

## Voting WITH Jesus

It is an easy trap to fall into, to label outspoken, “out-there”, Christians such as Brian Houston and churches such as Sydney’s Hillsong and Adelaide’s Paradise as “the Religious Right”. Amanda Lowrie does her best not to fall into this trap, and largely succeeds. Perhaps the problem is not so much the political perspectives of Hillsong et al, so much as the licence conservative politicians take on the basis of what the political positions of such mega-churches are perceived to be – conservative. This is not helped either by churches’ perceptions of where they should stand politically or their understanding of politics – either of the political process or what their approach to it should be.

Many Christians believe they *should* be politically conservative. But whether they believe it and practice it or others believe they do, I would argue that such beliefs betray a lack of understanding either of politics (in the case of Christians) or Christianity (in the case of people outside the Church) or perhaps both. In particular, I believe the biggest problem here is Christians not understanding politics and political ideology well enough to properly develop a coherent and Biblical political ideology which is based on a thorough understanding of *both* Christianity and politics. If it is all about “voting for Jesus” and if Christians believe the answer to every situation is “What would Jesus do?”, I would argue that the question should be “How would Jesus vote?”

I have a couple of theories about why Christians believe they should be politically conservative. Because the Bible speaks about being modest in dress, speech, conduct etc., Christians are thus called to have positions on these things which might be seen as conservative, especially in the sense of old-fashioned. Some Christians, on the basis of this, then make the mistake of thinking they’re supposed to be conservative on everything. Another theory is that because God relates to each of us individually and personally, some Christians therefore erroneously believe that our economy should be likewise based on the individual, leading to a belief in free-market economics. Ironically, this would create the situation where they argue for individual-

based economics but an imposed social morality. If they took exactly the same approach to society, rather than the economy, they would be arguing for the right of individual to make their own moral choices, a position which would be anathema to the vast majority of them. A third possibility, brilliantly put by Sara Diamond in an article on Dominion Theology in America, is that there are right-wing Christian groups such as the Coalition on Revival (COR) who are “post-millennialists who believe their job is establish the kingdom of God on earth now; [that] Christ will return only after Christians have been in charge for 1,000 years...”.

Perhaps part of the problem is the nature of political ideology. The Right favour regulated morality and de-regulated economics while the Left want regulated economics and de-regulated morality. I would argue that if God had to support one of those positions He would support neither but would be closer to that of the Left. The Bible slams corruption in business as heavily as corruption anywhere else, if not more so. Jesus had a lot to say about money, particularly because it can reveal a lot about your character. So a Christian position on the economy would favour regulation over de-regulation. As God said through the prophet Jeremiah, the human heart is inherently evil – that is, we will be as selfish as we are allowed to be, and free-market economics would give us free rein to be as selfish as possible, to thus sin against each other.

On the subject of morality, I believe Jesus would want people to know what His standards are, then let them accept or reject those standards. This is not the regulated morality, the morality-by-legislative-decree, that those on the Right favour. In addition, as God told the prophet Samuel, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart”. One could also add ‘man looks at the outward actions’. Regulated morality can only affect the outward actions – it cannot change the heart. Only salvation can do that.

Even if, for example, a law banning same-sex relationships were wildly and totally successful, the most it could achieve would be that no one would be living in such relationships. There would still be people who want to live in such relationships, and as Jesus argued in the Sermon on the Mount, concerning the commandments “Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not

commit adultery”, if you want to commit the sin then even before you’ve actually committed it you’ve committed it in your heart. Legislation, therefore, can never save people from sin, much as Christians would want it to.

I’d like to take a moment to state where I fit into all this. I was a member of the Left faction of the ALP in Sydney in the early years of the Hawke government, and borderline socialist when I encountered Christ at a Christian Life Centre service where the preacher was Frank Houston, Brian’s father. Frank Houston had come to Sydney from New Zealand in 1977 specifically to found this church. Hills Christian Life Centre was one of several churches planted from this church in succeeding years.

I spent nine years in another such church, North Shore Christian Life Centre in Chatswood. I have also visited Phil Pringle’s Christian City Church and attended that denomination’s branch church at Lane Cove for three and a half years before moving to Adelaide. I’m not sure whether I’ve had conversations with Brian Houston or Phil Pringle but I have with Frank Houston and I have certainly sat under the ministry of all three.

When Nick Greiner led the Liberals to victory in the NSW election of 1988, it was the catalyst for a major seismic shift in my political priorities and ultimately a return to political activity in the early 90’s. Greiner once said, while still Opposition Leader, that government should be run like a business. This was my crash-course in economic rationalism, and I developed an intense hatred for this ideology, that I believe is because of my faith and my relationship with Jesus Christ. Though I was not actively involved in politics at this point, I still read the Sydney Morning Herald, though, so in the light of this perspective the more I read about the Australian Democrats the more I liked them. When I felt God give me permission to re-enter political activity in the early 90’s, with my agenda of fighting economic rationalism joining either major party was out of the question (this was the era when Hawke and then Keating ruled the ALP with their economic rationalism). Keating would hate my politics as much as anybody’s – I’m the sort of person he was disparaging with his famous “basket-weaving in Balmain” jibe, though I’d contend he was misreading us.

On this basis I joined the Australian Democrats in 1993. In the party I've made no secret of my faith – I once said “I'm in the Democrats, not in spite of my faith, but because of it”. When I appeared before the party's South Australian division's Candidate Assessment Committee on the way to being the candidate for Elder in the election of 2002 the first question I was asked was why did I leave the Labor Party. When I answered that I left because I left politics after becoming a born-again Christian, that prompted the next question about the Democrats being pro-choice, pro-euthanasia, pro- same-sex relationships etc. While I have never seen those policies as being central to the Democrats they are results of the Democrats essentially being pro-choice on everything – that is, that people should have full rights to make their own moral choices, a position I can, as a Christian, in fact fully support, even if I would disapprove of some of the choices some people can and do make.

The thing is, Christianity itself only works if it is voluntary. Salvation is there for everyone but you have to voluntarily accept it of your own free will. God thus gives us a choice – accept or reject – and He honours whichever choice we make. All the “evils” wowsers and others campaign against are merely consequences of us making the choice to reject God's salvation. So if God allows us to accept or reject Him, He therefore effectively allows us to live our lives on that basis, including any “evils” we may indulge ourselves in as a consequence of not accepting Him. If He allows people that choice, shouldn't I or the Church? Lowrie includes an interesting quote from no less than Brian Houston on this point:

“... I also believe that ultimately human beings have to make their own choices, and I ultimately can't tell you what you should do. I can only give you the parameters that I believe.”

Lowrie committed a *slight* error (of omission rather than commission) in her account of how Hills CLC became Hillsong. Hillsong was originally the name of a praise-and-worship conference run by Hills CLC. At one stage in the very early years a friend of mine (who was later my best man) had the job of organising the transport for the conference. As Brian Houston pointed out

on *Australian Story*, the name-change came about because people began referring to the church as “the Hillsong church”.

The role of Christianity in politics is not to legislate morality – especially if you believe, as those on the Right do, that morality consists of sexual and personal lifestyle issues. Jim Wallis, in his excellent *God’s Politics* (which is subtitled “*Why the American Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*” and which should be required reading), makes the point that the Right have succeeded in defining morality as narrowly as possible – to things like abortion and homosexuality. A truly Christian definition of what constitutes a moral issue would be as broad as possible – to include, for example, issues like asylum seekers. I would contend that economic rationalism is the biggest moral issue of all.

If Christianity is to have a role in politics, and I believe it must, then that role must surely be to argue these sorts of issues – including, for example, to back the arguments of previous *Quarterly Essay* contributor, and one of my political heroes, Clive Hamilton, in his books *Growth Fetish* and *Affluenza*. That is, to argue *against* the materialism of our post-modern culture. Lowrie devotes a whole chapter of her essay to how mega-churches like Hillsong deliberately adopt the very language and style of post-modern consumer culture. While I agree that this approach has its faults – it leaves some of us, including me, a little uncomfortable - I would say that Pentecostalism does this because Christianity has always done this – to speak the language of the people they are trying to reach. This does lead to a tendency to work within the prevailing system, even if that system is unjust, which in turn leads to much of the criticism the Church has received over the years.