

What should the role of Christians in politics be? More people than ever are asking that question. Christians cannot pretend they can transcend politics and simply “preach the Gospel.” Those who avoid all political discussions and engagement are essentially casting a vote for the social status quo. American churches in the early 19th century that did not speak out against slavery because that was what we would now call “getting political” were actually supporting slavery by doing so. To not be political is to be political.

The Bible shows believers as holding important posts in pagan governments — think of Joseph and Daniel in the Old Testament. Christians should be involved politically as a way of loving our neighbors, whether they believe as we do or not. To work for better public schools or for a justice system not weighted against the poor or to end racial segregation requires political engagement. Christians have done these things in the past and should continue to do so.

Nevertheless, while believers can register under a party affiliation and be active in politics, they should not identify the Christian church or faith with a political party as the only Christian one. There are a number of reasons to insist on this. One is that it gives those considering the Christian faith the strong impression that to be converted, they need not only to believe in Jesus but also to become members of the (fill in the blank) Party. It confirms what many skeptics want to believe about religion — that it is merely one more voting bloc aiming for power.

Another reason not to align the Christian faith with one party is that most political positions are not matters of biblical command but of practical wisdom. This does not mean that the church can never speak on social, economic and political realities, because the Bible often does. Racism is a sin, violating the second of the two great commandments of Jesus, to “love your neighbor.” The biblical commands to lift up the poor and to defend the rights of the oppressed are moral imperatives for believers. For individual Christians to speak out against egregious violations of these moral requirements is not optional.

However, there are many possible ways to help the poor. Should we shrink government and let private capital markets allocate resources, or should we expand the government and give the state more of the power to redistribute wealth? Or is the right path one of the many possibilities in between? The Bible does not give exact answers to these questions for every time, place and culture.

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