

**Salt to the World
Christian Socialist Movement "Salt to the World" Conference, 30th
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The first church that I joined, not long after I became a Christian as a teenager, used to have its prayer meetings on a Wednesday evening. I went to one of them the night before the first General Election I was able to vote in, in 1974. Afterwards, one of the church elders spoke to me. He was a retired chartered accountant who had been very kind since I had first wandered in to the church a couple of years earlier. "Election tomorrow", he said, "we'll be going Conservative shall we?" My response was hesitant but plainly negative, and he expressed some consternation. And I suppose that if it hadn't been clear to me before that, it was clear then that in evangelicalism, conservative politics was taken as read.

The case for Christian involvement

Essentially, the ground on which I maintain that Christians should engage in politics is that God cares about the consequences of political decisions. Anyone reading the Bible must come to that conclusion. Scripture is shot through with exhortations to govern honestly, to act with justice, to protect the innocent and punish the guilty, to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Those exhortations are everywhere. I was looking recently through the prophecy of Isaiah, and they are bound up indivisibly there with the exhortations to honour God. A friend told me recently that there are 28 references in the Old Testament to how orphans should be treated.

Now, of course, some will read those passages and many others like them and believe that they don't have any political significance. They would maintain that they are addressed not to a nation but only to the church, or that they have only a narrow personal significance. People will insist that we must read passages like these through a particular pair of spectacles, and not take their meaning at face value.

But those viewpoints really can't be sustained. If we read the Bible with the intention of understanding what it actually says, we cannot escape the conclusion that He cares about how nations are run. In the Old Testament, we read about not just Israel, but judgements on other nations too - whether they are run justly - and not just in their relationship with Israel. It is clear that God cares about these things, and that He wants His servants to contribute to putting things right. That is the basis for Christians engaging in politics.

Of course, that raises many questions. Should Christians be associated with one party rather than another? How far can Christians collaborate with non-Christians? Isn't there a danger of being diverted away from God's path and Christian commitment? Won't political entanglement compromise the distinctiveness of our witness to the Gospel and undermine our evangelism? Those are serious questions. But my starting point - that God cares about how nations and communities are run and that He expects us to be as well - is surely incontrovertible.

I want to see more and more Christians active in Labour politics. Apart from this fundamental reason, I would suggest three others:

- Firstly, Christians can influence policy, and influence for the better the way in which politics is carried out. If we are disillusioned with politics, have lost faith with politicians, maybe its because the Christians have pulled out. Christians should be back in there and I've seen ample to persuade

me that just by getting involved, Christians can have a big influence for the better.

- Secondly, Christians ought to be involved just to provide a witness to the non-Christians who are involved. What does it say about our faith if we Christians leave all the work of striving for a better world - and it is hard work and the political parties contain vast numbers of decent people conscientiously striving towards that goal - what does it say about our faith if we just leave non-Christians to get on with it.
- And thirdly, it is good for the life of our churches to have the insights and understanding of our communities which comes from grappling with their problems in the political process.

In making these points, I am not arguing that every Christian ought to go out and join a political party. I am arguing, though, that it is right for our churches to be aware of political developments in their area and sometimes to participate in them - not in a party way but perhaps on an issue basis. I am also arguing that it is right for some Christians to join a political party, and to be committed to its programme, and that it is right for our churches to provide support and encouragement and understanding for those who do, because their political activity is a proper and valid expression of their Christian calling.

Evangelicals and the Christian Socialist Legacy

I want, before coming to a parliamentary perspective on our discussion, just to reflect briefly on the extent to which historically the evangelical tradition has been politically reactionary.

It is true that evangelicals have not played a leading role in the history of Christian socialism. Indeed, I was intrigued to come across this statement in an article published last year on non-conformist evangelicals in the late nineteenth century:

Many of course did manage to translate their traditional emphasis on the conscience of the individual into the collective conscience. A few, including John Clifford, called themselves socialists. J E Rattenbury, a Wesleyan minister, even advanced the view that evangelicalism and socialism were compatible.

Well, I hope that we are moving into a time when J E Rattenbury's view will seem less remarkable than it did to the professor who wrote that article.

But there always have been evangelicals who have wanted both to tell the good news about Jesus and to work to make things better for the many who were having a hard time.

In the last century, the best known examples in politics were William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury. They were both Tories, but we shouldn't write them off on that ground. Nelson Mandela singled out Wilberforce for special praise in the speech he made to both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall earlier this year and it is sad that the social justice, one nation tradition which Wilberforce and Shaftesbury exemplify has disappeared from today's Conservative Party.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, opened shops selling cheap meals, opened night shelters, started the first unemployment exchange, provided legal aid for the poor and launched a poor man's bank. In 1904, at the age of 75, he carried out a 29 day, 1,224 mile, 164 meeting evangelistic tour of Britain

Committed evangelical social concern continued into this century. In evangelical methodism, it contributed powerfully to the early development of the Labour Party.

F B Meyer was during the early years of this century the leading figure in the Keswick Convention and I remember reading his devotional book on Elijah when I was a student. But he also supported striking dockers in London in 1889 and in 1898 he supported the ILP candidate in North Lambeth and was described as 'virtually a Christian socialist'. In 1906 as President of the Baptist Union he declared that politics was an effort to 'illuminate the public mind with the ideals of Christ's kingdom' and argued for the redemption of individuals but also of the state; and said in 1907 that the election of members of parliament, as well as the problems of the inner life, were matters of legitimate interest in church life. He proposed a boycott of traders who paid low wages to women, and denounced the treatment of black South Africans. In 1909 he called for state action on housing and condemned the power of the House of Lords. He spoke of the wrongs which make the few rich and the many poor.

F B Meyer died in 1929. I have referred to him not to suggest his views were typical of those of evangelicals of the time, because they weren't, but simply to point out that there was space within evangelicalism at that time for those views, within living memory - just - and that Meyer was able to hold a leading position within evangelicalism while expressing them.

Evangelicalism was weak and its advocates few in number between the first and second world wars, and when its revival started after the second world war, social concern was not one of its major themes. Basil Atkinson, a leading figure in the Christian Union movement said in 1949: "If social amelioration is a means to evangelisation it is good. If it is treated as an end in itself it is bad". It took a long time for evangelicals to escape from that view, and you still come across it from time to time, but there was a turning point at the Lausanne Congress on world evangelisation of 1974 and since then attitudes have greatly improved.

My entry to Socialism

I joined Newham North-East Labour Party, whose representative I now am in the House of Commons, in 1979. It was in the immediate aftermath of the Reg Prentice affair, when the local party had been split apart by the attempts to de-select Reg Prentice as the Labour candidate for the next election on the grounds that he was really a Tory. Mr Prentice eventually settled the dispute by joining the Conservative Party. I remember the first meeting that I attended felt exactly like one of those Wednesday evening prayer meetings I used to attend as a teenager - a faithful remnant coming together out of a hostile world. I was surprised because the Labour Party had until weeks earlier been governing the country.

I expected, as a Christian joining a party whose militancy was renowned around the country, to be treated with suspicion and even hostility. I wasn't. The party members I got to know weren't Christians, but they accepted Christianity as one of the ideological commitments which could be validly held by Labour party members. Indeed, the Labour Party has always had much less problems with us as Christians than our co-religionists have had with our party.

I first visited Newham in 1976 with my Christian Union, to take part in a church mission in Forest Gate. We had a very exciting fortnight, I was gripped by the place and when a couple of years later I left college and found a job in London, I moved to Newham and joined a local church with those who had organised the mission. I also joined the Labour party. The party was still smarting from the

Prentice affair, and partly because of that, as somebody who had not been involved at all, I quickly became the constituency secretary. I was elected to the Council in 1984 and was the Leader from 1990 to 1994.

One of the reasons I was selected as the Parliamentary candidate in 1994 was that I had the support of most of the Moslems in my constituency party, and one of the reasons for that was being a Christian. Their way of looking at the world is not a million miles from ours' as Christians.

Socialism's appeal to Christians

I hope that more and more Christians will become active members of the Labour Party. We have to accept that there are quite a few sincere and committed Christians in the Conservative Party. But in this group meeting here today we are among the growing number of Christians who feel deeply that we are paying a terrible price for seventeen years of Toryism, and that it is part of our Christian walk to say so:

- the divisions within our nation and the fact that the gap between rich and poor just keeps on getting wider
- that we have paid a terrible price for the Government's promotion of selfishness - in division, in family breakdown, in crime
- that the Government should not just be sitting back but acting over the fact there are quarter of a million people under 25s long term unemployed
- so many youngsters who don't have jobs, have never had jobs and have no prospect of jobs
- that it is Government policy to starve legitimate asylum seekers out of the country, forbidding them both to earn a living and to claim benefit
- that the world's poorest countries are paying vast sums to the west in interest charges at a time when their economies are in a state of collapse and many of their people dying for the want of the essentials of life

And as Christians, we see all those issues - and others - as not just policy issues but moral issues which demand a response from us as Christians.

Lord Skidelsky, the Tory peer, wrote recently that he was suspicious of Tony Blair's attempt to discover a Christian justification for public action. He summed up his argument like this: "Freedom of choice, including the freedom not to do one's duty, is God's bequest to man. The demands Christianity makes are on individuals, not the state".

This is getting to the heart of the contrast between socialism's appeal to Christians and that made by Conservatism. God made each of us and calls each of us personally to follow Him. He has set each of us free, He has brought each of us out of darkness into His glorious light. That is the gospel message which is at the heart of our lives.

But where do we go from there? What is the new life that Jesus is calling us into? What does it consist of? "The demands Christianity makes are on individuals", says Lord Skidelsky, and he is right, "but not the State" - and there he is wrong. Because we are the state. We are all part of it. Right from the beginning, ever

since God told Adam that it was not good for man to be alone, it has been clear that we have been made to live not in isolation but in relationship with others.

Conservative Christians usually accept that Christians are supposed to be kind. But then we cannot in all honesty sit back in silence when the state of which we are part perpetrates obvious injustice. Christianity does make demands on us as individuals, and among those demands is to make a stand for what is just in the state which we are part of. We cannot escape that. And that is why we are Christian Socialists and why we are in the Labour Party. Its because we take the Bible seriously in a way that modern Christian Conservatives do not. The truth is that Christianity makes demands on us as individuals, and through us on the state.

Now I don't want to give the impression that I am claiming more than I am. I don't claim that Christians can only support the Labour Party. I don't claim that electing a Labour Government will usher in the Kingdom of God. I entirely accept that there are good and committed Christians who vote Conservative. But I do say this. It is very hard today to defend from a Christian perspective the record of the Tories over the past 17 years. There is a compelling Christian case for change, which is compelling for us as evangelicals *because* we are evangelicals, not in spite of it.

For many of us, and I hope for more and more of us, it is part of our Christian calling to work for that change. Not instead of evangelism, but alongside it. The Bible calls us to both.

The response of the Christian right

Conservative Christians will do anything to steer Christians away from those issues. They keep on pressing us back to the agenda of abortion and the rest, because that is territory they feel comfortable on. They shouldn't, of course, because for example the number of abortions has rocketed since 1979, not least because of the promotion of selfishness we have endured in that time. But that is where they feel comfortable. The agenda of the Christian right is threadbare, reducing the richness of Christian moral teaching to concerns about individual (mostly sexual) morality. We must reject that narrowing of the political agenda. It is not Biblical, and we must refuse to be pigeon-holed into a small moral compartment where they want to confine Christian discussion.

When the Sunday Telegraph published an interview with Tony Blair about his Christian faith last Easter, there was a flurry of letters to newspapers from the Secretary of the Conservative Christian Fellowship, insisting that Christians could not support Labour because of our alleged positions on abortion, gay rights and euthanasia. They are desperate to keep on that narrow, moral agenda, and not to allow Christians to reflect on the broader issues of our society where the Tories have inflicted such damage.

Now I have no objection to Christians entering the debate on abortion, gay rights and euthanasia, but I am very angry when Conservatives try to make out that those are the only political issues that Christians can have any views about. Have they never read the Bible? Can they really read the words of the prophets about justice, about the poor, about aliens and sojourners, can they really read how Jesus proclaimed his message as to bring good news to the poor, and yet convince themselves that they have nothing to say to us today?

For years, the Government has been complaining about church comment on political issues. We had the absurd allegations that the Faith in the City report of

ten years ago was 'naïve Marxism', and whenever a timid church voice is raised to point out the damage wreaked by some aspect of Thatcherite ideology, a chorus of Tory MPs is dragged out to condemn the comment as not Christian enough or Godless. We must not allow the right to silence those Christian voices of criticism.

Still less must we allow the churches to be taken over, as they have been in the USA, by the organised political right.

A life of moral dilemmas?

I think Christians sometimes assume that a Christian in politics spends his or her life wracked by moral turmoil; that each day we face a clear choice between following our conscience and obeying the party whip. Any politician who attains political office has managed to keep on the right side of the whips and so must have rejected conscience. Equally, any politician who follows conscience will spend his or her life in the political wilderness. People often take it for granted that that is what politics is like.

In reality, it just is not like that. Invariably, politics is about making choices between alternatives where the moral case if there is one can be made either way. That's true even over issues which are inherently moral rather than economic. For example, Christians in the House of Commons will make out a moral case on both sides of the current argument about banning handguns. I have been a member of Newham Council for twelve years and I was its Leader for four, and in that time I honestly cannot recall a single occasion when I faced a dilemma over a decision on the grounds of morality versus party policy. Life just is not like that.

I suppose the closest I came was shortly after my election, when we had a vote on Sunday trading in the House of Commons. It was a relatively minor issue - I wasn't in the House when the main decisions about Sunday trading were being made - I think the Government was proposing a modest extension of the permission for Sunday trading, in relation to garden centres or something of the kind.

I discussed the matter with two Christian Conservative MPs. Both objected to the proposal, but decided in the end to be loyal to the Government and support it. One of those MPs has since become a Government whip and the other a junior minister. I was able to vote as I wished because it wasn't a whipped vote, and voted against.

Two points about that. Issues like that do not arise every day, or even every month. We are not faced with tough moral/political choices on a daily basis. They are actually quite rare. But secondly I also expect to be in a position, in the event of a Labour Government being elected, of casting my vote in the lobby of the House of Commons to support the Government rather than merely in line with my own opinion. There may be occasions where I argue strongly for one viewpoint in the party but lose the argument, and then in the lobby vote in the opposite way to support the party, because in the interests of my constituents I will want to sustain Labour in power. There will be more at stake than merely my personal opinions.

But the point I would like to emphasise is about the nature of a life in politics. I make voting choices which I am completely comfortable with. Politics is not off limits to Christians on conscience grounds. Quite the reverse. In working for change for the better in our communities, in casework with individuals, in

representing our constituents, there is ample scope to exercise full-hearted Christian commitment.

One last practical point. When I was first elected to the Council, a group of friends in my church who were Labour Party members or supporters started to meet together to pray once a month. When I became Leader of the Council, we started to meet each week. We still do that, meeting on a Sunday morning before church, to pray about what has been happening in the area, in the party, in Westminster. That's been an invaluable lifeline for me.

Faith's impact on politics

The heart of our argument today is that our faith pushes us to the left in politics and away from the right. But our faith also has a very great impact on how we do our politics. Christians in politics can make a difference by how they behave, how they deal with their constituents, how they deal with their colleagues and how they set their priorities as they go about their political work. The toughest moral choices I have had to make as a politician have been about whether to follow a particular course of action towards a political ally or opponent. Christians can offer a way of doing politics which works in the real world but avoids the manipulation and the back-stabbing which anyone who has been a member of a controlling Labour Council group will have experienced. Actually, I think the Christian way works better, and it certainly serves its electorate better. That's one of the reasons I want to see more Christians involved.

Within our faith also is the power to lead a life of public service. That concept originated in the original evangelical revival, and desperately needs reviving today. George Eliot said in 1857: "Evangelicalism brought into palpable existence and operation the idea of duty; a recognition of something to live for beyond the mere satisfaction of self". The historian David Bebbington says that perhaps the evangelicals' greatest achievement was to have established politics as an honourable profession for honest people rather than a playground for party hacks. Brothers and sisters, let's do it again!

A motto for Christian involvement

To sum up the Christian political calling. I choose Jesus' words Matthew 10.16: "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves". Christian politicians are called to combine shrewdness and worldly wisdom with piety and Christian faithfulness. There is no place for wooliness or naivety or ignorance; we are called to be wise, to be shrewd, to be careful. But we are also required to make no compromises over our faith, to make no concessions to immorality or dishonesty or spite. Wise as serpents, innocent as doves.

It's a tough calling, but actually it's the calling that all of us have. And I hope that the political dimension of our calling will be apparent throughout our churches as this momentous general election approaches in these next few months.