

The Institutional Church and Political Activity

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THE IDEA that there exists a necessary relationship between the Christian faith and politics is, of course, not new. The subject is an exceedingly difficult and controversial one. It is something which sharply divides all the mainline Protestant denominations. We have had, for instance, the so-called Social Gospel in the nineteen twenties. The Social Gospel demanded that ministers devote their sermons to political issues and that church bodies make pronouncements on these issues to guide the conscience of its members and influence public policy.

The Nature and Rise of Social Activism

Now, however, the involvement of the church in political activity is being advocated and pushed much further. The demand is that the church move from words to deeds. Sermons and pronouncements are not enough. There must be active lobbying for decisions by legislative, executive, and judicial bodies. There must be direct per-

sonal participation by church members, ministers, and denominational officials in mass demonstrations, some violent and some nonviolent. Following the current slogan that we must put our money where our mouth is, church bodies are withdrawing denominational funds from enterprises they disapprove of and investing them in enterprises that meet with their approval. Individual church members are urged to follow the denominational party line in their own private investments. This political use of denomination and private funds is urged upon us as an imperative of the Christian faith and described as corporate responsibility.

This push for what has become known as Social Activism is not limited to domestic affairs such as when we are urged to withdraw funds from businesses that have defense contracts or to invest funds in high risk black-controlled enterprises. It spills over into foreign affairs. It demands church use of a financial club in the domestic af-

fairs of South Africa, Rhodesia, and Portugal—but not, curiously enough, in the domestic affairs of Communist countries. It demands the support of so-called liberation movements in Africa and revolution in Brazil. It has caused a group of high officials of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to go to Paris and consult with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong delegations in the very midst of governmental negotiations—in violation of the Logan Act, I might add. It has caused the United Presbyterian Church to send money to a Protestant group in Colombia in spite of the vehement protests of the Colombian Presbyterian Church. These interventions in foreign affairs are to some extent funneled and directed by the World Council of Churches.

Social Activism is finding its place in ecclesiastical structures. In my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States, which is going through a thorough-going restructuring, Social Activism is recognized in a new division in the general executive board designated as corporate responsibility. A new office has also been created, that of Washington communicator, with a salary of \$20,000 a year. He is in fact a lobbyist, and it remains to be seen whether he is required by law to register as such. Most mainline denominations have some structural recognition of Social Activism called by various names such as Council on Church and Society.

The movement from the Social Gospel to Social Activism is not very old. It probably owes its impetus, if not its birth, to the civil rights movement and was further strengthened by the controversies over the Vietnam War. Its latest reenforcement has come from the Women's Liberation Movement and is taking the form of a demand for quotas (the word is usually avoided) for women as well as ethnic groups in denominational structures. As we observe

the impact of anti-war groups, civil rights groups, and Women's Lib on the life of the church and we remember the Great Commission, one wonders who is converting whom and to what.

A Personal Frame of Reference

Anyone who tries to answer this question and appraise Social Activism cannot do so in an ideological or theological vacuum. He must do it on the basis of his own convictions, and fairness demands that he make clear from what standpoint he makes his judgments. In response to this demand, let me say that I am a member of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, subscribe to the Standards of my church (*i.e.* the Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Book of Church Order), adhere to the Calvinist Reformed theology, and believe that a Christian's position in all things should be Bible-based and Christ-centered. In other words, I am a conservative in religion.

In politics I am and have been a life-long Democrat. For much of my life I have supported liberal candidates and policies. I do not regret this insofar as these earlier years are concerned, but in later years I have become a conservative. I do not mean that I have become a prisoner of the status quo or lost the compassion for the underprivileged and the dedication to political and social ideals which once caused me to be a liberal. But I do mean that, in my firm opinion, times have changed so much that the issues of earlier years are no longer the same and different approaches and remedies are called for. By way of example, I have come to the belief that crucial social problems like poverty and racial tensions are too complex to be solved by the mere expenditure of federal funds and the extension of governmental power.

The Conceptual Approach to Religion and Politics

Turning to the relation of religion and political science, I have no difficulty in affirming the relevance of the Christian faith to my chosen professional field. For most of my life, I have tried to rethink the basic concepts of political science in the light of the Christian faith and written a book in which I reviewed such concepts as state, law, constitution, civil rights, citizenship, and representation in that light. I believe this kind of rethinking is a very fruitful endeavor because it yields a truer and deeper understanding of these concepts and delivers the political scientist from being the victim of gadgetry and all that which is merely technical. Political institutions and processes are illuminated and brought into perspective as they are linked with the purposes which have or should have brought them into existence. Moreover, the confrontation of Christian theology and political science exposes false values, many of which lie hidden under various labels like behavioralism. I would like to see the kind of intellectual reconstruction required by this enterprise extended to all other fields, particularly those of philosophy, psychology, history, economics, and sociology because they deal directly with human life. Obviously, the vastness of human knowledge puts this task beyond any would-be twentieth century Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, this necessarily collective task can only be undertaken by scholars who are as well versed in theology as they are in their professional fields, and that is something which is rare indeed. We should observe, too, that this is a task primarily for laymen and not ministers. Ministers may well be useful as resource persons, but they are not equipped to do the job themselves.

Rethinking the concepts of one's profes-

sional field in the light of the Christian faith, valuable and illuminating as it is, cannot solve the problem of Social Activism. It touches it, to be sure, but it does not solve it. A concept is one thing, and a public policy is quite another. The first refers to thought, while the second refers to action. The most that I can say for the conceptual approach in relation to Social Activism is that it may produce enough insight into the issues to be faced and the context in which they arise to enable public officials to make the right decision as Christians. It may supply resources for an answer, but not the answer itself. This is commendable and desirable, but it is not enough. At this point, I know of no way to proceed except by grappling with specifics and see whether doing so can lead to guiding principles.

The Issue of Civil Disobedience

The first issue I shall discuss is that of civil disobedience. Perhaps it would be well to begin by reminding ourselves of the difference between civil and criminal disobedience. Civil disobedience can be identified by three criteria: (1) high-minded motives arising out of religious convictions, (2) the unavailability of legal means to obtain redress of legitimate grievances or to promote a righteous cause, (3) the willingness to accept the consequences of disobedience. Criminal disobedience fails to meet the first and third criteria: the motives are reprehensible like greed and revenge, and there is a total unwillingness to accept the consequences. The second criterion is obviously inapplicable. Civil disobedience was resorted to rather extensively by people in the civil rights movement. Some of these people met the first and third criteria. Whether or not they met the second criterion has been much debated. The issue depends on a judgment of

fact, *i.e.* whether the alternative legal means of peaceful persuasion, voting, and access to the courts were sufficiently effective and prompt to achieve the legitimate demands of the blacks. There is considerable disagreement on this point and probably always will be.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States has endorsed the principle of civil disobedience, much to the dismay of large numbers of Presbyterians. It seems to me, however, that a Christian must conclude that the General Assembly was right insofar as the principle itself is concerned. If the early Christians had not disobeyed the commands of the constituted authorities of their day by following the admonition of the apostle Peter that we must obey God rather than man, Christianity would have died with the first generation. Nor would Protestantism exist, including its Presbyterian form, if the early Reformers had not followed the example of Martin Luther when he uttered the famous words, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God."

It should be observed, however, that endorsing the principle of civil disobedience—even if all three criteria are scrupulously met—should not be regarded as an automatic invitation to apply it. Every human being, and especially a Christian and the church to which he belongs, must carefully consider all the consequences of his acts to the best of his ability. Church bodies must realize that their pronouncements easily and often do lead to misunderstandings with the result that civil disobedience degenerates into criminal disobedience, and lawlessness, in turn, is apt to bring brutal repression. Young men who publicly burned their draft cards—a clearly illegal act—are a borderline case. Even if we grant them the benefit of the doubt as to motives and recognize their willingness to accept the consequences, they fail to meet

the second criterion for civil disobedience because they had the option to get classified as conscientious objectors. But even here, some people might stretch a point by arguing that these young men had no real legal alternative because it took a dramatic gesture like card-burning to press their cause upon the public. Conceding this point merely for the sake of argument, the fact still remains that such a gesture can have serious consequences. It may result in military defeat induced by low domestic morale in a war which, in fact, is necessary for national survival and the safeguarding of the Christian values of Western civilization.

It will do no good to invoke Christ's admonition to turn the other cheek. Jesus did not instruct his disciples to turn other people's cheeks, and governments are responsible for the welfare of peoples and not just themselves. A church body or a high church official who condones or encourages young men to burn their draft cards may become morally responsible for national disaster. It is this matter of political responsibility which may prevent the granting of amnesty to draft dodgers and deserters of the Vietnam War. Of course draft dodgers and deserters are guilty of criminal disobedience because they do not fit any of the criteria for civil disobedience. The point is that these people have no moral right to amnesty and the government has no moral duty to grant it. Whether amnesty is granted or not is a matter of public policy based on a judgment as to what is most conducive to the national interest. To act on principle alone without regard to consequences can lead to the most atrocious sacrifice of human life, welfare, and happiness, whether performed by individuals, churches, or governments. It might be noted, in passing, that our Social Activists are not always consistent, for they insist on the moral right to disobey the draft law

and, with equal fervor, insist on the most uncompromising obedience as a moral duty to busing pupils from one end of the city to the other so that racial balance may be achieved.

The Issue of Corporate Responsibility

The second issue I shall discuss is that of corporate responsibility. This issue, as we have already observed, deals with money and, more especially, with investment. It arises from the fact that religious denominations have very large sums of money at their disposal running into many millions. Not all of that money is spent on denominational programs. Much of it is invested in stocks, bonds, land, and buildings. Large amounts are also deposited in banks. Some of the money, of course, is spent for the salaries of ministers and denominational board executives, for operating expenses, and for benevolences. It is noteworthy that benevolences is an elastic term which can include many causes. In the Presbyterian Church in the United States, for example, the Birthday Offering of the Women of the Church for 1973 amounted to more than \$400,000, and half of this sum was assigned to the relief of world hunger—an imperceptible drop in one enormous bucket.

The Social Activists contend that the possession of those vast sums creates a moral responsibility for churches (and individual church members as well) which no Christian can rightly ignore. As the slogan goes, churches and church members should put their money where their mouth is. Let us note, in passing, that this slogan is not consistently adhered to, for the Social Activists raise a loud outcry when conservative church members diminish or withhold their contributions to denominational causes and support because they do not approve the uses which the denomination makes of

them. In this case, the slogan is quite forgotten. In general, one can say that the concept of corporate responsibility discards the usual economic criterion of investing money where the highest returns are after due consideration to the element of risk. Considering the size of denominational funds, it is easy to see that if the demands of the Social Activists were met, the impact on economic life would be great, especially if large numbers of individual church members took parallel action.

The suggestion that the investment and spending of money should be governed by moral rather than economic criteria would appear to be an economic rather than a political matter since we are dealing with money. In a way, of course, it does. At bottom, however, it is a political matter because the causes for which it is proposed that money be invested, spent, or withheld are usually clearly political and always have strong political implications. The concept of corporate responsibility, therefore, necessarily means a profound involvement of the institutional church in political activity, political activity not being understood in the modern sense of a mere struggle for power (though such a struggle is always involved) but in the old Greek sense of a collective pursuit of the good life.

Let us admit that there is validity to the principle that moral considerations are relevant to the investment and spending of money. These considerations may be decisive in some cases. For instance, I believe every Christian would agree that churches and churchmen should not invest their money in houses of prostitution, no matter how high the rate of return might be.

Nevertheless, admitting the principle requires that moral considerations be carefully identified in concrete situations, that the proper occasion for acting upon them be dependably determined, and that the probable consequences of political action

be thoroughly ascertained and evaluated beforehand. Such an analysis always depends upon a judgment of facts, facts which are not theological or moral but political, social, and economic. And respect for facts, whether palatable or unpalatable, is essential in applying Christian principles. There is no place in the Christian life for untruth, distortion, wishful thinking, or prejudice. This aspect of the application of moral principles calls for a professional knowledge and expertise which ministers and church bodies seldom possess. It is something which falls in the domain of laymen, *i.e.* businessmen, educators, lawyers, government officials, military officers, political scientists, economists, sociologists, and (in the case of ecology) of natural scientists. Any political involvement of the institutional church which neglects or disregards professional knowledge and expertise is irresponsible and must be condemned on Christian grounds.

Unfortunately, most of the involvement of the institutional church in political activity with which I am acquainted belongs to the category of irresponsible activity because the judgments of facts on which they are based are faulty and the moral motivation which prompts it is marred by prejudice. Space does not permit me to go into all the cases I have in mind, so I shall illustrate what I mean by pointing to only one example, namely Social Activist attitudes and actions dealing with South Africa.

Many of the mainline Protestant denominations, among which are the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the United Presbyterian Church have condemned South Africa in the harshest terms and sought to apply their concept of corporate responsibility to that country. The World Council of Churches has done the same. All these bodies defend their position in the name of the Christian faith. What is wrong with that?

In the first place, this position fails to take into account the magnitude of the problems which South Africa is facing. Some legitimate questions should be asked of our churches. What right have they to expect the white people of South Africa to bring millions of blacks from the most primitive tribalism into the twentieth century in one generation when it took the white peoples of Europe over two thousand years to reach it? How great a financial burden can four million whites carry to raise the standard of living of sixteen million blacks without killing the goose that lays the golden eggs? How do you govern and promote peace and harmony in a country that is multi-national, multi-racial, multi-lingual, religiously and culturally diverse? To ask such questions is to answer them or, rather, to confess one's inability to answer them. Certainly our Social Activists have never replied to the late Prime Minister Verwoerd's challenge to the Commonwealth Conference in London some years ago: what else would you do?

In the second place, this position is faulty because it judges South Africa in terms of black and white when what you have got is various shades of grey—or brown. There is no doubt whatever that there are South African policies which are morally indefensible, *e.g.* some measures which are characteristic of police states, some features of petty *apartheid* which affront human dignity, the breakup of families in labor compounds. But no account is taken of the fact that townships have replaced ghettos and more money is spent on the housing, education, and health of the blacks than in any of the black republics to the north, an amount vastly larger in proportion to what is spent on the blacks in our own country. No account is taken of the policy of creating Bantustans whereby blacks are being trained for self-government with independence as the ulti-

mate goal. One trouble is, of course, that many of our critics have no conception of what a Bantustan is. A recent report of an official body to the 1973 General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church obviously confused it with townships. No account is taken of the fact that the most informed and severest attacks on what is wrong with South African policies are to be found publicly expressed in South African newspapers and universities. No account is taken of the fact that large numbers of blacks from the republics to the north are migrating to that House of Horrors, as the title of a recent book calls South Africa. This migrants apparently know better!

In the third place, the above described one-sidedness is based on more than ignorance. It reeks of virulent prejudice. How else can one explain that our Social Activists shed crocodile tears over poverty and disease in the Transkei but are dry-eyed over worse conditions in Lesotho and Botswana—not to mention the black republics to the north? How else can you explain the condemnation of townships like Soweto while not one word is said about the ghettos of Rio de Janeiro and Lima which I have seen with my own eyes and which are among the worst in the world? Where is the condemnation of the Brazilian and Peruvian governments for adopting a policy of letting them rot? Why is it that the police state measures of South Africa are denounced while the much more severe ones of the Communist states are given the silent treatment?

In the fourth place, racial segregation in South Africa is judged by reference to American, not South African, conditions. Segregation by law in the United States was indeed an evil which we have abandoned *de jure* and are trying to abandon *de facto*. But in South Africa, segregation is made necessary by the vast cultural,

economic, social, and health conditions of the peoples who live there. To integrate in that country would cause an explosion—a repetition of the famous Durban riots when the Zulus tried to exterminate the Indians, violent expulsions of peoples like that of the Asians in Kenya and Uganda, bloodshed as in the massacre of Arabs by blacks in Zanzibar. Those who cannot get along must be separated, and people of like origins, language, and culture naturally gravitate toward each other. Curiously enough, the one case in which South African segregation policies are indefensible is the very one never mentioned by our Social Activists, namely the application of *apartheid* to the two million Coloureds who live in the Cape Province and whose position with respect to the South African whites is almost identical with that of our American blacks.

In the fifth place, our Social Activists do not think through the consequences of withdrawing American business investments in South Africa. It would seem elementary to see that the first victims of such a withdrawal would be the blacks—the very ones which our Social Activists claim to be most concerned with. Many blacks would lose their jobs as well as the beneficial effect of the higher wages paid by American business on the policies of South African business. Also lost would be the broadening effect of the American presence on the tendency of South Africans to a parochialism born of geographic isolation.

This necessarily brief survey of the application of the concept of corporate responsibility to South Africa illustrates the terrible vulnerability of that concept to error in judgment of fact, to prejudice in the moral realm, and to political irresponsibility.

The Issue of Compensatory Action

What has become known as compensatory action is a response to the plight and pres-

sure resulting therefrom of groups which are and have been the victims of unfair discrimination. It springs mainly from ethnic groups and women who have received unequal treatment. These groups demand equal pay for equal work. They protest against discrimination in employment on the basis of race, national origin, or sex. They point to the fact that their members are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Almost everyone concedes that their cause is a just one. Their legitimate demands resulted in legislation designed to assure equal rights for everyone in fact as well as in law, by private employers and groups as well as public bodies. In the case of women, an amendment to the Constitution has been endorsed by Congress and is now pending before the state legislatures for ratification—a veritable, Pandora's box.

The movement for equal rights and non-discrimination has gone beyond the achievement of equality in the hitherto recognized sense. The call now is for what is labelled compensatory action. What this call means was most dramatically propounded by the Negro James Forman who appeared before top denominational bodies and demanded that they hand over many millions of dollars to black organizations to compensate for the years of slavery and the discriminations which followed emancipation and for which he held the white churches responsible. He described his demand as a call for reparation, which is another word for compensatory action.

The movement for compensatory action was taken up by the federal government through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Office of Equal Opportunity. This has meant the application of federal pressure on the federal bureaucracy, private employers, and universities to force them to hire more blacks and women to the point where a "balance" has been achieved, and to rectify salary

scales and status in rank for these groups at an accelerated rate to bring them up to the level of those already on the payroll. Public school children are to be bused regardless of time, expense, and distance to the extent of achieving a "racial balance" and public school teachers are to be re-assigned with the same end in view. In all this the term "quota" is not officially recognized because so much opposition to it has developed, but its substance is disguised and retained under such terms as "proportionate" and "plans for affirmative action." Needless to say, the Social Activists are strongly in favor of compensatory action and they strain every effort to support it.

Compensatory action is having a great impact on ecclesiastical structures. As is the case in so many other instances, the impetus for compensatory action came from the government rather than the churches, and the churches are merely responding to a secular movement outside. The Social Activists are pushing for structural changes which would give a representation to ethnic minorities and women that would correspond to the relative number of these groups in the church membership. In addition, Social Activists are pushing for special recognition for youth, usually defined as people under thirty. These changes are applied to denominational courts and assemblies, boards and agencies, and church colleges and seminaries. The effect on local congregations is less marked and will probably be slower to appear, but I have heard of a sixteen year old boy being elected to the status of Ruling Elder in a Presbyterian church, and the number of women ministers and church officers is increasing.

We have now reached a point where we must appraise the concept of compensatory action. Is it a Christian concept which the institutional church is bound in conscience

to approve and apply? Before I try to answer this question, let me first dispose of the James Forman argument that reparation is due to those who have been victimized. That argument is clearly bad theology. There is no way to pay for two centuries of slavery, discrimination, and exploitation. There is no amount of money that can cure broken hearts, deep-seated feelings of inferiority, and the agony of personal insecurity. Similarly, where blessings, privileges, and opportunities have been conferred on someone, there is no way by which the recipient can begin to pay for what he has received and enjoyed. Grace is free. All he can do is to pass on the blessings he has not earned to others who do not deserve them either.

The real and authentically Christian basis for a government's social policy is response to human need. What is done is done and cannot be undone. What counts are the present and the future, because these are things we can do something about. The question, therefore, must be reformulated in the following way: is compensatory action a proper response to human need?

The argument which is made for compensatory action is that when things are out of balance they are one-sided, and to get them into balance, more weight must be placed on the other side. If women are to occupy that position in political, economic, and social life to which their abilities entitle them, special extra efforts must be made to achieve that end. The men do not need such efforts because they occupy that position already. If the potentialities of the black people are to be actualized, special extra efforts must be made, efforts which need not be made for the dominant white people. It must be conceded that there is a good deal of validity to this argument. Thus, parents who have two children, one who needs a great deal of medical atten-

tion and one who does not, more money will have to be spent on the first than on the second, and neither the parents nor anyone else will think that there is anything unfair about it. Parents try to meet the needs of their children and recognize that those needs are not the same in either character or extent. On the family level, therefore, any Christian should endorse the concept of compensatory action.

But endorsing this concept as a basis for action by governments and churches raises serious problems which Social Activists generally ignore. One of these is the logical inconsistency inherent in affirming compensatory action on the one hand and the principle of equality without regard to race, national origins, or sex on the other. You simply cannot have it both ways. Compensatory action only transfers discrimination from one group to another. To grant favored treatment to blacks in employment means to discriminate against the whites. Individual job seekers no longer stand on their own merits but as members of a particular race, and that is precisely what is normally meant by racism. This is especially true when it is argued, and it is by some of the more extreme Social Activists, that a less qualified applicant should get a position because he is black. It is generally admitted that such employment policies are illegal and immoral when the less qualified applicant happens to be white. Why is it not equally illegal and immoral when this applicant happens to be black? What all this amounts to is that it takes two wrongs to make a right and that injustice must be perpetrated that justice may be achieved.

There are people who, recognizing the logical inconsistency of affirming both compensatory action and nondiscrimination, frankly choose the former. They do so in order to achieve ultimate equality. Ultimate equality is taken for granted, accepted

as an axiom. But is it really such? Any survey of society, past and present, shows that inequality is an inseparable and inescapable part of life. Christians will agree that God loves all human beings equally right down to the individual person, but no one can contend that God has endowed them all equally. To argue that ultimate equality is a Christian objective cannot be sustained. God singled out the Jews as His chosen people, not the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians. Jesus chose twelve disciples, not one hundred or one thousand. Equality in the Christian religion is absolute in the sense that we are not called to do and to be more than God enables us to do and to be. That is all we have a right to expect.

As is true with all principles, compensatory action should not be applied without the most careful and conscientious consideration of probable consequences. Assistance to one group should not inflict injury on other groups. In the case of busing, churches should adopt a flexible attitude and not consider it as a dogma to be universally applied without regard to time and place. In some places, busing results in interracial friendships among black and white children, thus paving the way for adult harmony in the future. In other places, busing results in physical injury and disorder to the point where no education is possible for either blacks or whites because all school time must be devoted to discipline. Furthermore, no busing or other form of compensatory action should operate to the detriment of excellence and merit. It can also happen that the money used for busing might be better spent for other purposes advantageous to both races, such as raising teacher salaries and improving school equipment. The Christian view of busing, therefore, must be flexible enough and open-minded enough to take circumstances into account and see to it

that Christian principles have Christian consequences.

Criteria for Involvement of the Institutional Church in Political Activity

One of the most obvious observations concerning Social Activism is that Jesus was not a Social Activist. He sympathized with the poor and fed the five thousand who came to hear him, but he did not feed all the people in Palestine nor suggest an anti-poverty program. He said not one word about the institution of slavery so prevalent in his day. He did not join the zealots or denounce Roman policies. He approved the payment of taxes to Rome and urged the Jews to render unto Caesar (who was a pagan) what is Caesar's. He attended the synagogue regularly. He honored the Temple, so much so that he was indignant at its profanation by money changers. In short, Jesus was not a revolutionist or a Social Activist in any sense that we would recognize. Jesus was concerned with the transformation of the mind and heart of men. He looked upon social and political evils as symptoms and dealt with the source. Why prescribe palliatives when you have the cure?

Neither can our Social Activists find much comfort in the epistles. Instead of preaching the abolition of slavery, the apostle Paul urged slaves to obey their masters not only as a matter of prudence but of conscience. He told wives to obey their husbands and children to obey their parents. He said that magistrates should be honored and not resisted. When the apostle Peter converted the centurion Cornelius, he did not tell him to quit the Roman army. It is true that the apostle James loved the poor and said some harsh things about the rich, but even he did not come up with an anti-poverty program, and he ascribed the existence of war not to

social or political causes but to the human heart.

The New Testament position being what it is, the Social Activists fall back on the Old Testament, particularly the prophets. They are fond of saying that the church should speak with "a prophetic voice," by which they mean a fervent and ceaseless denunciation of current political, social, and economic evils. This reliance on the Old Testament makes it necessary for us to determine just what the role of a prophet in ancient Israel was and to deduce from this what are the criteria which should govern the involvement of the institutional church in political activity.

In the first place, it should be noted that the prophets were speaking for God, not for themselves. Time and time again, they would say: Thus saith the Lord. They were not voicing personal opinions, sociological conclusions, or debatable propositions. God spoke to them and gave them a message. They were utterly convinced of this fact and needed no sociological surveys and computerized data to give them the certainty and authority with which they spoke. It would appear, therefore, that churchmen and church bodies should be similarly convinced to the depth of their being that they are speaking for God at God's specific and unquestionable direction, or else they should keep silent. Few church pronouncements indeed show signs in the language and the context in which they are made that they originate in that kind of certainty and authority.

In the second place, the ancient prophets spoke unwillingly and did so only under divine duress. They did not enjoy their message at all. Moses did his best to argue himself out of his commission to deliver the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery. Jonah tried to escape his commission by fleeing to Spain which, in his day, was thought to be the end of the earth. Jere-

miah pled with God that he not take up his role as a prophet and lamented over the events he was obliged to prophesy. And Jesus himself, let us not forget, wept over the fate of Jerusalem which he foresaw. Yes, the role of a prophet is a heavy and painful one which nobody in his senses would seek and relish. In contrast, most of our modern would-be prophets seem to enjoy their message and luxuriate in denunciation.

In the third place, the ancient prophets ran enormous personal risks, unpopularity being the least of these. Jeremiah was thrown into prison, a dungeon where he sank in the mire. Daniel was thrown into a fiery furnace. Elijah fled for his life into the desert from the wrath of Jezebel and Ahab. John the Baptist was beheaded. In contrast, our modern would-be prophets speak their uncostly message from comfortable, airconditioned, and well equipped offices and enjoy the protection of constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech. Among them, I can think of only three who ran great personal risks and paid a high price for it, namely Martin Niemoeller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King. Niemoeller was sent to a Nazi concentration camp. Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis after a term in prison. King was in prison several times and was the victim of an assassin's bullet. But these martyrs are few indeed and not at all typical of our modern would-be prophets.

In the fourth place, the ancient prophets never limited themselves to denunciation and purely negative messages. They were like Isaiah who held up visions of peace, of a new heaven and a new earth, of forgiveness whereby blood-stained souls would be white as snow. They offered the people something to live for and to live by. In contrast, our modern would-be prophets are mostly negative, and when they venture to say something positive, it has none of the

power, precision, and color which characterized the message of the ancient prophets. Martin Luther King was an exception, and people still remember with nostalgia his famous sermon, "I have a Dream." In that sermon, he stood in the tradition of the ancient prophets.

In the fifth place, when the ancient prophets spoke, they did so with foreknowledge. Under divine inspiration, they saw the future in all its infamy and all its glory. They knew that when you prophesy, you had better be right! And they were. Nor was this a matter of giving forth ambiguous Delphic utterances. Thus, when king Zedekiah inquired of Jeremiah if there was a word from the Lord, Jeremiah replied: "There is: For thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon." This is exactly what happened. Again: in the fifty third chapter of Isaiah we find a description of Christ so detailed, so specific, and so accurate that it is startling. Let the scholars argue whether these words were written seven hundred or three hundred years before the birth of Christ. It does not matter. We have here a clear case of foreknowledge either way. Let the Jews argue that Isaiah was describing not Jesus but Israel. It does not matter either, for Jesus was the incarnation of everything Israel was supposed to be, with the result that both the Christian and the Jewish interpretations are right. In contrast, it is evident that our modern would-be prophets do not have foreknowledge. They do not even claim it. And yet, if they are true prophets, they should have it, whether it come to them from predictions based on the most thorough research and understanding of the facts or by direct perception of the future as was the case with the ancient prophets.

If the would-be prophets, past and

present, in the World Council of Churches like Eugene Carson Blake and Philip Potter are to be real prophets, if those who so loudly demand that the churches speak with a prophetic voice are to be believed, they ought to meet the five criteria we have just described. If these criteria are not met, it becomes impossible to distinguish preaching from propaganda. The worst aspect of Social Activism is that it plunges the churches so deep in politics that the necessary theological foundation is ignored and the Gospel is lost.

No Christian should lack a social conscience and ignore political issues, but he should approach them with an intellectual humility that knows the limitations of finite minds, the complexity of social and political issues, and the distorting effect of human sin on human judgment. He should approach them with a compassionate heart that embraces all political contestants in its love. He should cultivate his personal moral and spiritual life, and sensitize his conscience so that he can rely on the invisible resources which God grants to those who love Him and believe in Him. Finally, in the midst of much that is evil, he should remember the sovereignty of God and not act and speak as though any man or group of men can claim omniscience and omnipotence.

If it be said that my analysis of the involvement of the institutional church in political activity results in a serious curtailment of that activity and puts a powerful brake on Social Activism, the answer is that it does and that I intend that it should. Church involvement in political activity should be reserved for cases where the principle and its consequences are indisputably clear, as was true in the condemnation of the Nazi regime abroad and compulsory racial segregation at home.