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Engaging the City of Man: Christian Faith and Politics

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To what extent should Christians be involved in the political process?

This question has troubled the Christian conscience for centuries. The emergence of the modern evangelical movement in the post World War II era brought a renewed concern for engagement with the culture and the political process. The late Carl F. H. Henry addressed evangelicals with a manifesto for Christian engagement in his landmark book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. As Dr. Henry eloquently argued, disengagement from the critical issues of the day is not an option.

An evangelical theology for political participation must be grounded in the larger context of cultural engagement. As the Christian worldview makes clear, our ultimate concern must be the glory of God. Building from that, we understand that when we are instructed by Scripture to love God and then to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are given a clear mandate for the right kind of cultural engagement.

We love our neighbor because we first love God. In His sovereignty, our Creator has put us within this cultural context in order that we may display His glory by preaching the gospel, confronting persons with God's truth, and serving as agents of salt and light in a dark and fallen world. In other words, love of God leads us to love our neighbor—and love of neighbor requires our participation in the culture and in the political process.

Writing even as the Romans Empire fell, Augustine, the great bishop and theologian of the early church, made this case in his monumental work, *The City of God*. As Augustine explained, humanity is confronted by two cities—the City of God and the City of Man. The City of God is eternal, and takes as its sole concern the greater glory of God. In the City of God, all things are ruled by God's Word, and the perfect rule of God is the passion of all its citizens.

In the City of Man, however, the reality is very different. This city is filled with mixed passions, mixed allegiances, and compromised principles. Though the City of God is marked by unconditional obedience to the command of God, citizens of the City of Man demonstrate deadly patterns of disobedience, even as they celebrate and claim their moral autonomy, and then revolt against the Creator.

Of course, we know that the City of God is eternal, even as the City of Man is passing. But this does not mean that the City of Man is ultimately unimportant, and it does not allow the church to forfeit its responsibility to love its citizens. Love of neighbor—grounded in our love for God—requires us to work for good in the City of Man, even as we set as our first priority the preaching of the gospel—the only means of bringing citizens of the City of Man into citizenship in the City of God.

Thus, Christians bear important responsibilities in both cities. Even as we know that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, and even as we set our sights on the glory of the City of God, we must work for good, justice, and righteousness in the City of Man. We do so, not merely because we are commanded to love its citizens, but because we know that they are loved by the very God we serve.

From generation to generation, Christians often swing between two extremes, either ignoring the City of Man or considering it to be our main concern. A biblical balance establishes the fact that the City of Man is indeed passing, and chastens us from believing that the City of Man and its realities can ever be of ultimate importance. Yet, we also know that each of us is, by God's own design, a citizen—though temporarily—of the City of Man. When Jesus instructed that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, He pointed His followers to the City of Man and gave us a clear assignment. The only alternatives that remain are obedience and disobedience to this call.

Love of neighbor for the sake of loving God is a profound political philosophy that strikes a balance between the disobedience of political disengagement and the idolatry of politics as our main priority. As evangelical Christians, we must engage in political action, not because we believe the conceit that politics is ultimate, but because we must obey our Redeemer when He commanded that we must love our neighbor.

We are concerned for the culture not because we believe that the culture is ultimate, but because we know that our neighbors must hear the gospel, even as we hope and strive for their good, peace, security, and well-being.

The Kingdom of God is never up for a vote in any election, and there are no polling places in the City of God. Nevertheless, it is by God's sovereignty that we are now confronted with these times, our current crucial issues of debate, and the decisions that are made in the political process.

This is no time for silence, and no time for shirking our responsibilities as Christian citizens. Ominous signs of moral collapse and cultural decay now appear on our contemporary horizon. A society ready to put the institution of marriage up for demolition and transformation is a society losing its most basic moral sense. A culture ready to treat human embryos as material for medical experimentation is a society turning its back on human dignity and the sacredness of human life.

Trouble in the City of Man is a call to action for citizens of the City of God, and that call to action must involve political involvement as well. Christians may well be the last citizens who know the difference between the eternal and the temporal, the ultimate and the urgent. God's truth is eternal and Christian convictions must be commitments of permanence. Political alliances and arrangements are, by definition, temporary and conditional. This is no time for America's Christians to confuse the City of Man with the City of God. At the same time, we can never be counted faithful in the City of God if we neglect our duty in the City of Man. That's a good principle to remember as America gears up for a crucial political debate.

