

**JUSTIN GIBONEY, MICHAEL WEAR,
AND CHRIS BUTLER**

**FOREWORD BY
BARBARA WILLIAMS-SKINNER**



COMPASSION



CONVICTION

**THE AND CAMPAIGN'S GUIDE
TO FAITHFUL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**



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CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIANS



POLITICS

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act led to what's known as the Trail of Tears, in which almost fifty thousand indigenous people were removed from the southeastern United States and relocated west of the Mississippi River. More than four thousand persons died from disease, hunger, and cold during the journey. This forced relocation was popular with Americans who were eligible to vote because it freed up land for settlers, but it led America further down the path toward the heinous sin of exploitation and oppression of indigenous people.¹

According to Robert L. Burgdorf Jr., who contracted polio as a toddler, people with disabilities faced “widespread, systemic, inhumane discrimination” prior to organizing and advocating alongside their allies against such societal barriers. Children with disabilities were systematically excluded from public schools; public transportation was almost totally inaccessible to those with mobility and visual impairments; and many were institutionalized in remote, unsanitary, and dangerously overcrowded

facilities. Some people with mental and physical conditions faced involuntary sterilization and were denied lifesaving medication and medical treatment. All these things motivated Burgdorf to write the Americans with Disabilities Acts of 1990.² This landmark legislation prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunication.³

Both instances represent political decisions that changed the course of history. In one instance, Americans failed to stand up for the voiceless and vulnerable. In the latter example, America finally corrected a history of injustice and neglect. In both cases, citizens had an opportunity to significantly affect the present and future well-being of others. Had Christians organized and rallied against the Indian Removal Act, perhaps they could've stopped President Andrew Jackson from signing it, saved thousands of lives, and even improved the station of indigenous people today. We'll never know for sure, but we do know that our participation in the political process or lack thereof—and the principles we employ—greatly affect our neighbors.

Politics can be a matter of freedom or imprisonment, free speech or censorship, housing or homelessness, life or death. Politics is an essential aspect of modern life. It is how we govern ourselves, and it plays a major role in how we organize ourselves as a society. Political actions have started wars and defined certain people as property, but they've also fed the hungry and provided care for the sick. Christians must be faithful and thoughtful in how we choose to wield our influence and political power.

We hear endlessly about political scandals, broken campaign promises, deceptions, and power trips. Watch local news and it immediately becomes clear that politics can be corrupt, dangerous,

and filled with idols. Some people get involved in politics for the wrong reasons, and others who start with lofty ideals seem to lose their original purpose in the fray. Given this reality, should Christians participate in politics? Should we partake in such a broken arena or leave the political world to its own devices?

Politics is ugly and imperfect because our world is broken—because we as individuals are broken. Nothing was unaffected by the fall (Genesis 3), and politics is no exception. But like it or not, politics touches every aspect of society. How and when we worship, what constitutes a crime, and what children learn in school are all subject to political decisions. To avoid or dismiss political engagement is to forgo an important opportunity to help our neighbors and to promote the righteousness and justice that are the foundation of God's throne (Psalm 89:14).

We hear a lot of disheartening stories about politics and politicians, but there are also many encouraging stories—stories in which the needy are supported and society is improved because of kindhearted advocacy and thoughtful policy decisions. Refusing to engage civically is failing to steward the things God has placed in our sphere of influence. How can we be salt and light if we have no contact with society (Matthew 5:13-16)—especially in an arena with such a significant and broad impact on society? Christians should engage politics because doing so provides us with a robust opportunity to love our neighbor by acting justly, promoting human flourishing, and seeking the prosperity of our community.

The Christian's Primary Objective

As Christians, our primary objective is to profess the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations (Matthew 28:16-20). No other task

should be allowed to interfere with or obscure that purpose. If the Great Commission becomes secondary, or if Christianity is understood primarily as a means of accomplishing social or political goals, then we've handed to Caesar what belongs to God (Matthew 22:21).

Do not interpret this book's focus on the political space as a suggestion that professing the gospel should be subordinated to political activity. While God has given us power to bring about change and help those around us in real ways (James 2:15-16), our world will continue to be a place of sin and suffering until Jesus returns (Romans 8:19-21). This truth is important to keep in mind as we discuss our interactions with society. It provides us with perspective, helping us remember the ultimate things rather than being consumed by the temporal matters of this world. Our civic participation will not glorify God if it's placed above worship, evangelism, or Christian fellowship.

Why Should Christians Engage Politics?

What are you willing to do for the people you love? If a family member was being mistreated, in addition to your prayers would you also use your time and resources to stop them from being hurt? If they were unjustly imprisoned, would you advocate for them? If a teacher was treating your child unfairly, would you address the issue? Of course you would. We rightly expect that kind of urgent action from the people who say they care about us.

In the Great Commandment, Jesus says to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). When Jesus is asked "Who is my neighbor?" by a lawyer who's trying to narrow this love imperative, Jesus responds with the Good Samaritan parable. Through that illustration we learn

that our neighbors aren't just allies or people in our community. Anyone can be our neighbor, and we are called to be a neighbor to everyone we have the capacity and occasion to help (Luke 10:25-37). To love others as we love ourselves is to give them the care and consideration that we'd provide for ourselves and our loved ones. If we were negatively impacted by injustice, we would advocate for ourselves; according to Scripture, we should also advocate and stand up for others (Isaiah 1:17).

Part of taking the Great Commandment seriously is realizing that love is more than a feeling or sentiment. Love is substantive and active. Loving our neighbors is not the same as simply not hating them; in the biblical sense love is not a lack of hate or of anything else. Love has form and content, as described in Scripture, and it compels us to act (1 Corinthians 13; see also Matthew 5:43-47). If you never left your home and avoided all interaction with other people, you couldn't be characterized as a loving person. Instead, you might even be unloving because of your lack of concern for others.

Loving our neighbors involves actively seeking their well-being. James 2:15-17 illustrates this point well:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Saying that we love our neighbors is nonsense if it's not reflected in our actions. Such actions are the outworking of our faith. If we're unwilling to go out of our way and use our resources to make sure others are taken care of, we're not living like the good Samaritan—or, more importantly, like Jesus Christ.

The Great Requirement and Doing Justice

In Micah 6:8, we find what has been called the Great Requirement:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Just as the Great Commandment requires us to actively love our neighbors, the Great Requirement commands us to further the cause of justice.

The first part of this requirement, “act justly,” obligates believers to take affirmative steps toward promoting justice. Like love, justice is more than merely the lack of injustice. Justice is substantive and active; it means we’re willing to give of ourselves for others. The political arena enables Christians to act justly in meaningful ways.

The prophet Isaiah describes God as a purveyor of righteousness and justice continually, and speaks to God’s expectation that his children will bring about righteousness and justice as well (Isaiah 59:14-17). Justice is a clear and prominent theme in the Old and New Testaments. Also, in both the Old and New Testament, Scripture tells us that government is ordained by God. Paul writes in Romans, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1). Government is for our good (Romans 13:4), and there is a biblical expectation that governmental bodies ought to uphold and advance justice (Amos 5:15). The Psalms contain a prayer that governmental leaders of that time might “defend the afflicted among the people, save the children of the needy,” and “crush the oppressor” (Psalm 72:4).

In other words, our government is tasked by God with protecting us and rendering justice. Moreover, while there is no biblical prescription for precisely which system of government (monarchy, liberal democracy, etc.) is best, we can trust that God has placed us in a particular time, place, and context in which political decisions regularly affect our neighbors for good and for ill. Therefore, Christians should participate in the political system and do our best to ensure that society is treating people fairly and upholding healthy standards of human dignity. In Jeremiah 29:7, God calls the believer to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” We’re not islands unto ourselves; we’re affected by what goes on around us and should pray and take action out of concern for it.

Whether we’re protecting the unborn, supporting fair prison sentences, or making sure the elderly are taken care of, politics provides a forum for advocating for our neighbor’s well-being and pursuing justice. Our daily walk should be a promotion of the love and truth of the gospel (Ephesians 4:15). Treating all God’s children with human dignity through the political arena is an opportunity we should not bypass.

Politics provides Christians with an opportunity to actively love our neighbors through advocacy, policymaking, and civic representation. To refuse to engage in politics is to refuse to take advantage of a useful tool for God’s work.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Christians aren’t limited to analyzing our relationship with the public square solely in theory or through abstract application. The Bible itself provides us with several concrete examples of

righteous people who used politics to further the will of God and help their neighbors.

Joseph (Genesis 39–41)

After Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt and he was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit, Joseph was asked to interpret Pharaoh's dream (Genesis 37:18-26; 39:2–40:23; 41:14-24). After successfully interpreting dreams for Pharaoh, Joseph was considered a man of discernment and wisdom, and he was put in charge of the whole land of Egypt (Genesis 41:39-40). This was a government position of great authority that forced Joseph to make some tough political decisions. Joseph traveled around Egypt to understand the lay of the land and familiarize himself with the job he had undertaken (Genesis 41:46). He created a strategy and processes for surviving the famine. During the seven years of abundance, he collected all the food produced and stored it (Genesis 41:47-48). When the seven years of famine began, Egypt was able to survive it because of Joseph's plan (Genesis 41:56-57). They were also able to sell grain to famished people from other areas.

Moses (Exodus 5–12)

After growing up in Pharaoh's family and later choosing to embrace his Hebrew heritage, Moses was chosen by God to deliver his people out of slavery (Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-9). Moses was hesitant to accept his commission because he thought he was inadequate. As part of his commission he had to confront Pharaoh and attempt to convince him to release the Hebrews from captivity. In essence, Moses was using his influence to try to persuade Pharaoh to do as God commanded, which was by definition a political act, although it had far greater implications. He also had to deal with the complaints of his people once Pharaoh increased their labor due to Moses' demands (Exodus 5:21). Moses' faith in

God and his willingness to confront government authorities on God's behalf resulted in the liberation of the Hebrews.

Daniel (Daniel 1–2, 6)

After King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, he took its most talented young people and brought them into his Babylonian kingdom (Daniel 1). Daniel was one of the young people the king tried to endear and indoctrinate so they would follow him uncritically. But Daniel stood up to the king on more than one occasion. First, he refused to defile himself by drinking the king's wine or by eating his meat (Daniel 1:8). He also refused to stop praying to God when an ordinance required him to do so (Daniel 6:10-22). Furthermore, Daniel worked with the king by interpreting his dreams and was given "a high position" as "ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed in charge of all its wise men" (Daniel 2:48). When faced with political pressure, Daniel refused to defile himself, but he didn't refuse to accept a political position from which he could do good for others.

Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 1:1-11; Nehemiah 1:1–7:3)

Ezra and Nehemiah were central figures in Israel's return from Babylonian exile. Ezra worked with the Persian king to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem "to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah" (Ezra 1:1), and Nehemiah worked to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 2:17-18). Neither man could have accomplished his task without engaging government and the public square. Both men endured discouragement and political opposition that was determined to prevent them from doing a "great project" for God (Nehemiah 6:3; see also Ezra 4:8-24; Nehemiah 4). They both persevered and advocated to continue with God's work. They used secular government and political mechanisms to do God's business.

Paul (Acts 16:37-39)

Paul was a Roman citizen, and he used his citizenship—a political designation—to further his God-given commission. After being beaten by government authorities in Philippi, he informed them that he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37). This was a major revelation that forced them to let him go, but he wouldn't accept a secret release. Paul made them escort him out of the city to make a public statement that would give the Philippian church some relief and encouragement (Acts 16:38-40). Instead of using his political influence for self-preservation and his own benefit, he used it to further the mission of the church.

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

There are also many historical examples of Christians faithfully using political means to fight for justice and righteousness.

William Wilberforce: *Politician and Abolitionist*

William Wilberforce was born in the United Kingdom in 1759. He was raised in a wealthy family and his strong connections helped him achieve his political ambitions early in life. In 1780, he was elected to Parliament and would serve until 1852. Wilberforce converted to evangelical Christianity during England's religious revival in 1785, and his faith was the catalyst for his great passion to end slavery. He and a group of abolitionists known as the "Clapham Sect" committed themselves to ending slavery in the United Kingdom and pursued that objective through petitions, propaganda, and organizing. Wilberforce's goal of ending slavery was achieved in 1833, a month after his death.^a

Frederick Douglass: *Abolitionist, Orator, and Writer*

Frederick Douglass was born on a plantation in Talbot County, Maryland. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but he estimated

that it was around February 1817. Douglass was born into slavery, was separated from his mother early in his life, and was sent to Baltimore to work. His master's wife taught him how to read, and from there Douglass began educating himself and teaching other slaves to read and write. In 1838, he escaped slavery and headed north. While in Massachusetts, he began to participate in abolitionist campaigns and became a member and preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. He went on to become an outstanding orator who fought the evil of slavery with passion that was formed and guided by Scripture. Douglass advised President Abraham Lincoln, and his work played a major role in the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.^b

Catherine Booth: *Women's Advocate and Mother of the Salvation Army*

Catherine Booth was born in Ashourne, Derbyshire, England, in 1829. She was one of five children and was raised in a Christian home, where she learned Christian theology and read the entire Bible eight times by the age of twelve. Booth taught Sunday school and met her future husband, William Booth, after he preached a sermon she said was one of the best she'd ever heard. The couple had eight children and together founded the Salvation Army. Mrs. Booth advocated for exploited women and worked for the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act that contained general protections for women and raised the age of consent, passed in 1885.^c

Dorothy Day: *Activist and Journalist*

Dorothy Day was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1897. Early in life Day became interested in journalism, moved back to New York, and became a writer. She was active in antiwar

and bohemian culture but eventually felt empty and lost in that lifestyle. In 1927, Dorothy and her daughter were baptized in a Roman Catholic Church, where she found new meaning and a biblical framework for redemptive social reform. Day co-founded the Catholic Workers Movement and the newspaper *The Catholic Worker*, and she dedicated her life to helping workers and the impoverished.^d

Fannie Lou Hamer: Advocate, Orator, and Organizer

Fannie Lou Hamer was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi, in 1917. She was the youngest of twenty children, and her mother and father were sharecroppers. She was a devoted Baptist who believed that fighting for justice was her calling. In the 1960s, Hamer worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to demystify the political process for southern blacks and register them to vote—a dangerous endeavor in the Jim Crow South. Her faith in God was key to her ability to withstand police brutality, disenfranchisement, and involuntary sterilization (a “Mississippi appendectomy”) while refusing to hate her oppressors. She was one of the most skilled orators and organizers in the civil rights movement and was known to have a powerful effect on audiences with her speeches and songs.^e

Putting the Witness Before the Win

While politics can be used for good purposes, we shouldn’t ignore the concerns of those who fear that it can corrupt individual Christians and taint the church. Throughout history Christians have certainly misused and been used by politics. We have supported unjust institutions and failed to correct elected officials who’ve harmed people.

Christians have to be deliberate about avoiding the pitfalls of political participation. While we certainly shouldn't plan to lose, Christians must keep in mind that we aren't engaging primarily to win political battles or to serve our own interest (1 Corinthians 10:24; Philippians 2:3-4). We already have the ultimate victory, which is our salvation and the kingdom that God has promised (Matthew 16:19; 25:34). Nothing in this world is comparable to our inheritance in the kingdom of God. No political ideology can replace the kingdom, nor does the kingdom of God rely on our political plans and priorities. Accordingly, we should participate in politics primarily to help others and to represent our Lord and Savior in the public square. This doesn't mean we have to ignore our own interests, but we can't be consumed and misled by them. Adherence to Jesus' teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, will prevent us from approaching politics in a self-serving way.

When in conflict we should demonstrate that our public witness is more important than winning a political battle. This means that if our side has to do something unloving or corrupt to win, then it's better for us to lose in that situation. We once heard a Christian political activist and donor express despair to a friend about the fact that his candidate lost in a presidential election. He told his friend that the lesson he learned from the loss was that "next time, we just can't tell the people what we actually want to do."

This is completely wrong. It's better to lose than to sacrifice our virtue for the sake of what is politically expedient, to defend leaders' harmful policies, or to condone immorality. It is better to lose that temporal battle. If our actions don't glorify God and serve as the salt and the light of the world, then they are good for nothing (Matthew 5:13-16).

The knock on many Christians in politics is that we use our religion as a cover to impose our prejudices and serve ourselves. Some of this criticism is unfair and malicious, but it has been true in too many instances. Just like Amaziah the priest in the book of Amos, some Christians have forsaken the Word of God for political favors and proximity to power (Amos 7:10-17). That's sinful because it undermines God's purpose for our own personal benefit.

Our primary purpose in life is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. That said, Christians should also participate in political activities because they give us a significant opportunity to actively love our neighbors by promoting their well-being and defending their best interests. The Bible and history show us that God's children can do great work in politics as long as they aren't *of* politics. There will be suffering and sin in the world until Jesus' return, but through the power of God we can make a difference and reflect the kingdom of God through the political sphere.

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