

# The Church and Public Policy

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What should be the attitude of the church — and of the Christian — toward the great problems of our time? The problems of racial conflict, poverty, environmental pollution, crime, war, underdeveloped countries, population control, etc.? Should the church member take an active interest in public policies that seek to ameliorate economic and social conditions detrimental to human welfare and dignity? Or is his responsibility fully met when he has helped bring Christ to the world and when he manifests love toward those he meets each day? Does the imminence of Christ's return suggest that active concern with public policy is inappropriate to a Christian whose priorities are in proper order?

Most members of the church would probably endorse the latter position. They regard the world as inevitably headed on a downward course, believe that anything that distracts attention from spreading the gospel is a snare of Satan, and are convinced that the path the church has followed is the only path consistent with the true faith. Perhaps they are correct — but then again perhaps they are not.

Any assumption that the church should direct its attention only to the spiritual health of mankind immediately confronts the fact that the church *has* concerned itself with men's physical condition since its inception. For decades the church has sponsored programs that minister to men's material needs. Nor can it be said that the church has done this solely because such a ministry provides an opening wedge for more effective evangelism — since the church has also supported legislation that restricts the sale of alcoholic beverages and curbs cigarette advertising, and it applauds members of the church who are prominently engaged in supporting such legislation.

When the church carries forward educational efforts warning against

destructive health habits, it can be argued that this creates goodwill and a milieu more favorable to its spiritual efforts. But when it backs legislative measures having the same objective, this justification applies no more than if the church advocated legislation against racial discrimination, against poverty amidst affluence, and against pollution. Are not these evils much more destructive than bad health habits? Thus it cannot be logically argued that increased concern for legislation promoting men's physical, mental, or emotional welfare is incompatible with accepted church practices.

The position herein taken is that Christian principles should be applied in every phase and on all planes of human experience — that the Christian's obligation has a broader sweep than is usually associated with it by most church members.

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## I

What principles do I have in mind? Four, primarily.

The *first* is implicitly rather than explicitly identified with the Christian faith: the principle that sufficient individual freedom should be guaranteed by government to enable men to pursue their legitimate spiritual and secular interests. This principle has long been associated with the concept of the dignity and importance of the individual — a concept to which Christianity has made a major contribution.

The *second* is that in a world in which the rich, the aggressive, and the clever have a disproportionate share of life's benefits, the welfare of the poor, the despised, and the downtrodden deserves special consideration. The writings of the latter Old Testament prophets as well as the example of Christ eloquently attest to the biblical nature of this attitude.

The *third* is that, since God has equal regard for all men, regardless of race or color, we should be likewise in our private and collective lives. The life of Christ and the preaching of Paul amply vindicate the Christian character of this principle.

*Finally*, war is a morally repugnant and an ineffective means of settling national conflicts.

The thesis being advanced rests largely on the following propositions. If we want to sustain democratic freedom for ourselves, we should seek to sustain it for others. If the individual Christian should be especially solicitous of the unfortunate, public policy should do likewise. If racial discrimination is wrong in our private and church affairs, it should be opposed in public affairs. Finally, if it is desirable for the individual Christian to relieve human distress, it is even more appropriate for him to prevent such distress.

Specifically, it is a more intelligent act of lovingkindness to help a jobless man find a job, or obtain job training so he can support his family, than to bring him food baskets. (The latter have their place, of course.) The former act not only helps supply the man's physical needs but also enables him to maintain the dignity and self-respect that charity does not and cannot provide. Again, if it is desirable for the individual Christian to act in this more enlightened fashion, it is equally appropriate for public policy to promote full employment, with the enthusiastic support and encouragement of practicing Christians. "Do unto others" is a wise basis for public policy as well as for private behavior. Last, war simply cannot be squared with the Sermon on the Mount.

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Is there a persuasive reason why the Christian should not attempt to apply Christian principles to every activity in which he participates, to give them the widest possible reach? Unless the answer, incredibly, is negative, the Christian would seem to bear the responsibility not only for acting on Christian tenets in his private life but also of acting on them in his role as citizen. And this means that he should seek to determine what policies best incorporate those tenets and which candidates for public office are most likely to support them.

## II

Is it all rather hopeless, since a general deterioration of individual and collective behavior lies prophetically before us? Certainly there are ample grounds for pessimism concerning the future of our society and our world. Yet it is entirely possible that the situation that has existed during the last century will persist for a considerable time — that is, conditions will improve in some respects and worsen in others.

It can hardly be denied that public morality has made some progress in the past hundred years — in the treatment of the mentally deranged, in improved prison conditions, in protective legislation for the Negro, in public health and other services for the poor, in the treatment of conscientious objectors, in the replacement of the spoils system with civil service, and in numerous other ways.

At the same time, few Christians would deny that Western civilization has seriously retrogressed in terms of the prevalence of religious faith, in the perversion of the faith which remains, in the moral nihilism and chaos which abounds, and in the general decay of private morals. In the most fundamental sense, Western man's spiritual well-being seems to be declining, but amidst the decline men have somehow managed to adopt more

humane policies in certain areas. There is no compelling reason to believe that this paradox will not continue for years to come. In any case, it is the Christian's responsibility to help his fellow men in every possible way, whatever the prospects for success may be.

Will the church member's interests and energies be diverted from more pressing matters — the salvation of souls — to less pressing matters, such as the reduction of personal indignities and physical suffering? This is not a danger that can be cavalierly dismissed. In fact, it can be cogently argued that the modern churches have grievously erred in directing their attention almost exclusively to social work and social legislation while ignoring the emphasis on individual salvation that unquestionably is central to New Testament teaching. Even so, there is a position on the continuum somewhere between total absorption in social legislation and total indifference to it which most adequately meets Christian premises.

It is not being argued that the church should redirect its major efforts toward political, economic, and social reforms; that would be a grave mistake. But the church could make clear that it endorses certain general principles without endorsing specific political means for implementing those principles.

That is, the church could make clear its staunch support of legislation intelligently designed to reduce racial discrimination — but without approving a particular approach or a particular bill. It could make clear its sympathy for legislative efforts to help the poor and the unfortunate — without taking a stand on the various concrete alternatives for achieving that end. It could make clear its approval of public policy that enlarges or bulwarks individual freedom without trying to identify the precise balance that should be struck between freedom and order. (Exceptions might be necessary where religious freedom was directly at stake.)

If this seems to restrict the church to a role of bloodless, platitudinous philosophizing, it is only because the church is not qualified to follow another course, nor could it do so without jeopardizing its capacity to play its role on the world scene. Is the church really qualified to say whether the poor should be helped by continuation of the Job Corps rather than by the program of the National Alliance of Businessmen or by using the federal government as an "employer of last resort"? Is the church qualified to prescribe the precise legislation needed to support Negro voting rights and school desegregation? Or to specify the kind of legislation that would best ensure adequate health care for lower income groups? Or to advise whether foreign aid should be bilateral or through the United Nations — or how

much aid less developed countries are capable of wisely absorbing? Can it knowledgeably declare what legislative priorities the nation should establish in meeting its many urgent needs?

No, the church has no expertise to offer in these matters. These questions involve highly technical and complex matters that cannot be resolved by Christian goodwill, intuition, or an examination of the Scriptures. The church could become embroiled in endless controversies of a divisive nature if it sought to take stands on particular bills. But enunciation of certain broad general principles would be divisive only insofar as some people resist a deepening awareness of the full implications of the Christian faith.

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If this awareness leads to resentment, let us recall that Christ did not hesitate to set forth views which angered those with a limited or a distorted view of God's will. Most of the readers of SPECTRUM probably wish the church had taken a more forthright position on racial discrimination — in public, private, and church life — before secular and Negro criticism forced it belatedly to recognize the unchristian character of such discrimination. We cannot comfortably assume that we will not face avoidable and embarrassing crises in the future over other matters which a clear-sighted projection of the Christian faith might help us avoid.

### III

The job of the church is to carry on the work it has been doing, and to do it with all vigor and dispatch — while also proclaiming its support for the political realization of Christian principles that are clearly applicable to public policy. But the church should leave up to the *individual* the job of applying those principles to specific issues.

True, the individual member lacks expertise, also. True, he may judge unwisely. But to decide is to take risks, and the possibility of error is a hazard of existence for Christians as well as nonchristians. Surely it is better for the Christian to act and occasionally err in his efforts to help his fellowmen through appropriate public policy than to ignore this plane altogether. Neither the climate of the times nor the fullness of the Christian vision permits us the privilege of confining our constructive efforts exclusively to church and private spheres of action.

On the other hand, if the church were to appear to be placing God's sanction on a specific policy which later proved ill-advised, the church could be subjected to damaging criticism. People expect individuals to err; they are less tolerant of church error.

If the church, then, helps provide its members with a broader Christian

perspective and sensitizes their consciences to their need to help their fellowmen on as many fronts as possible, it will have played its part adequately.

But will this distract laymen and the ministry from their major goal — saving souls? I do not believe so. The ministry's hands are already full — and I am not suggesting any appreciable diversion of their efforts or those of the active laity. But as every pastor sorrowfully knows, most church members are not active in the church and are not likely to become so in the future. The church may remonstrate, supplicate, threaten, coax, and cajole as it will, but most church members will only stir uneasily in their seats and continue their passivity.

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If these persons were to apply some small part of their unused energies in cooperating with others in relieving the unfortunate, furthering racial harmony, and promoting greater equality of opportunity, they would have taken a step forward. And if the ministry were more alert to the correlation between certain broad public endeavors and established Christian values, this would represent no insignificant increase in their enlightenment. As a consequence, the tone of their message would be subtly altered in such a way as to produce a more Christian orientation toward public policy by the laity.

Meanwhile, the church would not leave itself open to criticism that it and its members are largely indifferent to many of the great questions that agitate our age.