

# Christian Engagement and Public Policy

Following Jesus' guidance can go a long way in helping us succeed in this area

BY PRESTON MANNING

**D**r. Franklin Pyles, President of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, has made justice and compassion a front and centre issue for the church in the coming years. He is calling C&MA congregations to action in the local community as well as on the national and international levels.

Such a focus and calling raises the question: "How should Christians and Christian congregations engage in public policy debates and processes?"

## TWO LEVELS

This question can be answered on two levels. If you were to ask it of a political consultant, he or she would list such activities as the following: Define the issue(s) with which you are concerned (poverty? foreign aid? the conditions of aboriginal peoples? tax equity? end-of-life issues?).

Define your positions on these issues, identifying what changes in existing public policies or laws you would like to achieve. Define the policy and decision-makers in government (federal? provincial? municipal? elected? unelected? candidates aspiring to election?) you need to influence. Seek opportunities to meet the

appropriate officials and politicians and present your case. Enter into coalitions with others like-minded to increase your influence. Organize and/or participate in public hearings and meetings, forums, talk shows, and media events to increase public support for your positions.

In other words, be persistent and skillful in using the tools democracy gives to us all to influence the public agenda—freedom of speech, freedom of association, and opportunities to persuade others to use their voices, positions, and votes to effect change.

But there is another level on which to address this question of how Christians should engage themselves in influencing public policy in the public square. Jesus himself addressed it when he gave instructions to his earliest followers as he first sent them out to do 'public work'.

## JESUS' GUIDELINE

During the first year of his recorded ministry, Jesus taught his disciples in private while he himself conducted the public part of his ministry. His disciples accompanied him and



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observed his public activities, but they themselves had little or no public role. (Believers first need to spend time with Jesus in private and in association with their fellow believers, becoming well grounded and instructed in their faith before stepping into the public square.)

Eventually, however, the day came when Jesus sent his disciples out to do ‘public work’ in his name—to cast out the spirits of evil, to heal the sick, and to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. But before doing so, he gave them this explicit instruction recorded in Matthew 10: “Behold I send you forth as sheep among wolves; therefore be wise as serpents and gracious as doves.”

### WISE AS SERPENTS

As most Christians know, in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, ‘the serpent’ is the symbol of the devil—the personification of evil. So Jesus is saying in effect, “Be wise (shrewd) as the forces of evil.”

He himself demonstrated this wisdom on many occasions. One such occasion was when he was questioned by his opponents on the subject of taxes (a matter of public policy). “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” they asked him. The question is asked, like most questions raised by the media or your opponents in the political arena, not for the purpose of getting an answer but for the purpose of getting Jesus into serious political trouble.

If he answers “Yes”, he will alienate his own followers who hated Revenue Rome and its tax collectors with a passion. If he answers “No”, he will be in even worse trouble because to deny Caesar’s right to collect taxes was a crime (treason). So what does he do?

Notice firstly that he doesn’t answer right away. (Don’t feel compelled to answer loaded political questions immediately—and if you don’t know what to say, say nothing.) Instead, he asks if anyone in the crowd has a coin. When the coin is duly produced, Jesus points to it and asks a question of his own—“Whose inscription is this?” “Caesar’s” they reply. To which he then responds with the shrewdness of the serpent, “So render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Brilliant, and shrewd. If he had said that in a scrum outside the House of Commons it would have made the evening news. It would have increased, not diminished, public respect for himself, his position, and his followers.

### GRACIOUS AS DOVES

Wisdom in and of itself, however, is not sufficient to guide us through the opportunities and dangers that await the believer who seeks to express and practice his or her faith in the public arena. That wisdom must be expressed and

exercised in the right spirit—not threateningly but with the graciousness of the dove.

Believers who by their words and actions give the impression that, if only they had the power, they would force others to accept their position on some issue are not walking in the footsteps of Jesus. He invited people to follow him; he did not compel them to do so. He and his teachings were a threat to many in authority, not because he threatened them directly but because of his appeal to ordinary people.

Jesus didn't just teach graciousness, he demonstrated it. He did so especially on an occasion when he was publicly challenged by his opponents on a question of sexual morality—the one issue where we, his modern followers, most often falter and discredit him and ourselves.

You will recall the story, recorded in John 8. His opponents dragged before him “a woman taken in adultery.” Then they asked Jesus: “In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women, but what do you say?”

This of course is again a loaded question, asked solely for the purpose of getting Jesus into serious political trouble—just like many of the questions on sexual morality put today by hostile media and interest groups to people of faith who venture into the political arena.

How did Jesus handle it? Once again he didn't answer immediately or impulsively—he took his time. But when he did answer, his response was a model of both shrewdness and graciousness.

First, just a dozen well chosen (inspired) words spoken in public—“He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone”—a shrewd rebuke of the antagonistic and judgmental spirit which motivated his interrogators.

And then, most importantly for us, some gracious words spoken in private to the unfortunate woman now left alone with Jesus. “Where are your accusers?” he asks. “Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she replies. To which he responds—with the graciousness of the dove—“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now, and sin no more.”

Jesus knew what to say in private on such issues and what to say in public—something we need to learn. He also knew how and when to express understanding, grace, and mercy without compromising his convictions (that adultery was still wrong)—something we need to learn as well.

One wonders if his opponents had brought before Jesus two people “taken in a homosexual act”—for which the Mosaic Law proscribed the same penalty—whether Jesus would have responded in the same wise and gracious fashion. I personally think he would have—the question is, would we?

## FOLLOWING JESUS

What is required of us to be able to speak and act in the public square, on public policy issues of concern to us as Christians and citizens, with the shrewdness and graciousness of our Master?

Knowledge will help—knowledge of our opponents and their objectives, knowledge of the broader audience, and the knowledge of faith inspired perspectives on the subject at hand—knowledge that comes through prayer (Solomon's prayer for wisdom), study (after the example of Paul), discussion with fellow believers and authorities, and the inspiration/guidance of the Spirit of Christ.

But if the experience of Jesus' earliest followers, as recorded in the New Testament, is in any way instructive, the most important thing is for us is to be in closer more constant fellowship with him—not just in private devotions and services with fellow believers—but out in the world—in the marketplace, in the prisons, in the hospitals, in the schools, in the ghettos, in the country clubs, in the media, and in the political arena—where Jesus himself continues to do his public work with the shrewdness of the serpent and the graciousness of the dove.

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