

Can My Vote Be Biblical?

The Bible gives profound principles that should inform our attitudes and behavior in the public sphere—including voting.

Adapted from "Can My Vote Be Biblical?" by Evangelicals for Social Action

Every democratic country in the world allows its citizens the right to make a significant difference in their government's actions by voting and participating in the political process. Americans in the United States have this privilege in the upcoming national elections on November 3.

Inevitably the question arises among some Seventh-day Adventists whether or not they should exercise their right to vote. We would say absolutely yes—and the church's stance through the years supports such a conclusion (see the accompanying article by Paul Gordon).

But the more important question we must address is How should Christianity affect one's voting preferences at the polling booths. And in particular: How should the religious values of Adventists impact our voting?¹

If the Bible spelled out for us which candidate or political party to vote for, our decision-making would be simple. But the Bible provides no such details, nor does it provide us with a clear economic or social plan we should support.

However, this is certainly not to say that the Bible is silent on the matter of choosing national leaders and social politics. In fact, it gives profound principles that should inform our attitudes and behavior in the public sphere—including voting.

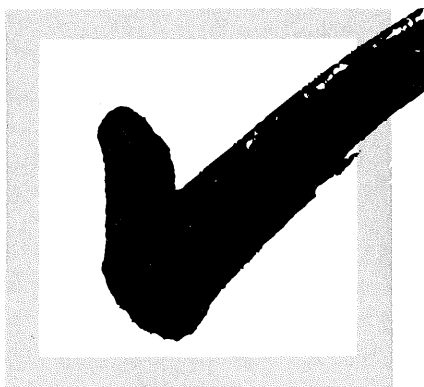
The application of biblical principles to contemporary social and political problems is not without difficulty,

though. Even people who agree on the same biblical principles often disagree on their application toward specific social programs or policies.

Thus, our purpose here is not to provide a list of approved political candidates, but to list guidelines that might become the basis for serious dialogue about the application of faith to the sociopolitical issues facing society today.

We recognize that underlying any such discussion should be our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This commitment should override any nationalistic urge, economic interest, or political ideology. We should see ourselves participating in the political process as instruments of Christ to foster peace, freedom, and justice in our world.²

While not exhaustive, the following guidelines may provide a starting point for reflection on the application of faith to public issues.



Basic Biblical Principles

1. The Family Is a Divinely Willed Institution

The family is the basic unit of society and the institution responsible for the rearing of children. Christians must resist the growing tendency for the state to usurp the role of the family. It is God's will for one man and one woman to live together in lifelong commitment (Gen. 2:23, 24; Matt. 19:3-9).

The government may enhance, through legislation and tax rates, the scriptural plan for the family, marriage, and sexuality. Public policy should seek to protect and safeguard the welfare of the family unit and its God-given responsibilities. And in cases where the biblical ideal may not be reached, such as single-parent families, the state must also ensure the welfare of those involved.

2. Every Human Life Is Sacred

Human value comes from the knowledge that we are all created in God's image (Gen. 1:27) and meant to live life to the fullest. The Christian story of redemption—Christ's life, death, and resurrection—is God's attempt at expressing the immeasurable value of each person.

The value of each person is totally independent of his or her social usefulness. Christians, therefore, need to support policies that seek to protect the rights of human beings and that enable them to live meaningful lives, no matter their age, culture, or race.

The principle of valuing human life means that access to adequate health care, education, jobs, etc., should be seen as a right of every individual, particularly for those most vulnerable in our society.

3. Religious and Political Freedoms Are God-given, Inalienable Rights

Throughout Scripture a person's choice to believe or not to believe in God was never a condition for God to provide daily sustenance (Matt. 5:45). The right to exercise one's faith should never be usurped by the state. Thus, the power of the state should remain separate with regard to the exercise of religion.

This is not to say that morality and civil laws do not intersect or relate to each other. Given human nature's drive toward self-interest, control, and power, there is need for checks and balances that enable freedom of expression as an inalienable right.

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4. God and His Obedient People Have a Special Concern for the Poor

One of the most dominating themes in the Bible is God's concern for justice for the poor and oppressed.³ God invites His followers to have that same concern for the poor.⁴

This concern will recognize the existence of social evil—as manifested in institutional structures that perpetuate oppressive conditions—rather than always “blaming victims” for their lot in life. Caution needs to be taken for those politicians who hide behind the cloak of the Bible while perpetuating unjust laws and policies. Only those leaders who, among other things, seek justice for the poor are acting biblically.

5. God Requires Just Economic Patterns in Society

The starting point of all biblical thinking on economics is that God is sovereign. He is the only absolute owner of all things (Ps. 24:1; Job 41:11; Lev. 25:23). The earth's resources are meant to be wisely shared for the benefit of all the world's citizens.

The Bible condemns both those who are lazy and those who become rich by oppressing others (Isa. 3:13-16; Jer. 5:26-29; James 5:1-5). This principle suggests that God wants wealth to be shared, reducing the extremes of wealth and poverty (Lev. 25:10-24; Acts 2:43-47; 2 Cor. 8:8-15).

In fact, the divine command to implement justice in the economic and social affairs of a society is so strong that it led to God's emphatic condemnation of both Israel's and Judah's economic oppression.⁵ Christians need to support those economic policies that seek to provide equitable opportunities for people to earn a just living.

6. God Requires Christians to Be Peacemakers

Violence impregnates our society at every level. Society desperately needs a community of people called “blessed” because they are “peacemakers.”

Christians are called upon to do everything we can to reduce the proliferation of military expenditures, particularly when so many suffer from hunger and the lack of basic necessities of life.

Much violence results from the idolatry of nationalism. No matter what nationality we might be, we must recognize

that we are first and foremost Christians. Thus, our faith should always be the basis upon which we evaluate and critique our national identity and interests.

7. The Creator Requires Stewardship of the Earth's Resources

*We can be instruments
of Christ to foster peace,
freedom, and justice.*

The earth is the Lord's (Ps. 24:1), and humanity is to exercise wise stewardship over it (Gen. 1:28). God expects us to protect the environment from polluters and from overdevelopment simply for economic gain. Adventists,

as Sabbathkeepers, should be at the forefront of environmental concerns. To keep the Sabbath, the memorial of God's creation, and not support social policies or engage in activities that enhance the quality of earth's environment and our existence is a moral contradiction.⁶

8. Sin Is Both Personal and Social

It is important to remember that from a biblical perspective sin manifests itself at both the individual and social level. While lying and committing adultery are clear actions against the will of God, it is also a sin to be uncritical of unjust and oppressive social structures (Amos 4:1, 2). The Bible denounces laws that are unjust (Isa. 10:1-4; Ps. 94:20).

Christians committed to a wholistic conception of the gospel will support social policies that counter evil when it is manifested within structures and institutions of our society. In many ways this is a complex task. Discerning social evil as

is manifested in “principalities” (institutions) and “powers” (influence peddling on the basis of status or economic interests) is often difficult and elusive. Yet to maintain the status quo by not getting involved to change things is, in effect, to support unjust practices, policies, or governments.

9. Personal Integrity Is Vital

Scripture demands that leaders be honest and upright. Dishonesty in individual and public affairs undercuts the democratic process. A politician's personal and family life should be an example to the community. Politicians should be honest and humble enough to recognize their mistakes. Knowing that we all err, we should forgive those who offer forthright confession.

10. An Other-oriented Ethic

An important biblical principle asks that the needs of the “other” demand a response equal to the protection of the self. How a political party or policy might

impact “my” pocketbook should not be the primary criterion for decision-making. Rather, the basis should be: How will this policy impact those less fortunate, and how will it create a more equitable and compassionate community?

Justice Is Strength

The Bible suggests that justice makes a government strong (Prov. 16:12). The ideal ruler is one who leads well and “has pity on the weak and poor; he saves the lives of those in need. He rescues them from oppression and violence; their lives are precious to him” (Ps. 72:13, 14, TEV).

To participate in the political process as informed voters is not just a right of citizenship but a Christian responsibility.

¹ The framework for the discussion below is taken from *Can My Vote Be Biblical?* Tracts for Justice, published by Evangelicals for Social Action.

² *Ibid.*
³ Ps. 35:10; 103:6, 7; 146:6-9; Jer. 22:1-5; Isa. 58; Amos 4:1-3; 8:4-8; Luke 4:16.
⁴ Deut. 27:19; Ps. 41:1, 2; 82:1-5; Prov. 14:21, 31; 22:22; Isa. 32:1-8; Luke 14:12-14; Matt. 25:31-46; 1 John 3:17.
⁵ Hosea 8; Amos 2:7; 6:1-7; 7:11, 17; Isa. 10:1-4; Jer. 5:26-29.
⁶ See Josef Greig, “Adventists and the Environment,” *Adventist Review*, Apr. 19, 1990.

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Shall I Vote?

A look at the church's historic position

BY PAUL GORDON

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States, 11 Southern states seceded from the Union, and America was plunged into civil war. A short time later, on May 21, 1863, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was formally organized.

The third annual session of the General Conference, which convened at Battle Creek on May 17, 1865, was destined to be historic in regard to the question of voting. Among the delegates were prominent Adventist leaders, including James and Ellen White, who actively participated in the work of the conference.

A significant resolution concerning voting was adopted:

“Resolved, That in our judgment, the act of voting when exercised in behalf of justice, humanity, and right is in itself blameless, and may be at some times highly proper; but that the casting of any vote that shall strengthen the cause of such crimes as intemperance, insurrection, and slavery we regard as highly criminal in the sight of Heaven. But we would deprecate any participation in the spirit of party strife” (*Review and Herald*, May 23, 1865).

This basic resolution, along with supporting counsels from the pen of Ellen White, has continued to be a guide for the church for more than 125 years.

Later Writers

Discussing the coming political campaign of 1880 in one of his last editorials, James White said: “We as a people, as Adventists, have before us an all-absorbing subject, and a work of the greatest importance, from which our minds should not be diverted. . . .

“It should be our duty to adapt ourselves, as far as possible without compromising truth, to all who come within the reach of our influence, and at the

same time stand free from the strife and corruptions of the parties that are striving for the mastery” (*ibid.*, Mar. 11, 1880).

Writing from Australia in 1898, Ellen White emphasized: “We are not as a people to become mixed up with political questions. . . . Be ye not unequally yoked

together with unbelievers in political strife, nor bind with them in their attachments. . . . Keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do” (*Selected*

Messages, book 2, pp. 336, 337).

Just one month before the death of James White, Seventh-day Adventists were gathered for camp meeting in Des Moines, Iowa. A proposed action was placed before the delegates, which read:

“Resolved, That we express our deep interest in the temperance movement now going forward in this state; and that we instruct all our ministers to use their influence among our churches and with

the people at large to induce them to put forth every consistent effort, by personal labor, and at the ballot box, in favor of the prohibitory amendment of the Constitution, which the friends of temperance are seeking to secure” (*ibid.*, July 5, 1881).

Some disagreed with the clause that called for action at “the ballot box” and urged that it be taken out. Ellen White, who was attending this camp meeting, had retired for the night, but she was called to give her counsel. Writing of it at the time, she said: “I dressed and found I was to speak to the point of whether our people should vote for prohibition. I told them ‘Yes,’ and spoke 20 minutes” (*Temperance*, p. 255).

Ellen White never changed that position. In an article written for the *Review* just a year before her death she reemphasized the responsibility of all citizens to exercise every influence within their power, including their vote, to work for temperance and virtue: “There is a cause for the moral paralysis upon society. Our laws sustain an evil which is sapping their very foundations. Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be. Ev-

ery individual exerts an influence in society. *In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue?*” (*Review and Herald*, Oct. 15, 1914; italics supplied).

Three conclusions seem clear:

1. We are always to vote “on the side of temperance and virtue.”
2. The decision to vote for candidates is a personal decision. If you vote, “keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do.”
3. We are to stand free from political strife and corruption.



Paul Gordon is secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, General Conference. This material is adapted from a two-part series, “The Right to Vote—Shall I Exercise It?” in the Adventist Review, September 18 and 25, 1980.