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## Keeping Politics Out of the Sanctuary

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# KEEPING POLITICS OUT OF THE SANCTUARY

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**The church's energy should be spent in redeeming  
the lost, not in rallying against them.**

Nearly every week I receive letters or telephone calls from Christians soliciting our church's involvement in a political issue in our community. The requests range from pressuring public school board members to fire a homosexual teacher to protesting in front of an abortion clinic.

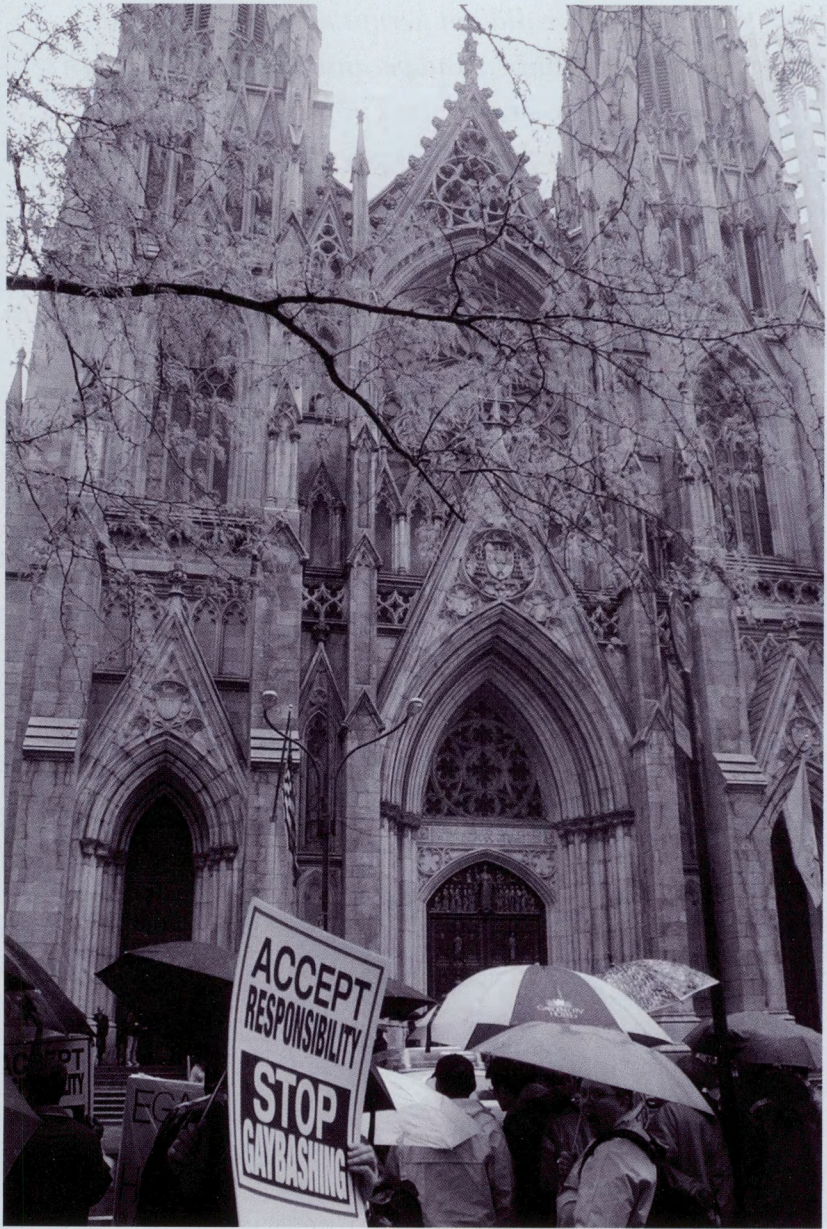
The people who call are passionate, and they want something done. They want me as a pastor to be a cheerleader for their cause, and they want access to the thousands of people who attend our church. If I decline their request (which I do), they

are often upset with me, and in subtle ways they call into question my Christian convictions. Nearly every pastor I know faces this same pressure on a regular basis.

Now, as individual believers we can and should exercise our privilege as citizens in a democracy.

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\* *Edward G. Dobson is a Senior Editor of Christianity Today and Pastor of Calvary Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. "Keeping Politics Out of the Sanctuary" appeared in Christianity Today (May 20, 1996). Used with permission.*



WIDE WORLD PHOTO



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Christian citizens have the opportunity to inform themselves on the issues, vote their conscience, run for office, and lobby for legislation.

But the church as the church cannot allow itself to be co-opted by political action; and pastors and others who speak for the church cannot allow themselves to be distracted from the gospel by partisan engagement. As a former board member for the Moral Majority, I know the potential danger of this kind of political activity—the possible jettisoning of the gospel for a political agenda.

The acid test came several years ago when the Grand Rapids City Council passed a Gay Rights Ordinance to protect homosexuals from discrimination. The reaction was immediate and volatile. Believing that the public would repeal the Gay Rights Ordinance, a group of pastors formed a coalition to force the issue to a public vote. Petitions and signatures were collected primarily through churches, but our church refused to cooperate.

I stated publicly that gays *were* discriminated against in our community, but that a special ordinance was not the most appropriate way to deal with it. I have also publicly stated that homosexual activity is sinful.

But because we did not permit anyone to pass out petitions in our church, and because none of the church's resources were involved in the campaign, we were called "weak" on the gay issue—seen as duped by the gay community and as promoting gay rights in our community.

We held firm. While individual Christians within our church were free to work toward passing the petition, we as a corporate body did not participate. The petition drive fell several thousand signatures short—a number our church could have easily generated, and so we were blamed by some for the petition drive's failure. I discovered that refusing to involve the church in political activity is not popular among some Christians.

There appears to be an increas-

ingly hostile group among evangelical Christians. Their anger is fueled by fundraising letters, newsletters, tapes, and videos from national ministries. These ministries are sometimes alarmist, trading on the fears of Christians who clearly see the moral decline of the surrounding culture. They not only advocate the “right” moral positions (the declaration of truth), they advocate the “right” moral action (the application of truth). Their moral action often includes political action, lobbying, and association with the “right” political party. The unfortunate implication is that it is not enough to believe right; you must also act right according to their definition.

#### A Politics-Free Platform

To deal with these pressures for political action, our church has developed these perspectives to guide us:

*We should not expect or demand that the political system be Bible-friendly.* Some American Christians expect their government to reflect their own biblical values. Few Christians in other countries expect the same of their governments. We should *not* expect people and the political systems they create to reflect our values when they do not share our Christ.

To expect public institutions to defend or promote Christian values is to expect more of these institutions than the Bible does. The Bible

teaches that the primary function of government is to promote an ordered and structured society where wrongdoing is punished and right is commended (Rom. 13; 1 Peter 2). Of course, some believe ours is a Christian nation and ask: Should we not return to the faith of our founding fathers? In my opinion, this is not an option because the faith of our founding fathers consisted largely of expecting rational men to do the right thing. Unfortunately, they failed to take human sinfulness seriously. And their experiment failed (despite its rhetoric) to treat all people equally, favoring as it did white landowners, while permitting and promoting slavery and the second-class existence of women.

*We have clear responsibilities to the political system, even when it is hostile toward us.* First, we are to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Remember, this instruction was written when Nero was emperor, and he was decidedly anti-Christian. We need to pray for President Bush just as we did for President Clinton.

Second, Paul tells us, we are to live “peaceful and quiet lives” (1 Tim. 2:2, NIV). In an atmosphere of divisiveness and partisan hostility, this counsel of civility can guide us both as Christian citizens and as a church body. Even when the government is hostile to us as a Christian body, Paul counsels, we are to walk softly, speak quietly. This instruction

is in stark contrast to the angry rhetoric of many Christians today.

Third, Paul concludes, we are to live godly and holy lives. Our lives should do the speaking for us. And we are to keep the main thing *the main thing*—pleasing God who “desires everyone to be saved.” Our focus is to preach the gospel and live in relationship with the public order so as to make the gospel attractive.

*We should keep the church out of partisan politics and political action.* We have chosen as a church to be politics-free. We do not march for or against anything. We do not promote letter-writing campaigns. While some members of our church may do some or all the above—exercising their freedoms and obligations as citizens of a democratic system—we do not believe that the church as church should be engaged in any of these activities.

This is, however, not to say that the church should ignore injustice and remain silent in the public square about grievous wrongs. The preaching of biblical truth will often be countercultural. A prophetic voice speaking against the tide of public opinion is sometimes precisely what is needed from the church. But the accent must always be on what can be done to meet the needs of suffering people; it must be an invitation to those with the political power to work with us to solve problems and help people lift them-

selves above circumstances. Attacks on leaders in either party are not the church’s business.

*We should demonstrate the authenticity of the gospel where we live.* Christians are concerned about the social and moral issues of today, but what are we doing in our own communities to deal with these issues? We are against abortion, but what alternatives are we providing? What kind of love and concern do we demonstrate for the mothers who walk into abortion clinics and the people who work in them? We are concerned about the failure of welfare, but what are we doing to empower marginalized people with Christ and through job training and opportunity? If we are going to demand better from the government, should we not first live out the social implications of the gospel in our own communities?

Our church is on a journey of discovering the social implications of the gospel. A group of people takes meals every night to homeless people living under bridges in Grand Rapids. We have a ministry that works with dependent people and families and offers financial and spiritual counseling and other means to help them out of dependence. We are working together with 11 key African-American churches in our community to combat racism and provide job training. Living out the gospel by dealing with injustice



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and sharing our resources with marginalized people is the appropriate strategy for the church.

*We cannot expect politics to offer permanent solutions.* Politics cannot because it is based on a flawed view of sin and society. One of its premises is that if you elect the “right” representatives who will pass the “right” legislation, you will have the “right” society. But we know this is not true. You don’t change society from the outside by legislation; you change it from the inside—one person at a time. Ultimately, the Great Society and the Contract With America will fail. The only permanent solution is the gospel of Christ, which changes people from the inside out. Some Christians have lost this perspective.

#### **Here I Stand**

During the debate over the Gay Rights Ordinance, a person asked me two troubling questions: “Ed, if you are not going to take a stand now, when are you going to take a stand?” and “If you don’t take a stand now, won’t it be too late down the road?”

Reflecting on these questions, I have identified three simple principles.

First, I will make it my first priority to share the good news. My consuming commitment is to the gospel. I fear that overt political involvement will lead to polarization and alienation from people who need to hear the gospel.

Second, I must continue to develop a biblical social conscience. The poor, the homeless, the abused, the imprisoned, and the sick (including HIV-positive people) must be within the circle of my love and touch.

Finally, as a pastor, I will approach the area of political involvement with *extreme* caution.

When will I stand up? Whenever I am told by political authority to disregard God’s truth (Ex.1:15-22) or asked to worship other gods (Dan. 3:1, 2) or told to deny the gospel (Acts 5:27-29). Short of these circumstances, I will continue to preach the whole gospel to the whole person and in so doing will resist the temptation and pressure toward politicizing the church. □