

★ ROY HERRON ★
STATE SENATOR & FORMER MINISTER

GOD AND POLITICS

★ HOW CAN A CHRISTIAN
BE IN POLITICS? ★



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God and Politics

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*For my beloved sister, Betsy,
who married outside the party
but always kept the faith.
Your courageous laughter in the face of cancer
bears strong witness to the Lord of life.*





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INTRODUCTION



What are you working on?" my son John asked when he came into our home library before going to school.

"A book on faith and politics," I replied.

John quickly and skeptically asked, "*Do they go together?*"

John speaks for most people.

This book is about two topics one should never raise in polite conversation: religion and politics. Ms. Manners would caution us not to mention either, much less both at once. But in America, religion and politics were siblings before the states were united. The founders drew on religious ideals and rhetoric as they created our republic.

In 1775, John Adams wrote his wife, Abigail, "Statesmen may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone which can establish the principles upon which Freedom can securely stand." Adams believed that "a patriot must be a religious man."¹

The original draft of the Declaration of Independence referred to the “laws of nature and of nature’s god” and the “Creator” who endows us with “certain inalienable rights.”² The Second Continental Congress inserted into Thomas Jefferson’s document two more references to God, appealing “to the supreme judge of the world” and referring to the delegates’ “firm reliance on the protection of divine providence.”³

When the Constitutional Convention struggled in a fierce debate in 1787, Benjamin Franklin emphasized the importance of religion for America’s past, present, and future: “I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that ‘except the Lord build the House, they labor in vain that build it.’ I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel.”⁴

When our nation’s first president gave his farewell address, George Washington warned, “Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that

national morality can prevail in exclusion of a religious principle.”⁵

In that tradition, this book seeks to explore, using both ancient Scripture and contemporary experience, how a Christian can be in politics today. Accordingly, I write as a confessing Christian and a practicing politician.

I grew up in a home where asking a blessing before meals and saying prayers before bed were daily facts of life. A caring, loving church family nurtured me. In college I learned from and worshipped with fired-up friends at a Baptist student union, excited evangelicals in an interdenominational group, and faithful Methodists and Roman Catholics at an interfaith center. I studied New Testament and ethics in Scotland before returning to the States for a joint program in divinity and law. I worked in campus ministry, preached at local churches, and served in small ways from the rural South to New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen. Then I returned to my hometown where I practiced law to support my preaching habit. As our church’s full-time minister observed, “We pay Roy a dollar a year, and it only takes three sermons to get our money’s worth.”

Finally I fell from the pulpit to the pit of politics. In defense, I offer two mitigating circumstances: a rough family and a tough neighborhood.

My family included county legislators, sheriffs, a

state legislator, a judge, and a federal law enforcement agent. Within two blocks of our home during my mother's lifetime have resided five mayors, five legislators, four or five judges, a public service commissioner, and the Speaker of the state House of Representatives who later became governor. Frequently visiting relatives on our block were two U.S. senators, including one who became vice president.

Such family members and neighbors bore witness that public service could be an honest, even honorable, way to love your neighbor as yourself.

In high school and college, I worked for my U.S. congressman and the Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives. After law and divinity school, I worked with members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate and in a presidential campaign. When my state representative became governor, I ran for his seat. I now have served almost two decades in the Tennessee House and Senate.

I write this book for Christians, though I hope others also will find it useful. I do not intend to exclude, and I surely do not wish to demean, other faiths or their faithful. I do, however, write—and serve—out of my own faith, and I pray my experiences will be useful to other Christians confronting questions about politics and public service.

My shortcomings notwithstanding, God knows we need Christians in politics. We need politics to be practiced faithfully. In sum and substance, we need *faithful politics*.

HOW CAN A CHRISTIAN BE IN POLITICS?

*Politics: The art of looking for trouble,
finding it everywhere, diagnosing it wrongly,
and applying unsuitable remedies.*

ERNEST BENN

Politics is a beautiful word to me!
SENATOR ANNA BELLE CLEMENT O'BRIEN

*He who refuses to rule is liable to be ruled by
one who is worse than himself.*

PLATO

How can you be a *Christian* and be in *politics*?" I hear this question from people of faith all the time. They seem startled that a former minister has run for and serves in public office.

I recall once when I was about to preach at a church near Nashville. Johnny Hayes, a member of that congregation, introduced me by telling of a political fundraiser he had attended the night before that honored a one-hundred-year-old gentleman. Johnny asked the centenarian how he had survived so long and so well

as a member of a small minority in a county dominated by the other political party. The gentleman's sage reply was, "Johnny, you've just got to know who you can trust and who you can't trust."

When Johnny asked just whom one can and cannot trust, the old man allegedly replied, "There are just three types of folks you can't trust. You can't trust lawyers, you can't trust preachers, and you can't trust politicians."

Johnny turned to me sitting behind the pulpit, squirming on the overstuffed chair, and said, "This fellow here is a lawyer, a preacher, and last week he went to work in a political campaign—you can't believe a *thing* he says!"

The congregation roared with laughter.

It was not the first time that I'd been the victim of a good joke. After all, I am a lawyer. But even lawyers are more respected than politicians.

I will never forget the letter a student wrote me not long after I began serving in the legislature. I'd represented her parents as an attorney a few years earlier.

Dear Mr. Herron,

My name is Candy and my Mom and Dad think a lot of you since your days with Legal Aid so I chose to write you as part of a school assign-

ment. What I'd like to know is, what inspired you to move from the Legal Aid Office (where you were a big help to the people) to being a state representative?

Implicit in Candy's question was doubt, even at a young age, that one could do good in politics.

How should we answer Candy's question? Can a Christian do good in politics?

WHAT IS POLITICS?

To answer Candy's question and many others, we can begin by asking what the word *politics* means. We get the word, as well as some of our central ideas about politics, from the ancient Greeks. For them, the term *politics* referred to the interactions of Greek citizens in their city-state, the *polis*. As one scholar puts it, "Politics is the polis, or civil community, ordering its life together on the basis of the public good. And to be human is to be a participant in that kind of community."¹ In fact, the Greeks considered any person outside the polis to be a nonhuman, a "barbarian."²

All the terms in this definition are important as we think about politics: *civil, community, ordering, life together, public good*. The common denominator is the concept of organizing our shared experience. Politics

involves what we do together to try to make our shared life better, recognizing that sometimes the actual result can be that we make our lives together worse.

The organized face of politics is government. Government is the collection of institutions and laws that develop out of the often-messy process of people

Politics involves what we do together to try to make our shared life better.

engaged in politics. We may like or dislike our particular government, but it is what we have made ourselves in our attempt to create a better life together. If we more or less like the government we have, we ought to maintain it and

keep it healthy. If we don't like the government we have, we should change it for the better. In both cases we will be involved in politics.

In this book, then, I use the term *politics* to describe the American process of electing our leaders and the process of their serving us. Generally, I use the term in a neutral, descriptive way. But not *everyone* is so inclined.

A NEGATIVE VIEW OF POLITICS

Many of us feel we have all the government we can stand and more than we can afford. We strongly, instinctively react against politics when we consider waste, fraud,

corruption, deception, arrogance, misuse of authority, and burdensome taxes. Many people of faith hold this view of politics and government, and they also believe that government in recent decades has contributed to moral decline and the weakening of traditional values.

Anger and frustration toward government today are very high. But if you find yourself frustrated with government, imagine how frustrated we elected officials feel when we try to make government work and often cannot. Time and again, my task is not, as I would wish, to pass needed laws or set up helpful programs, but rather to try to stop bad bills and simply make existing laws and programs work. Often I work to get government to help people, but perhaps even more often I try to keep it from hindering or even harming citizens.

Like my father before me, I get edgy around April 15 when my wife and I calculate our federal taxes. I've seen governments waste money much too often. I've even known corrupt people in government who stole public funds. I know too well how fallen our government and its officials can be.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF POLITICS

As frustrating and maddening as government and politics can be, they are necessary, and they are often forces for good.

I served in the Tennessee General Assembly with a wonderful senator named Anna Belle Clement O'Brien. Senator O'Brien started hundreds of talks and speeches with these words: "Politics is a beautiful word to me!"

She would explain, "Politics is how crippled children walk, the mentally ill get care, roads are built, health care is provided, children are taught."

It is through the political process, through electing people to represent us, that government works, doing the things we ourselves—as the *polis*—ask it to do.

Among other things, we ask governments to provide for the national defense; build roads, airports, courthouses, and jails; foster a business climate for economic prosperity; protect workers; support needy children; protect us from hazardous wastes and deadly poisons; educate our children; prevent and punish crime; promote good health and prevent epidemics; and defend our constitutional rights to free speech, association, and worship.

It is through the political process that government works.

Indeed, whether we respect our governments or not, we ask them to play important and positive roles in the life of every American citizen. I submit that, for

all the flaws, our American political system is a blessing that too often we take for granted. And no one owes government more than I do. Here is why.

HOW POLITICS SAVED MY CHILDREN

About nine weeks into my wife's first pregnancy, we went for the initial ultrasound. The doctor moved the wand around in what I told my wife was the same purple grease I used on our tractor and equipment when I was a boy working on my family's farm. After a few moments, the doctor said, "See the little heartbeat?"

We did see sort of a pulsation—the heartbeat of our firstborn-to-be.

"And look, there's a second heartbeat," the doctor stated rather calmly. "Twins."

I started laughing as Nancy gasped for breath.

The doctor kept moving the wand around in the ultrasound jelly. I thought the doctor had done enough damage for one day and started to ask her to stop, but I waited too long. Suddenly the doctor sounded excited: "What's *that* over there? Are there *three*?"

A few minutes later, the doctor finally announced, "I think there are *just two* babies."

I never thought I would be relieved to be having "just two babies." Of course, I had never even conceived, so

to speak, of having twins. Of all the things I thought might befall me, this simply was not one.

Still, we left the office thankful that we were having “just two” babies. Stunned, but relieved there were not *three*.

A DOCTOR RECOMMENDS ABORTION

Ten weeks later we received another jolt. Our doctors discovered complications in the pregnancy. A specialist

We left the office thankful that we were having “just two” babies.

in high-resolution ultrasound told us there were two little boys, probably identical. I immediately teased my wife, because she had grown up with her mother, her grandmother, her sister, a female dog, and her five-to-one outnumbered

father. I told Nancy that to achieve true gender justice, I would go get a male, bird-dog puppy.

As the exam went on, we joked about possible names. I modestly suggested Roy Jr. and Roy III. She quickly rejected that idea. We laughed out loud, and it truly was one of the happiest moments of our lives. Meanwhile, the doctor continued his work.

Then the specialist told us the twins had a condition that he had seen only sixteen times. In fifteen of those

sixteen cases, both twins had died. The sixteenth time, one of the twins died.

Thirty-two babies. Thirty-one dead.

He told us our twins were not going to live. He recommended an abortion.

“How sure are you, Doctor?” I asked.

The doctor said he was pretty sure.

“Like 90, 95, 98 percent certain?”

He replied with a single word: “Yes.”

The doctor again recommended an abortion.

In twenty-four hours, we had six consultations with three doctors at two hospitals.

Further tests and a visit with a high-risk pregnancy specialist named Sal Lombardi led to a more hopeful prognosis. If Nancy could carry the boys several more weeks, Dr. Lombardi told us we *might* yet take two boys home.

BIRTH DAY

Nancy was the minister of discipleship at a church in Nashville, but the congregation—and many other friends—ministered to her during that time. Her Bible study group met in our little apartment as Nancy went on “modified bed rest.” We saw Dr. Lombardi weekly during much of the summer, and finally in late July, he told us to come in daily. Standard protocol at that time

had only required visits every third day, but just the week before a couple with triplets had experienced the death of one of their babies, so he changed the protocol with us.

Dr. Lombardi was trying to delay the delivery as long as possible so that the larger baby, whose lungs were not yet fully developed, could have a better chance of surviving. But he did not want to wait so long that the supply of blood to the smaller baby diminished so much that it killed him.

He literally was trying to balance the life of one twin against the other.

Seven weeks before the due date, on August 2, primary election day, we were told, “You can go to the hospital. You’re going to deliver today.” While the larger baby’s lungs still were not as developed as Dr. Lombardi wanted, to wait any longer would endanger the smaller baby. In fact, he said if we waited even a single day longer, the smaller baby would probably die.

John and Rick were born that day. That marked the end of one difficult period and the beginning of another. Living in a neonatal intensive care unit for twenty-eight days straight was more than we ever wanted. But we were so thankful our sons were alive. After four weeks, they sent us home from the hospital with both boys.

THE POLITICS OF LIFE AND DEATH

So, what does this story have to do with you and with politics?

Dr. Sal Lombardi, the high-risk pregnancy specialist who decided that our twins' birthday would not be their death day, graduated from public schools, then went to college and medical school on federally subsidized student loans. He developed his extraordinary expertise by learning from taxpayer-funded teachers in government-funded universities and hospitals.

Dr. Doug Brown, the obstetrician who so skillfully delivered our babies and took care of Nancy, received government-subsidized education and training.

The neonatologists who kept our babies alive also received government-funded education and training, as did many of the nurses whose care was essential for the boys' survival.

The hospital where our boys spent their first four weeks is part of a private university, but it receives literally millions and millions of tax dollars from our government.

But this is only part of how our boys were saved by government and tax dollars.

One of our premature babies was treated with *surfactant*, which helped his lungs develop so he could breathe and survive. That miracle-working, lifesaving

drug was developed with millions of tax dollars made available through our federal government.

The neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) where our sons spent their first four weeks was itself an invention made possible and developed with both federal tax dollars and private donations.

Several other treatment techniques, procedures, and medicines that helped save our babies and literally thousands and thousands of others were developed with government funding.

Several other treatment techniques that helped save our babies were developed with government funding.

Simply put, if not for the wise and compassionate decisions of men and women in government and the tax dollars paid by us all, my sons would have died. You can see, then, why I am unlikely to agree with any oversimplified depiction of government as evil.

In America, politics selects and controls the governments that save lives—or don't. In America, politics and government are often forces for good. If sometimes they do not do their job as well as they should, then we should participate in the process and make them better.

Plato wrote, “He who refuses to rule is liable to be ruled by one who is worse than himself.”³

And so it is for faithful Christians today. If people of faith refuse to participate in politics, then others will make the crucial decisions. In a democracy, the people get the government they choose—and work for. You could say we get the government we deserve.

Government can be awful, or it can be good; often it is some of both. It is our duty, both as citizens and as Christians, to make it better. The question, then, is not, how can a Christian be in politics? The question is, how can a Christian *not* be in politics?



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Writing a book with the word *Christian* in the title reminds me how far this sinner falls short. My family knows that best and yet both forgives and loves. My wife, Nancy, and our sons, John, Rick, and Ben, inspired and encouraged me while writing this book. John and Nancy also edited. I cannot thank all four of them enough for their help with the book and for so much more.

My mother is, and my late father was, a servant leader who never forgot the call to serve both God and neighbor. My sister, Betsye, and brothers Ben and Dean always have been there for me in campaigns, public service, and other dubious undertakings. So have Nancy's parents, Fran and L. J. Miller, and her sister and brother-in-law, Jan and Dennis Dugan. I thank them all for their counsel, tolerance, and love.

I owe large debts to many Tennesseans, especially to the Seventy-sixth House District and Twenty-fourth Senatorial District. They have been my constituents and, in so many ways, my most faithful and patient teachers.

For almost two decades, the members of the Tennessee General Assembly have been my teachers and mentors, colleagues and friends, prayer partners and fellow servants. I am grateful for their fellowship and faithfulness.

My indebtedness and gratitude extend to many other

public servants working for the State of Tennessee and in national and local governments.

Mentors with whom I have been privileged to work include the late Congressman Ed Jones, Congressman Jim Cooper, Congressman John Tanner, Governor Ned McWherter, Governor Phil Bredesen, and Vice President Al Gore. Their leadership and integrity have influenced these pages and my own attempts to serve, and I am deeply grateful to each.

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Many ministers and church leaders have nurtured my faith and thus contributed to this book. In particular, Billy Vaughan and Greg Waldrop have helped me wrestle with religious vocation in the political world.

Scholars particularly influential in shaping this book and this writer include Matthew Black, John Donahue, Walter Harrelson, Larry McGehee, Ted Mosch, Tom Ogletree, Peggy Way, and Susan Ford Wiltshire.

Authors Will Campbell and John Egerton taught me to write, to trust God more than government, and to fight for progress.

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Stephanie Egnotovitch edited my first book and nurtured ideas that became this one. I continue in her debt.

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The Vital Questions series editor Dan Taylor knew this book was in me, but neither of us anticipated his having to labor so hard for its birth. He is much more than an excellent series editor, and I am immensely grateful.

Michael Lamb has served as research assistant, editor, brain trust, campaign staff, running partner, and friend. He has also become like an older brother to our three boys and like a son to Nancy and me. Without Michael and Dan, this book truly would not be.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



CHAPTER 1

1. Discuss the contrast between the Benn and O'Brien quotes at the beginning of this chapter.
2. Where did the word *politics* originate? What did the concept mean to that civilization? Did those citizens view politics positively or negatively?
3. What does the author say is the common denominator of the various definitions of politics? How does he define the term for the purposes of this book?
4. What image or impressions come to mind when you hear the words *politics* or *politician*? What has contributed to your opinion?
5. The author distinguishes between the actions of a politician passing a needed law or setting up helpful programs versus trying to stop bad bills

or simply trying to make existing laws and programs work. Can you think of one or more examples of the latter in local, state, or federal government?

6. Why is politics necessary? What are some of the things we ask and expect the government to do for us?
7. What do you think of the overall current state of U.S. politics? What are its strengths? weaknesses?
8. Herron tells a story of how politics saved his sons' lives. Have you heard of similar stories? Perhaps you have one of your own to share. Do those stories affect your view of the government? If yes, how?
9. What is Herron's view regarding a Christian's involvement in politics? Did anything in this chapter change or reinforce your view of a Christian's role in government? If so, how?

CHAPTER 2

1. How does the Bible help us know how to vote?
2. Take another look at Jeremiah 29:7 at the beginning of this chapter. What does this verse tell us



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3. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 4th ed. (Fair Lawn, N.J.: Oxford University Press, 1953), 32, quoted in M. Judd Harmon, *Political Thought from Plato to the Present* (New York: McGraw, 1964), 32.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Roy Herron is a Tennessee senator, attorney, and former minister. A professional speaker, he also teaches divinity and law at Vanderbilt University. He authored *Things Held Dear: Soul Stories for My Sons* and

coauthored *Tennessee Political Humor: Some of These Jokes You Voted For*. He and his wife, Nancy, have three sons, John, Rick, and Ben.



SPEECHES AND SEMINARS BY ROY HERRON

“At a weekend chock full of expert speakers, any talk by Roy Herron is a highlight. He can discuss serious themes expertly or bring down the house with his sharp wit or, remarkably, do both in a short period of time. And in every case, his generous spirit shines through.”

—*Professor Howard Gardner, MacArthur Prize Winner*

“Roy is a fantastic speaker. He regaled us with stories both showing humor and having a poignant message. He drew the audience in to his every word, built up suspense, and ended with a great crescendo that brought down the house.”

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“Roy Herron has an uncanny ability to connect with almost any audience, where listeners find themselves both entertained and moved. I have seen him amidst many national leaders, and even there he clearly stands out.”

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“Roy Herron combines the clarity of a good teacher, the appeal of a popular politician, the spirit of a committed preacher, and the wit of a down-home humorist. Listening to him is both fun and fruitful.”

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“Roy’s speaking is like an embracing arm around the shoulders. With candor, humor, and insight, Roy weaves a tale that leaves the listener surprised, wiser, and more hopeful.”

—*Rabbi Elie Spitz, Congregation B'nai Israel*

“Roy Herron is a deeply thoughtful and provocative speaker. He can motivate a room like no one else, with personal warmth and sparkling humor. He is a treasure with much to offer.”

—*Marion Kahn, Marion Kahn Communications*

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