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DENOMINATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC POLICY

Introduction

When Jesus was asked the question regarding one's obligation of paying taxes to the civil authorities, he was somewhat agitated. He requested a coin and then looking at the coin responded,

“Whose head is this and whose title?”

They answered, “The emperor’s.”

Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

-Matthew 22:20-21

The scripture merely records that those who asked the question went on about their business amazed. For some, the matter is clear, resolved. For others, the matter of state and religion is still somewhat challenging. Throughout the ages, the church has struggled with the question. What is the church's appropriate role in addressing issues of state and government? Indeed, denominations have answered this question differently at different times.

There are those in the church who, at one time, believed religion should be entirely separate from engagement in the world and especially from anything political. Others have taken

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a different interpretation, believing that engagement in the world is the duty of the Christian and sing with gusto, "This is my Father's world." In so doing, they proclaim that there is no part of the created order in which a Christian does not have a stewardship responsibility. While the response of Jesus that day to the political question may have begged for greater specificity by some, to others it was clear, being an integral part of Christian discipleship. Yet it continues to challenge Christians and non-Christians alike. Indeed, the discussion in the current course of events has an interesting and different dimension as it is being addressed both in and outside the church.

Historical Perspective

Historically, there were some who argued for a distinct demarcation between the sacred and the secular. To fuse the latter in any way with the former resulted in desecrating the holy. The sacred and secular, spirit-and-flesh controversy characterizes the distinction among many denominations and the nature of religion as practiced by many Christians. This spirit-flesh dichotomy found expression in personal behavior as well as how the Church related to the world, especially to the state, government, and politics.

As a member of one of the so-called mainline Protestant denominations and one historically considered moderately progressive if not "liberal," my ministry began in a context of expected political and social engagement. Thus, this perspective addresses the role of the church and marketplace. As a United Methodist and Wesleyan, my understanding of the role of the church is couched in the theology of its founder, John Wesley, who proclaimed that he looked upon all the world as his parish. His was an unparalleled engagement in a myriad of social issues

and challenged the political structures of his day, both in eighteenth-century England and the new nation called The United States of America.

Role of the Black Church

The organization of the vast majority of African Americans in the Black Church has had a unique response to the question of the sacred and secular, spirit and flesh, the church and the world. To be sure, the various denominations within the social construct called the Black Church hold diverse positions, as does the church generally. However, the Black Church continues to grasp a more holistic understanding of faith and religion.

Many have defined the Black Church's expression of religion as otherworldly or escapist. Those who know this church better understand the complexities of Black religious expression. One cannot understand that complexity without acknowledging the beginning of the Black Church in a context of slavery, white-church domination, racism, and segregation—and most importantly, state sanctioned second-class citizenship. Thus, the expression of religion by and among Black people existed within the sanctions of the larger racist community. The church had to navigate in the midst of hostile territory for the most part. It did so with remarkable skill and effectiveness.

By and large, the Black Church took a more engagement of the world posture, often finding creative ways to do so, depending upon regional expressions of hostility and freedom. As greater freedom was given, more liberties were taken. Yet, its theology dictated its sociology. However, its social context determined the application of its theological suppositions.

The context of slavery, racism, second-class citizenship, segregation, and poverty, was seen the in the framework of the

biblical narrative of a just and loving God and a Savior who made no distinction between slave or free and rendered the whole of humanity as children of God of infinite worth. The task of the Black Church was to determine how it would be faithful to this understanding of the Gospel. In the late nineteenth and all of the twentieth century, the Black Church found its expression to the social and political milieu in two primary ways: a ministry of compassion and a ministry of protest. When government and the larger society did not respond adequately to the needs of Black people, the church found ways to do so! When civil authorities and government proposed legal means to dehumanize and deny the benefits of citizenship, the Black Church protested! Its protest would become more organized and effective into the latter part of the twentieth century.

It is important that the Black Church is defined: those places where Black people practice the Christian faith—in congregations. Some of these may be independent while others may belong to a larger denomination either exclusively Black or predominately white. In any case, there is an expression of the Black Religious Experience that transcends denomination, region, and church polity.

During the nineteenth and a good portion of the twentieth century, Black people were absent from active participation in the political development in the United States. In many sections of the country the ballot was denied them, and in most places so was political office. They were thus outside the political process. The primary avenue open to them was protest. The Black Church led the way as the Protest Movement of Black America later joined by secular movements that were born of the Black Church, as were its earliest leaders.

While the impact of protest is powerful and often effective, its

chief drawback is reactive rather than proactive. It is response after the fact, or more specifically after the decision or policy formation of local, state, or federal government. Thus, the Black Church needed more effective ways to be involved in the political process within the constraints of regional barriers and government sanctioned religious participation. These included gatherings in the congregation where candidates were invited to share their political positions on a variety of issues, and citizens shared their concerns. "Get out the vote campaigns" led by the church were popular and effective. In those regions where Black people were denied the vote, the church played a leading role in the effort to challenge laws and practices that sought to keep them out of the political process.

When one views the history of the so-called Mainline Protestant churches there has been a rather concerted effort to be engaged in the political process. More conservative and evangelical churches tended to maintain a posture of non-involvement in politics for most of the twentieth century. One might argue that the more progressive Protestant denominations, as well as Roman Catholicism, and the Black Church had considerable impact on many of the important political decisions of the past fifty years. These generally resulted in more progressive legislation, especially the body of Civil Rights legislation.

Role of Protestant Denominations

However, there has been a decided change in this pattern in the last two decades. For whatever reason, there seems to be a decline in effective political engagement by many Protestant denominations and the Black Church, particularly at the point of government policy and its formation. Interestingly, the more conservative and so-called evangelical churches have departed from their historical posture of non-involvement in politics to

an aggressive, well-organized, and financed effort for engagement in this process. Indeed, in recent years and in recent political debates and elections, its voice (the voice of “conservative” and primarily white evangelical churches) has been prominent.

Former President Jimmy Carter voiced concern in his book, *Our Endangered Values*. He notes:

The most important factor is that fundamentalists have become increasingly influential in both religion and government, and have managed to change the nuances and subtleties of historic debate into black-and-white rigidities and the personal derogation of those who dare to disagree. At the same time, these religious and political conservatives have melded their efforts, bridging the formerly respected separation of church and state. This has empowered a group of influential ‘neoconservatives,’ who have been able to implement their long-frustrated philosophy in both domestic and foreign policy.¹

There is clearly a need for greater participation of the religious community in today’s discussion of government policy both locally and nationally. More specifically, the Black Church, which represents one of the largest constituencies impacted most directly by government decision, must find ways to be more engaged in policy formulation. Also, Jim Wallis, in *God’s Politics*, observes: “The politics of God is often not the same as the politics of the people of God. The real question is not whether religious faith should influence a society and its poli-

¹Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 3.

tics, but how.”² Wallis has an interesting chapter in *God's Politics*, “Protest Is Good; Alternatives Are Better,”³ which moves the church into a more crucial place of strategy and policy formation. This must increasingly be the role of the Black Church. It must present alternatives. It may even offer a “third” way.

Further, it is increasingly clear that the politics of conservative religion are not the politics of progressive religion. The Black Church has a peculiar mix of conservative, progressive, and liberal perspectives, often not fully expressed either by so-called conservative or white evangelicalism or white Protestantism. Thus, the Black Church must articulate its own positions on a variety of political and social issues that may or may not reflect the positions of either.

Denominationalism is, in part, the corporate expression of religion in American life. The Black Church, the expression of several predominately African-American denominations, as well as hundreds of Black congregations as part of predominately white denominations, represent considerable political and economic power not yet fully realized. Its leaders possess influence in the Black community, some would argue, nearly equal to African-American political leaders.

Role of Black Denominational Leadership

In light of today's political reality and a growing conservatism that often has a negative impact on the well-being of the Black citizenry, a review of the appropriate role of Black denominational leadership is timely. Here are several responses for consideration:

²Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 56.

³Wallis, “Protest Is Good; Alternatives Are Better: What Are We For,” in *God's Politics*, 43.

1. There should be a consultation of denominational leadership to discuss the current political context and possible interdenominational response. The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) can play a critical role in such a consultation, as is it is already doing on a limited basis. ITC should be encouraged to continue this effort and expand the participants. Its role in co-hosting this gathering is an important step in this regard.

2. The United Methodist Church has a long history of social and political activism. It is fortunate to have a denominational agency charged with the responsibility of monitoring political and economic conditions, including public policy and proposed federal legislation. Its headquarters are in Washington, DC, along with its staff, and represents a strategic location for this role. It advises its congregations on the status of legislation that may have particular significance to the church and its constituencies. Such a process might be developed by denominational leadership as it relates specifically to the African-American community.

3. Again, a United Methodist reference. In my denomination, there is *A Book of Resolutions*,⁴ which is updated and approved every four years by the denomination's policymaking body, the General Conference. This resource contains the official position of the denomination on an array of political, economic, and social issues. A gathering of African-American denominational leaders might review current denominational positions on political and social

⁴See the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

issues to determine places of common agreement. Research in this area could be published and made available to the broad constituencies represented among the denominations.

4. Denominational leadership could identify common positions taken by the various denominations. These could be targeted for appropriate follow-up action within the boundaries of the separation of church and state. It could be determined how these issues might be presented to appropriate political leaders, legislative committees, and Political Party Platform Committees.

5. Denominational leadership might identify a list of priority issues to be addressed, requiring special attention. Not all issues may be of the same import at a particular time. Thus, a more focused approach for action may be necessary. The concentration by the denominational constituency on a particular legislative issue or issues would carry considerable influence, as legislation is being developed and finally acted upon.

6. Denominational leadership should enlist the support and cooperation of the larger church community, including the already established interdenominational and inter-faith bodies. In many cases there will already be a common body of concern as well as agreed upon legislative positions, requiring action.

7. The importance of voter registration and "get out the vote campaigns" cannot be underestimated. Such an effort by the interdenominational community will have great impact when undertaken simultaneously and cooperatively. When denominational leaders speak with one voice, this can be a unifying impact on Black communities nationwide.

8. Denominational leadership should enlist the participation of those independent congregations who may not

be a part of denominations, but whose pastors are often members of the local Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Denominational leaders can enlist the heads of these organizations to address vital political issues.

As these and other proactive measures are considered as ways to increase the role of the Black Church in policy formulation at the state and national level, we offer one caution. Denominational leaders should be clearly non-partisan and issue-focused. It should be clearly understood that these several denominations and their leadership have no allegiance to a particular political party. As has been said, the church has no permanent allies or adversaries, only permanent issues, truth, the general welfare, and justice for all. As individual politicians or party platforms reflect support of these permanent issues, they could expect support by individuals who comprise these bodies. But it must always be understood that these bodies consider God neither Democrat nor Republican!

Interestingly, it does appear that in many circles there are those who suggest that faith must be a private matter and has no expression in the marketplace. As denominations take a more active role in public-policy formulation, they might encounter such admonitions. Stephen Carter addresses this issue in a convincing manner in *The Culture of Disbelief*. Not only does he put forth the notion, "...that there is nothing wrong when a religious group presses its moral claims in the public square. But one must distinguish between the religious motivation for a moral position that is otherwise within the power of the state to pursue and the religious motivation for a moral position that simply involves the oppression of members of other, less politically powerful faiths."⁵

⁵Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 91.

Conclusion

The stakes are high! The Black Church and the more progressive elements of the religious community must be more actively engaged in the political discussion, debate and public policy-formation. This forum, "Theology and Public Policy," here at ITC, has presented an arena for a discussion, not only of the state of Black America but also our unique needs. It is a beginning!

Jim Wallis relates a personal experience with Lisa, an effective community organizer. He writes: "When people would complain, as they often do, that we don't have any leaders today or would ask where the Martin Luther Kings are now, Lisa would get angry. "We are the ones we have been waiting for!" she would declare. And hers was a powerful call to leadership and responsibility and a deep affirmation of hope."⁶

This might be the challenge to denominational leaders as they face complex and sometimes perplexing political issues, crying out for leadership: "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

⁶Wallis, *God's Politics*, 374.

and the very word "literary" itself is a
 historical and cultural construct, not
 a natural or essential category. The
 very act of defining "literature" is
 a political and ideological act, one
 that reflects the power relations of
 the society in which it is performed.
 As a result, the study of literature
 is not a neutral or objective pursuit,
 but a critical and reflective one.
 It is a way of questioning the
 dominant values and norms of a
 culture, and of exploring the
 possibilities of alternative ways
 of thinking and acting in the
 world. In this sense, the study of
 literature is a form of resistance,
 a way of challenging the
 status quo and of imagining
 a more just and equitable
 society.