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THE CHURCH'S RELATION TO THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE OF THE TIMES

When I bring an army against a country, and the people of that land choose a watchman, and when he sees the army coming, and blows the alarm to warn them, then anyone who hears the alarm and refuses to heed it—well, if he dies the fault is his own. For he heard the warning and would not listen, the fault is his own. If he had heeded the warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and doesn't sound the alarm and warn the people, he is responsible for their deaths. They will die in their sins, but I will charge the watchman with their deaths. (Ezekiel 33:2-6, TLB)

Introduction

Because these are times that try one's soul, this essay is intended to motivate Christians to examine their views on the church's relation to the current political struggle or perhaps re-examine their views on the relationship between their faith in Christ and the world of political involvement. Hopefully, this message will supply useful ideas as you grapple with the great political and social issues of our time. The aim is to provoke discussion, not dissension; reflection, not recrimination; political awareness, not political antagonism.

Political Involvement

A noted scholar recently made a study of the church's relation to social concern, and questionnaires were sent to a num-

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ber of churchpersons inquiring about their attitudes toward involvement in social issues. One respondent, who is engaged in student work on a university campus, returned his questionnaire unanswered, appending the following comment: "Dear Sir, this is out of our field of calling. Wish we could help."

In our society today, interdependence has supplanted independence as the rule of life. The Christians' social conscience requires involvement as a member of the team of humanity. If there is poverty, take a lead to eradicate it. If there is injustice, like Amos, point it out. If there is corruption, turn the rascals out. If there is waste, become a steward. One of the most significant areas of Christian concern is politics—the formation and implementation of public policy for the public good. But simply to discharge the elementary responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting, paying taxes and obeying laws is insufficient since it does not allow the Christian to fulfill the gospel obligations in the fullest sense—a modern democratic context. Rather, the Christian should plunge into practical political activity, as deeply as personality and talents permit.

Political involvement means active participation in the life of the state. The state is a divinely-ordained institution, the primary function of which is to provide law, order, justice, and the opportunity to pursue individual happiness in society. This is a fundamental tenet to modern democratic political theory and is in harmony with the teachings of historic Christianity. Our political system is composed of human, not divine beings; therefore, it will be no better than the people who make it up. If Christians refuse to become politically involved in our political system, we will have a corrupt system. It will be disastrous if we do nothing.

Sadly, too many of us must be included with those Americans whose primary interests are their own wishes and

ambitions. It is not surprising that they have been living in a decade in which private purposes take precedence over public ones. We can indignantly say this does not describe us—church-going, Bible-reading, non-drinking, sexually moral Christians. But can we deny that we have catered to private tastes and wishes while remaining aloof from politics, law, justice, education, and other concerns of public life? Can we say that we really do care about the evil condition of our nation?

Martin Niemoeller, the courageous German pastor who suffered eight years of imprisonment for his opposition to Hitler's regime, confessed after his release that the German Christian community bore a considerable measure of responsibility for the disaster that had overtaken the unhappy land. The church did not warn people and so many perished. In Germany, they came first for the communist, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. They came for the trade unionist; I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up. We as Christians have remained silent, allowing the flames of hate and evil to rise, not sounding the alarm to extinguish the flames.

The Church and Political Struggle

Regarding the church's relation to the political struggle of the time, listen closely to see if this conversation reflects your thinking: Should I be interested in politics? Oh, no, Lord not me! My citizenship is in heaven. My job here on earth is to win souls. You placed me in this world to proclaim the gospel to my fellow human beings, not to get involved in political manipula-

tions. Besides, Lord, politicians are corrupt, have no principles, and will do anything to get votes. Followers of you, Lord, are to keep themselves unspotted by the world and to abstain from all appearance of evil. Lord, your gospel is spiritual, not social: Christians have no time to help mend the fallen, corrupt society that comprises the world around them. To spend precious time in political and social action aimed at patching up the world is futile and distracts from your work, Lord. You are in control, and your inscrutable providence in its own time through prayer will remedy injustice and oppression.

These reasons for non-involvement have a persuasive ring, but they are distortions, inadequate rationalizations, and must be recognized as such. This represents a head-in-the-sand religion. Nowhere does scripture indicate that God approves of the excesses of wicked rulers. Should Christians not work to change or replace a regime that neglects basic human needs? To improve society is not worldliness, but love. To wash one's hands of society is not love, but worldliness. The refusal to become involved in public affairs is a breach of the second great commandment. Jesus said that his believers, the Christian community, are "the salt of the earth." We are to enhance those around us by presenting justice and equality for all humankind. However, he also said, "But if the salt has lost its savor, with what shall it be salted? It is thereafter good for nothing but to cast out and to be trodden under foot of man." (Matthew 5:13). Salt, to be effective has to be mingled with the food, in touch with it, melting into it. If we Christians retreat into our own worlds, unmindful of our nation's true condition, our neighbors' despair, our friends' deprivation, our government's insolvency, then we can no longer be the salt of the earth, and will, in fact, lose our savor.

Christians must exercise a stewardship of influence. We

are obligated to take the opportunity for political participation seriously. Christians should be sensitive to the working of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of their lives. This sense of responsibility, then, extends to the civic realm, and believers will seek divine direction regarding voting and the possibility of even more active involvement in political affairs. Just electing Christians to office does not change the nation nor heal its wounds. Some well-meaning Christians want to heal the nation by organizing the Christian vote and voting the problem away. God has spoken quite clearly to this point in Zechariah 4:6: "not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit." As hard as it is for us to accept, we cannot heal America at the polls. This way, we are trying to solve a spiritual problem with secular means. We can only change America by spiritual repentance, and then God promises to heal the spiritual problem of our land.

The problem of America today is both personal and spiritual, and we are our worst enemy. America is sick today not just because her governmental officials are sick; they merely reflect their constituencies. America is sick because we are spiritually dead. The church must serve as the moral conscience of the community, giving guidance in distinguishing between what is right and wrong. The church must lead its believers to construct a balanced perspective on both political and social action. Hence, followers of Christ work in communities, promoting God's righteousness and love and maintaining human justice. Christians bring to the political realm a sense of integrity so often lacking. They take stands on moral issues and affirm without hesitation those acts of the state that violate God's law are wrong. They have the necessary spiritual tools to combat the tendency of politics to be "dirty." They realize from scripture that God has made them stewards over

the world which God created. God has provided power as an instrument to use for accomplishing this task, and Christians are expected to use this power to control government authorities and direct their efforts into proper channels.

Biblical Mandate and Political Involvement

It is time for the church to sound the alarm and realize that Biblical history supports the church's involvement in the political struggle of the times. God has always been involved when injustice prevailed in the land. When injustice prevails in our communities, state and nation, because of political corruption, bribery, or other evils, the churches should address the issues. As God's spokespersons, the Old Testament prophets thundered against injustice. For those of us who still say there should be no relation between the churches and the political struggle of the times, listen as the Old Testament spiritual leaders speak who were deeply involved in the political struggle:

Amos – (addressing Israel): “You are enemies of the righteous, receivers of the bribes, and you turn down the needy in the gate.” (5:24, TLB)

Micah – declared “no sacrifice or religious service will compensate for injustice, what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (6:8, TLB)

Gideon – a military and spiritual leader.

Moses – after leading Israel out of Egyptian bondage, organized Israel into political and sub-divisions.

Samuel – judge and priest.

Joseph – head of the royal granaries in Egypt, a position that placed him in pharaoh's inner council.

- Daniel – trained for royal service in the court of the Chaldeans. He advised and spoke God's messages to both Babylonian and Medo-Persian Kings.
- Mordecai – active in Persian politics. At the risk of life, he and Queen Esther, his cousin, thwarted a plot against the Jews and saved their people from execution.
- Cyrus – a powerful king of the Persian Empire - called God's anointed.

In the New Testament era, believers represented a cross section of Graeco-Roman society. One of Paul's converts at Athens was a member of the court, which was charged with deciding questions of Grecian morality. Jesus pronounced woes on the Pharisees for scrupulously tithing every product of their labors while omitting "weightier aspects of the law, justice, mercy, and faith." As in the Old Testament, believers in the New Testament times saw earthly governments as being under the authority of God. Neither Jesus nor any of his apostles ever intimated that participation in public life was "worldly."

Conclusion

Christians are encouraged to examine their involvement in the political arena. There is a relationship between faith in Christ and the world of political struggle. The author suggests that we should plunge into practical political activity, as deeply as personality and talents permit.

There is an historic relationship between modern democratic political theory and Christianity. Since our political system is composed of humans, not diving beings, it is incumbent upon us to be involved. To do nothing invites disaster. Also, Christians must exercise a steward of influence, taking

the opportunity for political participation seriously. We are our own worst enemy: "status quo" and non-involvement. Christians can bring a sense of integrity to the political realm, which is so often lacking. Demonstrating aggressive action, we will take stands on moral issues and affirm as wrong those acts of the state that violate God's law.