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Can a Christian Be a Politician?

A Book Review

By Alice-Catherine Carls[©]

Roy Herron is a Vanderbilt-trained lawyer and Methodist minister who won election almost 20 years ago to the Tennessee State House, filling a seat left empty when Ned Ray McWherter became the state's governor. Herron continued to win elections and is now a state senator. He is also the author of a new book: *How Can a Christian Be in Politics? A Guide to Faithful Politics* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 2005), 193 pp. ISBN 0-8423-8108-2. \$ 7.99 pb.

A well respected Tennessee politician and the heir to a Southern Democratic dynasty, Herron lives on the farm that has been in his family since 1813. When he was growing up he counted among his neighbors Ned Ray McWherter and Albert Gore Sr. and Jr. He is the author of two previous books: *Things Held Dear: Soul Stories for My Sons* and *Political Humor: Some of These Jokes You Voted For*. His upbringing, education, and experience would appear to make him an ideal person to analyze the opportunities and the dilemmas of Christian citizenship, which U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis defined as "the most important office."

Tyndale Press's Vital Questions series in which Herron's new book appears "investigates key issues that make a practical difference in how Christians think and act." In *How can a Christian Be in Politics*, Herron sets out to prove that the terms Christian and politics are compatible. Each of the nine chapters of the book features four components. First, Herron gives a clear definition of positive politics and establishes criteria for citizen behavior. He then illustrates his points with concrete examples, showing the need for Christian citizens and politicians to be involved in politics to address specific problems and dilemmas that need solving, such as poverty, organ transplants, domestic violence, prayer in school, and teen drunk driving. Third, Herron gives a brief analysis of the pros and cons of some stances on the issues, and finally, he offers his own opinion.

These four components are not handled mechanically, however. The author mixes and matches them in ways that are not predictable. The definitions and examples are deceptively simple; the brevity of the discussion is often frustrating; but his approach is effective for stimulating critical thinking. The book thus achieves its goal, which is to "provide a substantial, accessible discussion of issues about which Christians

need to know more.” The reader’s critical thinking is further advanced by means of the discussion questions at the end of the book.

Herron provides the reader with a set of biblically grounded moral and spiritual mandates and criteria that serve as a philosophical base and as guidelines for action. He also reminds the reader that the American political tradition is rooted in religion and morality and that America needs faithful politics today as much as it did 200 years ago. By contrasting negative and positive views of politics, he shows that civic involvement in public affairs is a civic duty that can contribute to the betterment of the community. The politician should work toward *shalom*, the biblical order of justice, righteousness, and peace. Citing Matthew 25:40 about “serving the least of these,” Herron further defines the politician as a disciple and a servant.

The Tennessee senator addresses three issues at length: justice, life, and freedom. All three deal with protecting people who are vulnerable. Over and over again Herron stresses our responsibility toward the poor and the biblical mandate for economic righteousness and mercy. He discusses life from several angles: a father’s love for his children, the politician’s awareness of the complexity of abortion issues, and the husband’s anguish during his wife’s difficult pregnancy. He defines freedom as political freedom, of course, but also as spiritual freedom, i.e. freedom from the bondage of sin. Like a good politician, he draws on emotional examples. Like a good preacher, he illustrates points with edifying tales drawn from either his and his family’s life or the lives of his constituents. These stories get the reader involved while conveying sincerity and a commitment to others, traits that are evident in Herron’s professional and personal life.

One of the most effective parts of the book is Herron’s discussion of political compromise, which he says should transcend partisanship. Political compromise is sometimes important in order to preserve peace. Recognizing one’s own conviction as incomplete makes room for others to join in the process of building a better community, of “bringing movement,” as he puts it. Herron cites Pope John Paul II whose opposition to abortion was well-known but who nonetheless advised pro-life politicians to support bills that reduced the numbers of abortions. Compromise without conforming can result in healthy partisanship; for in the end we serve God and should act as good Samaritans. Compromise is thus an essential ingredient of faithful politics, which Herron otherwise defines as compassion, patience, listening, humility, prayer, love, truth, courage, and joy.

Having defined Christian politics in this way, Herron devotes the last two chapters of the book to putting faith into action and defining Christian citizenship. He proposes the Wesleyan quadrilateral approach to evaluating politicians and politics by means of biblical mandates, tradition, experience, and reason. Thus armed, a Christian can and should participate in politics, vote, interact with his/her elected representatives, and provide “new visions and dreams” and a “fresh imagination.” Thus, even those who only provide feedback become capable of the kind of transforming leadership that puts God’s grace into action. In our post 9/11 world, such leadership is being tested by new challenges, such as the dialogue with American Muslims, the expansion of multicultural outreach, and the new world order—issues that Herron does not specifically address. His proposed path to action, however, should withstand the test of time

because it is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in Herron's well-known ecumenism and genuine commitment to *shalom*.

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