

Politics, the Church and Freedom

By David Robertson

The church member was quite adamant. What a dreadful message – the minister should stay out of politics. To which most of us would say a hearty ‘amen.’ The last thing we need in the church in Australia today is politics being brought into the church – US style. Except it all depends on what one means by politics. The message concerned was about euthanasia. Should we not this, or abortion, or theft, or greed, or sexual exploitation, or injustice because they are ‘political’? No minister has the right to tell his congregation how to vote or to preach party politics from the pulpit. I think groups such as ‘Evangelicals for Biden’ or ‘Evangelicals for Trump’ are bordering on blasphemy, because they are equating the good news of Christ with support for one particular political candidate. But surely we cannot as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, remain silent about the sins and injustices in the world. Is there no prophetic word in the New Testament?

For those of us who are Presbyterians, we have a heritage which is the opposite of the ‘say nothing political’ perspective. I was reminded of this in reading Donald Macleod’s excellent new book, *Therefore the Truth I speak – Scottish Theology 1500-1700*. It doesn’t exactly sound a page turner – but it is riveting! No more so than in the story of Andrew Melville one of the founding fathers of modern Presbyterianism. In a famous incident Melville went in 1596 as part of a deputation from the General Assembly to King James VI. The King kept interrupting him so Melville took hold of his sleeve – called him ‘God’s silly vassal’ and warned him; “There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is Christ Jesus the King, and his kingdom the Kirk, whose subject King James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member! “.

The principle of the spiritual independence of the Church and the headship of Christ was a radical and deeply embedded one.

In 1843 my own denomination was founded when over 400 ministers and hundreds of thousands of members, left the Church of Scotland over the question of State patronage. Unwilling to accept that either the Parliament or the secular courts had the right to determine who should be minister or how we should worship, they left to form the Church of Scotland, Free.

That ‘Disruption’ was also felt in Australia. For example, Andrew Fisher, Australian Labor Prime Minister for three terms at the beginning of the 20th Century was a Scot of Free Church extraction. He remained a committed Christian for all his days and saw no reason to keep Scripture and Christian principles out of politics.

The impact of Christianity upon politics was profound. For example in 1901 a foreign observer wrote: “Many of the supporters of the Labor party say grace before every meal, go to church on Sundays, and strictly observe the Sabbath as a day of rest. They would not tolerate the principles of Christianity to be questioned.”

What does all this have to do with today? No serious Christian aware of Scripture and history, should argue that there is no place in the public square for Christianity. Ironically we have swung from one extreme, where in medieval Europe the State was sometimes seen as just an arm of the church, to one today where the church is often seen either as an arm of the State, or at the very most a private club subordinate to the State.

I took a vow to protect the ‘spirituality and freedom of the Church of Christ’ and ‘that the civil magistrate and that the

Civil Magistrate does not possess jurisdiction or authoritative control over the regulation of the affairs of Christ's Church;". And yet I find myself in a world where, even in countries with a strong Protestant heritage of religious freedom and separation of church and state, we now seem to meekly accept that the State has the right to tell us not only if we can meet, but also tell us how to worship. I realise that the situation is a little more complex than that – and for the sake of good public health we as churches will want to go along with government advice. But now that it has moved from advice to law, we need to be very careful. Once the State has a taste of controlling and dictating to churches (even telling us when we can sing, take communion or gather to speak to one another), I suspect it will become an acquired one which will be hard to give up.

This week I came across an extraordinary article from C S Lewis – written in June 1958 – in which he gives a number of prescient and prophetic warnings which we are seeing fulfilled in our day (you can read more quotes and get the whole article here - <https://theweeflea.com/2020/10/27/c-s-lewis-maureen-from->

[barnsley-and-the-dangers-of-the-covid-19-response/](#)

But I leave you with this extract:

A hungry man thinks about food, not freedom. We must give full weight to the claim that nothing but science, and science globally applied, and therefore unprecedented Government controls, can produce full bellies and medical care for the whole human race: nothing, in short, but a world Welfare State. It is a full admission of these truths which impresses upon me the extreme peril of humanity at present. We have on the one hand a desperate need; hunger, sickness, and the dread of war. We have, on the other, the conception of something that might meet it: omniscient global technocracy. Are not these the ideal opportunity for enslavement?

The question is whether we are sleepwalking into losing freedoms that our ancestors suffered to gain for us.

David Robertson