

## Christians and Political Fanaticism<sup>1</sup>

This study will not address everything about politics. My main purpose in this study is to challenge us to consider our hearts over these matters. How do we look at politics in terms of the Bible and in terms of our hope? Are we too easily caught up in these matters? William G. T. Shedd (19<sup>th</sup> century) and John Newton (18<sup>th</sup> century) both spoke on these matters.

### Shedd on Political Fanaticism<sup>2</sup>

Shedd argued that Patriotism is an instinctive feeling and is not to be rejected but cultivated. “But one chief mode of cultivating and sanctifying the sentiment is to *moderate* it.” It can degenerate to fanaticism. “The claims of a man’s country are inferior to the claims of God upon him.” It cannot have first place in our lives. “Hence if a man devote his time, his strength, and his thoughts so excessively to the political party to which he belongs as to neglect the concerns of his own soul and the religious welfare of his family and society, then his so-called patriotism is a sin.” (260)

Shedd argued that political fanaticism was rampant in America. Each election year excited the people “unduly and extravagantly.” We tend to think one certain policy over another is often the decisive factor in our nation’s destiny. We place unnecessary weight and importance on to political issues. “Government is an uncertain and experimental science. It is often difficult to say which is the better of two propositions, or two measures. Nothing but the trial will decide.” Our Christian faith, on the other hand, is not subject to these things; it is not “an uncertain and experimental science. It is drawn out in black and white in a written volume.” We must therefore recognize that in politics, men may properly differ. Then he concludes with this short paragraph:

The great defect in American politics is fanaticism. Let your moderation in politics be known to all men, is the true maxim for the people. It will be a happy day when the masses of our citizens shall be as greatly excited upon the subject of morals and religion as they now are upon politics, and as moderate in their political excitements as they now are in their religious. (262)

Shedd’s words should challenge us. Are we more zealous about politics as we are about our own relationship with Christ? Do we know the details of our political party more than we do of our own Christian doctrine? Shedd saw this fanaticism in the nineteenth century. Do we not see more in our generation?

### Newton’s Thoughts on Politics

John Newton’s moderate views help us in our day of heavy interest in politics. In 1775, when the Americans were reacting against England’s control, Newton called for a prayer meeting (5AM on Tuesdays). It was well attended and he added the following statement:

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<sup>1</sup> The audio recording of this lesson can be found on [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com).

<sup>2</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, “Political Fanaticism,” in *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 259-262.

We do not pray that either army may knock the other on the head, but that the Lord in his wisdom (for I believe it is beyond the wisdom of the wisest men) would point out expedients for peace, and that the sword may be put quietly into its scabbard. It seems to me one of the darkest signs of the times, that so many of the Lord's professing people act as if they thought he was withdrawn from the earth, and amuse themselves and each other, with declamations against instruments and second causes and indulge unsanctified passions instead of taking that part which is assigned them Ezek. 9:4. [*“And the LORD said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.”*]

He further added that he believed the Lord still reigns and He alone was our sure sanctuary. “Thus you have the substance of my political creed.”<sup>3</sup>

When England was involved in some sort of war in 1794, he was grieved and believed that the nation's “sins plunged us into it.” He was convinced that the best he could do for his country was to pray for her. Then he tells John Ryland, “Sin, my friend, is the great evil. Let us preach against sin, let us cry to the Lord for mercy, let us point to Jesus as the only refuge from the storm, and let us leave the rest to them who know better.” (*Wise Counsel*, 305) Rather than getting all excited about this and that political issue, he looked at the matter *theologically*.

He recognized these national events were from the Lord (309) and that God was still accomplishing His purpose. He believed meddling in politics (as ministers) was wrong (331).

I believe as you say that intermingling of politics with religion has done much harm. But I thank God this is not my easy besetting sin. My whole concern with politics is to tell the people that the Lord reigns, that all hearts are in his hands, that creatures are all instruments of his will, and can do neither more nor less than he, for wise reasons, appoints or permits; that sin is the procuring cause of all misery; that they who sigh and mourn for our abominations and stand in the breach pleading for mercy, are better patriots than they who talk loudly about men and measures, of either side.<sup>4</sup>

This is spiritual wisdom. We can so easily get exercised over political events and speeches. Our affections are too dependent on the fortunes of political events. What matters most is the nation's spiritual and moral condition. Think about it, none of the political parties in our nation encourages true righteousness. Newton refused to “meddle” in these things. When the subject of “national debt” came up, Newton focused on a different national debt.

I meddle not with disputes of party, nor concern myself with any political maxims, but such as are laid down in Scripture. There I read, that righteousness exalteth a nation, and that sin is the reproach, and if persisted in, the ruin of any people. Some people are startled at the enormous sum of our national debt: they who understand spiritual arithmetic, may be well startled if they sit down and compute the debt of national sin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Newton, *Wise Counsel - John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr.*, ed. Grant Gordon (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Wise Counsel*, 324.

<sup>5</sup> Josiah Bull, ed., *Letters by the Rev. John Newton* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1869), 235.

We may have thoughts about our own national debt and national problems. But we should be more concerned about the spiritual issues of our nation. I fear more energy, time, and passions are expended on political matters than spiritual issues.

### **Some Biblical Thoughts**

We are taught from Hebrews that in this earth (and nation) we do not have a lasting city — “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Heb. 13:14). Paul says that our “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20) and that “from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” In both passages, we are reminded of a coming city and a coming Lord.

Remember the words of our Lord in Mt. 22:21, ““Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” But we are also to set our minds and affections on the things above where Christ is (Col. 3:1ff.). Obedience to our civil authorities must be followed (Rom. 13:1ff.; 1Peter 2:13-17) but we do all this “for the Lord’s sake” (1Pet. 2:13).

### **Some General Conclusions**

1. Political *zeal* must not cloud our judgments.
2. Political issues must not preoccupy our time.
3. Political matters do not change hearts, lives, and especially eternal matters.
4. Our hopes, countenance, and expectations must be on the Lord and His Word and not on the fortunes of our political parties.
5. Remember, God possesses the true seat of power — it does not exist in our political parties, the White House, the Congress, etc.