

# CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT.



*The new name for the Christian Socialist Movement*

## **A faith-based manifesto?**

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*This text contains some minor amendments compared to the lecture as given, to aid clarity.*

Friends thank you and thank you to the Reverend Canon Peter Leonard, and the Dean and Chapter, for inviting me to give this evening's lecture.

Standing here in this lovely cathedral today, I am conscious of the history of this sacred place and the part it has played in our nation's story. And what better place to be talking about faith and politics, since the Cathedral is named after the English martyr, St Thomas of Canterbury? He certainly experienced a coming together of faith and politics in a very dramatic, and bloody, fashion. And of course, the cathedral tower was used during the Civil War to defend the Royalists against Parliamentarians who subscribed to their own 'faith-based manifesto'. I'm glad we are addressing the same subject in a somewhat more genteel manner this evening.

I should say, first of all, I bring with me greetings from my friends at Christians on the Left. We are the organisation for Christians on the left of politics, and particularly within the Labour Party. I volunteer as one of the national officers. Our role is to promote Christian values within politics and to encourage Christians who vote Labour to get more involved. For example, forty of our members are MPs and in the General Election we will have twenty members standing as Labour Parliamentary candidates for the first time. I know how they are feeling, having myself been a Labour candidate in the past.

I work for the Methodist Church, acting as Chief Investment Officer of our Central Finance Board, responsible for assets of over £1 billion. Much of my role is in ethical and responsible investment, engaging with companies about issues such as human rights, climate change, executive pay and the living wage. To talk about that would be the subject of another lecture altogether. Although I am here in a personal capacity I mention it because I have found that applying faith to investments has had some parallels with applying my faith to politics.

I must congratulate Peter and his colleagues for choosing the title of this lecture series. For, although it is a question, it is incredibly open-ended and raises all sorts of other questions and issues.

And let's acknowledge that it can be risky to talk about faith. That's why Vanity Fair magazine was told, when interviewing Tony Blair some years ago, that 'we don't do God'. Faith words get easily misinterpreted, sometimes deliberately. Moreover, most Christians involved in politics quite rightly don't want to be triumphalist, or self righteous. We by no means have a monopoly on compassion, or wisdom, or motivation, or virtue. Like anyone else, we are sometimes wrong. And we are not seeking to force our views on others – to do so would not be consistent with a belief in free will anyway. But sometimes we have to take a risk, even in this age of Twitter and Facebook, and think and talk about how faith and politics should work together. So friends, please bear with me as I share some ideas with you and I look forward to discussing them afterwards.

During the forthcoming election campaign, political parties including my own will seek to persuade people of the merits of their election pledges. The battles of claim and counter-claim began long ago but as we approach Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> of May, so the debates will become more intense.

For Christians this should raise some important questions. What role has faith in all this? How should Christians approach the election? And to what extent should faith and politics interact? As Christians we may not wish to hide our light under a bushel, but is getting involved in politics worth the candle?

This evening I will talk about why people of faith, and particularly Christians, should be thinking about politics and why we should all be more involved. Faith and politics can work together in a democracy such as ours. The state of affairs today gives us all good reasons to engage and play a greater part in determining the future of our country and our world.

And I want to start by answering the question, 'A faith-based manifesto?' with a big, resounding, "NO"!

No, we cannot have, and should not have, a political manifesto based on faith values...we should not have a '*faith*-based manifesto'...not unless Christians show up and take part. Not unless church people are there and involved. Not unless our theology is in the right place on faith and politics.

#### Two positions to avoid and a full sense of the Christian Gospel

There are two contrasting positions Christians need to avoid taking. Please forgive my exaggeration here to make the point.

The first is to hold that the church should focus solely on saving souls, that it should preach the Gospel – yes, in season and out of season – and make disciples. And that out of our loving response to God's grace yes we should help the poor and the needy, but we should not confuse the Christian message by getting any *more* involved in a fallen world.

The problem with this view is that it limits God. It recognises Jesus as Saviour, and his death and resurrection. But it ignores the Kingdom of God, or kicks it upstairs into some 'upper storey' religious concept that has no practical relevance. Tom Wright suggests that it gives the impression that Jesus' ministry on earth was an "*a story of an atoning death with an extended introduction.*"<sup>1</sup> This worldview is simply not found in the Bible.

At its extreme our faith can become private religion and that leads us to become the kind of people the prophet Amos condemned, practising religion while being willing participants in an unjust society content with people being poor and oppressed. Or vulnerable to the kind of questions we find in the book of James, about what real evidence can be seen that we have been justified by faith.

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<sup>1</sup> *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright, SPCK (2007).

<sup>2</sup> *New Issues facing Christians Today*, John Stott, Marshall Pickering (1999).

The opposite approach, and we find this said a lot in politics, is to draw inspiration from the life of Jesus – though perhaps being selective about which teachings to emphasise – and focus almost solely on building the kingdom of God on earth.

But this approach has yet to work. It can downplay the purpose and message of Jesus death and resurrection. He becomes instead just another revolutionary to follow – when ultimately we remain in need of a saviour. In Tom Wright's words again, the Gospels become "*just a story of some splendid and exciting social work with an unhappy conclusion...*" It basically defaults to the kind of action Owen Jones talked about here last week – hoping that with a bit more organising and demonstrating we can reach the Promised Land by our own efforts.

Neither approach represents the whole Gospel, though there is much good sense in both. We are, instead, co-workers promoting the Kingdom of God in its fullest sense while recognising that ultimately everything is in God's hands. What we do today has worth in the new creation. Our hope in that new creation leads us to act today.

We may need, as the Revd John Stott argues<sup>2</sup>, to revisit our Biblical doctrines.

Of God, who is Lord of all and concerned with justice.

Of humanity – in that we are not simply souls in bodies but we are made in the image of God.

Of Christ – who is our example to follow in his concern to rescue people from poverty, illness, and sin. If we want to know what priorities to have when working for the Kingdom of God, we start with the life of Jesus.

We need a full doctrine of salvation – it includes membership of God's Kingdom, recognising Jesus as Lord and saviour, and it never, never, separates faith from love.

And finally continual renewal of the church's role, as a living – and prophetic – witness to the world around it, acting as salt and light and so helping to transform and reform society.

This is no easy challenge. This I know is the mission of this cathedral, which you declare very clearly indeed and live out in practice.

### Christians should be involved

Well...You invite someone from politics to talk about manifestos and they start by talking theology...

Of course it is all very well for me to say we should promote the values of God's Kingdom here and now, but why should that mean getting deeply involved in politics? Should we not say – yes, we should be engaged in politics to some extent, following Jesus' model, but we shouldn't compromise our faith by joining a party or getting more deeply involved? Perhaps it is enough to focus on the church being a good witness, joining in campaigns from time to time on important issues such as global poverty and climate change.

This is great, fantastic, but not enough. For a start, the Bible offers different perspectives. When we look at the lives of people such as Joseph, David, Esther, and Daniel, for example, we see faithful people engaged in politics. They all made choices and took risks. They had to hold onto their faith, and their core principles, while judging where it was right to compromise. Their actions changed nations.

Active citizens, including people of faith, need not *only* to be campaigning for political change. We need to be active within the political process. The two go together.

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<sup>2</sup> *New Issues facing Christians Today*, John Stott, Marshall Pickering (1999).

We can, I think, see a classic example of this in 1 Kings 18. This is the famous story about the showdown on Mount Carmel between the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal, linked to a corrupt and immoral King and Queen. The false prophets are vanquished but God's prophet, Elijah, did not act alone. Elijah needed someone else. He worked with Obadiah, who was part of the political system at the time. Obadiah held a high position of leadership, yet held onto his faith, and took risks for that faith. Then Elijah comes along and says can you set up a meeting with the King, and Obadiah makes it happen. One was a prophet calling government to account. The other was in government, involved in the political system. Both were faithful, but had different roles. Both needed the other.

I hope it is not stretching the example *too* far to see parallels today. The church needs to act as a prophetic witness while at the same time, people of faith should be getting involved in politics.

As Archbishop William Temple argued, the church should not be arguing for very specific policies on the issues of the day, but it should be speaking in support of Kingdom values and calling politicians to account where it sees injustice and need<sup>3</sup>. Some of those politicians should be Christians.

The church itself has a great track record campaigning for social justice. Campaigns to cancel developing world debt and to make poverty history have disproportionately involved church people, and have moved governments. More recently, a concern for the poor and for social justice has led many churches to open food banks across the nation. Most food banks are run by the churches. This really is faith in action.

More quietly but just as widespread, church members are helping thousands get out of debt. Christians Against Poverty has pioneered work up and down the country to train churches to offer debt counselling, with many moving stories of how people have been helped. But, friends, increasingly people involved with food banks, with debt counselling and other social action are finding it is good, but not enough.

Opening food banks meets a desperate need here and now. But we are faced with a government whose policies are helping create, or at best not sufficiently alleviating, that need. That raises some serious questions. Is *this* the Conservative vision of a Big Society, for volunteers to be the sticking plasters for a society in which many have been failed by their own government? Food banks are essential – unfortunately – but they are not enough. And they won't stop rising inequality.

Counselling people in serious debt difficulties is a real lifeline. It can provide real hope – and testimonies show significant change for the good to people's lives. I really urge anyone in difficulty with debt not to despair or try to face it alone. Seek out a trained debt counsellor. Such services are necessary – unfortunately – but they are not enough.

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that, if the current government's economic policies continue, household debt as a proportion of income will rise higher than before the financial crisis. New people will go on getting into debt problems unless government policy changes. After all, payday lending was only restricted when politicians took action and then regulators followed their lead.

Finally – I hear you say – our lecturer is showing his true political colours!

Well yes, but my main point here is that in Christians on the Left we are seeing many church people getting involved in politics for the first time. Some are parliamentary candidates standing for election in May. Others are supporting candidates, or standing to be on local councils<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> *Christianity and social order*, William Temple, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.christiansontheleft.org.uk](http://www.christiansontheleft.org.uk) for details.

That is the message of the Show Up campaign run by Christians in Politics<sup>5</sup>. We are encouraging Christians to show up to the places where key decisions are being made. Those decisions, about welfare, about the economy, about health and education, are made by those who are *there*. Whatever we might think about politicians, at least they do show up. If we think we can do better – well let's show up too and get involved.

Now, at this point, we can face some temptations.

The first is to adopt a consumerist approach to politics. We can judge politics mainly by, 'what's in it for me?' Maybe tax cuts, or lower tuition fees. And before we get too self-righteous about it, think about the title of this lecture – 'a faith-based manifesto?' That could so easily become an 'our interests served manifesto'. In the run up to this general election we will see pressure groups and NGOs publishing their own manifestos, listing policies they would like to see adopted. Should faith groups do the same?

When I was a Labour parliamentary candidate in 2001, in Wantage in Oxfordshire, I was often quizzed by church members on one or two particular issues. One issue was licences for Christian radio stations. For some, this seemed to be the deciding factor driving their voting intention. It was absolutely right to lobby me and hold me to account. But was it right to make it the main issue to vote on?

There is a related temptation – and that is to back the Christian man or woman regardless. On one occasion in Wantage while I was calling on voters' homes, a man asked if I minded answering some questions.

"Of course not", I replied, rejoicing at this opportunity to engage with a voter.

And so he began:

"Do you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord?"

"Yes," I replied, somewhat taken aback.

"Do you believe he died for our sins?"

"Do you believe he rose from the dead and will come again?"

I replied in the affirmative.

"Right," he said. "We're voting for you."

Standard canvassing procedure during an election campaign is to record the support gratefully and move to the next house. But on this occasion I had to say something. I thanked him for his support and urged him to look at the parties policies as well. Which set of policies, in the round, best fitted in with what he thought should be our national priorities for the next five years? Which manifesto best met his faith-based worldview? I'm not sure he followed my advice and I was certainly grateful for his support. And that gentleman, at least, was engaged and participating in the electoral process.

For the other temptation is to say there is no point, it's not worth it. This is the 'Russell Brand-type' philosophy. The system isn't working, it's corrupt, so disengage and get other people to disengage too. If enough of us do that – or rather don't do anything - hopefully some sort of benign revolution will miraculously occur. But that, as we have seen, is not a sustainable option for a Christian, or anyone else who cannot sit by while injustice continues.

Anyone with a worldview – and that is everyone – already is political. Our view of the world and our place within it, and the way we live, is politics in action, even if to a tiny degree. The key questions are what worldview do we have, and what should our politics look like?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/showup/>

That is why faith and politics can and should mix. Everyone has a worldview. We hold presuppositions about how the world works. Some of us, many, have a worldview that includes God. Some faiths, Christianity and Islam for example, are proselytising faiths already in the public square by definition. A healthy democracy does not suppress some people's worldviews, requiring them to hide the reasons for their particular political beliefs. Instead, it should require everyone, whatever our beliefs, to be open about where we are coming from and understanding and respectful of others. It should require us to work with others honestly, inclusively building genuine relationships, and compromise where necessary to make progress towards the common good.

Getting more involved in politics is easy...because it need only mean taking one small step from where we are now. For example, for some people that might mean voting for the first time. Or joining the party we vote for. Or if we are a church person, supporting Christians in that party. Or joining a local branch of the party we support. Or becoming a candidate.

Christians need to be active in promoting kingdom values and campaigning against injustice. They also should be more engaged with and involved in politics at every level. There is always another small step we can prayerfully take.

#### Issues that matter

Lest we doubt it, there are many good reasons to be engaging in politics today. Here I may well diverge from my friends in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties who are giving the subsequent lectures. Each one of us will have developed our politics from our common Christian faith, but we have arrived at different conclusions about how best to apply it. In my case, I believe involvement in the Labour Party is the best way to apply the Christian faith to politics.

The rise of inequality is perhaps the main issue facing us. It is a global and a national phenomenon and affects almost everything else. The financial crisis hit people hard but the subsequent, delayed, recovery has revealed some major distortions in our economy. Quantitative Easing and other measures have inflated asset prices and encouraged more borrowing. This is a global trend, with debt levels rising in both developed and developing markets. Meanwhile, in the UK many people are struggling on low pay, often below the living wage, with the median income just above £20,000 a year. Yet boardroom executive pay continues to soar, as if in a different world. I should know, since I regularly vote shares against those policies. We have focused on the economy but we have things the wrong way around. This is not inevitable.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, says in a collection of essays called '*On Rock or Sand? – firm foundations for Britain's future*',

*"There is a general social assumption that the economy has the power to dictate what is and is not possible for human beings. We believe that if we can fix the economy, the fixing of human beings will automatically follow. This is a lie."*<sup>6</sup>

The financial crisis was an existential crisis for many in the City and in boardrooms. In 2008 as bank after bank fell into trouble, one broker told me he was questioning the meaning of everything. Our faith in what we once felt was so sure was shattered. But now we are in many ways back to business as usual. In the absence of a new idea, a new way of thinking about the world, new values that stick, we are just returning and defaulting to what we once knew. The existing power structures in society have been challenged, but they remain. They have been battered but they are still there. That is why we see such exorbitant pay packages for those at the top and little action for those on very low incomes. It's why we remain unable to separate good economics, which we need and cannot ignore, from bad economic ideology. It is why we are not challenging market distortions as we should.

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<sup>6</sup> *On Rock or Sand? – Firm foundations for Britain's future*, John Sentamu (ed), SPCK (2015)

Equality – our equal worth before God – must be central to any Christian’s politics and that is certainly true for Christians on the Left. It is what has led many Christians to the left of the political spectrum as we seek to see that fundamental principle evident in society, and internationally.

The influential Labour Party thinker and Christian Socialist RH Tawney, maintained that equality and faith went together. Writing in his *Commonplace Book* he stated that: *“In order to believe in human equality it is necessary to believe in God. It is only when one contemplates the infinitely great that human differences appear so infinitely small as to be negligible...What is wrong with the modern world is that having ceased to believe in the greatness of God, and therefore the infinite smallness...of man, it has to invent distinctions between men...that some men are gods and that some flesh is grass and that the former should live on the latter.”* You may not hold his faith but eighty years on, we are much wealthier but can we say the modern world’s approach in practice is very much different, all be it in 21<sup>st</sup> Century form?

Archbishop Welby writes, human beings are *“God’s image bearers, created and loved by him. The principle of the intrinsic value of every human being has its foundation here. We are all equal.”*<sup>7</sup> What might that mean in policy terms?

At the least, it should mean everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their God-given potential. Each generation should have equal opportunities and access to high quality education – a modern-day equivalent of the Jubilee Laws which reset economic opportunities every 49 years; every generation. It must surely mean people are paid a decent wage and guaranteed work. Some of these things you will find in the Labour Party manifesto.

These things won’t happen automatically. Tawney’s conviction was that equality was about more than economics. It was about a fairer distribution of power. It was about people gaining sovereignty over their lives. This is where politics has to move.

We need the campaigns and we need people showing up in politics. We cannot wish these things into action. We need both firm conviction and skill.

There are other issues too that we need to engage with, that require active government. The threat of climate change is real and yet global action is too slow. Governments may wish for a world where temperatures rise only 2C, but that requires large scale investment in carbon capture and storage, more investment in renewables, and even more nuclear power. It requires companies to act more quickly than they want to. It requires politics. And it requires politics that sees government as having a role and is not simply trying to reduce its role in society.

Equally the rapid pace of technological development has been amazing. Technologies that seemed new at the time of the last General Election in 2010, such as the smartphone, now seem commonplace. But that provides challenges too. Can we ensure everyone is involved in the technological revolution? There are associated ethical dilemmas too, that will not solve themselves.

There are also big security questions that face us. There is a big debate about defence at the moment. Christians are only too aware about the tragic situation in Iraq and Syria, with the oppression of Christians and other minorities. We cannot take it for granted that the government will do the right thing regarding security. We need to be involved.

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<sup>7</sup> *On Rock or Sand? – Firm foundations for Britain’s future*, John Sentamu (ed), SPCK (2015)

## Vision and hope

I believe there is an even more important reason to get involved. We need vision and hope in our society. This is where I do agree with Owen Jones's comments in the previous lecture, last week. The need for vision and hope is becoming a common refrain, and it matters.

For example, take *Bitter Lake*, an experimental documentary by Adam Curtis, available on BBC iPlayer. It makes for harrowing viewing, using as it does previously unscreened and unedited footage of conflict and its aftermath. Adam Curtis examines how in his view, the old certainties have disappeared. He does so through the prism of Afghanistan. *Bitter Lake* is a very difficult watch but it explores the sense of a loss of meaning and direction today. The film ends with Curtis saying: *"It is an uncertain world...Our leaders also seem to have lost faith in anything and the simple stories they tell us don't make sense any longer. The experience of Afghanistan has made us begin to realise that there is something else out there, but we just don't have the apparatus to see it. What is needed is a new story and one that we can believe in."*

A new story to explain the world, that we can believe in.

This cathedral has been a place of worship through centuries of change. It has stood as a witness to the ultimate story, the story of God reconciling men and women to himself. It is a message that is still needed.

What will our place be in this story? Both personally and collectively?

How exciting it would be to discover together how we could work for a society, a country, and a world based on the values of the Kingdom of God.

And how exciting it would be to be just a little more involved in politics and, especially, in politics together as Christians on the Left.

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