

"THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC ISSUES"

INTRODUCTION

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WE RAISE BOTH KINDS OF QUESTIONS

There are times when we find ourselves asking both kinds of questions. We ask religious questions - questions which go to the very depths of our religious knowledge and experience. Does life have any meaning? Does God hear us when we pray? Is there a God? What will happen to me when I die? We ask religious questions from time to time.

We also ask what I would call practical questions that have to do with public life - public affairs, public issues, social concerns. Let me give you several examples of the questions that are in the minds of people at this time.

First, which of the two major political parties is best qualified to manage both the domestic and foreign affairs of this nation? Put in its simplest terms, the question is "Who shall I vote for?" A second question: why is there so much lawlessness in this nation and what should we do about it? A third: why are we in South Vietnam? Should we stay there. If so, what should we do? And the fourth: (perhaps the most serious) - how can we resolve the racial tensions that are now tearing the nation apart? These are questions about public issues that a great many people are thinking about.

HAS THE CHURCH ANYTHING TO SAY?

The question that stares me in the face all of the time and especially during these past few months is this: Has the church anything to say in answer to such practical questions? Should it try to answer them? Has it any responsibility for what we call the matters of public affairs, or should it confine itself entirely to the so-called religious questions in the first group? How do you feel?

Some people, at one extreme, say that the mission of the Church is to the spiritual needs of people. It should confine itself to that mission. It should minister to the spiritual needs of its people and stay out of public affairs, have nothing to say or do about the day to day affairs in which people are involved.

At the other extreme, there are those who say that a man's spiritual life is part and parcel of his total existence. They say the way he prays cannot be separated ultimately from the way he votes. Therefore, the church must guide him in public affairs as well as in private matters and bear witness in those particular areas of life where people have to make decisions that affect society as a whole.

This morning I should like to tell you how I have tried to settle this question for myself. What should the role of the church be in public affairs, public issues. And how should a minister play his part in that role. How involved should he become in community affairs. My answer will not necessarily be yours. I hope some of the things I say will help you to see and to understand and assist you in making the best response you can to the public issues which confront us all.

MAN: A COMBINATION

I begin with the nature of man himself. I begin with the fact that every man is a combination of body, mind and spirit - these three and these three are one. The Church's primary responsibility (as I see it) is to the spirit of a man or a woman - for the spirit is the most determining factor in a man's life. His spirit often shapes his thinking and it has a great deal to do with the way his body functions. It is the primary responsibility of the Church to lift a man's spirit when it is low, down in the depths, to clean it when it is corrupt, to steady it when it is wavering and knows not which way to turn. It is the primary mission of the church to help a man or a woman have a right spirit in all things, and this to the Christian, means to fill a man's spirit with the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Now the mind of a man is primarily the responsibility of the teacher and the school. His body is primarily the responsibility of the doctor and the hospital. Yet, there are times when the Church has to take a hand in all three branches of human activity. If, for example, a man's spirit is broken because for generations he has been treated as a second class citizen, then the Church should be concerned and try to do something to change that situation. If a man's body is wasting away because of lack of care, lack of proper food, treatment, shelter - then it is the church's job to be concerned, to see that care is provided. If a man's mind is being perverted because it is being fed on falsehood or filled with unwholesome literature, then it is the church's mission to do something to correct that situation.

My conclusion, therefore, is that the Church cannot separate itself from anything in which a man is involved - for man's spirit cannot be separated from his body or his mind. When you come right down to it, his belief and behavior are two sides of the same coin.

And so the Church makes pronouncements concerning public affairs and issues. Its pronouncements are important and should be carefully considered. Even more important are its performances. One performance of concern is worth more than one hundred pronouncements of position. You and I are a part of a branch of the Christian Church that has always taken this position. Our Methodist Social Creed is one of the finest statements in Christendom and it summarizes our concern. It is one of the unique contributions to present day Christian thought and action.

BACK TO THE QUESTIONS

Having said this to you in general terms, I am still left with the questions that I raised at the beginning of the sermon, questions dealing with the election, lawlessness, foreign policy, and the racial issue.

I have no intention of giving dogmatic answers to those questions; this is not my intention. For one thing I do not feel well enough informed to issue any statements (although according to this week's TIME magazine some of the clergy are). These issues are complicated and few of us are well enough informed to make public statements. I have some personal opinions as you probably have but I would hesitate to preach these opinions as Christian truths.

It is my duty, as it is the duty of every religious leader, to arouse the conscience of people about the great moral issues that touch our public life and well-being and this we have tried to do over the years. It is part of the responsibility of the church to provide opportunity for people to become better informed about public issues through its forums and programs - hence the program scheduled for this evening. However, I think the best any minister or religious leader can do in public is to give guidelines to help people arrive at the answers for themselves and this is what I should like to do in the moments that remain. There are four guidelines that I would put before you.

I. AVOID BITTERNESS

First - stay above the bitterness of the presidential election campaign. Don't let the bitterness infect you. Bitterness never made a person better, it has never made a nation stronger. During the summer we were told that this would be one of the bitterest campaigns in recent American history. Remember that there have been other campaigns and that somehow the nation has managed to come through them. Remember there have been other candidates - none of whom have been the perfect human being - some of whom you have voted for with reservation. Things are apt to be said that are unfair, untrue, unjustified. Remember, too, that a person can have strong convictions and I hope you will, without thinking that the person who has convictions different from yours is either a Communist or a Fascist.

This is the first guide-line. There is enough bitterness in life without your being infected with the bitterness that is bound to be in the campaign itself, but need not be in you.

II. THINK TWICE

Second - think twice before you try to place the blame for things like the lawlessness that prevails in the country on any particular person or particular group of people. I ran into a person this summer while on vacation (a good Christian, too) who placed all the blame on the Supreme Court and on one person on the Court. To be sure the court is made up of intelligent human beings and it is not above criticism, but I cannot for one moment believe that the lawlessness and violence which prevails in this nation can be laid at the door of the Supreme Court.

Some there are who place the blame on the parents. My heart aches for the parents sometimes because they are the ones who are said to be responsible for the delinquency and lack of discipline that prevails in the lives of teen-agers. I know some of them are to blame. But what about the good parents - the ones whose children run away? The two things do not always go together. Some of the

best behaved young people come out of the worst homes, and some of the most difficult ones come from homes that are models of what a home should be.

My second guide-line would be this: remember the cure is infinitely more important than the cause. Yes, we can all criticize and find areas where blame can be placed. But I would use some of that energy you are using to detect the cause to initiate a cure.

THIRD BEWARE OF ABSOLUTES

A third guideline: beware of religious and political idealists who talk in terms of absolutes. Now that may seem strange to you, coming from the pulpit, but there are many people in both the church and political life who, at this particular time, like to indulge in ideals and absolutes which are certainly worthy, but often not true. Let me give you an example or two.

There are those who say that the political parties have always nominated the best available man and the people always choose the best man for president. That is a very reassuring statement to be made in these troubled times, but you know as I know that that is not necessarily true, that political parties make mistakes just as individuals do, and that there have been occasions when the best available candidate was not nominated, and that our history lessons can point out several times in American history when the people did not choose the best man for president. We may make mistakes again. I hope and pray we will not, but when you are thinking about these things, don't be misled by promises that come from idealists who do not look the facts in the face.

Others are saying that a certain form of government will eliminate all evils that now poison the waters of life. That too is reassuring, but you know it is not true. You know that no government, no matter how good it is, will take all the evil out of life. Certainly a better government will make things better, but the evil in life is not in the government. It is in the people who do the governing and in the people who are governed. Some say that all we need to do is to put prayer back into the public schools and that everything will be right again. As much as I believe in prayer and the value of it, I wonder if this is the solution to all our problems.

ONE FINAL GUIDELINE

One final guideline. I fear that it is too general to be of any help to you, but it may suggest the spirit which I should like to communicate to you and which I hope will spread abroad among our people. In stormy weather, don't be afraid of the storm. Don't try to rock the ship. Roll with it and put your trust in the Captain.

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He will not give you detailed, specific answers. He will not tell you who to vote for, what to do in South Veitnam, how to deal with every issue concerning civil rights. No specific answers, but he will give you some great guidelines that will enable you to find the right answers - like the guideline he gave to the man who raised that question about paying taxes to Caesar. "Reneder" he said "unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's". It is a great guideline when you ztop to consider it. One that ought to guide us in the days and weeks ahead.

LET US PRAY O God, thou hast made us with inquiring minds and consciences that are alert to our responsibilities. As we try to find our way through the troubled waters, keep our spirits from from bitterness and our minds open to opinions and convictions that are different from ours. And then help us to make our contribution to the life of this nation that it may be better - happier - more completely dedicated to Thee. Amen

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