Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

Articles from the Congregationalist, 1958-1996

Readings in the History and Polity of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches
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Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor
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THE "CHURCH"

Congregationalism is founded on the idea that Christ called his followers into churches, particular communities of believers gathering regularly for worship and service, not into a Church, a national or international organization superior to local congregations and mediating their relationship with their Lord. The very name of the movement, Congregationalism, derives from this conviction.

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INTRODUCTION

How do the churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian churches understand themselves? In many ways they are typical of other mainline Protestant churches. A person comfortable with the worship at a Presbyterian, Methodist, Christian or United church would most likely be comfortable worshiping with Congregationalists. Congregational clergy receive their training in seminaries sponsored by many denominations. When, however, it comes to polity, church organization at the national as well as local level, Congregationalists have distinctive ideas.

It began with English observers of the Protestant Reformation, such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrows, who believed there was another step to be taken. This was a return to the type of organization envisioned by Jesus Christ and reflected in the earliest New Testament writings, especially the book of Acts and Paul’s letters. These early churches were diverse, autonomous, lacking central authority, and required a high degree of commitment. To these English Reformers the shape taken by the Roman Catholic Church was more that of Caesar’s empire than of Christ’s kingdom. The newly formed Church of England, while independent of Rome, seemed compromised by its retention of a similar structure.

At great risk to position, property, and life, the English reformers set about to “purify” the Church of England. The more radical reformers formed unauthorized “Independent” or “Separatist” congregations. Many fled first to Holland and then to the British colonies in North America. As founders of a new society in America the Pilgrims and Puritans entered a new phase with the authority of government behind rather than against them. This new position as the established church of the New England colonies posed new challenges regarding questions of church membership, tolerance of religious diversity, and the relationship between religious and civil authority.

With the passage of an American Constitution embodying a “separation of church and state,” the expansion of the frontier, and the waning of evangelical fervor, Congregationalists gradually lost the dominance they enjoyed in colonial New England. Losses were exacerbated when one wing, the Unitarians, split off to form their own denomination. Questions of denominational identity and cooperation across regions came to the fore. By the end of the nineteenth century Congregational churches had moved away from Calvinism, embraced modern ideas about science, and, while local autonomy was still affirmed, put a national structure into place.

The founders of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (1955) reacted against what they perceived as an un-Congregational centralizing trend which would deny basic Congregational convictions about the church. A proposed merger of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church into a “United Church of Christ” would result in a more centralized “presbyterian” system. Proponents saw it simply as a more efficient form of organization which would retain essential principles.
When the great majority went with the new United Church, the "Continuing Congregationalists" were left with redefining themselves and Congregationalism (a name which the majority, tellingly, did not retain). Many of their reflections on Congregationalism in the twentieth century are recorded in the NACCC's *Congregationalist* magazine. This book contains a selection of those writings. They are arranged by topic, and within topics chronologically.
SOCIAL REFORM
AND REFLECTION

Rev. Russell J. Clinchey, D.D.

"Should the National Association adopt resolutions on faith and action?"

This was the subject of the only actual debate which occurred in the general session of the meetings of the National Association at Pomona. It was not scheduled, but rose spontaneously when the Resolutions Committee proposed two resolutions and asked for their adoption by the delegates.

These resolutions said:

**RESOLUTION I**

"Whereas the Congregational Christian Churches have traditionally stood for the dignity, education and equal opportunity of each individual in a free society. And whereas the Minority Groups in our land today are in a historic struggle to attain their God given rights."

"Be it resolved that we assembled together in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, call to the attention of the Free and Independent Churches of our fellowship, their Christian privilege of carrying on our traditional role of extending to all men the rights and privileges we hold so dear to ourselves."

**RESOLUTION II**

"Be it resolved that the traditional role of the Congregational Christian Churches of cooperation with all men of goodwill in their effort to build a Christian Society be reaffirmed. That we commit to the free and independent Churches in our fellowship this cooperation with all agencies seeking to promote the highest religious ideals."

After discussion and debate the members voted to "table" the first resolution, and to "recommit to the Committee" the second one. The majority by which this was done was not a large one. The presentation of the resolutions, the reasons given in support of their adoption, and the meaning of the fact that they almost were adopted, clearly show why there is a need for serious comment and reflection by everyone upon all that the raising of this issue portends for the future of our witness to the principles of free Congregationalism.

The First Fact

The first fact which should be made crystal clear is that the question "Should the National Association adopt resolutions on faith and practice?" does not depend primarily upon the nature or content of the resolutions.

Those who voted to "table" and to "recommit" the resolutions did so because they were resolutions, and to their minds the adoption of resolutions (which then become creeds) on matters of faith and practice destroys the nature of the free Churches by establishing an authoritarian code. That is why they believed that the proposal to adopt, in the name of the National Association, any resolutions, be it the best or the worst, was an act which should be voted against.

A Fortunate Fact

It was most fortunate that the proponents of both sides in this debate included men and women of integrity, devotion, and ability, and we can be sure that all respect the personalities of one another. Therefore we can go forward into the discussion of the main issue which confronts us now with the assurance that we can do so upon the highest levels of fellowship and appreciation.

A Free Fellowship

The real issue was as to whether or not Congregationalism is willing to remain a free fellowship. I say remain, for it most certainly had its rebirth ten years ago at Detroit in that atmosphere. We had just come through the turmoil of the preceding decade when the then leaders induced the Churches to give up their birthright of autonomous freedom and become part of an overhead ecclesiastical system. At the same time the Council for Social Action formulated a radical social creed, which was established by resolutions, and then it proclaimed its authority to speak for the Churches, on the basis of these resolutions, to the governing authorities.

The issue before our Churches is whether or not they will maintain an association of Churches, free from religious or social statements a free church fellowship.

Free To Follow Truth

The one priceless gift which we as Congregationalists have to offer the Christian world is that of a fellowship of those who are devoted to Jesus and desire to be His true disciples, learning to know the meaning and enlightenment of His experience of God. This fellowship is made up of gathered groups of His followers who are free to follow the truth as clearly as their experience of God gives them to see the truth, and who seek to express their devotion to God by the various means, and through the various rituals, which best grant the healing, restoration, and renewal of their souls.

The source of this experience and conviction is that which the mystics have called "The Inner Light", and this is personal. It is the soul at home with God, bringing forth the fruits of that spiritual awakening. But each one will have a different experience, and will bring forth different fruits. Therefore no one and no group can thrust fingers of coercion or authority or force into the heartstrings of a fellow Christian, seeking to bind his will to theirs, or to compel him to accept their interpretation of the faith, or their social and political programs and utopias.

It is because of such a heritage as this that we must build our houses of free faith on these premises —

1. Each follower of Jesus is free to make his own interpretation of the word of God in whatever form it finds him, and then freely build his faith, and the practice of it, upon that interpretation, immune from the coercion of any resolution seeking to include him without his consent.

2. Therefore, no group, in any Church, or Assembly, or council can ask for the adoption of a resolution containing a particular creed, or program of social and economic action, because no matter how large the majority might be the act of adoption would assume that it spoke with the voice of all the Churches or the assembly which passed it.

That way is the Congregational Way. It is the one mark of our uniqueness; it is the one gift we have to offer to the whole experience of Christian life and work. It is the pearl of great price for it is the mark of the glorious freedom of the children of God arising above ecclesiastical conformity, and social and political collectivism.

It is our task to make it a real and living experience in the life of the world.
There is a story concerning the little old lady who one day walked into a bookstore and asked the clerk if he had a non-partisan book on the Civil War written from the Southern point of view.

I take it that every person here tonight is a partisan concerning the subject under discussion. We are all sincerely interested and concerned about the many social, economic and political problems which confront mankind in our age. We are all devoted to the Christian Church and to the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ, our Lord. No one of us, I am certain, feels that Christianity ought to be silent, innocuous or indifferent concerning these problems. Our partisanship is quickly and clearly revealed, however, when we begin to discuss the methods which the Church should employ in dealing with these problems.

It would be very easy for this dialogue to become a debate concerning the various issues which face our society, and begin to argue the pros and cons of the admission of Red China to the U.N., a negotiated peace in Vietnam, the growing paternalism of the Federal government, and various aspects of the racial problem. I take it, however, that we are not here for that purpose. Rather we are here to discuss the place of the Church in society and the basic task of the Church as it seeks to work in a society confronted with complicated social, economic and political problems.

I am and always have been strongly opposed to social action pronouncements by Churches, boards, committees, or other organized Christian groups. I would like now to state some of my reasons.

1. Much of what is contained in many social action pronouncements is innocuous and a statement of the obvious. These pronouncements are often preceded by a statement full of vague generalities urging us to be Christian and pressing us to make judgments based upon our understanding of Jesus' moral and ethical principles. They urge us, in other words, to be for righteousness and against sin, and it is assumed as a matter of course by most people, I would judge, that this is the appropriate stance for a Christian Church to take.

2. Such statements are, most of the time, quite ineffective in precipitating change where change is most needed... in the minds and hearts of men. Much of the time these statements are ignored by all except newspaper editors who are looking for controversial items with which to fill their front pages. There has been such a plethora of social action statements during the past 24 years on any and every subject that they no longer catch the eye nor the interest of the general public.

3. The pronouncements issued by Church bodies are usually the work of a small group of men and women and these men and women are, most of the time, those who have a preconceived idea of what conclusions ought to be arrived at. They are not an impartial group studying a problem. They are a strongly partisan group promulgating their idea as to what is the "Christian solution" to the problem. They are in no sense representative of the thousands, or in some cases millions, of members who belong to a particular denomination.

At one point in my career I requested membership on a social action committee. My first meeting with that group was in Kenosha. A number of people proposed that we take to the floor of the conference a resolution urging Congress to adopt the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. When I happened to ask how many of that group had read the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, not a single person was able to raise his hand! I telephoned my wife, had a copy of it sent to me special delivery, and the next day read certain sections of it to the committee. It was then decided that perhaps a bit more study was necessary before the introduction of the proposed resolution.

Recently I read in a magazine published by the National Council of Churches, entitled "Interchurch News" that the governing board of the National Council of Churches was appointing a committee of "experts" to study the situation in Vietnam and make recommendations. I happen to know personally one of the men who was appointed as an expert to this committee and I can assure you that he is no more expert on Vietnam than you or I happen to be. Perusing the list of other names, I became absolutely convinced that this group was not going to study and come to a conclusion concerning the situation in Vietnam. They already know what they think ought to be done in Vietnam and in a few weeks or months they will issue a report suggesting that we ought to have a negotiated peace in Vietnam, which for some of them will mean peace at any price. Their "findings" are a foregone conclusion.

4. I am also convinced that social action pronouncements by the Church damage the image and the reputation of the Church as a spiritual institution charged with the redemption of individual human souls. I am constantly reminded of those words of Dean Inge to the effect that the Church which marries the spirit of one age finds itself a widow in the next. For the Church to identify itself with one side of a controversy in which equally sincere
The Place of the Church
In the Social Order

Rev. Norman S. Ream

Christians will have sharp disagreement gradually weakens the effectiveness of the Church's spiritual work.

There have been a great number of books published lately charging the Churches with ineffectiveness in the world, seeking to find out why the Churches do not have a better reputation in the world and why the Gospel which it preaches is so ineffective. I am persuaded that this attitude is in large part due to the fact that the Churches have, in an attempt to change the world by political means, become identified with the world, and have secularized the Kingdom of God by identifying it with some kind of Utopian political society. The Churches cannot seek to become a political pressure group and expect to maintain the respect of the world. The whole thing is backwards. It is an attempt to use religion for social, economic and political purposes rather than to bend social, economic and political activity towards the ends implied in the meaning of the word "religion" itself—the binding of individual men closer to God.

5. The Church, it seems to me, has a much more basic task to accomplish than that indicated by the passage of social action resolutions. It is the Church's task to change individual lives and if the Church were successful in that, it would be accomplishing far more toward the end of Christianizing society than can be done with any number of resolutions. Those who put their faith in social action misunderstood the real force for change in society—the individual. Society exists for the individual, not vice versa. To deny this is to deny the fundamental principle of Christianity which is that a man, not a society, but a man, must be born again, see the light, be converted. Mass action is always unthinking action and unthinking action cannot lead to a better society. It may change society, but its final result is only to replace one problem with another.

Let me share a story which, I think, illustrates my point. Not long ago a speaker at a certain midwestern college stated in the course of some remarks to the student body that baseball had done more for race relations than the Christian Churches. I would suggest that this is patently ridiculous for several reasons. How was it, do you suppose, that Jackie Robinson was able to break into baseball? Primarily because he was a good baseball player, and good baseball players make good teams, and good teams make good money. Secondly, because a certain man named Branch Rickey was a dedicated Christian. Finally, because the Christian Churches along with other groups have been able to produce a change in attitude in many individuals in this country, an attitude which would accept a Negro in baseball. If baseball has done anything for race relations, it has done so only incidentally. It is the Christian Church working on individuals, men like Branch Rickey, that has made possible most of the advances in race relations during the past twenty-five years.

Now I happen to be rather happy that I belong to a group of Christian Churches which have in the last ten years passed but one resolution at its annual national meeting, and that one resolution was to the effect that we would pass no resolutions about social, economic and political affairs. This does not mean that this group of Churches is not interested in political, social, and economic affairs. I am quite sure that we are just as interested as are the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians, but we have faith to believe, slow as it is, the only way to make for permanently better relations between men and between nations is to work on individuals one by one.

One need only to read the newspapers these days to see that General Eisenhower is right. There is a moral decline in our country. There is a growing lack of respect for the institution of private property, as witness the tremendous increase in shoplifting in this country, especially among college students. It is in this area that the Church needs to be working on the moral and ethical understanding of each man to help each man see that there are rules by which he must live, objectively valid, divinely ordained, and if a man ignores them, the consequences are evil. Each man must be guided by his own conscience and led by the holy spirit.

Finally, I would suggest that the basic weakness of the Christian Church today is what I would call a failure of nerve on the part of its leadership. To change men, one by one, even with the help of God, seems too huge a task. We lack the will, the patience, the faith. The result is that we have often sought to do what Jesus suggested we might do—take the kingdom by force and violence, through political action.

When Jesus, following his resurrection, told Peter to "feed my sheep," and commissioned His disciples to go to all nations, teaching and baptizing, there is no slightest hint that he desired them to organize as a political pressure group. Their task was different. The task of the Church is different. It is in the world to be sure, but if it becomes identified as being of the world, its usefulness and its uniqueness will end.
How Express Our Social Concern?

by Moderator Howard Conn

Epiphany, the season between Christmas and Lent, commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. In my ministry I have found this an appropriate time to consider the relation of Christian principles to social problems. What may Christians say to the world about the issues confronting society?

In our National Association this is an unresolved and controversial topic. Within our fellowship are at least four groups clearly definable in their attitude toward the churches' relationship to social issues: the Fundamentalists, who focus on personal redemption; the cautious, who say that since we respect individual interpretation we ought to leave controversial matters to persons; the reactionaries, who find the banner of freedom a shield by which to avoid encounter with social change and to remain free personally to oppose it; and the liberals who wish to carry

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How Express Our Social Concern?

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forward the social concern traditional with our fellowship. I can hardly describe these groups without showing my own selfishness, but I hope this can be regarded as an accurate analysis. All groups are welcome for the only persuasion we recognize is that of reason and love. The problem is how to function in diversity.

Differences do not distress me as much as they do some folk, but undoubtedly many will protest my mentioning points of disagreement. I am of the opinion that maturity comes from the ability to face and handle tensions. The National Association needs to develop this kind of maturity if it is to play the effective role in society that has characterized Congregationalists in the past.

What is required is to make some careful and precise distinctions that are difficult. I can best illustrate from my own experience. Strange as it seems to me, a sizable portion of my ministry has been involved in “social action” controversy. I say, strange, because my motivation for entering the ministry had nothing to do with any wish to reform the world. I am basically a philosopher and not a reformer. Yet one cannot reflect on the teachings of Jesus without sensing an obligation to try to make the kingdoms of this world nearer the kingdom of our Lord and his righteousness. The great prophetic movement which runs through both the Old and New Testaments is at the heart of the religious life. “Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’ . . . , but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another.” Congregationalists were pioneers in applying Christian principles to everyday life, as exemplified by the ministries of Leonard Bacon, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Bushnell, Washington Gladden, Arthur E. Holt, and a host of others whose names could be mentioned. These were ministers who spoke on problems of labor, industry, race, war, justice. I have a background from which to discuss this controversial matter, because I bear scars from my fight with the old Council for Social Action. The most disillusioning day of my life was the Saturday of the Claremont General Council when I spoke in formal debate against Liston Pope, Ruth Ishbel Seabury, and Emerson Hagen. I agreed with eighty percent of what they said, about the social responsibility of the church, but pled against the use of collective weight for specific programs of a controversial nature. My pleas fell on deaf ears. A Board of Review was appointed to study the CSA, whose findings and recommendations largely upheld the complaints of people in the congregations. But the 1954 General Council compromised the Report, and the CSA continued to function in partisan politics. When the UCC came into being in 1957 it provided a structural basis for an expanded CSA to take political stands and exert pressures in a way that Congregationalism never possessed. Political involvement is natural to the UCC in a way that none of us can approve.

I mention the foregoing to make clear my record of opposition to any agency that in the name of Congregationalism takes a group stand for partisan social measures. But now my uneasiness is in the opposite direction, toward what I regard as the timidity and the escapism of the National Association. Because of our choice of freedom as a method, we have not yet found a way to make clear that Congregationalists have positive convictions about the central matters of faith and order.

In broad areas of social change in which society is moving toward a more humane regard for the needs of people, it seems to me that Congregationalists should rejoice to affirm their solidarity with mankind. Surely we believe in justice for all people. Certainly Congregationalists have labored for more than a century to provide opportunities for the Negro. Surely we encourage the alleviation of poverty, and the elimination of war. Surely we have sympathy for underdeveloped nations, for the peoples of all lands, for the establishment of world law. We may differ as to the political measures to be taken, but should we be silent about the great objectives of society? There are forces of selfishness, ignorance, greed, hatred and bigotry which find many uses by which to oppose these goals. Congregationalists, as disciples of Jesus Christ, ought to make clear their sympathies and their hopes.

Vaughan Abercrombie once remarked to me that a lot of acrimony could have been avoided if Congregationalists had followed the clear distinction made by Leonard Bacon of New Haven at the Boston Council in 1865. When a proposal was offered to send a delegation to express views to President Andrew Johnson, he demurred, saying: “We are an Ecclesiastical Council. We have a right to take cognizance here of all moral questions, because what is moral is religious. We have a right to say here, in the name of Christ and the New Testament, that God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth; and that all distinctions which rest upon the color of a man’s skin, or the strangeness of his hair, are unchristian and impious. We have a right to say that; let us say it. But is it our province as an Ecclesiastical Council to interfere in what is purely and simply a political question?”

Dr. Bacon spoke sound wisdom, long unheeded by reformers who want to involve the church in every partisan dispute. The concerns I would express could be criticized as being too little rather than too much. I am not a person of action. I have no desire to make the church a power bloc in society. But in Epiphany at Plymouth I shall on some Sundays be talking about the social responsibilities of Christians. I would like to think that my colleagues in the National Association were focusing on similar issues.
CLASSICAL CONGREGATIONALISM
AND SOCIAL ACTION

by Harry R. Butman

There is small doubt that the issue of social action is rising among the Churches of the National Association. The very words "social action" are so semantically loaded that so factually a statement as the lead sentence of this editorial will instantly arouse suspicion or anger in those to whom the words are worse than anathema. But the Churches must not totally ignore a subject so massively and intensely a part of the agony of our day. If they do, they justly come under a condemnation similar to that which Oliver Wendell Holmes so truly and eloquently said of the individual: "A man should share the action and passion of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

The newsletter recently sent out by an ad hoc social action committee of pastors, plus one layman, in Michigan raises a question which should be instantly and forthrightly considered. This Editor's stance is that the social action issue should be dealt with on the basis of Congregational polity, and this can be tersely and unambiguously stated: The social position of an independent and autonomous local Church is the business of that sovereign Church, and the business of no other ecclesiastical body whatsoever. By Congregational polity and tradition, a local Church under the Headship of Christ can adopt a social credo which is far to the right, equally far to the left, dead center—or have no credo at all. No amount of votes or statements of disapproval by other Churches can have the least ecclesiastical effect on what a particular Church elects to believe and do (or refrains from believing or doing) in matters social and political. These are basics of our polity.

But these corollaries of the independence and autonomy of the local Church are murky comprehended. There are pastors of conservative political tendencies who view any indication of Christian interest in the alteration of the status quo as a dark plot of Popish, Communist, or Jewish origin, or, conceivably, a sinister junta of all three. Conversely, there are ministers of liberal persuasion who consider themselves under a Divine imperative to drag the National Association "kicking and screaming into the Twentieth Century"—to borrow the Michigan Newsletter's vivid and amusing quote. Either group would cheerfully see the National Association become a body totally dedicated to its particular political and social position, and would be unalarmed at the establishment of a Holy Office for the purpose of censuring political and economic heretics with bell, book, and candle. Both claim a singular private access to the mind of Christ. Neither is wholly willing to let the local Church freely have its say and will in matters pertaining to the market places and governments of this world.

This is precisely the hard, doctrinaire cast of mind which must be kept out of the Annual Meetings of the National Association. Whether all latecomers or marginal Churches know it or not, the separation of ecclesiastical issues and matters of politics and economics was one of the potent causes of the movement for the continuation of Congregationalism and the formation of the National Association. True, the fight was conducted on two fronts: one the legal battle—not yet settled—and the other that of parliamentary resistance to the dicta of the Social Action Committee of the old General Council. But both groups were one in striving to keep the local Church free from either ecclesiastical or social directives from a centralised national body. An effort to form a social action committee on the national level in our fellowship could fragment the National Association beyond any human possibility of restoration of wholeness. For the Annual Meeting to become a time for debating the issues that are rending America would reduce us to being another one of the denominations which spend their time passing resolutions introduced by small committees motivated by a social philosophy alien to the deep convictions of a number of laymen and pastors who justly protest the subsidization of programs which harm their consciences. Perhaps I am too dark in my apprehensions, but I submit that for men of either wing to attempt to make the platform of the Annual Meeting the megaphone for one loud voice will begin a bad work, and the end thereof is not easily foreseeable.

Nor is such a devastating confrontation necessary. Our policy gives to the sovereign local Church the inalienable right to speak its own mind and take its own actions. The second principle of Congregationalism, the fellowship of the Churches—the free relation of affection—makes it easily possible for Churches and pastors of like mind to meet regionally for the consideration of the grave issues of our time and to take any action which seems to them to be wise and expedient. Congregationalism is blessed in being free from the obligation, so essential in connectional Churches, to make minority opinion and action toe the line of denominational conformity.

We are, by long experience and conscious choice, what the nation at large has become almost by accident, a pluralistic society. Let the pastors and Churches of contrary schools of thought be content to move within the large liberty the Congregational Way grants them, free themselves of any contempt for those of opposing opinion, and eschew any effort to make (if such an effort be a-borning) the National Association a starkly monolithic body of one view only.

And to end this prickly piece on a note befitting Lent, I call to your remembrance the counsel of a great Congregationalist of yesteryear, Oliver Cromwell, a grim general of strong opinions and harsh actions. Yet upon one occasion, when learned divines clashed hotly, the layman spoke a good warning. The Seventeenth Century idiom is odd in modern ears, but the substance of doctrine is still sound when the fires of controversy are flaring: "In the bowels of Christ Brethren, bethink you; you may be wrong." This is needed humility. And in any seething conflict of convictions, sprigs of common sense and Christian love make good seasoning for the boiling pot.
IS IT PROPER FOR CHURCH LEADERS OFFICIALLY REPRESENTING SOME PART OF THE CHURCH AND OFFICIAL CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS TO BE INVOLVED IN CONTROVERSIAL SOCIAL ISSUES?

CHURCH LEADERS AS ACTIVISTS: GOOD OR BAD?

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The person who would give a thoughtful answer to that question cannot do so by merely approving or disapproving of the recent involvement of church leaders and official organizations in social issues. In fact it is my judgment that people such as myself who believe in involvement in controversial social issues do no service to the church or society by merely giving partisan support to everything that has been done. On the other hand, it is also my judgment that those disapproving of what the church has done need to give very careful thought to the basic issues involved in this argument. We need to see the difference between the
appropriate role of the church and the appropriateness of particular actions to carry out the role.

Several weaknesses in the present involvement of church leaders and official organizations in controversial social issues can be identified. Here I want to focus on certain basic things rather than on the question of rightness or wrongness of specific actions.

One weakness has been a strong ideological bias. The liberal political tradition developed during the 1930s has been the controlling political ideology of church leaders and official organizations. This ideology has stressed the almost automatic good of massive governmental spending programs, has been a strong supporter of various income-maintenance programs, has pushed for social-welfare programs, and has been anti-business and prolabor.

That church leaders interpreted the Christian tradition in terms of this political ideology has in many ways been good. More than that it is almost inevitable that church leaders will be dominated by the prevailing political ideology of the country. Yet a too close identification of the Christian tradition with one political ideology always leads to the ignoring of some issues. While church leaders have been very sensitive to the failings of business, they have been slow to recognize the failings of organized labor. A too-close identification means that church leaders lose their ability to be critical of some of the assumptions of an ideology.

The assumption that federal spending was an almost automatic good made church leaders slow to grasp the weaknesses in urban renewal, especially the displacement of poor people. Another weakness of such a too-close identification, especially when it is coupled with excessive loyalty to one political party, is the inability to evaluate the program of the opposite party on an objective basis. This makes church leaders and official organizations partisan supporters of a particular political line rather than constructive critics of the political process. (This over-identification was bad during the 1920s when it was with the Republican Party and is bad today when it is with the Democratic Party.)

A second weakness is the attitude with which many church leaders address the pressing problems of today, an attitude that lays the blame on others as though they were not in any way responsible for the mess we are in. For instance, many of the church leaders who have been most vocal in their attacks on the military-industrial complex, and who demand more loudly a new set of priorities, either fail to see or are unwilling to accept that they are implicated in both the complex and the present priorities.

Party in Power

The military-industrial complex was encouraged and developed in the 1960s by a liberal Democratic President, whom many of these church leaders strongly supported. The building of the complex was used to strengthen the Democratic Party, which most of these leaders also strongly supported. (This does not mean that the Democratic Party is bad; it just means that it was in power.) In pointing this out, I in no way want to imply that these church leaders bear special or more blame, or that one party is more to blame for a mess that is the fault of all of the people. Neither do I want to imply that they should not push for a reordering of priorities. But for them to call for a reordering of priorities in such a way that implies their innocence of the mess is a hypocrisy.

A third weakness is the hostility projected toward congregations and church members. Imbedded in many actions and official statements is a negative attitude toward these that is tangential to the issues, or is not a fair representation situation, or confused the issues. There seem to be two reasons for this hostility. The first is a projection of guilt. Many of these church leaders enjoy the benefits of a middle-class affluent society, they are far removed from the ghetto, poverty, and the problems of integration. More than that, in their professional striving in the church and in their personal goals, they are heavily influenced by the competitive get-ahead and get-more-success values. The conflict in their own lives between their understanding of what is required of them as Christians and their own striving for success is resolved by 'punishing' congregations and church members. The second reason is a projection of revenge, of getting even. Quite often the first pastorate that a minister has is unpleasant. In fact he may leave with the congregation hostile toward him and he toward them.

A fourth weakness, which is also a part of the third, is the fact that the actions of church leaders are many times an effort to meet their own emotional needs rather than an effort to solve social problems. To do something that relieves their guilt or concern about social evils is more important than doing something constructive—they want to feel better. One result of this has been the substitution of words for actions—and especially words that stir unrest and fear in church members and hopes in minority groups that are not fulfilled. Another result is the actions that do not help to solve the problem, but create conflict and are dysfunctional because nothing is gained. The value of the church as an institution that can help solve social problems is diminished.

A fifth weakness has been to interpret issues using the categories of right and wrong in a narrow and absolute way. This is a part of and a reinforcement of the desire in our country to identify the "good guys" and the "bad guys," to simplify every problem to a simple choice between good and evil. A discussion of the abuse and proper use of the categories of right and wrong would be an article in itself, so only a couple of comments can be made here. In regard to the Vietnam War, the attempt to make either the United States and the South Vietnamese governments the devils and

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the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese the saints, or vice versa, forces people to take sides on a false issue and diverts them from examina-
tion of the real issues raised by our involvement in this war. Most decisions at best involve a better or poorer choice. The better choice has some bad conse-
quences and the poorer has some good. Because this is true, people who are making an honest effort to support what is good may end up supporting the poorer. Nothing is gained and much is lost when such people are labeled as evil by their opponents, because their opponents have used good and evil in a very narrow and absolute sense.

In spite of the fact that it is possible to point to weaknesses in the present involvement of church leaders and official organizations in social issues, the nature of the church and the welfare of our nation require such an active involvement.

The Special Concern of God

The church as an institution in society grew out of and is influenced by a biblical tradition that is very much concerned with the rightness or wrongness of political and social actions and that sees the poor and the weak as of special concern to God. This is brought out dramatically in the Book of Job. Job rests his claim of righteousness on the fact that he was an advocate and defender of the poor and the weak, that he made sure that they got a fair deal. The Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy are set in the same context. The people of Israel should be particularly concerned that the weak get a fair deal, because they got a raw deal in Egypt. Much of the material in the Prophets is a protest to the way that the poor and weak were treated. The New Testament also emphasizes that a major part of righteousness is making sure that the poor and weak are fairly treated and have enough to live adequately.

This biblical tradition has been part of the tradition of the church throughout its history. The Roman Catholic Church, during the Middle Ages, using a variety of methods, tried to limit the lawlessness of our ancestors and increase justice. One of the causes of the Reformation was the abandonment of this concern for the poor and the weak by many leaders in the Roman Catholic Church.

But much more than the faithfulness to tradition is involved. The welfare of our nation is involved. Whether one views our nation as a marvelous dream or as a democratic system, the church's involvement in controversial social issues is helpful in making that dream a reality and that system function.

One way of viewing our country is as a marvelous dream, one of the greatest dreams that men have ever dreamed, a land of liberty and justice for all. The realist recognizes that such a dream runs counter to the whole history of mankind, that injustice and servitude are more natural. He is not surprised that this nation or any nation has not achieved it. When the Saturday Evening Post in a series of articles several years ago discovered that there was little justice for the poor and minority groups, it was no surprise for those who understand the nature of people. The issue is not our failure to achieve, it is whether we are striving to achieve a land of liberty for all.

If by all we mean everyone and if we are realistic about the nature of people, what hope is there for this marvelous dream unless we are called again and again from the pursuit of selfishness and the ease of prosperity to the task of making that marvelous dream a reality? If church leaders and official organizations are of any use, it seems only natural that they should be calling us to pursue that marvelous dream, even if it means involvement in controversial social issues.

Another way of viewing our country is as a democratic system, a nation with a government that is of and by and for the people. Such a system works only when every group has a voice in and influence on the government. We are a pluralistic nation—and this has always been our problem. How do we make sure that every group has a responsible voice in our nation?

Our forefathers were more realistic about this than we. When the vote was restricted to property owners, they were acting on a sound principle; only those who had a stake in society could exercise the vote responsibility. But they also saw that denying the landless the vote did not solve the problem. Madison, for instance, saw an inevitable disaster for our nation when there were a lot of people who had no stake in society—they would destroy the nation. One of the arguments used in favor of the first “give-away program” in our history, free land in the West, was based on this understanding of the situation. Free land was not throwing away potential income for the Federal Government; it was an investment in the future; because these people would have a stake in society, they would be able to be part of a pluralistic nation. (The urban riots of the late '60s should have been no surprise. Madison's warning came back to haunt us. Vast numbers of black people were removed from their familiar rural surroundings, confused and lost in the urban ghetto, feeling that they had no stake in society, and unable to influence the decisions that affected their lives. What happened was inevitable.)

It is my judgment that white church leaders and official organizations are helping to bring us through this crisis (and that black church leaders such as Martin Luther King made the present revolution one of constructive change rather than a violent disaster). But I would still see value in church leaders and official organizations being involved in controversial social issues, even if it could be shown that such involvement has been almost useless as far as helping solve the problem. Every society needs criticism. If it is to improve, someone must point out its blind spots. When a society becomes complacent about its
failures, it is in danger of disaster. A nation that will not tolerate criticism has ceased to be a free nation, whether the stifling of criticism is done by the government as in Russia or by the weight of public opinion.

Those, then, who oppose the involvement of church leaders and official organizations in controversial social issues need to give careful consideration to the tradition out of which such involvement comes and to the problem of making that marvelous dream a reality.

The Predicament

Yet the involvement of church leaders and official organizations in controversial social issues always puts them in a predicament. The relationships of church leaders and official organizations with groups, issues, and people are very complex. It is impossible to keep these in proper balance. Most people will agree that the church should be concerned for everyone, when this is considered as an abstract principle. But when the principle is applied, a lot of problems are created. How does the church keep a balance so that concern for one group is not rejection of another? How is concern kept from being approval and criticism rejection?

This is an old predicament. Jesus was faced with it one day when some of the leaders brought to him a woman who had been caught committing adultery. Would Jesus be on the side of law and condemn this woman, thus alienating himself from many of his followers? Or, would he approve of what the woman did, thus putting himself against the law? His answer to the leaders was to let him who had never broken the law cast the first stone. His answer to the woman was to go and not to repeat her sin. Jesus was continually criticized for his associations with people who were lawbreakers or who were considered the least desirable elements of society. It is just as difficult today as it was in Jesus' day to get people to see that concern for people is not the same as approval of what they do.

On the other hand, criticism is often interpreted as rejection. When many church leaders supported the grape boycott, many farmers immediately interpreted this as an attempt by these church leaders to destroy farmers. It was the same reaction as that of a little boy to a spanking, "Daddy, why don't you love me anymore?" Being the friend of the weak does not necessarily mean that one is the enemy of the strong. It may mean that one wants to make sure that the weak have a fair chance and that the strong do not abuse their positions. Abstractly, most people realize that criticism and rejection are not the same, but in the particular situation it is very difficult for them to see a difference when they are the ones being criticized.

A lot depends on "whose dog is getting kicked." When people voice opposition to the church's involvement in social issues, they often mean that church leaders should not be critical of what they do. The involvement of church leaders and official organizations must be more effective during the '70s. I would like to make some suggestions on how that involvement can be more effective.

Fellow Sinners

First, I see a need for a basic change in attitude on the part of church leaders. While in the past they have tended to approach the problems of society as though they were innocent and with condemnation of everyone else, in the future they need to approach these problems as fellow sinners and with concern for others.

Second, church leaders can help develop the practical ideals that will make it possible for society to progress. Revolutions against what is wrong are never enough. It is not surprising that, following the revolutions, there is the re-establishment of the kinds of government that existed before. Unless people have a new vision, they will reproduce the injustices of the past. People need to see, then, new ways of doing things. Practical ideals have the following characteristics. One, they make it possible for people to improve life by dealing with it as it is and not by fleeing from it. (The person who sees righteousness as possible only for the person who flees to the desert or who sees a just society only in terms of a rural past is not a practical idealist.) Two, practical ideals have specific suggestions for how the present life can be improved. Third, it is not possible to fully achieve them. Four, they feed back meaning to those caught in the present. The present revolution in our country lacks practical ideals. Whenever a person is sure that a revolution is necessary, but has no program for the future, he lacks practical ideals. We cannot solve our problems unless someone has a better idea.

Third, church leaders must become much more precise in their criticisms of issues and people. Being just for or against is no longer adequate. For instance, considering urban renewal, the thoughtful person can give neither blanket support nor condemnation. One must be very specific about the good and the bad. The complex issues of the '70s will be resolved only if we can be much more precise than we have in the past.

Fourth, the church must put even more effort than it has into community organization. Giving the poor and minority groups an opportunity to have a voice in decision-making is not only a guarantee of their freedom but a guarantee of a free society.

What is at stake in the whole question of the church's involvement in social issues is the welfare of our nation in the '70s. I, who still believe in that marvelous dream that is America, but who would be realistic about the weaknesses and failures of people and societies, and yet who am saddened by the injustices that mock that dream, see the church as an important way in the '70s by which to lift further the burden of evils that weighs down upon us and our society and keeps that dream from our waking.