

**"Playing Our Part": Christian Citizenship Conference
Crowstone Christian Centre, Westcliff, 10 February 2007**

I am delighted to be here this morning - in David's constituency - and to be able to speak with you about Christian Citizenship. I am really pleased this conference is taking place.

People sometimes say you shouldn't mix faith and politics. My view is the opposite - that faith is actually a great starting point for politics. I would like to see a lot more people playing their part as citizens deliberately from a starting point of faith. And it's a privilege to be able to discuss this with you today.

Let me just introduce myself to you. As a student I had been always interested in politics and supported the Labour Party, but I spent most of my spare time in the college Christian Union. Then, one summer thirty years ago, I helped out on a tent mission in Forest Gate, working on a team with a little Gospel hall for two weeks. For the first time I saw how what I believed as a Christian connected with my interest in politics and could make a real difference to the world around me.

I was also very influenced by a book called *Built as a City* by the late Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, about his experience of working in Canning Town.

David Sheppard was a remarkable man - I suppose even more famous as a cricketer than as a clergyman. I had the privilege of meeting him a couple of times towards what turned out to be the end of his life, when he was in the House of Lords. He was particularly influential on this Government's commitment to get young people into work. After his death, I attended last year a memorial service at the Mayflower Centre in Canning Town, and a large crowd of East Enders who in the 1960s were in his youth group at Mayflower turned up. Lots of stories were told.

One of them - who would probably have ended up behind bars had it not been for David Sheppard - told a story about bringing a coach load from the Mayflower to Southend. They arrived and the car parks were full. There was just one stretch where nobody was parking, but there was a sign painted on the road saying "No buses". The man telling the story said he saw that sign, said to his passengers - "*That's alright - this isn't a bus, it's a coach*" - and parked up. They had a great afternoon, and when it was time to go home they went back to the coach - just as it was about to be issued with a ticket by the local constabulary. So the quick witted East Ender said: "*Constable, don't do that - this coach belongs to David Sheppard*". It did the trick. "*David Sheppard?*" he said. "*Well, don't park here again*" - and off he went.

As a result of that mission I was on in Forest Gate, a new church was set up. When I graduated from university and got a job in London, I decided to move in and join the church, and I continue to be a member today. Because I wanted to be fully involved in the local community I joined the Labour Party and, in 1984, I was elected to Newham Council. In 1994, I was the Labour Party candidate in a by-election, and I have been the MP for East Ham ever since. Last year I was appointed to the Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

I want to suggest to you this morning three reasons why Christians should be involved.

- First, because of our calling. When we read the Bible, we learn of a God who is deeply concerned about His creation and who is eager that we play our part in caring for it.
- Second, because of our characters. As Christians, we are called and equipped by God to exhibit characteristics which benefit those around us.
- And third, because of our concerns. In the Bible, we learn of God's priorities for our world. We understand the world through the biblical narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation. They shape our priorities and concerns as we play our part in the world.

Let me say a little about each of these in turn.

1. Our Calling

First, our calling - why I believe Christians are called to work in the public realm. This conference is about "Christian Citizenship". The notion of citizenship is central to our calling into public service. You will have heard it said before that Christians have a "dual citizenship": we belong to a kingdom in this world but also to the Kingdom of Heaven. To be effective in our work in the public realm we have to acknowledge both these citizenships.

A. Citizens of Earth

We are citizens of an earthly kingdom. God created us as earthly beings. In Genesis chapter 1, we read of God bringing the whole of creation into existence. Human beings are the central part of creation, called to rule over everything else that God has made.

"And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'". This cultivating work encompasses I believe the whole spectrum of human work on earth - politics, social work, entertainment, education -our entire *culture*. God created us to be citizens of the earth, cultivating it and sustaining it; playing a full role in public life.

Christians have sometimes seen work in this world as unimportant. It's easy to understand why! If this world is passing away, as the Bible tells us, why waste time serving the public? If the ultimate need of humanity is for reconciliation with Christ, why try to satisfy passing temporal needs?

The answer is that, although this world is indeed passing away, we remain earthly beings, and we are called to fulfil God's design for us in the world.

Living in a democracy brings the responsibility to play our part in helping organise society. Christians ought to be involved in public life, if for no other reason than to provide a witness to the non-Christians involved. What does it say about *our* faith if we leave all the hard work of shaping our society and striving for a better world for others to get on with?

B. Citizens of Heaven

But we are not only citizens of earth. We are *also*, as the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are clearly not yet in Heaven, but we are like "ambassadors" of Heaven, here on earth. Although one

day we will live in the fullness of the Kingdom of God, in a sense that Kingdom is already here.

Some Christians - particularly in the evangelical tradition, of which I am a part - have been guilty of under-emphasising this. We have tended to regard salvation as simply being about repeating a prayer or making a commitment, after which life goes on pretty much the same as before. But salvation in the Bible is intimately tied to entering the Kingdom of Christ. Salvation means submitting to the Kingship of Christ over every area of our lives. Our salvation - our citizenship of Heaven - should change how we relate to our society.

Citizenship in Heaven does not exempt us from our calling to cultivate the world. The narrative of the Bible begins with the imagery of a Garden, and ends with a City and a new creation!

In his famous novel, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis imagines a bus trip from Hell to Heaven. When those from Hell meet their Heavenly counterparts they realise that they are pale reflections - ghosts - in comparison. C.S. Lewis understood that Heaven does not represent a departure from our material existence, but rather its completion! And as the "Kingdom Community" here on earth - already living with the citizenship of Heaven even though we don't yet experience it in all its fullness - we are not at liberty to withdraw from our earthly responsibilities either.

Living as members now of the Kingdom of God means *fulfilling* our God-given calling to cultivate the earth - but to do it with the character, concerns and priorities of Christ's Kingdom.

One of our greatest examples is a man we will be thinking a great deal about this year - William Wilberforce. Unfortunately for my purposes he was a member of David's party rather than mine - although mine didn't exist at the time. He became a Member of Parliament in 1780. Five years later he was converted to Christianity. Rather than withdrawing from politics and becoming an ordained minister, as he had initially considered, he decided to remain in politics and to shape his work by his new Christian priorities.

Last year we had the launch in the House of Commons of a little book called *"Travel with William Wilberforce"* which helps the reader visit places associated with the work of the great MP. The book has a photograph of Wilberforce's diary entry from Sunday 28 October 1787 - the moment, a year after he had become a Christian, when he decided on his life's work. *"God has set before me two great objects"*, he wrote, *"the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners"*. The campaign for abolition was the world's first great political campaign - led and inspired by Christians, with Christians doing all the legwork too. And it set the pattern for every campaign since, up to and including Make Poverty History.

It took Wilberforce and his allies twenty years, but next month we will celebrate the bicentenary of his life's work in abolishing the slave trade. Wilberforce acted in the light of both of his citizenships: his calling to care for the world, and his desire to do it with Christian priorities. And the results of his work changed the course of world history immensely for the better.

So, we have a theological calling as Christians to be involved in public life.

2. Our Character

The second reason why I believe that Christians should be involved in public life is because of the effect that our characters can have on society - that is, if we are truly following the example of Christ. When Christians think about politics, we usually spend most of our time discussing particular Christian "issues". Christians *do* have special concerns and it is right that we seek to persuade others of their importance. But I also think that placing too much emphasis on these issues is to misunderstand the Christian contribution to public life. The way in which we act is also important.

I do not mean to claim that Christians always exhibit these characteristics, nor that non-Christians do not. But I do mean to say that, if we are following the example of Jesus Christ, qualities such as willingness to serve, and trustworthiness, ought to characterise our lives. And this includes our work as public servants.

We are called to imitate the example of Christ, the Servant King. The way he lived His life on earth reminds us that power and status should not be used for our benefit, but for others. In Matthew's gospel, the mother of two of Jesus' disciples asks for them to be seated next to Him in Heaven. Jesus responds: although many earthly rulers may lord it over their people, this is not the way for Christians to behave. Why? Because Christ came to earth to serve - and so it should be with those who choose to follow Him.

Sometimes in the media you see people arguing about the public role of religion. But, you know, I don't meet a lot of secularist organisations out there providing shelter to the wanderer, food to the hungry, freedom to the oppressed. Day by day, night by night, it is Christians who are giving their time and their energy to comfort, to heal, to stand up for right, and to confront what is wrong.

I met up recently with someone I used to work with at the Treasury who went on to be Chief Executive of the Refugee Council. She wasn't a Christian but she became aware through her work that the people actually doing things to help refugees around Britain were almost all in practice from the churches. It was a complete shock to her. You won't find it written about in the newspapers. That is exactly the sort of service that Jesus calls us to. And in my friend's case, it compelled her to go into a church and find out what this was all about - and eighteen months ago to make a personal commitment to Christ.

In the Old Testament, Daniel is a great example of one of God's people holding political office. He was promoted to be one of three presidents in charge of many governors. The Bible says he *"became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom"*. So trustworthy was Daniel in his post that, when the other rulers began to plot against him, we are told that *"they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him"*. Daniel's life was transformed by his obedience to God - and as a result he was highly trusted as a public official.

There is today a perception that politicians cannot be trusted. One recent poll showed that only 24 percent trust Government Ministers to tell the truth. We came out better than estate agents and tabloid journalists, but only just, and we lagged behind almost everyone else. Of course its terribly unfair. But the perception is widely held. How can we rebuild trust in politics?

When I first became joined the Labour Party, I was rather nervous about the reaction I would receive when my party colleagues discovered that I was a

Christian. The reaction I actually received surprised me. They thought my ideological commitment to Christianity was odd. But at least, they thought, with a Christian the individual is likely to be reasonably trustworthy. And that view led to me being chosen for various tasks and, many years later, to being a Cabinet Minister in the current Government.

Christians have a greater motivation than others to be truthful and so to earn the trust of others. I hope that as Christians become involved in every level and aspect of public service that we will help to begin to restore much-needed trust in society.

3. Our Concerns

If the first reason is our calling, and the second is our character, then the third reason why Christians should be involved in public life, and especially in politics, is because of the issues which concern us - our concerns. In the Old Testament, you can't miss how the prophets' exhortations to obey God were bound up with exhortations to protect the innocent and defend those who cannot defend themselves. And God's judgements were not only directed against Israel but also against the surrounding nations.

The inescapable conclusion is that God is deeply concerned about how nations are run - and this includes the policies they adopt. We, as His servants, are to contribute in helping to put things right. When we read the Bible, we begin to see the world through the lens of God's creation, man's rebellion and Fall, and the future new creation. As Christians, this should inform the way in which we think about political and social issues right across the spectrum - from the economy, to the environment, to transport policy, and beyond!

There is no escaping that Christians approaching the same issue can come to different conclusions. There has been lots of recent debate about the Sexual Orientation Regulations. Because all of us were created equal, it has never seemed to me to be appropriate that some should be discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation. So I support the Regulations - though I know that lots of Christians do not.

I am glad that a transition period has been agreed for adoption agencies, and I hope that during that a way will be found for the Catholic societies to continue to do their invaluable work in good conscience and in a way consistent with the Regulations. It is certainly the Government's wish that churches and faith-based organisations should play a full part in providing services to their community, building upon progress we have already seen.

Disagreements over particular policies are inevitable - but we should not use that as an excuse to avoid getting involved.

So which issues should Christians be most concerned about? I believe it is clear from the Bible that dealing with poverty has to be at the top of the list. Jesus spent much of his time teaching on poverty. He instructed his followers that whatever they do for the poor they also do for Him. The American Christian activist Jim Wallis, in his excellent recent book *God's Politics*, says he once searched the whole of the Bible for every reference to the poor, and concluded it is the second most prominent theme in the Old Testament, after idolatry. In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses are about the poor or about money. In Luke's gospel it is one in every seven verses!

The prophets in the Old Testament challenged the people of their day to act with justice towards the poor. So, too, the Church today can play a "prophetic" role in challenging the Government to act with justice. And it is a job we have seen the Church performing very well.

Jubilee 2000 was an international campaign and, in the run-up to the millennium, millions of people across the world joined its call for the debts of the poorest nations to be scrapped. Then came the *Make Poverty History* campaign in 2005, culminating at the UK-chaired G8 summit in Scotland.

80% of the people who formed those human changes and bombarded their MPs with postcards were from the churches. I spoke at a Make Poverty History rally in Melbourne, Australia - and they were quite clear it was the British Government which had been leading the world. And it has been Christians in Britain whose vision and commitment has opened up new political possibilities, changing the mood of the country just as Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners did 200 years ago, and allowed national leaders to act.

The G8 and European Union made far reaching promises at Gleneagles. In Uganda for example, there are now three times as many children in primary schools. There is a long, long way to go before the Millennium Development Goals are achieved, but the progress there has been down to the churches. And we need more courageous campaigns like that one, more moral vision, more determination and commitment in our politics in the future too.

Christians in Britain have taken seriously the Bible's call for justice towards the poor and have helped bring about real changes to the lives of millions of the world's poorest people.

But Christians thankfully have not only been at the forefront of tackling social problems abroad - they have also been working for change here in the UK. I've watched the New Deal, to help unemployed young people, and others, being driven forward with real passion at the heart of Government. Some of the most imaginative and effective contributions have been from the churches.

When the New Deal was being developed, I got to know the work of the diocese of Birmingham well. The Diocese was tending to pick up New Deal participants nobody else wanted. On one occasion, they were asked to find a placement for a man who was due in court to be tried for 117 offences of burglary. He was placed on a project to decorate a church complex in Edgbaston - and he turned out to be an excellent painter, a skill acquired in a previous young offenders' institution! When the time came for him to go to court, the church administrator went along to speak up for him and to ask the judge that he should be given another chance - and, to everyone's surprise, the judge agreed. The young man has since apparently started up with a couple of others a painting business of their own.

At the ceremony at the church to mark the conclusion of the painting work, one of those who turned up was the young man's mother. She had never been to the church before, but after the service she searched out the administrator and said to him: *"When you went to court to plead for my son to keep his job, you saved his life"*. And I think we should have as politicians Christians who will make it their business that Government makes opportunities for lives to be saved in that way.

Conclusion

So, I have suggested three reasons why Christians should play a full role in public life - our calling, our characters, and our concerns.

I began this speech by outlining some of my own experiences as a Christian and a politician, and I would like to end my talk there too. One of my proudest achievements as a councillor was to begin the campaign to bring the Channel Tunnel Rail Link to a station at Stratford. A lot of people prayed for the station to go ahead, to bring back vitality into an area whose prosperity has always been linked to the railways. When I became the MP, I talked about it in my maiden speech - and I worked with others who shared my passion - two of them in particular - my parliamentary neighbour, the late Tony Banks, and your MP, David Amess, with us this morning, born and brought up in Forest Gate and a great and effective campaigner for that station too.

And now, in part because of the existence of that international station, the eyes of the world will be on us in 2012 when we host the Olympic Games.

We can change things in Britain. We can influence the life of our nation - and it needs influencing. In the police, on the council, in social services in the NHS, as a school governor, God can do extraordinary things through ordinary people obedient to his call.

This is my hope for each of us here. I pray that when you leave here today you will go and make it a reality.

Thank you.