

1

Christ's Call to Service

Senator Mark O. Hatfield

I have sensed for many years that we in the North American evangelical community have had a burning question put to us, both from within our community and from outside as well. What do we do with our political responsibility? Many have felt that political activity is beyond the scope of appropriate Christian involvement. I have frequently been asked by other Christians how I could retain my faith and still be a politician. There has been a general tendency to believe that faith is non-political and that the two realms are totally incompatible.

But today among the same circles there is a growing consensus, a reawakening perhaps, that Christian political and social involvement should be a part of our natural witness. This new awareness of the integration of our faith with our political, economic, and social life is helping us to recover the wholeness of the biblical message.

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The further question remains, however, of how, exactly, that Christian responsibility is to be exercised. What should be the shape of the Christian witness to the state? On this issue, a variety of views are being explored, tested, and debated, both theologically and practically. On the one hand, very conservative Christian political activists speak of turning the nation back to God by increasing America's wealth, power, and prestige in order to defeat our foes. On the other hand, the left-wing activists are willing to go to jail for pouring blood on the Pentagon steps. Some might deny that one extreme or the other is actually Christian. For our present purposes, we may ascribe righteousness as far as motives are concerned to the entire spectrum of action. The method, the shape, the scope, and the purpose of Christian political activity is the issue demanding our attention.

Let us consider some of the options open to us, not necessarily expecting to achieve unity and agreement, but in order to shed light upon our pilgrimage as believers. Since the time of Constantine, when Christianity became the official religion of the establishment, Christians have struggled with this very vexing problem. How could they both carry out the responsibilities of governing the state and reconcile those actions with the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The answer to this question in the medieval period was straightforward. The state was to operate according to the principle of retribution—the *lex talionis*: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—in order to serve its divinely appointed function. Those whose vocation during this time was to carry out that function, from the kings who ruled by divine right to the soldiers who fought their battles, were to do so dutifully and devoutly. But those others who were called to specifically religious vocations could pay more serious attention to Christ's gospel of forgiving love and contemplate living like Him. Sainthood was a possibility for them.

The Reformation, however, brought changes in the way Christians considered these issues. Luther and his

followers rejected the notion that some are meant to be saintly, like the monks, while others could live a less holy existence. Luther declared that each person in every walk of life should try to follow Christ's pattern in his individual relationships with others. But when people operate at the level of the responsibility for society at large, or corporately, then they are to follow a different standard, that of retributive justice. The state was seen as an order of creation, as Luther called it. The way it operated was part of God's design.

The Calvinist view, according to my understanding, differed from the Lutheran by stating that the standards which govern the state cannot be known naturally, but come from the revelation of the Bible. Nor does Calvinism accept a dualism of principles for the behavior of Christians, one for personal relationships and one for civil power. One set of norms ought to govern the personal and public lives of all people, including non-believers. Those norms are something more than simply the justice of an eye for an eye, but something less than agape love. A holy commonwealth, a type of theocracy, is found in the Calvinist model.

After the turn of the present century, a Christian pacifist view more visibly entered the American picture. With historical roots at least as deep as Calvinism, this view holds that the standard for both the individual and the state is forgiving, agape love. Both individuals and the state, and both believers and non-believers, can and should act according to that norm. But with the coming of World War II, support for the liberal pacifist view was severely shaken.

More pragmatic views of Christian political responsibility emerged, perhaps the foremost of which was the theological realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. He combined certain elements of each of the earlier perspectives, believing that there was always hope for a little more relative justice than presently existed. But the reality of sin must temper our optimism and sense of achievement.

Nearly all of these views, inadequately outlined here, to

be sure, have one element in common. They assume that Christians who have social and political responsibility will be required to do things which would let the agape love of Christ serve as the basis for their public actions. Furthermore, all these views since the time of Constantine tend to assume that political actions and responsibilities show the difference in values between those who have faith in a living God and those who do not. Yet, if we are realistic, we realize that for much of contemporary society the standards of Christian love are irrelevant. There is no commitment to live with Christ as Lord. He is not even an ideal to be followed.

Thus, we must consider a view of Christian political witness which assumes that there will be a difference between those whose lives are based on faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and those for whom such faith is simply not a factor. In other words, our Christian stance toward the state should be based on the recognition that the church universal has an identity and an ethic distinct from society in general. In this view, of course, there is the implicit temptation for Christians to see themselves as a pure and holy band of people withdrawn from the world while regarding the rest of society as damned. Such an attitude of withdrawal can easily lead to the fallacy that no political witness is really necessary or even possible. In so doing, the fact of Christ's lordship over all the world is ignored, and thus denied. Nevertheless, if we guard against the danger of conceding the world to the devil, I believe it is possible to construct a creative and vital model for a Christian's political witness.

This witness, as I see it, must begin with the fact that the Christian is called to live according to a kingdom whose reign and reality has not yet been accepted by society at large. The heart of our political witness must be rooted in our faithfulness to the kingdom proclaimed by our Lord. The vision of that kingdom places us at odds with the prevailing values of our society.

Let us look at the message of Jesus to His time and to

ours. The gospel accounts reveal Christ's persistent exposure of the shortcomings of the prevailing systems of His day. His call to discipleship beckoned those who followed to begin a new life, both personally and corporately, on new foundations. For Christ, the problems of injustice and the lack of social righteousness were at the very heart of the problem. The values upon which the existing institutions and political movements were based were the desire for power and domination, the quest for money, and the lure of prestige and recognition. The kingdom of Christ, on the other hand, proclaimed a new life based not on the values of selfishness but on a radical selflessness. The false values of money, glory, and power are to be forsaken. Instead of hoarding, there is to be sharing. Instead of ambition and glory, humility is to reign. Instead of power and domination, there is to be voluntary service.

The values of Christ's kingdom are as shockingly revolutionary in our own modern technological society as they were to the provincial Palestine or the militarist Roman Empire of His own day. Giving oneself to Christ and His society means that one's life will be utterly revolutionized. This is why I believe that one does not find in Christ's life an endorsement of any of the political trends of His day, be they the crusades of the Zealots, the approach of the Sadducees to work with the present system, or the haughty legalistic attempt of many of the Pharisees to achieve religious purity. Christ invites us to follow Him in creating a new life and a new society.

We must not suppose that Christ was a-political. On the contrary, His message could not have been addressed more pointedly to the social and political injustices and realities of His time. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, contains four beatitudes which deal with giving comfort and hope to the oppressed, and four others which give encouragement and blessing to those who help the cause of the oppressed. The truth is that our Lord set forth a hope for social and political renewal, for achieving God's purposes and standards of justice, which was far more radical in its dimensions than any of the movements of His time.

That hope is rooted in a response to the good news of the kingdom of God, and involves, today as then, a total transformation of the way life is defined.

In the light of this gospel of the kingdom, let us look briefly at the church as the basis of political witness to our society. I believe that the existence and the very life of the church must be at the heart of our Christian witness to the state. Christ's own images for the presence of His disciples in society—light, leaven, salt—all suggest that those called to God's purposes will have a distinctive identity, a unique character. The quality of this presence in the world is to be a sign of the kingdom's promise, and thus it is to shed light, to add a distinctive flavor, and to enable extraordinary hope and possibilities for the world.

Our problem, perhaps, has been that the church has not shed light because its own light has been too engulfed in darkness; it has not been the salt of the world because its own life has lost its savor; it cannot be the leaven because its own life is lacking the energy of God's Spirit. Given the great numbers of people represented by the church today, the sophisticated technology available to us, the friendly, or at worst indifferent, environment in which the church in North America exists, the church's lack of influence in the world may indeed appear as a discouraging contrast to the bold and dynamic witness of the early church, planted as it was in a pagan society with but a handful of people, few of whom were well-educated, well-bred, or influential.

Our Christian witness to the state must begin by re-establishing, in our own life as God's people, that quality which gives genuine witness to the kingdom. Our standard is never one of withdrawal, but rather one of pointed, courageous, and sacrificial interest and penetration into all passages of the world. Through the record of biblical history, God has worked to achieve His purposes for all the world by calling out a people to be faithful to Him, and then calling them to pour out their lives for the purposes of God's justice, of His love for all of humanity. Our task is always to call society toward the kingdom. We must never suppose that our only responsibility is to get individual

people saved. Rather, we must continually hold forth the messages and the promises of the kingdom of God to a secular society, to a society that does not yet proclaim Christ's lordship.

Of course if one temptation is to withdraw from the world, the opposite one is to take part in the world's systems uncritically, playing by their rules, their standards, in order to work for God's purposes. Again the Bible gives us, I believe, a different word of counsel. We are to be in the world, because Christ is Lord over all, but that is not to be mistaken for being like the world, captive ourselves to its myths, idols, and gods, absorbed by its system of thought, power, and life. Our fundamental allegiance and loyalty is always to another kingdom. Hence we can expect a tension, a clash, between the calling of that kingdom and those purposes to which societies and nations want to give themselves. Not to expect such a confrontation is to believe that the kingdom has already arrived and to nullify the witness and presence our life is intended to bear.

We must always ask society to embrace some aspect of the kingdom vision beyond society's present reality. Thus our presence and our witness will always have a prophetic quality. This is true by definition, simply because the kingdom has not yet been fulfilled. Our words and our witness must be translated into partial goals and be addressed to contemporary issues, such as the goals of human rights, or equality, or the elimination of poverty, or a new international economic order of justice and disarmament.

For instance, during recent months of my work as a senator (1976-1977), I have been involved in trying to take tobacco out of the Food for Peace program, to stop the funding for the neutron bomb, to combat congressional attempts to deny funds for President Carter's pardon program for draft evaders, to establish a world peace tax fund. Although at first glance there seems to be little uniformity or pattern in these activities, in each case my Christian commitment was fundamental to my motivations. I of course disavow any pretense of knowing a

definitive Christian position on such miscellaneous issues, and in the legislating arena these questions were debated in secular terms. Yet in each case an element of judgment was brought to bear on present policies, goals, attitudes, values, assumptions; a stance of challenging policies rather than accepting the general drift of things. As it happens, each of these proposals was defeated. Yet in each case, a witness was borne, I trust, to the goals which would move us in the direction of the kingdom, as I understand it. Essential to all of these is a prophetic stance which always begins at the point of what the kingdom asks of us all.

We of course know that sin will pose obstacles to the full achievement of these goals, and we know that even if and when they are achieved, the call of the kingdom still beckons us. We know too that even these goals cannot be reached without some fundamental changes in the values of materialism, pride, and power. Yet I believe that we can and must address a witness to the state which entails both judgment and hope. The judgment: that its present course is headed on the path to destruction and despair. The hope: that a vision of life exists, and that even the smallest steps taken toward it are better than treading the present path, broad and smooth as it may seem. If the challenge seems great, we might remember the simple yet compelling way in which an Old Testament prophet describes our responsibility in society: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, *RSV*).

2

God's Will and America's Destiny

Joel Nederhood

One speaks of America's destiny against a background of a long tradition of people who have encouraged one another by saying: "America is indeed the greatest nation in the world, the nation that God is going to use to establish His purposes in creation." European explorers and settlers as early as Columbus himself thought about the New World in terms of God's great purposes for mankind. Many of our colonial ancestors came to America with a sense that God was bringing them here not only to do something for themselves, but to do something for all people everywhere. By the time of the Revolutionary War many people were already speaking about America's special destiny. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow gave voice in the nineteenth century to a common and popular sentiment when he wrote:

Thou, too sail on! O Ship of State,
Sail on! O Union, strong and great.
Humanity with all its fears,

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