

# Christian Politics in the 21st Century

by James W. Skillen

*On June 19, the author addressed an audience in Seoul, Korea, gathered for the opening of a new Research Institute for Christian Politics. National Assemblyman Hwang Woo Yea extended the invitation after visiting the Center for Public Justice earlier in the year. The following are excerpts from Dr. Skillen's address.*

One thing we know for sure about politics in the next century is that Jesus Christ will still be Lord over all authorities on earth. This is the confession that Christians have made from the beginning. Whether living under democratic or authoritarian governments, whether persecuted or free, Christians have trusted that Christ rules the world both for judgment and for blessing. God's kingdom embraces the whole world, the entire creation. We also believe that because of God's patience the climax of Christ's kingdom lies in the future and will come by God's decision, not ours.

Christian politics in the 21st century must grow from this faith. It will build on this confession: Christ is Lord over all and the full and final revelation of his government is still to come.

## **Gaining a Christian Perspective on Politics**

Far too many Christians have, for too long, approached politics as if it lies outside their primary responsibility as Christians. When the distinction is drawn between "church" and the "world," for example, it usually implies that politics, economics, science, technology, and mass media are part of "the world." The Christian life is thus confined to personal piety, to church activities, to family prayer and Bible study. From this point of view, a Christian's engagement in politics or business is seen as a function in the secular world where Christian principles may apply to one's personal behavior but not to the structures and

activities of the political order or the corporation.

Christian politics amounts to more than the attempt to maintain upright personal behavior in a non-Christian environment. It must mean more than crusading for a few moral causes by political means. Christian politics must be about politics in its entirety. It must be about defining the very nature

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of government—about the structure, limits, and policy responsibilities of government. Our personal piety and heart-deep dedication to Jesus Christ should work their way out in the way we seek to obey God with all the political responsibilities we bear as citizens and public officials.

When we approach politics this way, we can see that the political arena is neither neutral nor non-religious. Rather, it is a world shaped by the religiously deep drives, commitments, and habits of a culture. Politics is organized by the vision of life that controls citizens and governments. You know better than I do the extent to which Christianity has influenced Korean culture and society in the 20th century. Your challenge now, and ours in the United States, is to avoid the easy path of simply going along with, or adapting to, democratic, economic, and

technological changes as they occur. Instead, our challenge is to develop a coherent Christian political perspective that will allow us to make judgments about the justice and injustice of the changes taking place. Even more, we should be seeking, as Christians, to exercise as much leadership as possible—leadership in our national parliaments, in our governments, in international organizations—to propose principled policies and changes in political structures that will advance justice domestically and internationally.

We should not fear that such a bold approach will give the appearance that we are trying to inject Christianity where it does not belong. Other religions, including humanist secularism, are seeking to lead and direct society and politics. Religions are what constitute and direct people's lives. They encompass and drive different cultures and their institutions. And what we find throughout the world today is that different religions are increasingly competing with one another within the same society. Few places on earth have only one religion that integrates the entire culture. Christians, therefore, ought to take their faith seriously in political life as most other religions do.

## **What Should Characterize Christian Politics in the Next Century?**

When Christians make the commitment to change their approach to politics so that it becomes part of their wholehearted service to God, what should they expect? What kind of pol-



itics should they be calling for in the 21st century? On what basis will they be joining together, as Christian citizens, to labor in the political arena of God's world?

For our purposes today, allow me to make five brief points.

1. The first is this: *Christian politics must always be principled and comprehensive.*

In politics, whether in the legislative chambers or in the executive branch of government, political issues come and go, and they usually require highly focused attention. One day the issue is defense policy, another day it may be welfare or education, and the next it is monetary policy. Issues will often come to public attention in a crisis situation, as a matter of urgency, such as your current economic and financial circumstances. Even without a crisis, diverse opinions will be voiced and the time for weighing evidence and making decisions will be short. These are not the circumstances in which Christian officials will have time to construct a political philosophy and a comprehensive framework for evaluating specific issues. They will have to rely on what they already know and on the expertise of others. The groundwork of Christian thinking must have already been laid. The principled vision must already control the actors. The ability to relate each issue to the principles of justice involved must already belong to the decision makers.

For a coherent Christian approach to become a characteristic of the Christian community in your country and in mine it is essential for those with the gifts and a political vocation to give themselves to the hard work of public policy research and political writing that can help shape a community of common conviction and understanding.

2. My second point is this: *Christian politics must reflect the fact that we are living in the time of Christ's mercy and patience between his first and second comings.* God is

graciously sending down rain on the just and the unjust alike. Both wheat and tares are growing up together in this world. God is not willing that any should perish and is redeeming people from every nation on earth.

The kind of politics we should pursue, therefore, is one that seeks the same civil rights and the same just treatment for all citizens in our respective countries. Public law should give all citizens the same religious freedom and not discriminate among



Hwang Woo Yea, a member of Korea's National Assembly, welcomes James Skillen to the opening of the Research Institute for Christian Politics.

them on the basis of their faith. Secular humanists, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians—all should enjoy the same civil rights. All should have the same access to public benefits, voting privileges, electoral representation, judicial proceedings, and equal opportunity to express their ways of life in areas such as education and politics.

3. In the third place, *Christian politics represents the continual quest for justice to be done to the multiple callings and responsibilities God has given human beings—the image of God.* The highest political aim for Christians is not democracy. Democracy in itself does not assure that justice will be done. Democratic elections and representative government can serve the highly important purpose of holding government accountable. But more important than the accountability of leaders to the people is accountability of both leaders and people to God's will for creation. The reason why people ought to have some say in government is not just so they can exercise a

degree of self-government. Rather, it is that they can help government shape laws so justice is done to the full range of their diverse responsibilities before God, most of which are not political in nature.

4. My fourth point is the following: *Christian politics in all of our countries must increasingly focus attention on international affairs and seek to engage Christians in cooperation across national borders.* If the 20th century witnessed the first world wars, the first worldwide depression, the first globally encompassing cold war, and the first steps toward a single worldwide technological, economic, and communications network, then the 21st century will not only continue these trends but will also become the century of worldwide political interdependency. This is not to say that local politics will dry up or that the diversification of peoples and cultures will not continue. The world is not only shrinking; it is also expanding and diversifying. But all of the diversification and expansion will be taking place in a single shrinking world.

5. Finally, I want to emphasize that *the challenge of Christian politics in the 21st century will be to build a truly international political association of Christians and to nurture a Christian political consciousness through which we can realize our political bond across national borders.*

Some of the developments to which we have referred make this more possible today than ever before. Communications and transportation technologies make international communication easier. The fact that Christians in all countries face many of the same international realities means that Christian political wisdom generated in one corner of the world can be useful to Christians in every other corner. So the question is not whether it is possible for Christians to build a stronger international network as citizens. Instead, the question is whether we will commit ourselves to do this with a sense of Christian urgency. □