

# How Can a Christian Be in Politics?

*A Guide toward Faithful Politics*

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois



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"The Parable of the Good Republican," chapter 7 is adapted from Roy Herron, *Things Held Dear* (Louisville: John Knox, 1999).

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herron, Roy.

How can a Christian be in politics? : a guide toward faithful politics / Roy Herron ; Daniel Taylor, general editor.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8423-8108-2 (sc)

I. Christianity and politics—United States. 2. Christians—Employment.

I. Taylor, Daniel, date. II. Title.

BR526.H43 2005

261.7'0973—dc22

2004019101

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Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## 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

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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."<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Greeks considered any person outside the polis to be a nonhuman, a "barbarian."<sup>2</sup>

All the terms in this definition are important as

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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.

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

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 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

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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 cli-



mate 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?"

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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 preg-

nancy. A specialist 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.

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

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?”

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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?

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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.

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.

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

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.

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

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?