

Is the Christian Political Right, Right?

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The story is told that during the United States Civil War, a clergyman sent a note to President Lincoln, intending to encourage the President. The note said "Do not fear; God is on your side." Apparently, upon reading the note, President Lincoln turned to his advisers and said "But that isn't the question. The question is: 'Am I on God's side?'"

The distinction is an important one and provides a context for analysing the political movement known as "the Christian political right."

As with all labels, the term "Christian political right" has its weaknesses and is potentially misleading. It is most frequently either a derogatory term (especially as used by the secular media) or a self-descriptive term by some who would like to be perceived as leaders of the movement. Complicating matters is the fact that those whom critics describe as belonging to the Christian right, and those who most loudly claim ownership of the label, are not necessarily the same people.

Left versus Right

This confusion is also true of the terms "left" and "right," which are culturally sensitive. In Russia, for example, being "on the right" implies a sympathy for, and a desire to return to, the communist system. In Iran, "right" implies a fundamentalist interpretation of the Islamic religion, with its political and social implications.

We need to start by clarifying what we mean by "left" and "right." Generally, those on the right approach politics with a belief in smaller government and an emphasis on individual responsibility and self reliance. Those on the left emphasize community and social responsibility, and are much less reluctant to involve the government in solving problems. These imprecise definitions will not satisfy any political science theorists, but they provide a common framework to address the question "Is the Christian political right, right?"

Putting Politics in its Place

A few more preliminary comments, however, are needed to provide the context of our discussion.

First, I would like to emphasize the relevance of the question before us. Our Reformed heritage requires us to pay attention to what Scripture teaches about areas of life that would not usually be labelled as directly spiritual. God's sovereignty applies to the totality of creation. I will not develop the point at length here. But at a time when some in evangelical—and even Reformed circles—suggest that the "one thing needful" is really the "only thing needful," and that as long as one is converted nothing else in life matters, we must reaffirm the Biblical truth that God demands obedience from our total being for all aspects of our lives. And while we must be aware that political issues are temporal—not eternal matters—we must, with Jeremiah, "seek the peace of the city whither I have caused

you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace." (Jeremiah 29:7) In article 36 of the *Belgic Confession*, we confess that it is a gracious God who provides us with magistrates for the restraint of evil and the promotion of good.

Having emphasized the wrongness of neglecting Christian responsibilities for this part of life, we must also be careful in how we apply Scripture to current issues. The Bible speaks very clearly on many matters that directly apply to the political sphere, and where Scripture speaks clearly, so ought we. However, that does not mean it is appropriate to argue that there are definitive and exclusively "Christian" answers to every political issue in our day. It is important to distinguish between *religious claims* and *political judgements*.

Perhaps the distinction is clarified with an example. Consider the issue of abortion. Christian thinking on these matters most certainly starts with the biblical teachings that man is created in the image of God, and therefore, every human life is precious. This is clearly a scriptural claim that applies to all and we must affirm it, also in the political arena. It is a Christian's starting premise when addressing these issues. But how does this translate into legislation? Obviously, it implies that there ought to be a law against abortion, but what should that law say? How should those who break this law be punished? Who is the murderer? Is it the doctor who performs an abortion or the mother who requests it? What about the father who urges her to? And, to carry it a step further, if there was capital punishment for murder, who should be so punished? I am certain that these questions would generate vigorous debates among us, and most would concede that Christians might reasonably come to different conclusions on these questions.

I raise this example—and there are many other issues on which debate would even be more vigorous than on the abortion/euthanasia question—to illustrate this crucial distinction between political and religious judgements. As I hope to make clear, we cannot separate political judgements from scriptural truth. The two are connected, and we need to be prepared to explain our political judgements with reference to the religious claims on which they are based. But the two are not the same thing. The failure to make this necessary distinction is harmful to the cause of Christ, as well as politically fatal.

Going back to our example, the clear authority of the Scriptures is that to take a human life through abortion is to destroy a created image-bearer of God and to violate His law. That is why it is wrong, and that is why governments must punish the wrongdoer. But in determining precisely what actions constitute criminal liability and what are the appropriate legal remedies, I cannot claim the same authority about such political judgements. Nor should I label those who disagree with me on a piece of legislation for being less Christian than I because of their different political positions.

Applied to the questions surrounding the Christian right, we must be clear that we are primarily assessing *political* rather than *religious* claims. I don't particularly like the labels "left" and "right," yet, as I make political judgments on the issues of the day, the policies I find myself supporting are usually described as on the right. I must recognize, however, that coming to different political conclusions is not necessarily a sign of unfaithfulness to

Scripture. I fear that sometimes those who step into the public arena wearing their Christian colours boldly are too eager to uncompromisingly judge those with whom they have political differences, while they are sometimes too timid to speak forcefully and directly on questions where the Scriptures warrant a loud, "Thus saith the Lord."

A Historical Context

Returning to the question "Is the Christian political right, right?," it is helpful to put this movement in historical context. Until the seventeenth century, it was assumed that religion and politics belonged together. Religious uniformity was deemed to be a necessary prerequisite for social order, and it was the government's task to enforce religious purity. This was carried out by governments both against Christians and in the name of Christianity against heretics. Already in ancient Greek society, the government enforced a particular moral code. Socrates, living some four centuries before Christ, was sentenced to death because his teachings were said to threaten the social order.

Religious freedom did not come about overnight, and is still denied in some parts of the world. But wars of religion in Europe, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment all contributed to the disestablishment of state religion. Within the development of western civilization came the realization that freedom of conscience and religion was, in fact, the first and foundational freedom.

Although religious freedom flourished, religion was never thought to be irrelevant to public life. The western democracies developed within a framework of a "moral consensus" among the citizenry. Most believed that there ought to be a separation of church and state, and in particular, that the state ought to be kept out of church disputes and that it not endorse a specific denomination. But politics was informed by, and dependent on, the moral influences of a religious society. In fact, one might go so far as to say, particularly in the United States for example, that a "civil religion" developed, in which ideas about love of God and country become intertwined.

This general characterization of western society was valid until about fifty years ago when the rapid secularization or "de-Christianization" of western culture began. To grossly oversimplify, one might say that in the fifties, these ideas were developed in the ivory towers of academia. During the sixties, they came to expression in popular culture. The media and entertainers celebrated the removal of constraints and the rejection of authority. Watergate and Vietnam marked the transition into the seventies. These events propelled the rejection of authority from the fringes into the mainstream. Confidence in our institutions, especially the institution of government, eroded.

Awakening of the Christian right

I think it is fair to say that the Christian community critically observed these trends, but generally minded its own business and did not become overly concerned or involved with the directions in the public policy arena until 1973. It was the United States Supreme Court decision on *Roe vs. Wade*—the abortion issue—which awoke the ordinary church member to

the fact that North American society was changing. No longer could we assume that the Christian moral consensus would be the basis of our living together in society.

In 1976, "The Year of the Evangelical," Jimmy Carter became President. His campaign focused on his claim that he was a born-again Christian. Americans, their faith in the presidency shaken by the events of the decade past, wanted a good man to restore integrity and their faith in the system. The problems, however, ran deeper than the person in the President's chair. Just having a Christian in office wasn't enough.

The stage was set for the first prominent, explicitly Christian political advocacy organization, the Moral Majority. Formed by Rev. Jerry Fallwell in the late seventies as an antidote to the secularization of American society, it had high hopes of achieving its goals by influencing the Reagan presidency, however, its supporters were disappointed. In spite of promising words, the Reagan administration was not seen to go very far in implementing the Christian agenda.

Having a Christian in office without an explicitly Christian agenda proved unsatisfying. So did having an explicitly Christian agenda without a Christian leader to implement it. And so the next stage was very predictable. The two were combined in the 1988 Presidency campaign of Rev. Pat Robertson. That campaign fell short but the organization it created—renamed the Christian Coalition—continued on. This organization is the focal point of the Christian political right in the United States today.

Since the hiring of Ralph Reed, a bright young tactician and spokesman, as its Executive Director, the Christian Coalition has developed into one of the most effective political organizations in the U.S. By taking the lead in applying new technologies, building an incredible network of contacts, and combining the two at a grassroots level, the Coalition succeeded in getting Republicans organized around a written "Contract with America" and in the 1994 Congressional elections, won control of Congress.

Observations

Before analysing the movement and what it stands for more closely, let me make a few observations based on the historical developments I have just outlined.

First, while it seems in retrospect that there was a logical development and thought process behind the movement, in reality this was hardly the case. In hindsight, we observe that the Christian community voted for a Christian in Carter, formed a Christian organization, and then tried to combine the two. But the truth is that each movement, at the time, was controversial within the Christian community. They were separate movements, with different leaderships and dynamics explaining their origins. To define them as one continuous movement, or as the execution of a single plan, is to distort what really happened at the grassroots level. That being said, however, we are all shaped in our thinking today by what we have learned yesterday and I think it is fair to link the logical development of the movement as I have done.

Second, the Christian right is a reactive movement, a response to the aggressive and

militant secularization of society. It is not surprising to hear within the Christian right a nostalgic desire to return to a past era when North America was Christian. That raises several questions. How Christian was the government in the fifties? Can we really hold up those models as illustrative of the influence of a Christian government on society? If it were not for the secularization of society, could the Christian community have been motivated to become involved in the same way as it is today? It is not a defined vision or plan for society that motivated the Christian right into action. Rather, it was the rejection of the secularization which was overtaking society, as well as a sense of loss of the dominant position—with its admitted privileges and comforts—which Christians had enjoyed in society.

I have traced the development of the Christian right using American examples because the intellectual leadership and profile of the movement is largely American. It should be noted that in Canada, the activities of the Christian Heritage Party, REAL Women, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada certainly can be linked to the Christian right. More recently, a group is trying to organize a Canadian equivalent of the Christian Coalition, directly borrowing their strategies. However, what has happened in Canada to date is really an imported Canadianized version of what's happened south of the border where it seems the movement is more sophisticated and mature.

Spokespersons

In recounting the origins, I have mentioned various names of activists with whom you might be familiar from the newspapers. It's worthwhile, however, to review some of the more prominent theorists who have given shape and intellectual leadership to the movement.

One such theorist is James Skillen, whose book, *The Scattered Voice*, sketches three distinct streams of thought among the religious right. The first Skillen has called "pro-America conservatives" and in this camp he names, among others, Jim Dobson, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Falwell. At the core of their appeal is a return to a better past where families lived together, government stayed out of the road, and children were taught the Ten Commandments in school. The charge is made that the elites who control our education system, the media, and the courts have "stolen" from the "silent majority" this Christian America. Now is the time to stand up and recapture it.

The second group, the "cautious and critical conservatives", which include people like Charles Colson and Doug Bandow, do not reject the pro-American analysis of what's happened, but they are skeptical about the possibility and even desirability of the solutions. Christians, Colson argues, are as susceptible to corruption as are secularists, and having the "silent majority" elect a government to recover the lost America is hardly a guarantee of a better life. In fact, looking back to the "good old days," were they really that good from a Christian perspective? What about the injustices which were done toward minorities? What about the treatment of the Japanese by the Christian majority during World War II? It is not that Colson and company disagree with the critique of what is happening in present society, but they warn that Christians are just as capable of unchristian behaviour as the secularists who presently hold office.

The third stream of thought Skillen has labelled the "sophisticated neo-conservatives." The names of Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak are the most prominent. Again, the basic critique of society is shared however Neuhaus and Novak argue that Christians need to take a much broader approach. They argue that some in the Christian right place far too much emphasis on politics. They also argue that over-emphasis on the institutions of family, church, and state has resulted in certain areas of life—economics for example—left either as an individual responsibility or as a state responsibility. The common approach is simply inadequate, they say, in organizing a society so that it conforms consistently with the calling of the Scriptures.

In summary, the pro-America conservatives are primarily focused on moral issues and a return to a better past; the cautious conservatives emphasize limited government, with checks and balances since power easily corrupts; and the sophisticated neo-conservatives try to develop a more positive Christian approach to all areas of society but, in trying to do justice to the complexity of these matters, end up with a less coherent and more academic call to action. It is useful to observe that the lines between these three groups are blurred at the best of times, and there is general respect and cooperation between them.

Is Conservatism Christian?

In the minds of the public, the distinctions between these movements are lost. The various elements of the Christian political right are lumped together as having two characteristics: Conservatism and Christianity. And if we are to develop an answer to the question "Is the political Christian right, right?" we must come to grips with the prior question, "Is being politically right— in other words, a conservative—Christian?"

I have already declared that my political bias is to the right, although I reemphasize that this is a political claim, and not a religious one. But I have no hesitancy in defending that claim on the basis of biblical teaching.

Among the various biblical principles that apply to the political sphere, at least three provide the basis for solutions which typically are described as being "right." The first is the emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility. I trust I do not have to spend a great deal of time convincing you that the Scriptures hold each of us as individuals, accountable for our actions and behaviour. The *Heidelberg Catechism* deals with the reasoning that one finds so prevalent in our society when it explains the doctrine of original sin. In Lords Days III and IV, the catechism points out that since the Fall, human nature has been corrupted and we are all conceived and born in sin. Apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, "we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness." (Question 8) So then, proceeds the questioner, is God not being unjust towards man in requiring an obedience of which man by nature is incapable? "Not at all," comes the response. Man is accountable and the justice of God will hold man accountable for his original as well as his actual sin.

In an age where everyone seems to be a victim and where political solutions seem to be focused on solving "systemic problems," the scriptural teachings regarding human

accountability are relevant and ought to guide our thinking. If God holds man eternally accountable for his actions, should governments who derive their authority from God (Romans 13) explain away an individual's responsibility for their actions on the grounds of systemic problems?

The second biblical principle incorporated into a conservative approach is a basic pessimism about human nature. Conservatives are not usually committed Calvinists, embracing the doctrine of total depravity. In fact, most would take considerable issue with it. Conservative thinking might be better described as "meritism," whereby people should be treated according to what they deserve. This approach is inadequate but it explains the individualism, the cold-hearted justice, and the glorification of materialism through unrestrained capitalism that characterizes some conservative policy. For conservatives, it's a matter of getting what you deserve. Work hard, do what's right, and a harsh criminal system won't affect you. You will enjoy the fruits of your labours and not need to rely on handouts.

But, as any observer of society will notice, many individuals do not behave in a manner to enjoy the wonderful life that might otherwise be theirs. For conservatives, this creates a basis to be pessimistic about human nature. After all, everyone has the opportunity to merit the good life, yet many choose not to. So it is from observation of social reality that most conservatives come to their pessimistic conclusions about human nature.

This is quite a contrast to the prevailing spirit of our day, which promises a society-created utopia. In that spirit, society responds to rallying cries in order to eliminate disease, end poverty, and build a prosperous economy. Consider how President Clinton mixed and misquoted both Paul and Isaiah in his inauguration speech: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has imagined what we can build." Over against such utopianism and trust in what man will accomplish, conservatives operate with a realistic pessimism about human nature.

The third biblical principle reflected in conservative thinking is a respect for authority. For the Christian, God is the ultimate authority who has provided, through creation and Scripture, the means for us to know him. (*Belgic Confession*, Article II.) Truth is not determined by what we feel but by an authority outside of ourselves which we can rely on to make proper judgements. Important in this regard is also the concept of delegated authority. God has created structures in which some have particular responsibility and authority over others. Parents have an authority over children. Governments have an authority over citizens.

Again, this principle is much better reflected in conservative than in liberal thinking. Conservatives tend to be traditionalists. They rely on custom and precedent for doing things a certain way. That, of course, is not without its dangers. For example, the 1992 decision of the United States Supreme Court, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, argued that the right to abort a child was an established twenty-year legal precedent. The question "is not the soundness of Roe's resolution of the issue, but the precedential force that must be accorded the ruling An entire generation has come of age free to assume Roe's

concept of liberty."ⁱ Essentially, this is a conservative argument. Abortion has worked this way for twenty years, we've learned to live with it, so let's leave well enough alone. Nevertheless, when contrasted with the liberal approach of egalitarianism (the belief in social equality) which derives authority from within the autonomous self and, consequently, has little respect for transcendent authority, I find myself much more in line with conservative reasoning. While we must never use tradition or precedent as a standard to distinguish right from wrong, Christians can appeal to much in our past. That does not mean that we may turn a blind eye to the injustices of the past and pretend that it represents an ideal to which we should return. But neither should we ignore nor denigrate the influence that Christian thinking has had on the development of western civilization and North American society. Canada and the United States have been developed within a Christian heritage and tradition, and it is appropriate for Christians to join conservatives in appealing to these traditions as a reason for present action.

I must point out that there are several biblical principles that do not fit well within a conservative frame of reference and are better dealt with by those more liberal in their political judgements. These include the biblical emphasis on the community responsibility for caring for others; the focus on serving others or servanthood; and the notion of stewardship over against the notion of property rights.

Combining Christianity and Conservatism

By themselves, liberal and conservative thinking are inadequate expressions of Christian political thought. Both are man-made "isms" that promise more than they deliver and are fraught with errors and inconsistencies incompatible with scriptural teaching. Yet, if Christians are to participate in public life—as is surely their obligation—then working within the political frameworks of the day is inescapable. In that vein, I defend my political "right" orientation, conceding that my political judgements are shaped, at least in part, by that framework. I do so cautiously, however, recognizing that by no means should I claim that my political judgements are more biblically sound than those of my political opponents.

If nothing else, the foregoing has shown the inadequacies of the political frameworks of both conservatism and liberalism to make room for a full-orbed Christian vision of public life. My defense of being somewhat conservative in my political judgements is not a defense of conservatism. Professor J. Budziszewski recently wrote two excellent articles in *First Things* in which he pointed out various problems that Christians ought to have with both conservative and liberal ideology. He observed:

"From time to time, Christians may find themselves in tactical alliance with conservatives, just as with liberals, over particular policies, precepts, and laws. But they cannot be in strategic alliance, because their reasons for these stands are different; they are living a different vision."ⁱⁱⁱ

Answering the Question

So where does this leave us in trying to answer the question "Is the Christian political right,

right?" Several points are implied by our discussion.

1. The Christian political right is properly involving itself and drawing attention to an area of life in which Christians ought to be involved as salt and light.
2. The movement correctly seeks to examine and base its positions on current issues based on the revealed will of God, and is willing to make the explicit link between God's call to obedience and the life of a society.
3. Involvement in public life, however, requires political as well as religious judgements. Political involvement inevitably results in drawing on the dominant political frame of reference.
4. While sympathetic to many of the issues raised by the Christian right, I fear that they have not made adequate distinctions between their religious claims and their political judgements. The result is that they have communicated, implicitly and sometimes even explicitly, that their position on a given issue is the only position a Christian might hold, and that every other position is therefore unchristian.

Observing how Christian involvement in public life has been combined with a conservative frame of reference raises three issues: moral reductionism, the problem of pluralism and being Christ-like.

Moral Reductionism

Christians involved in public life find themselves often pointing out that every decision is based on premises that are moral in character. Contrary to the prevailing spirit of our day, Christians must hold that moral neutrality does not exist and every political decision involves the imposition of some sort of morality. The real question of public life is, "Whose morality will be imposed?"

It is easy to fall into the trap of advocating that the state, by default, becomes the guardian of morality. Those on the Christian right enthusiastically embrace these arguments when it comes to obvious issues of morality such as pornography or homosexuality, but they are less apt to adopt the same logic when it comes to other issues.

For example, most Christian right activists argue that pornography is moral pollution. Just as the government has the duty to limit smog emissions so that we all have clean air to breathe, so it must keep the "moral air" of a community clean by curtailing pornography. Just as it is inappropriate for a factory owner to argue that his economic freedoms take precedence over the environment, so it is inappropriate to argue that the personal freedom to view pornography should take precedence over the moral health of a community.

That line of logic is familiar enough and most Christians who are politically right would readily agree this is an appropriate use of state power. But how many of those same people would argue that the Bible also speaks clearly against the immorality of oppression?

Look up oppression in the concordance. Read the repeated warnings in the Levitical laws against oppression. "Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy strangers that are in the land within thy gates." (Duet. 24:14) The Lord warns to come in judgement against those that oppress the hirelings in their wages. (Mal. 3:5) Paul warns the Thessolonian church that the Lord is the avenger of those who defraud their brothers in any manner. (I Thess. 4:6) But why is it that those on the politically right will almost immediately argue that any government involvement in the economy is inappropriate? Should not the same logic that argues for the curtailment of pornography as an appropriate limitation on individual freedom also argue that laws enforcing a minimum wage be an appropriate restraint against the sin of oppression?

The issue of what is an appropriate use of state power is complex and the above issues raise many other questions which deserve consideration beyond what we can give them. But Christians involved in public life can be very selective in the morality that they advocate. It should be noted that those on the Christian left are as guilty of this as those on the Christian right. Both are willing to "impose" morality in some areas and unwilling to apply the same arguments in others. The fact that those on the Christian right are quick to moral arguments on lifestyle issues like pornography also raises questions about the extent to which they are willing to rely on the state as the guardian of morality. Politics ends up being reduced to moral issues, and the range of moral issues tends to be selective.

The Problem of Pluralism

The inevitable question that Christians involved in politics must address is, "What about those of other faiths?" If it is true that freedom of religion and conscience is the first and most basic freedom, then certainly Christians must be prepared to defend the freedom of those of other faiths to practice their religion.

It is important to remind ourselves of the point we made earlier that the religious right as a movement is a reaction to the militant secularism of our day. Whereas once the "moral consensus" governing public life in North America was shaped by a Christian worldview, the modern mindset is antagonistic towards any Christian expression or claims in the public square.

In this setting, it is easy to paint any appeal for a Christian place in the public square as that of a petulant child who is seeking to regain his lost place. Consider that as recently as 1960, the expectation of presidential candidates was that they were church-going Protestants, and one's Christianity was almost a requirement for public office. This feeling was so strong that John Kennedy felt obliged to address the issue head-on in a September 12, 1960 address to the Houston Ministerial Association:

"If 40 million Americans lost their chance of being president on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the losers . . . in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people. It is not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me, but what kind of

America I believe in."

I certainly have problems with Kennedy's position, but he was quite right in saying that church affiliation should not be a test for public office. But consider how far the pendulum has swung in 35 years. Now, any Christian profession in public life is almost considered a disqualification for office. This led Ralph Reed to open the 1995 convention of the Christian Coalition with the rallying cry, "We will ride in the back of the bus no longer."

Christians need to think carefully about the issue of pluralism and avoid both extremes. The desire to create a Christian country, in which religious orthodoxy becomes a test for political office and a Christian majority enjoys a privileged position in society based on their religion, is not the sort of vision that should inspire Christian politics. But neither should Christians suggest that they are another interest group fighting for their rights, battling other groups to see who gets the front seat of the bus.

We must avoid and oppose a *relativistic* pluralism. In such a system, religion is effectively privatized so as not to offend others. This is the vision advocated by Kennedy when he suggested that his religion mattered only to him. Such pluralism is antithetical to the Christian faith and must be opposed. If our faith is vital and true, it must impact our involvement in all of life, including our public life.

Instead, we must advocate for a pluralism that recognizes that all citizens, whatever their faith, have the freedom—and responsibility—to live their religion, also in their public lives. Religious discussion should not be avoided but encouraged in public life. Such pluralism is only possible because of the framework of freedom provided by our Christian heritage. This is not simply a matter of claiming credit or seeking advantage for Christians; it is a matter of educating ourselves and society of the important roots of this freedom. When we lose sight of the origins of freedom, we run the danger of practicing intolerance.

Being Christlike

What does Christian involvement in public life communicate to the world about Christianity?

It is crucially important for Christians to consider how their actions reflect on the name they bear. It is not their own reputation and political career at stake; it is the name of Christ by which they are called.

It has been said that all questions in life reduce to: Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going?

When a Christian publicly identifies himself as such, he is telling the world what he believes about himself. I am a Christian. That is not only a confession that my only hope of salvation rests in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that I believe that for His sake I am forgiven and I live in hope of the glorious life to come; that is also a public confession about the purpose and meaning of this present life. For what I am doing here on this earth? To use the answer of the Westminster Confession, my purpose is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This world is not mine, it is not ours collectively, but this world belongs to God. Christ is the King of all of life and whether my fellow-citizens or those I meet

acknowledge it or not, Christ has claim over this country and over our lives. So where are we going? God will come again to judge this world. Every nation and tribe will one day acknowledge Him as the Lord of lords and the King of kings.

Christian involvement in public life—and this of course applies to home life, business life, and every other aspect of life as well—must be conducted in a way that brings honour and glory to God's name. And as in all our endeavours, our efforts in the public forum leave much to be desired. Indeed, here too, we see that our best works are but totally stained by sin.

That, however, is no excuse for inaction. In that vein, I am thankful for the Christian political right for awakening the consciousness of many Christians and promoting an involvement in an area that we too easily ignore. That doesn't mean we are blind to the dangers. We must be conscious to make careful distinctions between our religious and political claims. We must be careful not to employ rhetoric that leads to the illusion of social salvation. Politics and government cannot save us. God in His grace gives us government to restrain sin; it is only His redemptive grace worked by His Holy Spirit that overcomes sin. And God has clearly taught that this salvation is worked through the preaching of the Word applied by the Holy Spirit, and not through the force of government. It is not by might, nor by power, but by God's spirit that the hearts of men are transformed.

Lest we think that these problems and challenges are peculiar to our age, let me remind you of the story we started with. Like the letter-writer to President Lincoln, many are tempted to recruit God to their side in their pursuit of political objectives. May we be given the grace, however, to recognize the important distinction and instead, seek to serve God and obey His will, also in our public lives.

Notes:

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- i. Quoted in "The Problem with Conservatism", J. Budziszewski, *First Things*, April 1996, pg. 41.
 - ii. Budziszewski, p. 38. Both this article on Conservatism and the article "The Problem with Liberalism" by the same author, published in the March 1996 issue of *First Things*, are highly recommended to those who would like to examine these issues further.