at all wrong with a Christian being wealthy, or for a church to be large and successful; much can be achieved by the godly use of wealth. However, with such power comes responsibility, and temptation also; one of the most telling aspects of the child sexual abuse scandals that have been exposed in churches in recent decades is that large churches were all too often motivated by how much it would cost them if they ever allowed the scandals to be made public. And so, their very wealth that they intended to use for good became the thing that tempted them to perpetuate a terrible evil.



Conclusion

In summary, there is surely nothing wrong with the Church or Christians being involved in worldly politics, or having worldly wealth, influence or power; so long as we do not compromise our prophetic identity in order to wield it. And we should never seek such power as an end in itself; for all of its appearance of good, that is the greatest and most subtle temptation of the devil.

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