

Political Activism and the Christian's Responsibility

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[Presented at the California Pastoral Conference, January 27, 1981]

“Confusing” is about the only word which will describe the Christian’s evaluation of the full-scale involvement of fundamental and evangelical churches and their quasi-church organizations in the political arena. While we have lamentably grown accustomed to the liberal churches’ involvement in politics for years now, most of us find ourselves surprised, frustrated and confused by the conservatives’ sudden and powerful entry into the 1980 elections. As pastors, there were probably few among us who were not approached by our members with searching questions about such groups as the Moral Majority, the Christian Voice, the Religious Roundtable, the National Christian Action Coalition, the Christian Voters Victory Fund, etc. It is highly probable that many of our members enjoyed hearing political rhetoric based on: the themes of God, country, free market economics and national defense. In fact, if the truth were known, we would likely discover that not a few of our members mailed cash contributions to churches and organizations of the new Religious Right.

Now that the 1980 elections are over, are we to write off this phenomenon as a one-time occurrence? Is a paper on this topic anti-climactic and little more than a historical report? Not according to the predictions of *Christian Century* which declares its belief that the Religious Right will continue their work beyond the election into the realm of very active lobbying.¹ Writers for the Moral Majority make their ideas about the future quite clear, “Moral Majority must continue; we have no choice. The battle has just begun and promises to be a long and hard fight. We are prepared...but keep in mind that Moral Majority is not an old man gasping for breath, but a newborn testing its political lungs and finding them strong.”² Jerry Falwell is reported to have said, “We now have a great government in Washington which is friendly to what we are trying to do...Our work has just begun.”³ Former Senator George McGovern is also taking seriously the future of the Religious Right. He has announced the formation of the National Coalition of Common Sense with a budget of \$10,000,000 to “expose fundamentalists.”⁴ It would appear that in the minds of both the friend and foe of the Religious Right, there is an expectation that this phenomenon will be with us for some time.

A question frequently posed regarding the conservative churches’ entrance into the political scene is that of its effectiveness. Just how much political clout does this movement really have? From my research, I am not sure that anyone, save God Himself, really knows. It can be noted that most of those on the Moral Majority’s “hit list” went down to defeat. While Moral Majority only had a budget of \$1.5 million, that along with other conservative political groups disbursed \$9 million since January 1, 1979.⁵ Falwell, on the “Good Morning America” TV program of November 13, 1980, claimed to have contributed to the registration of 4 or 5 million people. On other occasions, it has been stated that Falwell’s group is responsible for bringing 14 million votes to the polls.⁶ Others have claimed that he speaks for 60 million people in the U.S.⁷ If this is true, the Gallup Poll’s survey does not reflect such strong support among the Evangelicals it questioned, finding 52% of the Evangelicals supported Carter and 31% supported Reagan in the presidential election; but just how reliable are such surveys in view of the polls taken prior to this last election? While we cannot determine the full measure of the Religious Right or even the effectiveness of the Moral Majority, I believe it is a force with which we must reckon so as to answer the theological questions it raises in the nation and in the minds of our parishioners. I

¹ *Christian Century* – Oct. 8, 1980.

² *Moral Majority Report* – Nov. 17, 1980, pg. 7.

³ *Christian News* – Nov. – Nov. 17, 1980.

⁴ *Christian Beacon* – Nov. 20, 1980.

⁵ *Record Searchlight*, Redding, CA – Nov. 6, 1980, pg. 6.

⁶ *Christian News* – Nov. 17, 1980.

⁷ *US News & World Report* – Sept. 15, 1980.

personally believe that a segment of this force, as it manifests itself in parachurch organizations, deserves our most careful scrutiny.

In order to understand religious political activism today, we are obligated to look at the various groups presently involved.

The group from Fundamentalist and Evangelical segments of the church which received the greatest attention prior to the election is the Moral Majority. Under the very dynamic leadership of Dr. Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church of Lynchburg, Virginia and radio and TV preacher, the Moral Majority has become the proverbial household word. The stated goals of the non-profit, registered lobby are as follows:

1. A belief in the Judeo-Christian ethic upon which the nation was founded
2. To act as a political organization not based on theological considerations
3. Opposition to abortion, pornography, the drug epidemic, the breakdown of traditional family life in America, homosexuality, ERA and other immoral cancers in the U.S.⁸

As a coalition of Mormons, Jews, Roman Catholics, Protestants of many persuasions and others, the Moral Majority claims to support the principle of the separation of church and state. While the organization claims to endorse no candidate, it does promote the criteria by which candidates should be elected. Private citizens are encouraged to vote on the basis of: “(1) Commitment to the moral principles which, in our opinion, made this nation great; (2) Competence and capacity to perform efficiently and effectively in the office being sought; and (3) A reasonable track record to support the genuineness of the candidate’s commitment.”⁹ The organization categorically states that it is opposed to the idea of a Christian republic.

Whether the Moral Majority lives up to its claims is a matter worthy of debate. While claiming to endorse no candidate, Dr. Falwell made the matter of how he was going to vote very public. In an article entitled “MM’s State Affiliates Not Election Year Phenomenons,” the MM’s state affiliates were cautioned about *endorsing* candidates who could go down to defeat or, even worse, win the election and then change their position while in office.¹⁰ A not-so-subtle “non-endorsement” endorsement of Mrs. Alma Noble for a congressional seat in the state of Hawaii is also made in the *MM Report*.¹¹ Furthermore, one of Dr. Falwell’s singing groups introduced a gospel number as one that would soon be sung in Plains, Georgia, “There’s a joy in the camp. A sinner has come home.”¹² One finds it difficult to be sympathetic to Dr. Falwell’s charge of “bad press” when the *MM Reports* often contradict the official position of MM. While stating a commitment to the separation of Church and State, the *MM Report* prints an article about Dr. John Gerstner, retired professor of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and enthusiastic supporter of MM, saying, “He (Dr. Gerstner) doesn’t think Church and State should be separate at all. In fact, Gerstner says the ideal situation in history has been for the Church and State to work together with laws based on the Bible, as interpreted by church leaders.”¹³ While “thrilled with the success” of MM, Fr. Robert E. Burns, C.S.P., apparently doesn’t understand the nature of MM either: “Today we have an energetic, fundamentalist Protestant political group called MM.”¹⁴ According to the official position of MM, it is not to be a religious group based on “theological considerations.” After reading three *MM Reports*, I can see why people are confused about the true nature and purpose of the MM.

Other segments of the Religious Right have gone even farther, even to the point of sending out large mailings which provide members, friends and all who will listen a list of candidates for whom the Christian should vote...some of which have probably come across your desks prior to the election. According to most of these, it would appear that the will of God at the polls in 1980 was the election of conservative Republicans. A

⁸ *Moral Majority Report* – Oct. 15, 1980, pg. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

¹² *Christian News* – Oct. 20, 1980, pg. 16.

¹³ *Moral Majority Report* – Oct. 15, 1980, pg. 11

¹⁴ *The Wanderer*, Oct. 2, 1980 as quoted in *MMR*, Oct. 15, 1980, pg. 10.

number of local Fundamentalist and Evangelical congregations polled local and national candidates and printed the results for their congregations, oftentimes including the candidates' past voting records. Ratings for Republicans in the Senate averaged 56.5% to the Democrats' 21.7% and ratings for the House showed Republicans with 79.2% to the Democrats 39.0%.¹⁵ Because such information came from churches, the ill-informed might well draw the conclusion that God was a conservative Republican.

In years past, it has always been appalling to us to be informed that the local Roman Catholic priest would have the gall to stand before his parish and tell the member exactly how a "good Catholic" should vote. Somehow, we are ill-equipped to tolerate this sort of thing among the conservative bodies of Protestantism.

No article on political activism in the church would be complete without reference to the liberal churches. For most of these churches, political activism has become a vital part of their so-called gospel. You undoubtedly read of the National Council of Churches' endorsement of the PLO with the requirement that the PLO make an "unambiguous statement" recognizing Israel's right to exist. In an article bearing the title "Christian Politics and The New Right," the liberals' philosophy is clear: "It is time for Christians to realize that Jesus Christ is Lord of all – and that includes secular politics as well as church matters."¹⁶ Yet in the same article, probably smarting from the wins of the Religious Right, the following statement appears, "Preaching the Word, not political mobilization or indoctrination, is the central responsibility of pastors." Looking at the track record of many liberal pastors, this statement is difficult to swallow. It appears to be the case that now that conservative pastors and congregations have moved into the realm of politics, the liberals want to cry "Foul." While LCUSA may boast that it is not a lobby, the Rev. Charles Bergstrom had to admit that LCUSA goes before the legislature to express its will.¹⁷ Few of us are even surprised when we hear of the liberal churches supporting some radical, liberal cause. While we may be outraged at the \$2,000,000 given to guerrilla organizations in Africa by the World Council of Churches, we know their action to be consistent with their involvement and support of left-wing politics.

Of course the picture will not be complete without a brief reference to those churches that will have nothing to do with government or the exercise of citizenship. This group includes not only the sect of Jehovah's Witnesses, but also pacifist groups, some Quakers and a few of the Fundamentalist groups. For many of them, government is evil or at least a symbol of the evil world. Voting and political activism is not encouraged at times even being discouraged, among its members; nor do their churches engage in political activities. Since they deem themselves to be "spiritual," they want nothing to do with the secular.

Looking at the political activism of such groups, there are several areas which immediately trouble us. In the case of the Moral Majority and like-minded groups, there is a serious misunderstanding of the Biblical concept of morality. Frequently quoted on Falwell's Sunday night TV broadcast is the passage, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14)." By most groups of the Religious Right this passage is regarded as a basic call for morality. What they derive from this passage is little more than moralism. They ignore such phrases as "my people," "humble themselves" and "turn from their wicked ways" and their theological message. A careful reading of the text and context will reveal that the Lord is calling His people to repentance and faith, not to mere morality. The immorality of the Israelites was only a symptom of a much more serious illness: unbelief. For the Christian, morality is the result of his faith in Christ. While the MM may be commended for its effort to get people to the polls, it must be censured for failing to come to grips with our nation's real problem: unbelief. The most worthwhile appraisal of MM on this very point as well as several other theological issues is an article by Dr. Bob Jones, III. Calling the immorality of our nation only a symptom, he writes, "Sin is the disease or causal factor in our national decline."¹⁸ The more one reads the literature of the Religious Right, the more he will discover a serious lack of distinctive Biblical Christianity....And yet, its leaders and disciples often regard what they are doing as "Christian." One cannot

¹⁵ *Christian Century* – Oct. 8, 1980.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Good Morning America" – Nov. 13, 1980.

¹⁸ *Faith for the Family* – Sept. 1980, pg. 3.

help but wonder if its call for morality is but a prelude for a return of Moral Rearmament or the old Social Gospel and eventually into the open, waiting arms of Humanism. In this regard, it should be noted that *Faith Aflame*, published by Dr. Falwell, carried an article by Edwin T. Dahlberg, noted liberal ecumenist and former personal secretary of Dr. Walter Rauschenbusch, the “father of the Social Gospel.”¹⁹ While it is true that God blesses the morality of all people in this life, the morality which He requires of His people is a morality of love which proceeds from faith in Jesus Christ. The preaching of moralism by any Christian renders a tremendous disservice to those who hear and respond, for they soon draw the conclusion that their morality makes them right with God. In such a preaching of moralism a sharp awareness of sin is blunted; and with such misconceptions people become more difficult to evangelize with the Gospel. “That only makes them more ‘respectable’ sinners. Hell will still be their eternal home.”²⁰

Another area of serious concern is that of a false ecumenism which has been produced and is practiced by the Religious Right. It cannot be denied that the promotion of a moral reformation is a religious activity. In promoting such a reformation, we find Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews and a wide variety of Protestants working together in a theological hodgepodge of moralism. Suddenly, in the name of morality, it is acceptable to be “unequally yoked together” with those of radically different doctrinal persuasions on the national level, while on the local level such alliances are forbidden. As Billy Graham was used to bring many an Evangelical into the ecumenical stream, so it could well be that the Moral Majority will be the tool to bring Fundamentalists and the remaining Evangelicals into the same ecumenical waters. “A close, analytical, biblical look at the Moral Majority, however, reveals a movement that holds more potential for hastening the church of Antichrist and building the ecumenical church than anything to come down the pike in a long time, including the charismatic movement.”²¹

Another area of concern is the belief that there is a moral *majority*. Could it be that we are just kidding ourselves? I have yet to see the documentation that the majority of people in the U.S. are moral. The very liberal *Changes* raises a valid question on this point, obviously for a different reason, “Not only are the concepts of morality of this group suspect, their quantitative arrogance is also suspect. By whose count are they a majority? A majority of whom? Americans? Christians?”²² I strongly suspect that we have in this country not only a Christian minority, but also a moral minority. Our national appetites would lead us to this conclusion.

The matter of Christian witness is also a matter of great concern in view of the activities of the Religious Right. As a result of their activity, many Christians have become confused. “Is political activity a valid function of the Christian Church?” becomes a burning question in the minds of many concerned Christians. For while MM pays lip service to separation of Church and State, it violates this principle regularly. If the Christian is sufficiently concerned, he can consult the Scriptures, but what about the non-Christian? In view of the powerful impact of the Political Right., what conclusions will he draw about Christianity from what he has seen in the last few months? He would hardly come to the conclusion that the role of the Church is to preach the Gospel with the urgency and fervency of the apostle Paul. Even when the Church’s role is not wrong, but could easily be misunderstood the counsel of Paul should be heeded, “Abstain from all appearance (εἶδους) of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22). Our task as the Church and ministers of the Word is that of the proclamation of *His* Word, not the gospel of politics. We dare not let anything within our control deter us from this task.

When the Church becomes politically active, it opens itself to the abuse of its political opponents. The old proverb, euphemistically stated, “Don’t fight with a skunk; you can’t win” comes into play here. Of course, Christ said the same thing in a much more beautiful manner, “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (Mt. 7:6). Anyone following the Religious Right’s progress will become quickly aware of the abuse it has taken in the press, especially in the area of political cartoons. One such cartoon shows Dr. Falwell drowning the liberals

¹⁹ *Faith For the Family* – Feb. 1980, pg. 2.

²⁰ *Faith For the Family* – Sept. 1980, pg. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Changes*, Institute of Changing Ministries, USC School of Religion – Winter 1981, pg. 1.

with the caption, “I baptize thee in the name of the Moral Majority and the Christian Voice! Next!”²³ Once in the arena of politics, the church dare not cry “foul” when a Nicholas von Hoffman writes a diatribe of scathing sarcasm entitled “Some Are Born Too Often.”²⁴ Neither should it complain when the ACLU in a paid ad in the *New York Times* reads, “If the Moral Majority Has Its Way, You’d Better Start Praying.”²⁵ In this case the *Jewish Week—American Examiner* got into the act attacking the ACLU for its attack on the Moral Majority with an article entitled, “ACLU Hysteria Insults Intelligence of Public.”²⁶ Of course Planned Parenthood had to get into the *New York Times* with a full page ad stating, “If you make contraception and abortion illegal, you better make sex illegal.”²⁷ And of course there is the infamous statement of Patricia Harris, Secretary of Health and Human Resources, “I am beginning to fear that we could have an Ayatollah Khomeini in this country, but that he will not have a beard, but he will have a television program.”²⁸ Granted, the world will always heap scorn and ridicule upon true Christianity wherever it can; but the Savior would encourage us not to actively seek such attacks nor provide the unbelieving world with additional opportunities for a kind of ridicule that hinges on blasphemy and becomes a stumbling block to our evangelism efforts.

It should also be remembered that we Christians have a tendency to be considerably naïve about the real nature of the practice of politics in this country. We as Christians, and especially as Lutherans, like to think of issues of politics as those confrontations which can easily be answered with the absolute truth of the Bible as we seek to do in the Church. And even when we, at times, have difficulty in doing this within the Church, we seem to think that the issues of the political world can be met with simple straightforwardness determining the issue at hand to be “good” or “bad.” It is with this simplistic approach that too many in the Church, preachers among them have chosen to face the political beast. For example, suppose the Rev. Gross Stimme has a concern that involves politics. Armed with the Bible, he comes prepared to face the political dragon only to discover that the rules for such a confrontation are not what he thought: one of the cardinal rules for such a confrontation is that of compromise. The only way such a confrontation will be permitted will be under the condition that each side will play the game following the sacred rule of compromise. If, prior to this confrontation, Rev. Stimme has made a big to-do about how he is going to clean up the government armed only with the Word of God and is also afflicted with a bit of pride or vanity, he may feel pressured into playing the political game of compromise and will at best only confuse or disappoint those who support him. I believe we have a case of this very thing in Dr. Falwell’s many statements about the prayers of the Jews. Having first stated with Dr. Bailey Smith that God does not hear the prayers of those who do not accept Christ,²⁹ he begins to vacillate. Under pressure of the Jewish community and millennial attachments to the Jews, Falwell among others changed his view to say, “God hears the prayers of every redeemed gentile and Jew.” When this statement failed to satisfy his critics, especially the Jews and universalists, Falwell visited Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum in New York and agreed to a statement defending American pluralism and stating that “God hears the cry of any sincere person who calls on Him.”³⁰ When asked to state his view on the doctrine of the “Chosen People,” one of his aids said that Falwell “probably would.” After several weeks and much pressure because of his three different statements about the prayers of the Jews, the petitioning newspaper was advised that Falwell would not present his views on the subject.³¹ As a politician in a political organization, he had no call to speak on a religious matter; and yet as a pastor, he had the call to declare biblical truth. While we do not judge the motives of Falwell and recognize the pressures that came upon him, we must censure him for compromising Scriptural truth.

As Christians we often are in danger of concluding that most of the political issues that concern us as Christians are clear-cut and relatively simple to resolve. The truth of the matter is that our political process

²³ *Record Searchlight* – Nov. 14, 1980, pg. 42.

²⁴ *The Evening Sentinel*, Carlisle, PA – July 30, 1980.

²⁵ *New York Times* – Nov. 23, 1980.

²⁶ *Jewish Week—American Examiner* as reproduced in *MMR* – Dec. 15, 1980.

²⁷ Reproduced in *Christian News* – Oct. 20, 1980.

²⁸ *Christian Beacon* – Nov. 6, 1980.

²⁹ *The Northwestern Lutheran* – Dec. 7, 1980, pg. 399.

³⁰ *Newsweek* – Nov. 10, 1980 as reproduced in *Christian Beacon* – Nov. 6, 1980.

³¹ *Spotlight* – Jan. 19, 1981, pg. 16.

makes most issues complicated and some almost impossible to resolve. It has happened more than once that a person has found himself on the “wrong side” of an issue simply because he did not discern the complexity of the issue. Christians must be aware that when faith and morality become political issues, they are subject to the complexity and the “give and take” of the political process. This fact was made all too clear to those conservative Christians who attended the Baltimore White House Conference on Families. Thinking that this conference would be definitely pro-family in its posture, many Christians attended with high hopes. But from the beginning of the conference, with the Christless prayer by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Baltimore, to the end, all basic Christian family principles were compromised into oblivion. The final resolution of the conference included favorable statements on ERA, abortion, homosexual rights, etc. so that many Christians were forced to walk out of the conference in protest lest they should be held accountable for the resolutions.³²

Another concern of the Christian who chooses to enter politics with moral and spiritual concerns must be the means by which he is going to achieve his objective. While many a Christian has begun with high principles and means, the pressure or frustration of trying to achieve his goal often causes him to stoop to the utilitarian philosophy that the end justifies the means. At the meeting of the National Religious Broadcasters in Lynchburg, Virginia, the members of the conference were told in a workshop, “Political leaders can be made to look like buffoons or heroes by carefully managing the information presented. The liberally-oriented media do it all the time, and conservatives can too.”³³

Still another area in the Christian’s entrance into the realm of politics is the Biblical matter of offense. If it is true that most political issues are complex and seldom clear-cut, the Christian must be extremely careful that he does not offend someone by using the name of Church or Christianity to propagate his view in matters which have no clear basis in Scripture. While the Christian and the Church has every right to speak out on truly spiritual and moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality, the Christian family, and religious freedom on the hand, the issues of national defense, nuclear arms, nuclear power plants, ecological and economic concerns, etc. do not fall into the area of the Church’s business on the other hand. And it just might be that Christians don’t know everything there is to know about these subjects. In these points and a host of others are points on which the Christian can validly differ. Our task as Christians and the Church is the preaching of the Gospel. How dare we turn someone away from the Gospel by our zealous verbiage (maybe even undigested regurgitations) on candidates, Republicanism, Democratism, Populism, Conservatism, Liberalism, a host of secular issues and the like? Equally offensive are the Religious Right’s high ratings to those whose morals are suspect as in the case of Robert E. Bauman who received high ratings from MM and who has since been allowed to plead innocent (through the process of plea-bargaining) to soliciting a 16-year-old boy if he would agree to a six-month alcohol rehabilitation program. Richard Kelly is also an embarrassment to the Christian Voice who gave him the highest score for his political performance...only to see him indicted on Abscam charges.

Sometimes the Christian’s presence in politics becomes downright embarrassing because of the Christian’s ignorance. It is amazing how many Christians there are who believe that God’s form of government is what we have in America, namely, a democracy. Somehow they seem to have forgotten that Americans pledge allegiance to “the *Republic* of the United States of America,” Some even go so far as to equate the form of our government in the U.S. with Christianity and with the same mindset seek a Zwinglian-Calvinistic theocracy as the ideal for America. While we readily admit our joy over the freedoms that the Church has enjoyed under our country’s form of government and even recognize that, in part, our government form was the product of the Christian faith, we cannot and must not identify Christianity with any form of government. We must also recognize that our government’s principle of the separation of Church and State has many interpretations. In part, this was caused by the various influences which led to the shaping of our governmental structure, such as Quakers, Deists, Puritans, Dissenters, Moralists, Christians, etc., most of whom saw the Bible and Christ as providing “a clear understanding of the profound yet simple precepts of Jesus Christ.”³⁴ The

³² *Faith For the Family* – Sept. 1980, pg. 10-11.

³³ *Christian News* – Oct. 20, 1980, pg. 16.

³⁴ “The Footprints of Time – 1879”, Charles Bancroft. *The Christian History of the Constitution of the U.S.A.*, Foundation for American Christian Education: San Francisco, 1975.

official founding documents of our nation acknowledged God by various designations and provided for religious freedom including the Church's freedom from government control. As originally written, these documents did not deny the government the right to call upon God or to proclaim days of thanksgiving or humiliation as in the case of Presidents Washington, Adams, Lincoln, etc. Neither did it deny the government the right to demand oaths in the name of God or legislate a moral code which was Deist-Christian in origin. Jefferson was the first of the presidents who took a more severe approach to the matter of this separation refusing to follow his predecessors in issuing proclamations of thanksgiving festivals. Today, that separation has evolved to a point never intended by the framers of our nation: a kind of governmental atheism or humanism. An example of this extreme position can be seen in "A Secular Humanist Declaration" which states on the subject of Church and State, "any effort to impose an exclusive conception of Truth, Piety, Virtue or Justice is a violation of free inquiry."³⁵ It is interesting to note that the document does not call this imposition a violation of the Constitution. More recently, we are beginning to see trends whereby the government seeks to rule the Church in the form of regulations it places upon the Church and its workers. Ignorance of such facts has led many a cleric to make some incorrect and often hideous comments and not infrequently to make of himself an absolute fool.

These errors and many others are of such a serious nature, that Dr. Bob Jones, Jr. was moved to call Falwell "the most dangerous man in America for Biblical Christianity."³⁶

The error of the liberal churches is one which has been often discussed...perhaps even cussed. Simply stated, it is a colossal mixture of Church and State...often to such a degree that the Gospel is seen as the gospel of left-wing politics. We should remember that if the Church should take upon itself the gospel of right-wing politics, it is also guilty of this colossal mixing. Today, the big thrust of the liberal church's politics is in the development of a "Liberation Theology" which holds to the right of violence to achieve a desired end, while still holding to the basic principles of pacifism for established nations. Luther was forced to warn against this very thing in his time: "since there are some stupid preachers among us Germans (as I am sorry to hear) who are making the people believe that we ought not and must not fight against the Turks."³⁷

The error of those who will have nothing to do with government and who do not believe in using the right to vote or to become politically active is that they ignore the Word of God which expressly declares all government to be an institution of God.

The above outline of modern religious political activism can only serve to drive us to the Scriptures so as to ascertain the will of God in this matter and thereby guide our parishioners through the present milieu of confusion.

Every Christian ought to read carefully Romans 13:1-7. Written with the cruel Neronian persecution in view, with several more persecutions to follow, the Lord makes clear the Christian's responsibility to government...even to bad government. First of all, every Christian is to recognize all existing government as having divine authority. The government is to be regarded as "God's minister." Even the Old Testament makes this clear, "By Me kings reign and rulers decree justice" (Prov. 8:15). The function of government is that of providing law and order. To those who violate the norm established by the government to provide law and order the government is to be a "terror"; and those who resist the government really "resist the ordinance of God...and bring judgment on themselves." To the Christian and the law-abiding citizen, "he (government) is God's minister to you for good." To government, God has given the right and duty of punishment including capital punishment. The motivation of the Christian to be obedient to the government is different from that of the non-Christian; the Christian obeys "not only because of wrath (out of fear), but also for conscience' sake." We understand this motivation to be the love of God in Christ. The Lord continues to remind us that the government has the right of taxation and is deserving of fear (respect) and honor. Immediately the question is raised, "What if the government is corrupt and blasphemous?" That is answered in Daniel 4:33 where the Lord graphically teaches Nebuchadnezzar a lesson. That the Lord will deal with corrupt and evil rulers is also taught

³⁵ *The Lutheran Layman* – January 1981, pg. 11.

³⁶ *Eternity* – July 1980 as reported in *Christian News* – Oct. 20, 1980.

³⁷ *Luther's Works*, Amer. Ed., Vol. 46, pg. 161.

in the history of the kings of Israel and Judah. When the Lord can tolerate a corrupt government or ruler no longer, He brings it to an end (Dan. 2:21). This judgment of God is always according to His timetable and not necessarily according to those man draws up from time to time. In Acts 12:23, the suddenness of His wrath against Herod Agrippa I is most sobering. A quick reflection upon world history makes clear the fact that God still deals with corrupt and unjust rulers and governments. The only justification for disobedience to government is the situation where the Christian is called upon to disobey God (Acts 5:29). In view of the context and situation of Romans 13, such a call would have to be a clear call to directly disobey a stated command of God or carry out activity whereby the Christian would be compromising his faith as in the *casu confessionis* of the Adiaphoristic Controversy. The Christian cannot practice “civil disobedience” as we see it today under Acts 5:29 or any other passage of Scripture.

1 Peter 2:13-17 repeats the content of Romans 13 calling for submission to the “ordinances of man” as given by the king or governor. The Christian submits himself “for the Lord’s sake.” Once again the role of government is to be that of preserving law and order. The Christian’s obedience to government is to be a powerful witness to “foolish men.” As free in Christ, the Christian uses whatever freedoms he has in this world not licentiously, but “as servants of God.” The word for “ordinance” (institution in *KJV*) is the word κτίσει which Dr. Scharlemann reminds us speaks of God’s creative activity.³⁸

Of a similar nature are the words of Titus 3:1.

Since the state is an institution of God, it follows that Christians should pray for it and its success with also the petition for the blessings of good government: “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Tim 2:12).

The principle of the separation of the two realms of Church and State is set forth in Jesus’ encounter with the Herodians and the Pharisees (Mk. 12:13-17, Mt. 22:21, Luke 20:20-26). The goal of His opponents was to “catch Him in His words.” At issue was the question of the Jew’s obligation to pay the Roman tax. In His answer, Jesus did more than merely provide a solution to the dilemma. He made clear that the believer is to recognize the two realms: that of Government and that of the Church. Inasmuch as the Christian is a citizen of a government, he is obligated to obey that government in temporal matters, including taxation. Inasmuch as the Christian is a citizen of the Church, he is obligated to its rule in spiritual matters. However, belonging to the Church in this world does not relieve or excuse the Christian from his obedience to the State. (In regard to Jesus’ payment of the temple tax, it is difficult to determine whether His payment constituted obedience to the Church *or* the State due to the theocratic powers of the Jewish church, Mt. 17:24-27. The main issue in this account is that of offense.) In addition to Jesus’ statement about the two realms, we have here a sharp delineation between the two.

In Luke 12:14, Jesus puts into practice His teaching on the separation of Church and State when He tells the man who asked Him to make a judgment about his father’s inheritance, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

Bowing to the authority of a corrupt government, Jesus reminds Pilate of the source of his authority, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

This separation of the realms in the teaching of Jesus occurs again when in Gethsemane Peter is told to put away the sword with the warning, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Here we have Jesus’ recognition of the State’s power of capital punishment. Regardless how urgent the case may be, the Church does not have the power of the sword (Mt. 26:52).

Jesus, in his high priestly prayer, reminds us of the Christian’s dual citizenship: “But these are in the world.... They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:11, 16). The one citizenship in the world is temporal; but the other is heavenly and eternal. It is of that heavenly citizenship that St. Paul speaks to the Ephesians saying, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). Peter bases his appeal for morality among the Christians of the dispersion on the fact of their dual citizenship, “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from

³⁸ *Church and State Under God*, ed. by Albert Huegli, CPH: St. Louis, 1964, pg. 23.

fleshly lusts...” (1 Pet. 2:11). It is because of this dual citizenship, that our Lord did not want Christians who had grievances among themselves to have these matters adjudicated by the civil courts, 1 Cor. 6:1-6. It should be noted that the Christian has every right to enjoy and use the legitimate blessings of his earthly citizenship. Paul certainly did. In Philippi, Paul makes an issue of his Roman citizenship and the fact that his civil rights had been violated, Acts 16:36-38. Before Festus, Paul again calls upon his Roman citizenship with his appeal to Caesar, Acts 25:11-12.

The Christian always remembers that in his earthly citizenship he has been called to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14). To the extent that the Christian seeks to fulfill that role, he is a blessing to his nation, whether the nation acknowledges it or not. The activity of the Christian’s sanctified life may so affect the land that the blessings promised by the Lord (“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.” – Prov. 14:34) will rest upon it.

A beautiful summary of the Christian’s position is offered in the second century *Epistle to Diognetus*:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by locality or speech or custom. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they take their share in everything as citizens and they endure all hardship as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them and every fatherland is foreign....Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.³⁹

It is interesting and refreshing to see how Luther interpreted and put to practice the teaching of the Scriptures on the matters of Church and State. His “Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia” – 1525, “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants” – 1525, “An Open Letter to the Harsh Book Against the Peasants” – 1525, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved” – 1526, “On War Against the Turk” – 1529,⁴⁰ “A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians” – 1522, and “Temporal Authority” – 1523,⁴¹ are most worthy of our reading today.

On the separation of the kingdoms, he writes,

For this reason one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about eternal peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other. No one can become righteous in the sight of God by means of temporal government, without Christ’s spiritual government. Christ’s government does not extend over all men; rather Christians are always a minority in the midst of non-Christians.⁴²

On page 9 of this paper, we saw Luther’s impatience with clergy who muddied the waters with their pronouncements on national defense.

Luther was incensed at the Church’s maintenance of its own armies and waging war. About this issue, he wrote, “If I were emperor, king or prince and were in a campaign against the Turk, I would exhort my bishops and priests to stay at home and attend to the duties of their office, praying, fasting, saying mass, preaching and caring for the poor, as not only Holy Scripture, but their own canon law teaches and requires.”⁴³ There has been much confusion as to whether Luther violated his own principles by pronouncements and advice given to rulers, princes and noblemen. What most of Luther’s critics fail to take into consideration was the confusing and chaotic situation which existed in Luther’s time. While Luther seemed to make clear what the scriptures taught about the two realms and their respective roles, the concept of the separation of Church and State did not exist, in fact in the government of that time. For example, when the peasants revolted, the princes

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 17.

⁴⁰ *Luther’s Works, op. cit.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Vol. 45, pg. 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 167.

and noblemen did almost nothing about the ruinous revolt. Because the peasants were carrying on their revolt in the name of Christianity, the Reformation and even Luther himself, Luther was constrained to speak. He blames “Princes, lords, especially you blind bishops and mad priests,” for the terrible state of affairs.⁴⁴ “As temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance.”⁴⁵ While he acknowledged the peasants concerns to be just, he declares them to be wrong in their use of force and then using the Gospel to justify their actions.⁴⁶ Luther explains why he spoke, “I do this in a friendly and Christian spirit, as a duty of brotherly love, so that if any misfortune or disaster comes out of this matter, it may not be attributed to me, nor will I be blamed before God and men because of my silence.”⁴⁷ Luther believed his advice had worth and said so, “Furthermore, both parties (rulers and peasants) are acting against God and under His wrath, as you have heard. For God’s sake, then, take my advice.”⁴⁸ With a full awareness of what he was doing, Luther said in his “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,” “Then I must instruct the rulers how they are to conduct themselves in these circumstances.”⁴⁹ Luther went even further in this matter, “Thus anyone who is killed fighting on the side of the rulers may be a true martyr in the eyes of God, if he fights with the kind of conscience I have just described, for he acts in obedience to God’s Word. On the other hand, anyone who perishes on the peasants’ side is an eternal firebrand of hell, for he bears the sword against God’s Word is disobedient to Him, and is a member of the devil.”⁵⁰ When over 100,000 peasants lost their lives in this battle, Luther too much sharp criticism to which he replied in his “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book,” “If it (The Harsh Book) pleases God I do not really care whether you like it or not.”

The Lutheran Confessions, of course, also speak to this issue. While we may disagree with Dr. Piepkorn on many issues, we will have to agree with him when he says, “The Symbols do not operate with the modern category of ‘state.’”⁵¹ Articles XVI of the *Augsburg Confession* and *Apology* set forth a beautiful definition of the two kingdoms carefully separating the Lutheran position apart from both the Roman Catholic and Zwinglian errors. The Table of Duties of the *Small Catechism* simply quotes Romans 13:1-4. Under the Fourth Commandment, the *Large Catechism* deals with the State and sees it as a necessary extension of the family which the Christian must honor. Article X of the *Formula of Concord* must also be considered because it deals with the matter of the Christians’ disobedience to government even in matters of adiaphora *in casu confessionis*. A study of the issue of Church and State in the Confessions and the writings of Luther is deserving of more time than is permitted by this paper. In such a study, Article XVIII of the *Augsburg Confession* and *Apology* should also be included.

As we look at the Christians’ responsibility in regard to political activism today, we must make clear the distinction between what the Christian does as a private citizen and what the Christian does in the name of the Church.

As a private citizen, the Christian is to remember that the State is to be ruled by reason and the Church by the Word of God. With that in mind, the Christian should take advantage of the freedoms and opportunities his form of government allows. In our land, he should use the right to vote and thereby contribute his views for the well-being of his government. We ought not to bind the Christians’ conscience to vote in some legalistic way so that failing to vote would be sin. It could well be that that Christian is protesting the fact that the election offers him no acceptable candidate or position by his refusal to vote. Perhaps some day we will be able to vote for “none of the above.” Under normal circumstances, however, the Christian should be encouraged to cast his vote regularly.

The Christian should also remember that he has the freedom to speak about political issues and should use that freedom vigorously to preserve the freedoms we enjoy in our land...whether it be the public forum,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 49.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, pg. 69.

⁵¹ *Church and State Under God, op. cit.*, pg. 91.

letters to elected officials, signing petitions and the like. As always the Christian should remember his dual citizenship and conduct himself in word and deed in such a way as is befitting his faith in Christ.

The Christian also has the right to take his concerns to the courts. Should he take issue with a matter he believes to be unjust, he can petition the judicial branch of our government in many ways...even by way of a suit. This route should be taken rather than the way of civil disobedience which scripture does not condone in secular matters.

The Christian also has the right to join or form political groups such as parties, lobbies, organizations and movements as long as such groups abide within the law and do not violate the principles of Scripture enunciated in this paper. Political activity carried out by the Christian in good order should be regarded as a part of his sanctification. The Christian should remember to be very careful about evaluating any political group he is considering, since politics and Christianity often do make for strange bedfellows. Any "Christian" group that has taken on the political beast, should receive double scrutiny.

For the organized church and its ministers, the matter of its entrance or involvement in politics must be viewed with the utmost care and deliberation. In most cases where the government is intact, the Church has no business speaking on secular matters; neither is it called to do so in Scripture. When the Church or the clergy have chosen to speak on matters of the secular, more harm than good has usually been done. And why? Because this is not the business or expertise of the Church and its workers, hearing the clergy speak on secular concerns usually reminds me of the banty-rooster who climbs to the top of the manure pile to crow. He does so with a great deal of honor and pride unaware that the odor of that upon which he stands overwhelms the dignity of his crowing. That upon which the modern clergy stands is, more often than not, ignorance. I fear that today's Church knows as much about the intricacies of politics as the bishops and priests knew about leading armies in Luther's day. Under no circumstances do politics belong in the pulpit; our call as pastors is to preach the Word in its truth and purity.

On the matters of spiritual and moral issues, the Church must speak. However, the forum it uses outside of normal church functions (should it feel constrained to speak), must be carefully chosen; and the issue must truly be one of spiritual and moral value. From what we have seen in the last few months, there are precious few political groups the Church can endorse or join and still be following the Word of God. Most Church involvements in such groups result in compromising scriptural principles to unionism, syncretism, ecumenism, utilitarianism, false witness and the like. It would appear that the best forum for the Church to use when it must make a public witness to the State on a Scriptural issue is its own distinctive voice by its own called representatives. This does not preclude the joining of forces on issues in which common interests are found... for example, joining forces with Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Reformed and others in preserving Constitutional freedoms for our Christian Day Schools. But in all such cases, three words of caution ought to be remembered: Careful! Careful! Careful!

In a case where the State, due to disaster or calamity, was destroyed and the Church was the only institution of God remaining, it could well be that the Church would have to offer leadership even in a few secular matters for a temporary period of time. Under such conditions, the Church should call upon the community to set up a government apart from the Church just as soon as possible.

In all of this discussion we ought not lose sight of the New Testament example of dealing with the spiritual and moral ill of its time. The issue of slavery was answered with the preaching of the Gospel. The unfortunate state of women was answered in the same way, "Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). Neither do we find long denunciation upon the gross immorality of that time; instead we find a fervent preaching of the Gospel: "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16); "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1). Speaking in the midst of the Areopagus, Paul could have let go with a tirade about the immorality of Athens; but he chose to say, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very, very religious..." (Acts 17:22). He knew that immorality was only a symptom of their erroneous religions and by way of Law and Gospel preached of Jesus. The words of Paul must never be forgotten, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Both the individual Christian and the Church must remember that whatever confronts them, the Gospel of Christ must be foremost. “And when I go to church, I expect to be looking up at the pulpit for pastor, teacher, friend, not for a ward healer.”⁵²

⁵² *World Vision* – Apr. 1980 as reproduced in *Liberty* – Sept.-Oct. 1980.