

THE DIRTY HANDS DILEMMA: ETHICAL DIMENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

The issue of political power and its use or misuse is a looming concern the world over. In that at least some measure of power and influence is an integral part of most public political offices, questions of social ethics necessarily come into view. When biblical Christians enter the political arena, they too are faced with the real temptation and possibility of sacrificing deeply held biblical principles for the sake of political expediency. Insofar as a strong case can be made that Christians should be engaged in every sphere of constructive human activity, it would seem that the global Christian community should willingly enter the political fray as salt and light with a view to being change agents for God's glory and the public good. Nevertheless, the prospect of "dirty hands" is rightfully disconcerting. The dirty hands dilemma is surveyed herein with the goal of illuminating the complex interplay of issues that bear on a thoughtful evaluation of the Christian's proper place in the public political square.

KEYWORDS: dirty hands, moral dilemmas, politics, political power, social ethics, biblical ethics, Christian ethics.

Introduction

In the popular comedic romance film, *Kate and Leopold*, Leopold is asked by Kate's boss J.J. why Kate may have refused J.J.'s invitation to go to the opera. Leopold replies, "Perhaps Kate resists on moral grounds." When J.J. asks, "How so?", Leopold's rejoinder is cutting: "Well, some feel that to court a woman in one's employ is nothing more than a serpentine effort to transform a lady into a whore."

The issue that comes sharply into focus here is that, on occasions, people in positions of power and authority use or abuse their power for their own sordid gains or for perceived positive ends. If power or position is indeed deemed to have been misused or abused, the issue becomes one of social ethics. In the example cited above, Leopold rightly perceived J. J.'s dishonorable intentions and boldly exposed them. In a similar fashion, should not citizens decry and oppose

the perceived misuse of power by their government leaders? Or, to some extent, do we consider the “strictures” of private morality to be *passé* in the public arena? Are the rules different for elected and appointed officials vis-à-vis those enjoined upon private individuals? If so, how?

In this essay, the essential question is the nature of political morality, especially as it pertains to Christian ethics. Herein, the following questions are explored and answered: 1) What is the nature of political power and influence? 2) What are the dimensions of the so-called “dirty hands” dilemma? 3) Is there a biblically Christian ethical approach that may be embraced confidently by Christian politicians and statesmen? 4) Given the actuality of moral quicksand on the paths of Christians in politics and state affairs, should Christians, nevertheless, be involved in the political arena? Thus, following a basic explanation of political power, a brief summary of the problem of “dirty hands” will be set forth, especially by surveying and providing analysis of many of the most insightful and influential works on the subject. Subsequently, four approaches to the problem within the Christian ethical context will be explored, followed by a discussion of and a setting forth of conclusions concerning the aspiration to Christian political involvement and the necessary place of Christians in the public political square.

The Nature and Control of Political Power

Insofar as ethical dilemmas in the political realm tend to have their source in misuse or abuse of power, it is appropriate that the nature of power in that arena is first examined. According to Sharp (1973, p. 7-8), *social power* is the capacity to control the behavior of others, directly or indirectly, through action by groups of people, which action impinges on other groups of people. Formal or high *political power* is that kind of social power wielded for political objectives, especially by governmental institutions or by people in opposition to or in support of such institutions. *Political power thus refers to the total authority, influence, pressure and coercion which may be applied to achieve or prevent the implementation of the wishes of the power-holder.*

There are two basic views of the nature of political power: 1) the people are dependent upon the good will, decisions and the support of their government; this is the *monolithic theory* of power and views political power as a “given” -- durable, self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating; and 2) the government is dependent upon the people’s good will, decisions and support; this perspective sees political power as pluralistic and fragile because it depends on many groups for reinforcement of its power sources (Sharp, 1973, p. 8-9).

However, the power wielded by individuals and groups in highest positions of command and decision is not, in fact, intrinsic to them (Sharp, 1973, p. 9-10); it must come from outside them -- from the society which they govern. Political power appears to emerge from the interaction of all or several of the following sources: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible (psychological and ideological) factors, material resources (property, financial and natural, communications, etc.), and sanctions (Sharp, 1973, p. 10-12).

Only in totalitarian regimes is the monolithic theory of power applied. In modern western democracies, it is considered self-evident that the government exists only by the will and pleasure of the electorate. Thus, the ethical decisions of leaders ostensibly reflect the will of the people whom they represent. Therefore, if a leader is deemed by the electorate to have engaged in an unethical act, the electorate logically shares a measure of responsibility and guilt for having placed that leader into a position of power. If said leader is left in power, the electorate is communicating that they approve of the leader's political *and* ethical course. If the electorate disapproves of the leader's course, it is incumbent upon them to remove the leader from office. In this way, the electorate wields political and ethical power and responsibility. Therefore, if finger-pointing begins, at least one finger ought to be directed by the electorate toward itself.

A useful evangelical political philosophy formulated by Ronald Sider was reprinted in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2004). After a survey of some of the present confusion in evangelical circles, he presented a methodology and normative biblical framework before laying out a 13-component political philosophy. One of these components calls for *democratization and the decentralization of power*. His argument was cogent: "Sinful people in a fallen world will almost always use unchecked centralized power to benefit themselves unfairly and oppress others. Therefore to avoid totalitarianism and injustice, power must be decentralized" (p. 149). Further, he suggested that "A large group of institutions intermediate between the individual and government decentralize power... These intermediate centers of power provide a check on governmental power..." (Sider, 2004, p. 149).ⁱ Sider's view seems to be consonant with that of Sharp insofar as neither saw power as an inherent possession of rulers/governments. Thus, in most normal political contexts, the power of governmental leaders is *derived* from the people being governed, from the *vox populi*. Or, as Hollis (1982) pointed out, "A political actor, duly appointed within a legitimate state, has authority coming finally from the People" (p. 396).

Through the foregoing explanations, the general aspects of political power and influence have been surveyed and, thus, an answer provided to the *first question* posed above.

The Nature of Politics and Dirty Hands Dilemmas

Politics is commonly considered a "dirty game", and for good reason. "Even good men are forced to abandon their principles for the sake of getting at least something done" (Hollis, 1982, p. 388). Even if the Christian in politics does not embrace a Machiavellian sort of utilitarianism, unless it is first demonstrated that there is a *distinction between public and private morality*, he will undoubtedly face moral dilemmas, even if not continuously! The diagnosis of Australian pundit Sauer-Thompson (2003) was poignant:

Do we trust politicians? Not really. Politics has been marked by a loss of trust the commentators say. Mistrust is the norm. We expect the politicians to be untrustworthy.

Let's face it, they have blood on their hands, they have an intimate relationship with rat cunning, treachery is a dear friend and they live in a world woven by webs of deceit. Mistrust and betrayal is the norm in political life.

However, if this viewpoint is accepted, if one expects for politics to be a dirty game, it probably will be. That is, anticipation of moral laxity in the public arena can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a newly elected official believes that "anything goes" in order to get the job done, he will undoubtedly operate in accordance with that belief once he assumes office.

On perhaps a more positive but rather curious note, West (1981) offered the following analysis specifically concerning the role of Christians in politics:

Christian politicians plow the reality of Christ into the common secular search for those structural and legal forms by which the government promotes the common good...(they) are not persons with certain scruples for which others must make allowances, or of principles that are always compromised. They do not draw back from morally ambiguous decisions because they live neither by public reputation nor by rectitude, but by grace. If the times comes when they must break a law or defy the government, the issue will be a positive one: How may justice best be served and humanity best promoted? (p. 439-440)

Was West correct, or was he overly idealistic? He seems to have suggested that, under the umbrella of grace, the Christian politician can do no wrong. Is it not possible for a Christian to become so hungry for power, glory and fame (or simply re-election) that justice and concern for humanity fall by the wayside? Might not a Christian leader's desire to have their political program implemented lead to ethical compromise as he or appointed proxies "bargain" with those in opposition? Of course, not all compromise is ethically shaky, nor is compromise restricted to the political context, as noted by Coady (2009).

As implied by the foregoing, the so-called "problem of dirty hands" is quite complex. Before proceeding, it is prudent that terms be defined. Graham (1997) has thus described our field of inquiry: "The problem of dirty hands arises because it seems that there are occasions when politics requires what morality forbids, and effective engagement in politics in these circumstances makes it impossible to keep one's hands morally clean" (p. 130). For some, it seems that dirty hands in politics are a necessity, "meaning that the vocation of politics somehow rightly requires its practitioners to violate important moral standards which prevail outside politics" (Coady, 1991, p. 373).ⁱⁱ

Michael Walzer (1974, p. 64-66), who wrote one of the seminal papers on the subject, seemingly accepted the concept of dirty hands as a *sine qua non* for political life, basing his position on the belief that political action differs from private behavior in three main ways. First, politicians act on behalf of others, as well as for themselves; this tension means that political

decision-making is both complex and difficult. Second, politicians are subject to the “pleasures of ruling”;ⁱⁱⁱ it is better to rule than to be ruled. Third, politicians may enforce their decisions, even using violence, if they so desire. Each of these realities contributes to a situation ripe for moral dilemmas.

Similarly, Nagel (1978) pointed out that involvement in public life seems to have a profound effect on its participants, an effect that he sees as “partly restrictive and significantly liberating” (p. 76). Public roles may, in fact, bestow great power, but also may impart a sense of “moral insulation.” In other words, public officials may lose a sense of culpability because of their position and the power that goes with it. This peril of position has been expressed trenchantly by Nagel (1978):

The combination of special requirements and release from some usual restrictions, the ability to say that one is only following orders or doing one’s job or meeting one’s responsibilities, the sense that one is the agent of vast impersonal forces or the servant of institutions larger than any individual – all these ideas form a heady and sometimes corrupting brew.^{iv} (p. 76)

In spite of the challenge of remaining ethical in the practice of politics, or maybe because of the promise of potential influence, good people *do* still enter the political arena but, as Walzer (1974) – after Machiavelli – noted, they must learn “how not to be good”. He parroted the conventional wisdom: “No one succeeds in politics without getting his hands dirty” (p. 66). Even the barest utilitarianism will almost certainly put the politician on a collision course with at least one moral dilemma.

But the question must be asked: Will our leaders necessarily and truly have “dirty hands”? If yes, may they be excused for having such? If a nation has collective needs and demands, it is possible that a leader will have “to set aside any personal moral doubts he may have about either these needs themselves or the means necessary to attain them” (Garrett, 1994, p. 159-160). In this situation, the leader is seen as “the servant of the primordial demands of his constituency” (p. 160). If he feels uneasy making this sort of moral compromise, maybe he should “get out of the kitchen if he can’t stand the heat”, and pass on the leadership to someone who is willing and able to get the job done (p. 160).^v

However, it may be that the very person needed to “get the job done” is the one who has moral scruples about a particular action or decision. Is it not immoral for that person to step aside, to shirk duty? Moreover, is not the ethically scrupulous person the one we would prefer to be making the difficult decisions (Walzer, 1974, p. 67-68)?

As suggested above, depending upon one’s view of authority and responsibility, it might be argued that “When his (a politician’s) hands get dirty, so do ours” (Hollis, 1982, p. 396). After all, he was elected by us (thus power was derived from us); therefore, do we not share culpability

for subsequent moral failures in the public arena? Perhaps our most profound problem with the issue of these sorts of dilemmas has been summarized most aptly by Coates (2002): “We want a clean house, but abhor the dirty tasks involved in cleaning it.”

Through the foregoing survey and discussion, a framework for understanding the perilous dilemma that awaits all politicians, and especially biblical Christians has been provided and, accordingly, a response to the *second question* posed above.

Approaches to the Morality of Politicians in the Christian Tradition

The root issue in deciding whether or not something is ethically questionable or wrong is one’s approach to morality. Griffin (1989) presented four main models of moral reasoning in the Christian traditions which impinge on the problem of dirty hands.

The first model, one of *moral purity*, offers a deontological (rule-ethic) approach to ethics. In this model, there is a single morality for all Christians, and efficacy is not the determining factor in one’s moral choices. If one embraces this model, he should – as a Christian – keep her/his hands clean (Griffin, 1989, p. 36).

The second model, *moral anguish*, argues that there are two moralities – one for the politician and another for the private individual. According to this model, political action should be undertaken responsibly, with an eye to effectiveness. Thus, its approach is *consequentialist*, and if the politician is to serve responsibly, he must do what is necessary to bring about the desired ends. However, it is likely that this will involve things that are immoral. Nevertheless, he must engage in these immoral actions, but he will be guilty nonetheless. The hands of the politician become dirty, and he must be willing to pay the price – “whether through internal guilt (hence, moral anguish) or external punishment” (Griffin, 1989, p. 38).

The third model, one of *dual morality*, is also primarily *consequentialist*, and asserts that the public sphere is, by definition, subject to different moral regulations than the private sphere. Thus, separate moralities exist in the two realms: in the public realm, there is pursuit of “effective consequences,” while in the private realm a “stricter” personal morality is in order. In this construct, the politicians’ hands are indeed dirty, but there is no guilt (Griffin, 1989, p. 41).

The fourth model is the *common morality* position. It argues for a single morality, but allows for the possibility of compromise with evil. However, this approach may have a *deontological* aspect insofar as it may prohibit certain actions as intrinsically evil. The expectation of this model is that the politician, or private individual, “can be both *moral* and *effective*, but that there are limits to the goal of efficacy” (Griffin, 1989, p. 46).^{vi} Thus explained, the politician’s hands can remain unsullied. As Griffin (1989) concluded: “Clean hands are possible in the fourth category, therefore, for guilt does not attach to persons who undertake actions with proportionate reason, which permit some evil but which are not evil in themselves” (p. 51).

Regardless of how satisfactory one may deem this approach, it seems that the common morality position is the one most potentially consistent with biblical doctrine, and thus the one

with the greatest likelihood of adequately answering the *third question* posed in the introduction of this paper. How so?

Clearly rulers are responsible for maintaining order and rendering justice (e.g., Romans 13:1-5 and 1 Peter 2:13-14). Nevertheless, no *carte blanche* moral exceptions are granted to rulers in Scripture, suggesting that there is no separate morality for those in positions of leadership. What is patently clear is that moral decision-making is indeed complex, and implies a certain level of *contingency*. Political decisions will not be cut-and-dried – all black and white – but neither are all handled on a case-by-case basis.^{vii} The common morality position recognizes the inherent complexity of ethical decisions, and encourages flexibility without surrendering to things categorically and intrinsically evil. This approach requires humility and steady dependence upon the Holy Spirit who guides the believer into truth (John 16:13); moreover, God – by His divine power – has granted biblical Christians everything they need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Discussion and Conclusions

A biblical Christian worldview demands that Christians be involved in every constructive sphere of activity, shining as lights and having an impact for the glory of Christ (e.g., Philippians 2:15, 1 Peter 2:9 and Titus 3:8).^{viii} No area – out of hand – should be ceded to Satan. Thus argued, a complete opting out of political involvement for fear of moral degradation would not seem to be an alternative. In fact, Thomas (2001) has argued convincingly that Christian spirituality should necessarily “involve participation in public life and the political process” and, therefore, that “‘political spirituality’ should be understood as a redundancy rather than an oxymoron” (p. 1, 10).

Thus, even if the specter of dirty hands apparently looms, the Christian who is inclined to political involvement should pursue his goals heartily, in spite of the plaintive cries of some of his co-religionists. We desperately need the “seasoning” that the Christian brings to the political process, or that process is indeed doomed to be a “dirty game”, notwithstanding of course the operation of God’s common grace (e.g., Mittwede, 2005). Thus, now an answer has been obtained to the *fourth question* posed at the beginning of this paper.

As Estes (1994, p. 7) pointed out, the foundational concept which undergirds this whole issue is really *the ethos of political leadership*. Of import is not only what political leaders *do*, but also who they *are*. On the basis of structural links used by the psalmist in Psalm 101 – thus forging a strong connection between who a leader is and how he rules, and especially the quality of *tamim*^{ix} expressed therein – Estes concluded that a leader, with the character of Yahweh as his “moral compass”, should aspire “to order his own personal character in blamelessness and to reproduce that character in his public administration” (p. 22). Further, he suggested that a values model, rather than pragmatic (utilitarian) model or a simple integrity (role) model, is the most fundamental approach to evaluating political leaders insofar as this model is predicated upon the assertion that a principled criterion, namely a leader’s worldview, is the *driving force* that shapes both his character and conduct (Estes, 1994, p. 22-23).

Does this mean that, if a leader has the proper worldview, he will always do the right thing and avoid ethical dilemmas? Not necessarily, for he *still* is prone to sin. However, transcendent, life-governing, biblical values provide a sturdy, resilient framework, not only for political involvement, but also for *all* activity.

As noted above, insofar as mistrust and misuse of power seem to be the norm in politics, we should not necessarily expect our elected officials to emerge “untainted” from a period of public service, but nor should we expect that their values will have been “thrown to the wind”. It is the hope and expectation of people in modern democracies that leaders will be moral; hence the still-common outcry when leaders transgress express societal standards. Although there has perhaps been an increasing tendency to disregard private sins or indiscretions in the evaluation of leader effectiveness,^x there remains for politicians not only the plumb line of public morality, but also the revealed call to blamelessness and integrity enjoined by Scripture. Thus, all those who enter public service should be prepared for both temporal and eternal reckonings. Accordingly, the reality of these “checks” ought to pave the way to the “balance” envisioned by the common morality approach to biblical Christian ethics.

Here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him. If he were a moral man and nothing else his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean (Walzer, 1974, p. 70).

I will refuse to look at anything vile or vulgar. *I hate all crooked dealings; I will have nothing to do with them.* I will reject perverse ideas and stay away from every evil.^{xi} (emphasis added)

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NOTES

ⁱ The institutions to which Sider refers are non-governmental, such as family, schools, media, church, etc.

ⁱⁱ The reference list of Coady (2009) is a treasure trove for those desiring to delve more deeply into specific aspects of "dirty hands" thought and analysis. In general, Coady (2009) provides a thorough secular treatment of the dirty hands dilemma, including up-to-date insights concerning the challenges introduced by the actuality and prospect of "supreme emergency" and terrorism. For a sparkling example of the latter in popular American culture, readers are also referred to the popular dramatic television series *24*, Season 4, Episode 21 [originally aired May 9, 2005], especially the emotional dialogue between former President Palmer and President Logan in the 19:00- 20:00-minute interval of the episode).

ⁱⁱⁱ So Thomas Nagel (1978, p. 77). Nagel writes: "the exercise of power, in whatever role, is one of the most personal forms of individual self-expression, and a rich source of purely personal pleasure."

^{iv} So Coady (1991, p. 379) who addresses the problem of corruption thus: "The point is not just that 'power tends to corrupt', though it does, but that the values which politicians find themselves driven to promote, and others find themselves driven to endorse, may be the product of degraded social circumstances and arrangements."

^v So Walzer (1974, p. 67).

^{vi} Of possible import here is the concept of *satisficing*, originally introduced by Herbert A. Simon in 1957. Satisficing action is neither maximising nor optimising, but has at its goal an outcome that is good enough. "It is

often rational to seek to satisfice, i.e. to get a good result that is good enough although not necessarily the best." See Anonymous. "Satisfice," <http://www.utilitarianism.com/satisfice.htm> .

^{vii} The question may still remain about the relationship of public and private morality. Nagel (1978, p. 79) significantly points out that "Even if public morality is not derivable from private, however, it does not mean that they are independent of one another. Both may derive from a common source that yields different results when applied to the generation of principles for action in the widely differing circumstances of private and public life." For example, Griffin (1989, p. 54) might refer to that source as "common morality" or "natural law". However, the only basis for any morality whatsoever is the character of God, as explained by Geisler (1989, p. 22): "In brief, Christian ethics is based on God's will, but *God never wills anything contrary to his unchanging moral character.*" [emphasis added].

^{viii} Hall (1994, p. 166) explains that Dutch political thinker and grandfather of evangelical political action Groen Van Prinsterer "charges Christians with the duty of being involved in politics." His political philosophy inspired and worked in tandem with that of Dutch Renaissance man, Abraham Kuyper, who was not only a great theologian and innovative educator and journalist, but also served as prime minister of The Netherlands. On this same subject, Hall grasps Kuyper's worldview well, noting that Kuyper thought that no aspects of life (even politics) "should remain untouched by the Christian. There is no important question in life in which the believer should refrain from seeking an answer from the Lord" (p. 159). Hall notes that Francis Schaeffer echoed this conviction: "the believer has a divine mandate to be a servant of Christ in every aspect of life...The Christian must seek to integrate spiritual norms with the realities of public life. The result must be the articulation of Christian political principles applied in a concrete national situation" (p. 159).

^{ix} According to Estes (p. 13-14), in modern language *tamim* (usually translated "blamelessness") "speaks of integrity, the seamless quality which unites a person's entire life – attitudes, ambitions, actions – by one central focus. *Tamim* supersedes the convenient dichotomy between one's private life and public life. Instead, the person is viewed holistically, his character being expressed throughout every aspect of his existence."

^x For example, consider the overall response to the so-called "sexcapades" and related record of lying and "language redefinition" of former U.S. president Bill Clinton, and perhaps also to the present Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, with his personal history of sexual immorality.

^{xi} Psalm 101:3-4 (a Psalm of David, the King of Israel) from the *New Living Translation*.

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