

# CAN A DEEPLY RELIGIOUS PERSON BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

This is not a theoretical question. A newspaper reporter asked the question and illustrated it with a politician who spoke of his deep religious faith and his opposition to abortion, euthanasia, and other positions that religious conservatives tend to take.

With an obvious knowledge of the Bible and its implications in practical life, the reporter noted, “The New Testament that [he] believes in calls on everyone to ‘render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’ ” (Pay your taxes and give your life to God.)

He aptly noted that the people of the United States need to know what this politician would do when rendering to one would offend the other. I am convinced the reporter had a clearer understanding of the dilemma of a Christian serving in government than many “conservative” Christians have.

Politics is, by its very nature, the art of compromise. Even a professing Christian in politics is going to have to compromise Christian principles at times. For example, one Christian governor efficiently established a state lottery system in his state in spite of his religious opposition to gambling. The state voted to establish a lottery, and it was up to him to see that it was carried out. He also needed to enforce the abortion laws on the books.

I am not a judge of any politician’s spirituality. However, Acts 5:29 says, without compromise: “*We ought to obey God rather than men,*” when God’s laws and man’s conflict. The word ought there is not optional—it is our duty. Rendering to God the things that are God’s and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s is not optional either—the choice is clear-cut.

The Bible teaches a two-kingdom ethic: the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this world. Romans 13:1-6, for example, clearly delineates the responsibility of the government and of the believers. The believers’ main purpose is to be salt and light, influences for truth, and witnesses of the power of Jesus Christ to transform lives. The purpose of the government is to maintain law and order, to protect the good, and to punish those who violate its laws. The attempt by many to blend these two purposes has resulted in confusion. Jesus said of the believers: “*Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid ... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

In recent U.S. presidential elections, many have insisted that the future of Christianity in America hinges on electing “Christians” to high places to preserve moral values. While Christians can appreciate when people of principle are in control, the salvation of the United States as a nation or of individuals within the nation does not hinge on Christian involvement in politics. Far too many have taken their focus off working to meet man’s spiritual need and focused on political action to Christianize laws and government institutions. Would someone who stands consistently for Christian principles ever get elected in our secular and pluralistic society?

Do we forget Rome after it was “Christianized” and other governments since that have tried to enforce Christianity? All of them failed. Many people suffered. For Christianity, by its very nature, is a voluntary faith. It is a faith of love that does not force itself on the rest of the world, but invites all to salvation.

The Bible teaches complete separation of church and state. The temptation is to trust in the hope that somehow Christianizing politics and government will lead to the betterment of society. In the last half century, numerous government leaders from the top down have professed to be born-again Christians. But it is also true that society in general has been on the skids spiritually as never before. I believe the fault does not lie at the door of the government as much as at the door of the church that has trusted in politics to promote its standards. The church has failed in the call to hold a standard of right living and to point men and women to the Christ who alone can change their lives.

The Christian's "politics" is not earthly or carnal but persuading men and women to be reconciled to Christ.

~Roger Berry