

From the birth of the Christian church, these questions have been raised again and again: What is the role of the Christian in politics? Can either a church member or the church herself be involved in politics? How should they relate to the state and to the political authorities who are in charge?

Some Seventh-day Adventists think that the church has no political role to play, and the individual Christian, at most, a minuscule part. This view is predicated on the concept that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Other Adventists insist that both individuals and the church have uncontestable socio-political responsibilities to improve living conditions. Some Christians go several steps further and claim that Christianity's main task is to work toward creating a Christian political order that will result in establishing the kingdom of God on earth. In between, there runs a whole gamut of views.

#### Christ's example

Jesus rarely referred to the type of political society to which His disciples should aspire. He did not claim to be a socio-political reformer or crusader. He did not enunciate any political platform. The temptations in the wilderness clearly had a political dimension and He resisted them. Even though He had more than one opportunity to take over society's rule by a sort of *coup d'état* (e.g., the feeding of the multitude and the triumphant entry into Jerusalem), He did not choose that option.

At the same time, the teachings of Jesus are bound to have a significant socio-political fallout when lived by the Christian community. He offered good news for the poor, liberty for the oppressed, and "life in all its fulness" (John 10:10, TEV). Therefore, contemporary Adventists, following the example of Christians throughout the centuries, must acknowledge a social responsibility resting on their shoulders. Adventist pioneers preached not only the gospel of personal salvation, but were also concerned about alcoholics, the slaves, oppressed women, and the educational needs of children and youth.

#### Biblical basis of socio-political responsibility

Christian socio-political responsibility is based on two biblical foundations.

First, the doctrine of Creation. God created *ex nihilo* a universe and established us as the ruling stewards of this world. Stewardship entails both responsibility and accountability for the domain over which one has jurisdiction.

Second, the doctrine of humanity. Human beings are created in the image of God. The parameters of human responsibility for service lie within this biblical concept of human nature. The

# The Christian and politics

*A case for judicious involvement in socio-political issues without compromising Christian priorities*

by  
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Christian view is that men and women are not flotsam on the sea of life, but persons with a responsible role to play and a radiant future. This human potential gives purpose, direction, and optimism to Christians serving others in a communal setting.

Thus Christianity is not a religion of isolated individualism or insulated introversion; it is a religion of community. Christian gifts and virtues have social implications. Commitment to Jesus Christ means commitment to all God's children and commitment begets responsibility for the welfare of others.

#### The dilemma of dual citizenship

Sincere Christians face the dilemma of dual citizenship. On the one hand they belong to God's kingdom, and on the other, to their country of citizenship. They are part of the "new humanity" and they live in the midst of the "old humanity." Is there here an inherent conflict? Must Seventh-day Adventists choose one

citizenship and renounce the other? There is little doubt that on occasion there may be a conflict when the demands or duties of one citizenship collide with those of the other. In such cases the Scripture is clear: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29, NRSV).

However, God's kingdom is not isolated outside of the present world; it "is among you" (Luke 17:21, NRSV). In other words, the kingdom of God is a sphere, a commitment, an attitude, and a way of life and thinking that permeates our total existence and gives special meaning to national citizenship. It is God's sovereignty invading human living.

### **Do-nothingism is political action**

The political ordering of society is God's providential provision for fallen humankind. God does not ask the "good people" of society to stay out of the political governance process and leave socio-political and economic control in the hands of "evil doers." Christians are to be the salt and light of the societal world, and therefore cannot simply opt out of the political process. Actually, such an abdication is in itself a political action which opens the way for political control by those supporting less than Christian values. "Do-nothingism" is a sure prescription for sin becoming the master. Adventists have both the right and duty to use earthly citizenship to keep the church free to fulfill her divine mandate and help as individuals to meet crying social needs.

### **Duties of political citizenship**

Seventh-day Adventists face at least four duties of political citizenship.

*First, the duty of prayer* for those in government authority. We need to pray for divine help in solving some of the socio-political problems that negatively affect human life and the proclamation of the gospel. The prayers and supplications of the faithful rise much higher

than statements and policy actions filling mountains of recyclable paper.

*Second, the duty to vote* and petition government authorities. Adventists should vote, even when at times the choice may be between a lesser of two or more evils. In this connection, registration to vote is a necessary first step.

*Third, the duty of education and being informed.* Adventists, no less than other citizens, need to be involved in ongoing self-education regarding issues that affect life both now and in the future. Political ignorance does not increase spiritual bliss.

*Fourth, the duty to run for and hold public office.* Adventists have this constitutional right. There are also appointments to government offices that do not involve campaigning. Ellen White states that there is nothing wrong in the aspiration to "sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation."<sup>1</sup> However, she does counsel denominationally employed ministers and teachers to abstain from partisan political activities.<sup>2</sup> The reason she gives is quite clear: party politics risks to be divisive. A pastor could easily split the congregation along party lines and greatly weaken his or her ability to serve as pastor of the whole flock.

### **Danger of politicization**

Having underlined the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship, it becomes necessary to warn against the danger of politicization of both individuals and the church. Adventists, like other Christians, can be deceived by Caesar. Success in politics frequently involves compromise, exalting self, hiding weaknesses, and playing partisan roles. At times, it becomes necessary to accept an expedient course that may not square with one's best moral convictions. Politics is a hard task master and can become all-absorbing. Christian politicians walk a difficult tightrope. They must avoid becoming tainted by the ironical and all-consuming quality of political activism that can downgrade their efforts to a level where it seems there is no God involved in human affairs.

There is an increasing danger of politicization of churches. This has led not only to church involvement in

political activity, but also to the interpretation of the Christian faith and gospel in terms of political values. Interest in many churches seems to have shifted from individual morality to social morality. The result has been that in certain segments of church society, secular ideas have been permitted to mold Christian values so that there is precious little difference between the secular and the sacred. It is sad to see that often Christian attitudes are the same as those of society in general.

### **Circumspect church involvement**

What we have just said points to the need for judicious political involvement. A world-wide church with thousands of institutions, 10 million adult members and many more followers, cannot avoid contact with the state, and involvement in politics—the art of governing. Not only people, but also church organizations, have rights and responsibilities. The church has the right to intervene regarding legislation or regulatory actions that affect—either positively or negatively—the church's mission.

The church must never (and *never* is a strong word!) identify herself with a particular political party or political system. Such identification may bring about a quick alpha of temporary privilege, but it will inevitably sweep the church down the slippery political slope toward the omega of evangelistic and prophetic paralysis.

In short, "the church must be the church," not another sociological agency. Her most promising approach to changing society is to change individuals, people. In so doing, Seventh-day Adventists fulfill on a binary tract, God's mission in the world: evangelism and service. ☛

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### **Notes and references**

1. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1936), p. 36.
2. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1915), pp. 391-395.