



Christians  
*in* Politics

**Getting involved in  
Student Politics**



## Getting involved in Student Politics

***“If there is one thing I regret as I look back on my time as a student, it’s the lost strategic opportunity to engage with the students’ union.”***

So said a former President of a Christian Union (CU) now working in the world of public policy. He’s not the only one; for many Christian students the world of student politics seems like a bewildering parallel universe and the opportunity to get involved never really registers. This needs to change. With universities shaping the people who will shape our culture in the future, it’s vital that students develop a Christian worldview that embraces wider engagement in areas like politics.

This requires the formation of strong biblical foundations, an understanding of student politics, and a realistic vision of what can be achieved.

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Our inspiration to take responsibility for government in this world derives from the Bible, and it begins in the very first chapter with the creation mandate:

*“Let us make people in our own image, to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all life – the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the livestock, wild animals and small animals.” So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them. God blessed them and told them, “Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters over the fish and birds and animals.” (Genesis 1:26-28)*

***Christians are called on ‘to be ready to do whatever is good’. Doing good is not to be limited to the church but all areas of society. In so doing Christians “make the teaching of God our saviour attractive” (Titus 2:10). ...Student unions are set up to do good on campus. They seek to enrich the experience of students culturally and promote student welfare. So Christian students should be among the first in line to serve, help and love their fellow students by being involved in their student unions. If this were the case I am sure Christian students would find their opportunities for evangelism - to speak of Christ - would go through the roof.***

Tim Rudge, UCCF

Here we receive the commission to ‘rule over’ and steward God’s creation. Exercising responsibility in the world is hard-wired into the human spirit, and the call to govern well continues to occur throughout the Bible.

In particular, the giving of the Law provides the Israelite people with God’s standards for how the nation should be governed. It demonstrates how justice, mercy, and righteousness lie at the heart of God’s agenda for humankind, and how

leaders have a responsibility to provide these for a community. This is confirmed as the prophets challenge each ruler in turn to live up to the requirements of the law, promoting righteousness and justice and defending the cause of the powerless and oppressed.

For some, the advent of the Messiah offered the hope of political revolution. But the Zealots were to be disappointed if they believed that Jesus would come with force to

eject the Romans. The mission and message of Jesus was 'repent for Kingdom of God is at hand'. Jesus shows us how the values of the Kingdom of God are diametrically opposed to those of worldly empires. He refuses to fulfil the traditional expectations of a 'political figure', while preaching a message that has profound political implications.

Although Jesus does affirm the legitimacy of human governing authorities, as seen in his exchange concerning Roman taxes (Matt 22:15-22), he also declares the total sovereignty of God over all powers. The role of political institutions is further addressed in a number of New Testament passages. In Romans 13, Paul states that they are established by God and that their responsibility is to restrain bad behaviour and to be His servant for the good of all.

Grappling with the respective roles of the Church and the state has remained a rich, fruitful, and sometimes controversial area within Christian tradition. To explore in more depth some of the best contemporary thinking in this area, you can visit Christians in Politics resources section ([www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk)).

### **WHAT IS THE STUDENTS UNION?**

Accepting that authorities (powers) are established by God for good government – and that all government is established for justice, we need to gain an understanding of student political organisations to understand how Christian students can begin to serve and lead in colleges and universities.

**Students' Unions** (SU) are representative bodies comprising the students studying at a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Their scope of influence is wide. For example; Plymouth University SU lists representation, commercial services, advice and welfare through to bars, entertainment, recreation, volunteering, sports and societies among its activities!

Most SUs are members of the **National Union of Students** (NUS), who provide training, advice, and regional and national conferences for delegates to have their say on policy and elect leaders. From being part of consultations about the future of courses through to the bulk ordering of materials to providing inexpensive resources for members, SUs are involved in making major decisions that affect all students at some point.

SUs actively encourage wide participation, often arranging for lectures to be cancelled in favour of attendance at their AGM. In spite of this, there has been the growing challenge of student apathy towards political engagement in recent times. This lack of mainstream participation has in many cases handed SU leadership over to people with more radical political views. In turn, this has dissuaded others from getting involved because the cut and thrust of student politics appears unrelated to the lives of everyday students. Add into this mix the current student funding model that increasingly requires term-time working, and it's not hard to see why participation is often so low. However, for Christians who have a heart for shaping student politics, this vacuum does represent a wonderful opportunity to get involved. Although opposition is inevitable, it has never been easier to make an influential contribution in this area.

In recent years, there have been some high profile situations where Christian student societies that are members of a SU have come into direct conflict with the equal opportunities policy of the union. These incidents have usually centred round the election of new committees and the requirement for candidates to sign an orthodox doctrinal statement. In most cases these have been resolved with the society able to remain a member of the SU, but there have been occasions where this membership has ended. This poses a dilemma: is our engagement in the political process contingent upon the SU seeing things from our point of view? Or are we willing to remain involved and engage in spite of what we might perceive as flawed and imperfect policies?

### **WHY SHOULD I GET INVOLVED IN MY STUDENT UNION?**

There are many demands on your time as a student. In addition to your studies, you may want to get involved in social or sporting activities. Some will need to work part time in order to keep their finances under control, and others will be facing the practical responsibilities of living away from home for the first time. Add to this the fact that as a Christian you will want to give time to fellowship and service, and you may be left wondering: why should I prioritise getting involved in student politics?

*Today's students need to respond to a call and rise to a cause that is bigger than themselves, and one that leads to the transformation of society... creating a pathway for cultural change through politics. My hope is that students will engage intentionally through direct involvement or by supporting Christians in this arena.*

Rich Wilson, Fusion

Firstly, as Christians we recognise that we have God-given responsibilities towards our 'neighbours' and to one another. These guide our mission of sharing the good news of Jesus with others and demonstrating the love of God through our actions. At times, both of these can involve or require a level of political engagement.

Secondly, we all have unique God-given personalities and areas of gifting that should be encouraged and developed. These can include a keen sense of justice; a desire to speak on behalf of a group; the ability to engage in debate with others; or a grasp of policy issues. All these qualities are valuable for leading and serving in student politics. Standing for election is not the only option; there are opportunities to serve the SU by being a listener on Nightline or being part of an entertainments setup team.

Finally, it is important to note that some SUs find student Christian Unions a threat. Often our societies are big and active with strong views. There's nothing wrong in that, but if Christian students are not encouraged to engage in elections, support SU officers in their sabbatical posts, and only ever turn up when they have their religious liberties constrained, it should not be a surprise when they are viewed with suspicion.

Engagement doesn't mean agreement with every SU motion or activity, but non-engagement can look like a selfish outlook on student life. Importantly, engaging in a gracious way helps to build relationships of trust with other groups – and over time this can have a dramatic effect upon the influence of Christians in student politics.

Bear this in mind, too, only students can make a difference in this sphere. Churches and other organisations don't have the same rights and therefore responsibilities.

### **PRACTICAL STEPS TO GETTING INVOLVED**

Here are a few pointers to help you get started: Find out about the Students Union in your own University or College (you should be able to find it easily on the internet or through literature provided to you). This should let you know about activities happening on campus that you can get involved in.

For the wider context (and loads of helpful advice), visit the NUS site at <http://www.nus.org.uk>

If you are interested in standing for election, it is possible to do so as an independent but you are more likely to succeed (and to influence others) by joining a political party that has views closest to you own. You do not have to 'sell your soul' or 100% agree with everything that a party stands for in order to get involved! Student politics can also provide a great route in to further political involvement in the future. Indeed, many politicians began their careers by getting involved in student politics. Most of the mainstream UK parties have youth sections:

Labour: <http://www.younglabour.org.uk/>

Conservatives: <http://www.conservativefuture.com/>

Liberal Democrats: <http://liberalyouth.org/>

SNP: <http://www.snpyouth.com/>

Plaid Cymru: <http://www.partyofwales.org/youth/?force=1>

Green Party: <http://younggreens.org.uk/>

UKIP: <http://www.youngindependence.org.uk>

To get you started, download the **Youth Resource** pack from [www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk) which contains three sessions aimed at young people and students exploring political engagement from a Christian perspective.

To be 'salt and light' in society is our challenge. Why not get involved and start to make it happen on your campus?



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR: GARETH DAVIES**

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