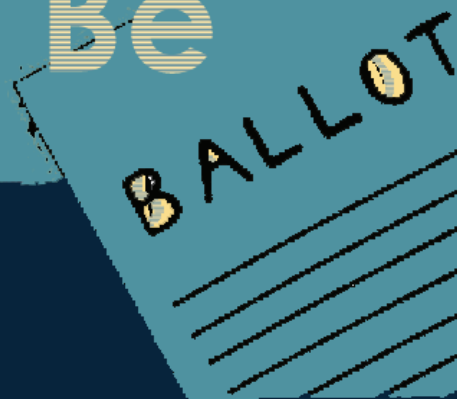


Can
My
Vote
Be



Biblical?

Jesus Christ is Lord. That confession is central to Christian faith, and we deny our faith whenever we fail to apply this confession to every area of our lives—personal, social, religious, economic, and political.

That's right: in addition to being Lord of Sunday mornings, Christ must also be Lord in the voting booth.

But how? It is a question particularly critical in a presidential election year. Quite simply, we must submit our politics to the risen Lord by weighing every political issue in the light of Scripture. Failing to do so makes idols of our society, our material interests, or our political ideologies.

Christ is Lord of the world as well as of the church. Our vote can become one of Christ's instruments for fostering the peace with justice God desires as Lord of the world.

Now we're left with two tough problems.

1. The Old Testament was written for a theocracy and the New Testament was written for the church in a pluralistic society. So how can one apply biblical teaching to secular society?
2. There is no detailed political or economic blueprint in scripture. So how can a Christian determine which political views are better than others?

Certainly the first application of both testaments is to the church.

But the Scriptures clearly teach that God also cares about and judges nations.¹ The Old Testament applied the same standards used for Israel to surrounding nations like Babylon.²

Biblical revelation about how groups of people should live together was not arbitrary. Our Creator knows how we should act towards each other to promote peace, dignity, and justice. That is why God revealed how we ought to live. Certainly sinful people will not live up to revealed standards. But to the extent that they do, even secular societies will enjoy partial peace, freedom, and wholeness.

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The second problem is also complex. There is no biblical text to tell us which candidates should be President. There is no chapter that

contains a blueprint for the international economic order in the twenty-first century. But that does not mean that Christians should derive their economic and political views entirely from secular sources. There are biblical principles that have profound importance for our politics.

Certainly the application of those biblical principles to concrete situations today is an extremely complex task. People equally committed to biblical principles strongly disagree over specific social programs, and that disagreement is legitimate and healthy.

But Christians must regularly discuss these conflicting proposals with those who disagree with them in a spirit of prayer, openness to the Holy Spirit, and unconditional submission to God.

So what are the biblical principles that should guide our hand in the voting booth?

1. The family is a divinely-willed institution.

The family, not the state, is the primary institution for rearing children. Christians must resist the growing tendency of the state to usurp the role of the family.⁴ Legislation such as tax rates should help create a climate conducive to the best Christian understandings of marriage, family, and sexuality. Legislation and public funds should discourage, not promote sin.

2. Every human life is sacred.

Every person is created in the image of God.⁵ Since God “desires all to be saved” every person in the world is immeasurably valuable. The great value and worth of each individual is totally independent of their social usefulness. People committed to interpreting Scripture well cannot remain silent when modern society forgets the value of each individual human life—as when it neglects the mentally challenged and aged, practices ethnic or sexual discrimination, or does not work to reduce abortion.

The earth is the Lord's, and humanity is to

3. Religious and political freedom are God-given, inalienable rights.

Throughout the Bible, we see that even though people rebel against God, God continues to provide the necessities of life.⁶ The state should not impose civil penalties for unbelief. The church and state should be separate. Every individual is valuable in God's sight. Further, sinful, selfish people regularly abuse power that lacks checks and balances. Therefore, freedom of expression and political liberty are crucial rights.

4. God and his obedient people have a very special concern for the poor.

In literally dozens and dozens of places Scripture teaches that God has a very strong concern for justice for the poor and oppressed.⁷ Therefore God also empowers his people to have a deep concern for them and to work with them to change structural injustices.⁸ A genuine solidarity with the poor and a strong commitment to seek justice with

exercise wise and careful stewardship of it.

them ought to be a central concern of politicians who seek to take scripture seriously. “If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established forever.”⁹

5. God requires just economic systems in society.

The starting point of all biblical thinking on economics is that God is sovereign. God is the only absolute owner of all things.¹⁰ God wants the earth’s resources to benefit everyone.

The Bible condemns both those who are lazy and those who become rich by oppressing others.¹¹ Throughout the Scriptures, God has commanded and guided his people to implement programs of economic sharing that reduced unjust extremes of wealth and poverty.¹² In fact, God cares so much about economic justice that he destroyed both Israel and Judah for two basic reasons: idolatry and

economic oppression.¹³ The one who is sovereign over economics requires economic systems that enable all people to earn a just living in fulfilling work.

6. God requires Christians to be peacemakers.

Christians look forward to the time when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”¹⁴ Until the Lord returns, unfortunately, persons persistently resort to wars and rumors of wars. Many Christians believe they should, as the lesser of two evils, engage in just wars for the sake of preserving some order in a fallen world. Other Christians believe that war is contrary to the teaching of Christ and that he calls us to overcome our enemies with suffering love rather than with the sword. But all should agree that Jesus’ words “Blessed are the peacemakers”¹⁵ are urgent in our time and should commit themselves to Just Peacemaking practices.

We must live out Jesus’ call to peacemaking in a world that devotes to

military expenditures each year an amount equal to the total annual income of the poorest one-half of the world's people. President Dwight Eisenhower reflected a biblical concern when he said: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, theft from those who hunger and are not fed."

7. The Creator requires stewardship of the earth's resources.

The earth is the Lord's,¹⁶ and humanity is to exercise wise and careful stewardship of it.¹⁷ Such a high calling requires each generation to protect the environment and preserve the quality of life for future generations. We are stewards of God's good gift.

8. Sin is both personal and social.

Consciously-willed, individual acts like lying and adultery are sinful. So too, according to the Scriptures, is participating uncritically in social structures that are not just.¹⁸ In one breath the prophets condemn both kinds of sin.¹⁹ The Bible denounces laws that are unjust.²⁰ Politicians

with a biblical perspective will have a deep concern to correct social structures that are evil.

9. Personal integrity is vital.

The scriptures demand honesty and personal righteousness. Dishonesty in public affairs undercuts the democratic process. A politician's personal and family life should be a good model for the rest of society. Government leaders ought to be humble and honest enough to acknowledge mistakes. Knowing that we all err, we should forgive those who offer forthright confession. Personal religious belief which fosters a profound sense of God's sovereignty over all nations and a sharp awareness of God's passion for justice help prevent the abuse of political power for narrow personal or nationalistic purposes.

10. God loves the whole world, not just the United States of America.

Although candidates for office tend to speak and act in the tradition of American exceptionalism, we know that God is equally concerned for

citizens of every nation and state throughout the world. We should take seriously Scripture's deep concern for 'foreigners' and e/im/migrants.

A Biblical Balance

To proclaim Christ's Lordship in politics means evaluating political candidates by their commitment to biblical principles rather than by their pragmatism, patriotism, or personality.

That does not mean that Christians should only vote for Christians.

Ironically non-Christians sometimes have a deeper commitment than many Christians do to fundamental biblical teaching about society.

Christians must resist the temptation to espouse simple prescriptions for complex problems, remembering that there is a mistaken zeal in politics as well as religion. There is undeniably a superficial appeal in the call to Christians to mobilize as a political force and elect "one of our own."

But the Christian must resist at all costs the temptation to use the gospel for political purposes or to make the gospel hostage to any politician or

political cause. The words of the apostle Paul, “Do not be conformed to this world,” must continually ring in our ears.

Unfortunately, no candidate for public office will embody perfectly a commitment to all the biblical principles mentioned above. More likely, candidates will be strong in some areas, weak in others.

One should strive to find candidates concerned about the whole range of concerns reflected in the above principles. “Christian politics” that focus exclusively on a few select issues to the neglect of other matters emphasized by the scriptures are misguided because finally they are not sufficiently biblical. Biblically informed politics will reflect the balance of concerns revealed in God's Word.

Assessing Candidates: Nine Steps

The nine steps suggested below are ones that you can take either as an individual or as a group. A group of Christian friends or church members could divide up the tasks listed below. During the course of two or three evening meetings together in your living room, you should be able to begin a meaningful assessment of candidates. There is no substitute, however, for extensive involvement in the complexities of politics. At everyone of the following steps, ask how the biblical principles discussed above apply to this issue or candidates.

1. Use the Almanac of American Politics.

This paperback is the best available guide to the political views and voting record of members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The Almanac profiles every member of Congress, along with a description of the district they represent, the votes they have taken on crucial issues, and how they are evaluated by a very broad spectrum of citizens' groups. Your local library should have a copy. A

less-comprehensive alternative is a website called “Project Vote Smart.”

2. Watch political debates.

During the course of a campaign, most candidates participate in televised debates with their opponent(s). The opponent(s) will have done a lot of your research and will probe for weaknesses. Watching the debate, listening, and asking questions is one of the best ways to become informed about where candidates really stand on the issues. Seeing them in action will also give you insight into the kind of people they are.

3. Get position papers.

Write to candidates and ask for all their position papers on the issues. Nearly every candidate will have developed such detailed statements which, if read critically, will tell you a lot about his or her stands. Nearly all candidates will have this kind of information available online.

4. Make personal contact.

If you have particular questions to put to candidates, write directly to them. Better yet, form a delegation of local Christians, set up meetings with candidates, and question them face-to-face.

5. Follow the mass media.

Find out what the candidates are saying in the newspapers and magazines, on radio, TV, and social media websites. Evaluate what is said about them by political commentators, editorial writers and columnists (though, note the source here, and take commentary with a grain – or pot–of salt).

6. Use citizen evaluation groups.

Many private organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, do their own evaluations of candidates, especially around election time. All organizations have their own axe to grind. Rarely are their evaluations done from an objective point of view. However, reading a variety

of such reports will give you an additional slant on the candidate's commitments. (Many citizen evaluation groups are listed in the Almanac of American Politics.)

7. Find out who is contributing money to the campaign.

Many questions can be answered by looking at the kind of campaign contributions a candidate is receiving. Is he or she a wealthy person who is putting substantial personal funds into the campaign? Is the campaign high-priced or low-budget? Are special interest groups heavily involved in supporting the candidates? Is there a particular profession, occupational group, corporation, or union that is giving large amounts to the campaign?

Now that we have both national and local campaign financing disclosure laws, it is easy to get this kind of information. At the national level (candidates for the U.S. Senate and House), the best resource is the Federal Election Commission. On their website, www.fec.gov, you can

search for a candidate's finance contribution report. You can view the reports online for free.

Campaign disclosure laws vary from state to state, but by calling the state, county, or city government offices, you should be able to find the agency that keeps comparable records. Other sources of information on campaign financing are newspaper reports and private organizations such as Common Cause, Commoncause.org.

8. Apply the biblical principles.

Evaluate all the data you have gathered in light of the biblical principles on God's will for society.

9. Vote!

In light of your careful study of the complex issues and biblical principles, vote prayerfully, knowing that it is not the most significant political act that you can do, but that it is an important one.

10. Keep working!

After you vote, your political life is not over so that you can rest until the next election. Your life is more important than your vote. Continue to work on issues in your community and at the state, national, and international level so that God's passion for peace with justice can be embodied on earth as fully as possible.

The Bible teaches that “justice is what makes a government strong.”²¹ The ideal ruler is one who “has compassion on the weak and poor, saves the lives of those in need, rescues them from oppression and violence; their lives are precious.”²²

Voting for candidates who promote programs consistent with biblical teaching is one crucial way of confessing that Christ is our Lord.

- 1 Ps. 96:10-13; Ps. 9:7-12; Is 42:1-4; Micah 4:1-4; Amos 1,2; Rev. 21:22-22:2
- 2 Amos 1-2; Is. 10:12-19; Dan 4:27; Ezek. 16:49
- 3 Ephes. 1:21; Matt. 28:18; Col. 2:10; Rev. 1:5, 19:16, 17:14
- 4 Gen. 2:23-24; Matt. 19:3-9
- 5 Gen. 1:27
- 6 Matt. 5:45
- 7 Ps. 35:10; Ps. 103:6-7; Ps. 146:6-9; Jer. 22:1-5; Amos 4:1-3; Amos 8:4-8; Luke 4:16ff
- 8 Deut. 27:19; Ps. 41:1-2; Ps. 82:1-5; Prov. 14:21, 31; Prov. 22:22; Is. 32:1-3; Lk. 14:12-14; Matt. 25:31-46:1; John 3:17
- 9 Prov. 29:14
- 10 Ps. 24:1; Job 41:11; Leb. 25:23
- 11 Is. 3:13-16; Jer. 5:26-29; Hosea 12:7-9; James 51:1-5
- 12 Lev. 25:10-24; Deut. 14:28-29; Deut. 15:1-6; Acts 2:43-47; Acts 4:32-37; 2 Cor. 8:8-15
- 13 Hosea 8; Amos 2:7; Amos 6:1-7; Amos 7:11, 17; Is 10:1-4; Jer. 5:26-29
- 14 Micah 4:3
- 15 Matt. 5:9
- 16 Ps. 24:1
- 17 Gen. 1:28
- 18 Amos 4:1-2
- 19 Amos 2:6-7; Is. 5:8-11, 22-23; Ezek. 22:6-11
- 20 Is. 10:1-4; Ps. 94:20
- 21 Prov. 16:12
- 22 Ps. 72:13-14

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