

Introducing Politics in the Classroom

BY JOHN WESLEY TAYLOR, V

In a small town, an Adventist church member decides to run for mayor. As a part of his campaign, he contacts the Bible teacher at the Adventist school and requests an opportunity to talk to the students. The teacher agrees. Speaking at an assembly, the church member tells the group that one of his top priorities, if elected, will be to build a ball-park for the town, and that if they would like to have that facility, they should ask their parents to vote for him. He then hands out copies of his campaign flier and asks the students to give them to their parents. The teacher follows up by promising the students that if they become involved in the campaign in some way, beyond simply taking the flier home, that they will earn extra credit toward their grade. Quite a number of students are eager to get involved!¹



A Christian educator is not someone who is a teacher and also, incidentally, a Christian; but rather, one who is authentically Christian in *all* aspects of life, including his or her role as an educator. Given this commitment, how should Christian teachers approach politics? How do they balance, for example, the goal of preparing knowledgeable citizens without hijacking instructional time to advocate pet political ideas? How do they help students become sensitive to, and perhaps actively involved in, sociopolitical issues without promoting a partisan agenda? Perhaps most importantly, how do they recognize the Lord-



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ship of Christ in all aspects of their lives, including their relationship to politics?

Laying the Foundation

In order for a student to think Christianly about politics, he or she must form a Christian worldview. At the heart of this worldview is an understanding of the great controversy between good and evil, which plays out in every facet of life, including politics. Another core ingredient is an awareness of the sovereignty of God, which acknowledges that God is ultimately in control of everything, including earthly governments. A third element is recognition of the all-encompassing Lordship of Christ. This implies that Christians must not create false dichotomies in their lives, segmenting activities into spiritual and secular realms. Rather, Christians must see their entire experience in relationship to God, and seek to glorify

Him in every dimension of their lives.²

How is this Christian perspective developed? Through both observation and reflection, as well as through conversation and experience. In the teacher's life, the student must see modeled the principle that the Christian is in the world, but not of the world. Through dialogue and life experiences, students should develop a framework of moral values that will enable them to address ethical issues—such as the equality of human beings and stewardship of the environment. Through thoughtful reflection, students must come to see their role as ambassadors for God, with vested authority and responsibility to establish positive relationships and influence decisions for the kingdom of heaven. Overall, they need to recognize that God, as Creator and Redeemer, claims their highest allegiance.

How, then, do Adventist educators go about setting up conditions and experiences so that their students will view politics from a Christian perspective? Connections can be quite readily made in the social sciences, as well as in other areas of the curriculum.

Connections in the Social Sciences

The social sciences (history, economics, and geography), can be fertile terrain for students to explore political issues. As a point of departure, they should learn that it was God who established the foundations of civil government.³ For background, they can examine the laws of the Mosaic system, found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, and compare them with current legislation. They might explore as case studies the lives of biblical individuals (such as Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Esther) who were directly involved in government, as well as scriptural principles that clarify the Christian's relation with politics (see Table 1). Students could also consider the historic and current Seventh-day Adventist views⁴ on government and politics, including pertinent statements by Ellen White.⁵

As teachers seek to inculcate a Christian perspective on politics, they must help their students understand its opportunities: for witness, for religious liberty, for making a difference in the lives of others; as well as its dangers: of compromising principle, of corrupting values, of consuming inordinate amounts of time and money.

Specific areas that could be addressed in the social sciences include the following:

- **Patriotism.** Having pride in one's country and expressing loyalty to one's heritage, while avoiding a militant nationalism that ignores the brotherhood of all humanity. Recognizing national heroes, particularly those unsung and perhaps forgotten.

- **Critique of government.** Holding civil leaders accountable; speaking out against unjust legislation, immorality, corruption, nepotism, armed invasion of other nations, and unfulfilled promises.

- **Civil disobedience.** Understanding what civil disobedience is and what it is not, particularly by examining historic and contemporary examples; recognizing different types of

civil disobedience (activist vs. pacifist, for example), and situations where these may be appropriate; clarifying the difference between respect for and blind obedience to authority.

- **Voting.** Becoming informed on issues, positions, and platforms; voting on the moral issues or personal qualifications and position of the candidate, and not merely for a certain political party; respecting the personal and private nature of the ballot.

- **Partisan involvement.** Understanding that partisan identification by the church and its leaders is restricted, and that party alignment on the personal level must be cautious and conditional.

- **Holding political office.** Analyzing one's motive for seeking office (power, prestige, and self-service vs. seeking

to address injustice and enhance the well-being of others); understanding the various types of office (for example, elective vs. appointive); evaluating the appropriateness of a particular political office for the Christian.

Certain class activities can further contribute to a student's Christian understanding of politics. This might include discussing one's rights as a citizen, including when it may be necessary to stand up for the rights of others or of oneself. It could involve providing opportunities for students to hear multiple political perspectives, such as from the various candidates running for a specific office.

Students can debate public policy, perhaps on such controversial issues as globalization; immigration policies; exploitation of natural resources; waste disposal; foreign aid and

Table 1

Biblical Principles Regarding the Relationship of Christianity and Politics

Foundational Principles

- The equality of humankind (Genesis 1:26-27; Acts 17:26).
- Stewardship of the environment (Genesis 2:15; Revelation 11:18).
- A moral government results in prosperity (Psalm 33:12; Proverbs 14:34; 29:2).

God's Role in Government

- God establishes civil government (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 21-23; Numbers 35:12; Romans 13:1).
- God opposes corruption in government (Proverbs 17:15; Isaiah 1:23; 10:1; Micah 3:9).
- God is ultimately in control of earthly government (Psalm 22:29; Proverbs 21:1; Jeremiah 18:7-10; Acts 17:26, 27).

Relationship to Government

- God expects citizens to respect and submit to civil authority (Deuteronomy 17:12; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 2 Peter 2:10-12; Jude 1:8-10).
- Christians are not to blindly obey civil authority (Mark 13:9-11; Acts 4:19; 5:29).
- God enjoins believers to pray for secular rulers (Ezra 6:10; Psalm 122:6; Jeremiah 29:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1, 2).

Action in Politics

- Moral principles must permeate society (Matthew 5:13-16).
- Christians have a responsibility to critique government (Psalm 12:8; Ezekiel 3:17-19; Ephesians 5:11).
- God encourages active involvement in social causes (Isaiah 58:6; Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:31-46; James 1:27).
- Christians are to advocate peace (Isaiah 2:4; Luke 6:29; Romans 12:18; 14:19; Titus 3:1).
- Christians must overcome evil with good (Romans 12:14-21).

Tension With Politics

- Political relationships involve inherent risks (2 Corinthians 6:14-17; 2 Timothy, 2:4; 1 John 2:15).
- Christians' first loyalty is to God's kingdom (Matthew 6:24, 33; John 17:15-16).
- Heavenly citizenship carries both limitations and responsibilities (2 Corinthians 5:20; Philippians 3:18-21; Colossians 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:9-11).
- Christians must answer to a higher standard than unbelievers (2 Corinthians 8:21; 10:3, 4).



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national debt; lobbying; conflicts of interest; spying and sabotage; justification for war; and the use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. A class might also explore how to make a positive difference as a Christian in relating to a variety of sociopolitical dilemmas such as racism, sexism, religious intolerance, environmental contamination, endangered species, the homeless, and victims of war.

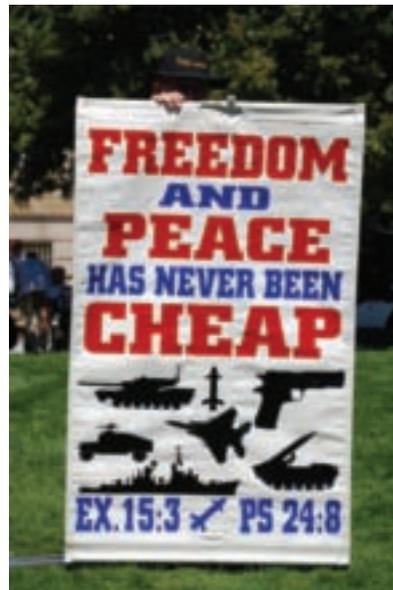
Exploration and discussion can also lead to action. Students, for example, could evaluate various avenues for political action on a specific issue—such as writing petitions, speaking with elected representatives, voting for candidates who support moral issues, protesting through pen and voice, appealing to the courts, or becoming directly involved in government—and then draft a plan and put it into action.

Connections in Other Subject Areas

Examination of politics is not limited, of course, to the social sciences. Sociopolitical issues appear in a wide variety of disciplines.

In science, topics such as global warming, stem-cell research, birth control, animal rights, nuclear energy, waste recycling, and origins (such as Intelligent Design) are hotly debated within politics. In technology classes, issues such as national security, the protection of privacy, intellectual property rights, software piracy, and computer fraud each have political dimensions.

In language arts, the ability to speak and write persuasively, to prepare proposals and plans of action, to marshal evidence, and to evoke compassion are pertinent to political debate. In a literature class, students can become familiar with their national literary heritage and discuss literature that explores sociopolitical issues. Certain specific issues are directly linked to language, such as freedom of speech, defamation, derogatory labels, stereotypes, sensationalism, and eroticism, which frequently emerge in political debate, particularly concerning government oversight and regulation.



Similarly, in the fine arts, students can become familiar with patriotic songs and national artists. They can debate controversial political topics such as freedom of expression and the regulation of the media; the depiction of violence and nudity; and racial, gender, or religious stereotypes; as well as the commercializing and politicizing of the arts for propaganda purposes.



In health courses, students can discuss the political ramifications of access to health care, the regulation of smoking in public places, and the recreational use of drugs. Exploration of topics such as hormone enhancement, antitrust legislation, and gender and racial discrimination in sports are particularly appropriate for physical education classes.

In a religion or ethics class, students might examine religious liberty and the separation of church and state, as well as religious intolerance, cults and sects, cloning, abortion, stem-cell research, and euthanasia—each of which can incorporate a political dimension.

Regardless of the particular topic or subject area, however, certain course activities can help students to effectively engage in the political process throughout their lives. These include collaborative projects where students develop skills in cooperation, conflict resolution, and compromise—without violating personal ethical principles. Teachers can foster positive attitudes that help students relate to others in a Christian manner, even when disagreeing over controversial issues. These include showing respect to those with whom one differs, recognizing the viability of alternative perspectives, and being open to further insight and understanding.

It is also appropriate for students to become familiar with the church's statements⁶ on climate change, human clon-



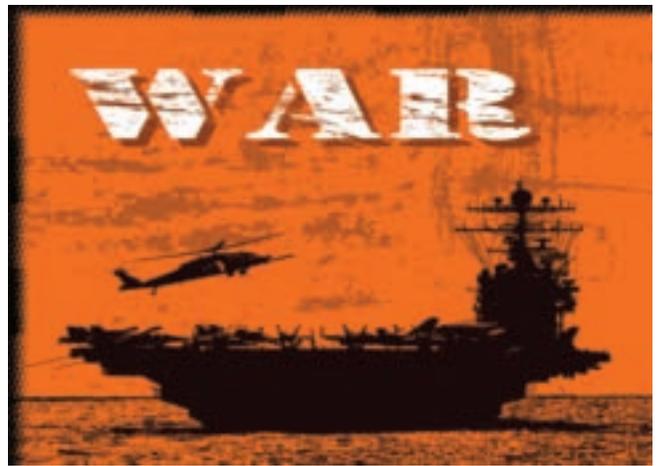
ing, racism, birth control, and same-sex unions, for example, as well as those that focus on specific political events, such as the crisis in Kosovo or the London terrorist attacks. These statements can serve as the basis for class discussion and can help students understand that the church is proactive and speaks to sociopolitical issues and pressing needs within society.⁷

Beyond the Classroom

Students need to transfer learning from the classroom to the crucible of life. Through precept and model, teachers should encourage them to live as law-abiding citizens—paying honest taxes, for example, and respecting traffic regulations. They should also help students to become advocates of peace and agents of reconciliation. Thus, Christian teachers must make it a priority to teach mediation and peacemaking skills, as well as the nonviolent resolution of conflict.⁸ This may also imply the adoption of a pacifist worldview, as well as a position of nonresistance or of nonviolent resistance.

Students must escape the grip of passivity, of feeling that one person can't accomplish anything, and become catalysts for social justice—seeking to redress wrongs, to address the imbalance of privilege, and to rectify violations of basic human rights. Christian teachers should encourage their students to speak out on moral issues, such as abortion, gambling, pornography, and same-sex marriage, as well as to become advocates of equity for the poor, the disadvantaged, and ethnic minorities.⁹

In essence, educators should promote judicious involvement in social causes—protecting the vulnerable,



providing a voice for the marginalized and neglected, helping the economically deprived, bringing hope to the rejected and exploited. They should help their students identify ways to overcome evil with good.¹⁰ Perhaps one of the best means to ensure that students develop a lifestyle of engagement is for teachers to create opportunities for service throughout the educational program, and engage in service themselves, thereby encouraging students to develop a sense of community and the response of compassion.

Points of Caution

As in any dimension of life, certain aspects of the Christian educator's relationship with politics require caution. These include the following:

- **Use of instructional time.** While course material must connect with students' lives and link to the "real world," teachers must be careful not to use class time to interject political issues unrelated or only marginally relevant to the stated focus of the course. Students, as well as parents and the community at large, have a right to expect that instruction will focus on the scheduled topics, without being commanded by an instructor's opinions on global warming, immigration reform, the war in Afghanistan, or any number of other political or ideological issues.

It is an abuse of professional duty for an educator to claim license to discuss his or her political views on whatever topic happens to be on the course syllabus that day. Furthermore, it is unethical to deliver to students academic opinions on topics outside of one's areas of expertise—and venting a personal opinion on unrelated topics is simply not an appropriate use of instructional time.

- **Political indoctrination.** Even if a political issue is pertinent to the topic at hand, the educator must still be careful not to "brainwash" students into mindlessly accepting a particular viewpoint or ideology. Political indoctrination can occur when teachers dogmatically

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insist on the correctness of their positions, while refusing to present alternative perspectives or allow students the opportunity to contest their view.

The Adventist teacher's function is not to dispense ready-made conclusions, but to train students to think for themselves. One way to do this is to present or provide access to materials that portray divergent views on contentious subjects, without denigration or innuendo. The teacher must never take unfair advantage of students' vulnerability or immaturity by intentionally presenting only one side of a political issue, and thus indoctrinating students exclusively with his or her own opinions before they have had an opportunity to examine other perspectives.

In discussing controversial issues, educators can express personal opinions, provided that they are noted as such and students are permitted to do the same.

All this suggests the need for tolerance of students' religious, political, or socioeconomic views, and treating their opinions with courtesy and respect. Under no circumstance should a teacher ever harangue, belittle, or intimidate a student—particularly in the area of politics.

• **Partisan involvement.** While employed in teaching or administration, particularly in denominational schools, educators should avoid engaging in partisan politics.¹¹ This activity would compromise the separation of church and state, risk the unity of the church, and limit teachers' ability to serve people of differing political persuasions.

• **Sensitivity to context.** Students in Adventist schools do not live in a social vacuum. They are connected to families and communities. Educators must consequently exercise sensitivity and wisdom



when discussing unpopular views or sharing materials from sources opposed by students' families, or by their religious or cultural affiliations. Parents, particularly, may be adamant in their desire to shelter their children from perspectives with which they do not agree.

Here, then, are some ethical guidelines for dealing with politics in Adventist schools:

1. Teachers must avoid disparaging the leaders or members of any political party, even as a joke.
2. Teachers must be cautious about encouraging students to campaign for a particular candidate, particularly by offering them an academic incentive.
3. The choice of a political candidate is a personal matter, and should not be urged upon others.
4. Teachers should never denigrate the political persuasions of other people, particularly students.
5. Teachers should deal sensitively with controversial topics.

Finessing Controversial Topics

Despite these cautions, teachers should not altogether avoid controversial topics, such as global warming, health care, or immigration policy—many of which involve moral imperatives. It does suggest, however, that teachers need to perceptively finesse their approach, while ensuring that their students are well informed.

One approach is to focus on general principles, rather than delving into the sizzling specifics of a local issue. When discussing immigration, for example, in a community where sentiment against illegal immigration runs strong, students could examine the sympathetic treatment given to the foreigner in the Bible.¹² This may inspire students to connect the dots, in much the same way that Jesus' listeners did as they reflected on His parables.¹³

Another approach might be to help students understand, through their study of balanced, factual information, that there are legitimate differences of opinion on certain subjects.

In this context, it is particularly important that they learn how to evaluate sources for trustworthiness and credibility. In an impartial way, and perhaps removed a few degrees from the area of conflict, teachers can help students understand how language, photographs, and statistics can be used to confuse, mislead, or inflame public opinion regarding a product, person, or idea. The teacher might even illustrate

how language in a survey can be used to predispose certain responses, thus skewing results. Yet another tack might be to help students understand that there is a difference between having personal convictions about the morality of an issue and trying to impose one's views on everyone else through laws and sanctions.

A Concluding Thought

When an orchestra interprets a work, three liberties are involved—the freedom of the instrumentalist to perform, the freedom of the conductor to interpret the work, and the freedom of the composer to hold certain expectations regarding the way the composition should be performed. Similarly, in an educational setting, there are three fundamental liberties: that of the student to learn, of the teacher to teach, and of the institution to fulfill its mission. As Christian educators, we must remember that all rights carry corresponding responsibilities. Consequently, the academic freedom¹⁴ to address sociopolitical matters, while crucial, must also be balanced with both the right of the student to learn within a focused and supportive context, and the right of the institution to maintain its philosophical integrity and to carry out its mission.

In sum, the Christian educator has a holy calling, a divine commission to teach in the manner of Christ, to make a positive difference in the school and community, and to prepare candidates for the kingdom of God. Like every other topic, politics must fit within this Christian worldview. ☞



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Certain distinguishing details have been altered to protect privacy.
2. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 10:31, 2 Corinthians 10:5; and Colossians 3:10, 11, 17.
3. Kerby Anderson notes that two key figures in the history of law are Samuel Rutherford and William Blackstone. Rutherford's *Lex Rex*, written in 1644, challenged the foundations of 17th-century politics by proclaiming that law must be based upon the Bible, rather than upon the king's word. Up until that time, under the Divine Right of Kings, the king had been the law. Rutherford argued from passages such as Romans 13 that the king, as well as anyone else, was under God's law and not above it. Similarly, Sir William Blackstone, an English jurist in the 18th century, maintained that the two foundations for law are nature and revelation through the Scriptures. Even the humanist Rousseau noted in his Social Contract that one needs someone outside the world system to provide a moral basis for law. He observed, "It would take gods to give men laws" (Kerby Anderson, "Christian View of Government and Law" [1999]). Available at <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/xian-pol.html>.
4. A comprehensive set of articles by Paul Gordon, originally published in the *Adventist Review*, September 18 and 25, 1980, describe in some detail the development of the denominational perspective. These may be

found online at <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/Voting.html>.

5. On a number of occasions, Ellen White urged believers to refrain from political involvement. In 1899, for example, she wrote, "The Lord would have His people bury political questions. On these themes silence is eloquence" (*Gospel Workers*, p. 391). This counsel, however, does not appear to exclude voting, speaking out on certain political issues, or holding public office. In 1881, with the nation discussing the prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages, White observed: "Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be . . . every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and vote be on the side of temperance and virtue?" (*ibid.*, p. 387). Furthermore, in an address given to the students of Battle Creek College on November 15, 1883, she stated: "Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day . . . sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 82). She clarified, however, that, loyalty to Christ and a commitment to biblical principles must always be paramount. "As disciples of Christ, you are not debarred from engaging in temporal pursuits; but you should carry your religion with you . . . Balanced by religious principle, you may climb to any height you please" (*ibid.*, pp. 82, 83).

6. These statements may be found online at <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements/index.html>.

7. A recent article in this journal by Mark Carr and Gerald Winslow provides excellent ideas on how these statements might be used in an educational setting. Published in October/November 2007 (pages 4-11), it is also available online at <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/jae200770010408.pdf>.

8. See the Peacemaking issue of *The Journal of Adventist Education* and the article by Elvin Gabriel on page 22 of this issue.

9. Contact ADRA for information on how to become involved: <http://www.adra.org/site/PageNavigator/involved/>.

10. Romans 12:21.

11. Ellen White addressed this matter quite directly: "Every teacher, minister, or leader in our ranks who is stirred with a desire to ventilate his opinions on political questions, should be converted by a belief in the truth, or give up his work" (*Gospel Workers*, p. 393). "Those who stand as educators, as ministers, as laborers together with God in any line, have no battles to fight in the political world" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 478).

12. See, for example, Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:9-10, 24:22; Psalm 146:9; Proverbs 31:8-9; as well as the Book of Amos.

13. Matthew 13:10-13, 34-36.

14. A document voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee (1987) notes that academic freedom comprises:

(1) **Freedom of Speech.** "While the right to private opinion is a part of the human heritage as creatures of God, in accepting employment at a Seventh-day Adventist college or university the teacher recognizes certain limits to expression of personal views. As a member of a learned profession, he must recognize that the public will judge his profession by his utterances. Therefore, he will be accurate, respectful of the opinions of others, and will exercise appropriate restraint. He will make it clear when he does not speak for the institution. In expressing private views he will have in mind their effect on the reputation and goals of the institution."

(2) **Freedom of Research.** "The Christian scholar will undertake research within the context of his faith and from the perspective of Christian ethics. He is free to do responsible research with proper respect for public safety and decency."

(3) **Freedom to Teach.** "The teacher will conduct his professional activities and present his subject matter within the world view described in the opening paragraph of this document. As a specialist within a particular discipline, he is entitled to freedom in the classroom to discuss his subject honestly. However, he will not introduce into his teaching controversial matter unrelated to his subject. Academic freedom is freedom to pursue knowledge and truth in the area of the individual's specialty. It does not give license to express controversial opinions on subjects outside that specialty nor does it protect the individual from being held accountable for his teaching." Available online at http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main_stat36.html.