

The case against Christian political parties

By Michael Schluter

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As a small Christian think - tank, the Jubilee Centre has had to think hard about how to bring Christian values into public life. One option taken by Christians in recent decades, especially in continental Europe, has been to form Christian political parties. I have close friends involved in efforts to develop a Christian party in Britain. While I respect their sincere motivation as fellow believers, and love them as friends, I believe they are mistaken. Why? Let me suggest four reasons.

While Christians should agree about values or principles, they may, and often will, disagree about policies. In the case of Sunday trading, for example, while the majority of Christians agree that it is in the interests of society that one day in seven should be kept as free of commercial activity as reasonably possible, Christians disagree about whether that is best achieved by restricting shops from being open (Germany), limiting the rights of firms to employ people on Sundays (France) or other means. In the case of South Africa in the 1980s, Christians should have agreed that the principle of apartheid was wrong, but they could legitimately disagree about whether sanctions were the most effective way to bring pressure on the South African government to change their position. Christians should agree about the principle, but may disagree about the policy. Because political parties have to be about policies, not just about principles, it is inappropriate in my view to give any party the label 'Christian'.

Secondly, the public might legitimately expect any party calling itself Christian to be led and staffed by Christians. How is this to be achieved in practice? If the party takes off, is it possible to find enough Christians to stand as candidates and to fill all the official and staff positions? If only the leadership has to be Christian, is there a glass ceiling in the party blocking progress beyond a certain point for those who are not Christians? Are non-Christians allowed to be members of the party? If so, and if they become the majority of the party, then the party may well have to choose between keeping its Christian ethos and remaining a truly democratic institution.

Thirdly, there is the danger which a Christian political party represents to Christians themselves. Political parties are about the exercise of power, and it is right that Christians should seek power for the wellbeing of their fellow citizens. However, there has always been the danger that Christians will use their religion, and their relationship with God, as a means of achieving or legitimating power. In Jesus' day, the Jewish leaders were using the temple and other symbols of their religion as a source of political position and leverage over resources. It was when Jesus spoke out against this abuse of the religious faith they had been given that they organized to get rid of him (Mark 11:12 –18). In the Old Testament, there is the same priority given to keeping the king away from holding a position in the temple (2 Chronicles 26:19–21).

Finally, attaching the label 'Christian' to a political party muddies the waters of evangelism. The gospel proposition is not primarily about the organization of human relationships, whether at local, national or international level. It is first and foremost concerned with a person's relationship with God, and then their relationship in the community of God's people. Of course I believe that this must affect the way society is organized, and that the Bible has a great deal to say about the use of power – that is why we set up the Jubilee Centre in the first place. But the social implications of the gospel must not be allowed to obscure the heart of the message itself.

I well remember traveling to Rwanda on one occasion with a Belgian colleague and discussing the activities of the Christian Democratic Party in his country. He spoke about the appalling behavior of its officers, in his opinion, in terms of backstabbing, lying on major issues and so on. I was left wondering whether he was able to distinguish adequately between this 'Christian political party' and the kingdom of God. One final point which mitigates the strength of this argument. In specific situations, to vote for a 'Christian party' may be 'the lesser of two evils', depending on the alternatives on offer. So to reject the Christian party option, as I have done here, will not always preclude voting for such a party. Such are the pragmatic complexities of political life.

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