

Churches Should Stop Interfering in Politics

On 23 April *The Australian* printed two articles, one by the politician Tony Abbott, arguing “yes”, and one by religious writer James Murray, arguing “No.” There were unsatisfactory things in both articles.

I maintain that the church should not be involved in the following questions: government policies on administration and finance, whether Australia ought to be a republic or a monarchy, Mabo, Wik and native title, the wharfies’ strike and the wages paid to members of the MUA, parliamentarians’ travel-ports, social justice issues, medical care, rural and urban families in poverty, the “stolen generation”, whether the government should ban certain kinds of firearms, the punishment of criminals (including capital punishment), how to treat vandals, rehabilitation of criminals, banning of whaling, protection of endangered species, pollution of the environment, global warming, Aboriginal access to “sacred sites”, the mining of uranium, the site of a second airport, aircraft noise, government policies on immigration, refugees, treatment for AIDS, care of the aged and mentally ill; government funding of church schools, racial issues, and other social, legal, and industrial issues.

Some people will say that the prophets of the Old Testament thundered about many issues of social injustice, oppression of the poor, and so on. However, the distinction between “church and state” was less clear then, because Israel was in theory governed directly under God. Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” If church members want to be involved in the issues above to make Australia a better place to live in, they should do so as citizens, using whatever organisations seem best able to achieve results.

Sometimes churches and missions get into areas like providing hospitals, schools, old folks homes, and transport facilities, because the state is not yet able to provide them adequately. Strictly, the church ought to withdraw from these areas as soon as the state provides acceptable services. The justification for Christian schools has to be that the secular humanist philosophy in state schools is not acceptable. Where Christian schools have trendy chaplains, there is no real alternative, however. “““““

James Murray used two very misleading arguments; one was that Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and liberty to the captives. However, Jesus came to relieve the I2QQr in _ and captives under the condemnation of the Law of Moses, the “weary and heavy laden.” James Murray also argued that if the churches did not involve themselves in the kinds of issues above, “the very stones would cry out.” That phrase is taken out of context very badly. Jesus was talking about the acknowledgement of Himself as Israel’s King and Saviour when He said that.

Christian people ought to go out of their way to help all who are suffering for whatever reasons, and act as Christ towards them, and in His name. However, because God’s Word tells Christians that they should “be subordinate to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake”, and that they cannot resist the political powers that have been ordained by God without having a bad conscience, liberation theology”, working for the overthrow of a government that favours the rich establishment, as some Christians have done in third-world countries, ought not to be contemplated.

Jesus had an entirely different attitude to holding positions of prominence and exercising power over others. To have influence over governments means getting into the powerful lobbies to influence people in government, and being involved with many of the nasty strokes that are played in those processes. Jesus said, to His disciples, that is, people “in the church”, “It shall not be so among you.” He gave his own example of humble service to others as real “greatness.” He too came to serve.

On all issues where God’s word has spoken, the church must in its preaching condemn sin and warn against God’s punishment. The church has the duty to apply the Law of God to sinners, as its “foreign work” and if it does not do this, hearers will fail to realise their need for forgiveness, and be impervious to the Gospel.

When the church justifiably speaks in a prophetic way, its voice almost always comes across in the negative, because God’s Ten Commandments are being flagrantly flouted. In the name of the commandment “You shall not kill” the church ought to speak out against abortion and euthanasia. When a government murders its citizens for political or racist reasons, or sanctions the maiming of some citizens for economic reasons, the church should also speak, “Stop it”, in the Lord’s name, because of God’s commandment against murder. In the name of the sixth commandment it ought to speak out against easy divorce, homosexuality, and prostitution. In the name of the seventh and ninth commandments it ought to address governments about the evils of gambling. In some cases_ the state may well react by persecuting those who oppose it, and Christians cannot do anything but quietly suffer the consequences. There is an increasing likelihood that more pressure will be put on churches to submit to government pressure to limit the right of parents to discipline children, to give up discrimination

against gays, or to acquiesce in women pastors on the basis of non-discrimination. Here the churches will have to have the courage to resist.

The sole duty of the church is to preach forgiveness of sin and salvation in the age to come from sin, death, Satan, and hell, through Jesus Christ the Lord. No other social or political body can, or will, do this. To the extent that the church involves itself in social and political issues it neglects its one essential task.

There are those who argue that, because church members have their consciences sharpened by the Word of God, they will make better legislators. That argument fails to recognise the difference between God's Law and human laws. God's Law strikes beyond words and actions, at thoughts and feelings. Human laws promote outward morality, or civic righteousness, and are based on common sense, and compromise. A human law that cannot be enforced is a bad law. Human laws can enforce only as much as the majority in the population are prepared to tolerate, but God's laws are absolute and categorical. The Sermon on the Mount cannot run a state. .

Christians do not have a monopoly on common sense. Some church leaders find it easier to criticise their governments than preach against the sins of their church people. Some church leaders who sound off on political issues do not even seem to be very well informed. Some people who have had direct experience of the way some church leaders wield power would probably feel safer in the hands of a good lawyer than a determined theologian or church leader. But the issue is not whether church some leaders who involve themselves in social and political issues do it badly. The issue is that advocating social and political measures that are designed to make this country a better place to live in is not the business of the church.