

Reformed Faith and Politics

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REFORMED FAITH AND POLITICS

[This report was presented to the 195th General Assembly (1983) as Part Two, Section B, in the report of the Advisory Council on Church and Society from the United Presbyterian Church, and as Section IV, Recommendation B, in the report of the Council on Theology and Culture from the Presbyterian Church in the United States.]

The Advisory Council on Church and Society and the Council on Theology and Culture jointly submit the following report on "Reformed Faith and Politics" to the 195th General Assembly (1983) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and recommend that the policy statement and recommendations of "Reformed Faith and Politics" be adopted and that the Background Paper be received and commended for study.

A BACKGROUND PAPER

The Crisis

The question of the relationship of God and Caesar is not a new issue, yet it arises today with a fresh urgency. All human communities have had to resolve the problem of the relationship of the deepest religious loyalties to their practical decisions about government. The solution of one society has never prevailed over all of humanity. In our day, the crisis between religion and government has disturbed regimes in Central America, Iran, Afghanistan, and Poland. Recent politics in the United States of America has been energized and disturbed by new forms of Christian political activism. Religious divisions have contributed to political conflicts and war, recently, in the Sudan, India and Pakistan, Israel and the Arab countries, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere. Currently, political leaders and scientists are taking serious account of religious forces. As religious leaders and students of religion have learned, their religious practices have political implications that they cannot ignore.

As members of the Presbyterian Church, we know that the sovereignty of God and the service of God are of utmost importance in our lives. We also know that the practical exercise of politics, the process by which we govern human life, interpenetrates most areas of our lives. Questions of life and death, whether considered on the global scale of peace and war or the personal scale of human rights in abortion, have both theological and political dimensions. Both God and Caesar are involved. There will be no peace without politics. There will be no answer to the vexing questions about abortion without politics. Human history through which God works to realize divine purposes is subject also to the politics of human beings. These humans act

out of a mixture of religious judgments and political judgments.

So we are inevitably political and religious. The God-Caesar question will not let us go. The question flows through Scripture. We are confronted with a variety of solutions. God moves Joseph into a position of authority in Egypt. Then Egypt oppresses Israel. God leads Moses out of Egypt and the confrontation between Yahweh, the Lord of Moses, and the god-king Pharaoh disrupts Egypt. The tribes of Israel are joined in a religious confederacy to resist the Baalistic city states of Canaan. Kingship is granted Israel only reluctantly by Samuel, for he sees the rejection of the Lord in the institution of kingship. Prophets and priests struggle to work out a solution to the problem of religious loyalty and political loyalty. In Amos the struggle is between the prophet of God and the priest of court serving the king. Through periods of political success and political failure, from David to the exile, the question is not absent. The Jewish struggle for pure religion breaks out into political conflict with their Greek and then their Roman masters.

Jesus himself from his birth to his death and resurrection was involved in the politics and faith controversy. The stories about his birth involve promises of the overthrow of the established order in Mary's Magnificat and Herod's perceived threat to his rule from the birth at nearby Bethlehem. His death is an act of political execution and his resurrection a surprising victory over the political order that attempted to silence him.

Luke described the charges brought against him by the elders as "perverting the nation," "forbidding tribute to Caesar," and the proclamation of "Christ a King." (Luke 23:2 RSV.) The three Synoptic Gospels related Jesus' own avoidance of the trap about paying taxes. Confronted by the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians, he avoided affronting Rome or Judaism by saying, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:25 RSV.)

Political thinkers have had to deal with the meaning of this aphorism in varied historical situations since that day. What is appropriately owed to Caesar, and what is reserved to God? Different political orders work out the issue differently. Jesus himself only avoided the verbal trap of his enemies. Soon he was to surrender his life to the representatives of Caesar. Could there be anything on earth more completely God's than the life of Jesus? Yet it was laid down before Caesar. The Gospel of John makes it clear that Pilate, the representative of Caesar, was acting under God's authority. Pilate, overwhelmed by the issues of the crowd's religious-political convictions, finally acquiesced to the crucifixion. The saying of Jesus of rendering to Caesar and to God points toward the need for a distinction, but it fails to draw the line for Christians or for Jesus himself.

Religious faith and politics are not the same reality, but they cannot be separated. On biblical grounds they cannot be separated, though distinctions can be found. Empirically they cannot be separated, for many of the

political conflicts of our day involve dimensions of faith.

Political authority, like water, is ultimately from God. Neither water nor political authority are gods, though in certain cultures both have been worshiped. Governments, like irrigation canals, must be organized by people; the breaking of either can create chaotic conditions. Often both canals and governments must be changed. Paul was confronted with Christian extremists in Rome who were tempted, in the name of Christian freedom, to be careless of political authority. His response in Romans 13 has protected political authority with religious legitimacy to both the health and detriment of the people.

Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who so resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they will receive. For government, a terror to crime, has no terrors for good behavior. (Romans 13:1-3 NEB.)

These words seem hard to those of us who are conscious of our own religious liberty, which comes out of a history of revolution. The Calvinist revolutionary, John Knox, understood "For government, a terror to crime, has no terrors for good behavior" to be foundational to the argument. Therefore, when a group of people were a terror to good people, regardless of their claim, they were not God's government and they were to be replaced. Usually, however, the text has buttressed authority and recognized the high place that governing authorities have in God's work. Too seldom has attention been given to the sentence preceding 13:1, "Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to defeat evil" (12:21). The last sentence in the section on government is also relevant: "Love cannot wrong a neighbor; therefore the whole law is summed up in love" (13:10). Paul, expecting the end of history, had a problem with Christian extremists and he ordered caution about challenging government. He, himself, of course, challenged it unto death. His advice to the Romans was meant for their time, but it has relevance to our time. He urges us to regard proper governmental authority as serving God and to see government in the context of good defeating evil. The summary of law, rightly conceived, is love.

The early hearers of the Gospel according to John anticipated martyrdom as Jesus and his disciples were martyred. The background of the New Testament is religious and religious-political conflict. The New Testament concludes with the saints oppressed by Rome and the overcoming of Rome in an apocalyptic vision. Thus, Scripture provides a plurality of answers to the question of the relationship of faith to politics.

Church history shows that the church has attempted many solutions to the God-Caesar problem. The early church defied the state's idolatry, and it was persecuted. Often it still is persecuted. Ascetics withdrew from the state. In small communities, the church still withdraws. The Roman Catholic medieval church attempted to run the state for Christian purposes, and

Christians who would run the state are still active. Martin Luther tried to maintain the church distinct from the social realm, recognizing that God governs both realms. In practice, often the church became subservient to the political needs of the rulers. John Calvin tried to reform the state while recognizing that the state is not and cannot be the Kingdom of God. The church in Reformed lands was tempted to establish a theocracy where it had the power.

John Calvin taught, and political history affirms, that no one form of the state will serve different peoples best. Governments must correspond to the limits and possibilities of the population. Social science confronts us with a variety of models of solutions to the God-Caesar issue. Beyond recognizing and describing the plurality, social science can help only a little in our search for the answer to the perplexities in the relationship of the God-Caesar problem.

Consequently, the search for wisdom for Presbyterians regarding the faith-politics questions begins in a recognition of: (1) the inevitability of the issue, (2) the importance of the issue, and (3) a variety of answers to the issue found in the study of the Bible, church history, and social science. All three sources will provide wisdom. The Bible particularly will provide controls to the options that are open to contemporary Christians in their resolution of the problem. From our history we learn of a particular Reformed way of perceiving those scriptural controls as well as a style of political action. Social science also helps us understand the contemporary problems around the issue and describes alternative consequences of certain choices.

The crisis of the relationship of faith to politics involves not only religious issues but the changing political scene. The American political system is troubled.¹ The national leadership has been highly unstable, with Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1952-1960, being the last President to complete two terms in office. Others have been assassinated, retired under criticism and intraparty conflicts, forced to resign under clouds of political scandal, or defeated at the polls. The 1980's may be a time of political upheaval characterized by fundamental debate and change.² The media, the reform of the primary system, the computer, the political action committees, the new religious-political groups—all impact a system characterized by political apathy toward and suspicion of the political process. The American political system is an old system that has evolved greatly and that is undergoing intense strains. Four issues that the last two General Assemblies have addressed in substantive ways raise questions about the system's ability to resolve problems. Can the United States' political process handle the issues surrounding the energy issue for a just and sustainable future? Is the system adequate to meet the needs of the urban population of the country? Can a just migration policy be developed with all the pressure groups and fears around the issue? Finally and most important, can a just peace be secured that will reduce the probability of nuclear destruction? All four issues, addressed theologically and ethically by the church, will require political leadership, which does not seem

to be on the horizon. Fundamental questions are on the national agenda, but most political leadership seems to be ducking, refraining from leading, settling for oversimplified media answers, serving special interests, and concentrating on reelection.

The Ambiguity

The complexity of the relationship of faith to politics inheres in the nature of politics as well as in the demands of faith. The classical political philosophy as articulated in the fourth century B.C. regarded politics as the governing for the good of the people of the city. Politics was a branch of ethics. Thomas More in the sixteenth century continued this theme in his writing of *Utopia*, as he portrayed an ideal society. Caught up in the religious-political controversies of his day, the author was martyred. Socrates and More both represent a view of politics as ethics and both made the ultimate sacrifice. An alternative view is perhaps best represented by Nicolo Machiavelli, a relatively religiously indifferent thinker of the sixteenth century, in *The Prince*. Here politics is basically the search for and the maintenance of power. His views too had their forerunners in the writings of the Greek political thinkers, particularly the cynics. In this view politics is a relatively amoral skill of ruling the people. Neither view in a pure form is sufficient. Ethics and politics are not united, but neither are they completely separate.

Politics on every level is obviously self-interested people pursuing their own advantage through the use of government. However, politics, particularly where exercised through democratic procedures, also requires a vision of the public good to be served. The politician must represent himself or herself as expressing the best interests of those represented. Too narrow a pursuit of self-interest exposes the politician to criticism and the profession to a reputation that cheapens the meaning of politics. Even self-interest must be disguised under promises to the civic good. Politics is a mixture of serving self and serving the public. People try to be ethical as well as political, although they are not perfect in either attempt. In politics and ethics the search for the public good and self-interest leads to uneasy compromises.

Reformed Christians understand this political ambiguity as rooted in our human nature. We are inevitably sinful in our political actions. All of our political actions reflect our own self-interest or our own perspective. The best hopes for our political life reside in knowing our sin as well as the sin of others and acting accordingly to minimize sin's effects. We may still be called to martyrdom. The willingness for martyrdom is essential to Christian political action.³ Not only Jesus and the apostles but also countless Christians have taken this route. The refusal to compromise on ultimate issues is a mark of Christian participation in politics. A recognition of our own sin, however, guards us against a willingness to force others to martyrdom and points toward the need for compromise and prudence in political action. Sin in politics, both as a distortion of

our created goodness and as the refusal to live in love, is not to be celebrated but to be recognized as the context for repentance, change, and transformation. Knowing that we exist in a violent world, we try to be peacemakers striving to realize God's peace or Shalom. Our tools for achieving peace are awkward; still, as the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, Augustine, taught at the beginning of the fifth century, we must use these imperfect tools. Faith gives a context for knowing that God wills people to live together in trusting, wholesome relationships. Hope provides a motivation for engaging in a politics of expectation that life can be more just. Love requires us to respond to the love God has shown by loving service to our neighbor. These central Christian virtues transform but do not annul the way Christians in society try to order society through moderation, courage, wisdom, and justice.

Reservation and Commitment

Until the founding in the twentieth century of frankly secular states, most earthly rulers in Christian civilization have been Christians. Maybe they were not thoroughly Christian, but they were baptized and most confessed themselves to be Christian. Christianity, since the overthrow of official idolatry, has been frankly quite political. The Christian hopes and values of their populations nurtured the politics of these societies. The societies were not secular; they were religious in Christian terms. Still the Christian faith could not be reduced to politics. Memories of prophetic distance of religion from politics were never completely eclipsed. Monastic groups withdrew from the politics of the state, though in both Eastern and Western Christendom they would return to reform politics. Clergy would demand and receive some exemptions from political responsibility. Religious visionaries would reawaken again and again the hope for a Kingdom of God that was different from political kingdoms. A faith with even a somewhat dim memory of Jesus could not equate Roman rule or its motley heirs to the Kingdom that Jesus announced.

Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, is among the most worldly of the world's religions. Yet, there was a reservation about political involvement that remained. The human spirit could not be satisfied with the peace of the city of the earth; it sought the peace of the city of God. A person caught up in the love of God knows that earthly justice is usually only rough justice. It is not enough. We pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God daily in the Lord's Prayer, recognizing that these earthly kingdoms or republics or people's republics are not God's fulfillment of human community.

Western Christianity in its Catholic and Reformed traditions is committed to political action. But it also has a reservation about political action. All of life is not politics. There is a freedom to the human spirit too great for any of our political organizations. The neglect of this religious reservation about politics has led and

can lead to a religious fanaticism in politics. The human spirit, the imaging of God in humanity, is too free to be satisfied in any political settlement. Knowledge of the greatness of the human spirit as well as knowledge of human sin must help Christians affirm a religious reservation about politics as well as a commitment to politics.

Two Roots of Political Thinking

In the closing days of the Weimar Republic, in 1932, Paul Tillich reflected on the relationship of faith to politics. The new pagan, political cult of Nazism threatened to overturn the weakened republic, which was also under attack by communism and by a collection of conservative political interests. Tillich's essay, "Two Roots of Political Thinking," made a contribution to thought that is still relevant. He argued that traditional regimes often were founded upon the sacralization of political systems in root myths of the society. Ancient Egypt and Babylon were characterized by myths that supported divine kingship and religious hierarchy and wove into the myths of creation the divinely ordered present government. Religion and politics were one, with politics favoring a particular religion and religion legitimating a political order.

In Israel, prophets arose who criticized the political order in terms of their understanding of God's covenant with Israel. Amos, for example, witnessed to God judging all nations by justice. Also, he held out the possibility of repentance or change for the political order. The present rulers were not merely to be legitimated but they were judged by justice, and there was a sense of movement or expectation to history. By hearing judgment now, better order could be established.

Consequently, one root of political thinking was the myth of origin involving worship of the motherland or fatherland, the sacralization of kinship, and the blessing of customary rule. The second root of political thinking had a sense of movement to history and evaluated rule by a standard of God's justice; it was the prophetic critique of a sacral politics.

Despite a tendency of the Middle Ages to sacralize the papal-Caesar settlement, the Western world kept alive the second root of political thinking until it broke forth again, borne by the movements of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment. Democratic politics, capitalism, and socialism all contained this movement of historical expectation and the centrality of justice or political ethics.

The Weimar Republic was an expression of this second root of political thinking. However, it was not strong enough, given economic depression, to withstand movements based on the myths of origin. The monarchists expressed the myth of origin, but they were enfeebled by lacking a sense of historical expectation; they were just trying to return to the past. The forces supporting the Weimar settlement seemed to lack sufficient respect for the truth of the myth of origin. They were critics of the past without deep roots. The Nazis expressed a romantic myth of origin

with a sense of future transformation in the dream of a Third Reich. They had the power of a myth of the past and a myth for the future, but they had no sense of justice nor any critical understanding of human reality.

Democracy depended upon critical reason, but in a period of worldwide depression it was a weak opponent to romantic, pagan myths of ancient Germany united with a promise of a political messiah and a transformed future. The churches, both Protestant and Catholic, were politically inept. The universities, press, and other moral-cultural institutions were in disarray and unwilling to fight for the weakened liberal culture. The fury of romantic myths and fighting cadres of Nazis overwhelmed them.

Protestants were too willing to abandon the political realm and Catholics were too willing to compromise with an evil regime to maintain their prerogatives. The democratic, mixed economy of the Weimar Republic could possibly have defeated the Nazis with more sophisticated understanding of the need to maintain a promise of a better order with justice and a willingness to fight the rising tide of barbarism. The churches, however, could not understand this and would not fight.

From this essay, we can conclude that the liberal republics of the Western world are weakened if they do not understand the need for maintaining a sense of the myths of origin. Myths of origin in our day are expressed in terms of civil religion. But civil religion is not strong enough in periods of stress, unless it maintains a sense of expectation or future promise combined with a strong commitment to social justice. Justice cannot only be the agreement of a society to order its life in a certain way but it must also be grounded in the conviction of the reality of a sovereign God, who requires justice in periods of stress as well as in times of affluence.

In our society, the civil rights movement, particularly as it was led by Martin Luther King, Jr., combined the affirmation of the American myths of origin in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the American dream with the demands of justice for the oppressed and the poor. The movement combined a willingness to fight, though nonviolently, for justice with a grounding of the fight in the democratic ideals of the country. The sense of expectation that the country would change toward fairness toward its oppressed was vital to the success of the movement. When it lost its expectation with the assassination of King, and as the movement surrendered the nonviolent strategy, it clouded its ideals to the point that its achievements were limited. Myth, critique of myth in terms of justice, and sense of expectation are vital to the expansion of further democratization in the liberal-oriented republics of the Western world.

Theology of Liberation

The most exciting contemporary movement to relate politics to faith is that of the theology of liberation. Theologies of liberation have grounded

their theologies in various social movements. Commentators distinguish between women's theology of liberation, black theology of liberation in its various forms of Caribbean, North American, and African theologies, and Latin American theology of liberation. All these forms of liberation theology identify with the social-political causes of their respective movements and engage in theology as critical reflection for and upon these historical movements.

The success of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua and the role of theologians in that revolutionary movement attach an urgency to the examination of liberation theology in Latin America. The Latin American form of liberation theology has arisen from theological reflection upon new forms of Christian community. Thousands (perhaps a hundred thousand) of "grassroot," basic Christian communities have grown in Latin America in the last two decades. These basic Christian communities unite for worship, Bible study, social analysis, and mutual support. A fascinating example of their dialogic work together is recorded in Ernesto Cardenal's four volumes of *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Here one can learn how peasants, artisans, poets, and priests studied and lived together. The reality of suffering under the Somoza regime is dramatized through peasant voices and accounts of martyrdom. The process of a developing Christian political consciousness is revealed. Eventually the Bible study, the social analysis, worship, and mutual support lead some to participation in armed revolution. Now the two priest brothers in the dialogue, Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal, are members of the new government. The United States is trying to undermine the new Sandinista government, fearing Marxism and larger unrest in Central America. The long history of United States' resistance to revolutionary movements in Central America dominates U.S. policy. The Somoza family whom the Sandinistas overthrew had been U.S. clients. The stage is set for a direct conflict between U.S. policy and believers who do liberation theology.

The battle on the foreign policy level is also an intra-church battle. Pope John Paul II fears and criticizes the development of a popular or people's church. His own politics and theology incline him to distrust Christian common fronts with Marxists. He warns against ideological distortions within the popular church, meaning the Christian base communities. He appeals for the recognition of the authority of bishops in the church. The struggle is not only of popular Christianity versus hierarchical Catholicism. The struggle goes on within the hierarchy as well, as the results of the Bishops' Councils of Medellin and Puebla reveal. The Protestant churches of Latin America fragment, also, on the issue of political involvement to change the present system. Thus Christianity in Latin America, which has been supportive of the present social situation of terrible poverty, extraordinary wealth, and military repression, is thrown into confusion.

The social reality out of which Latin American liberation theology has come is that of degrading poverty and military oppression. The liberation theologians

have abandoned hope for help with development from the developed countries under the present structures. They see the relationship of the developed countries to the poor countries as one of the rich exploiting the poor and enforcing that exploitation with whatever means necessary.

Five central themes of liberation theology are: (1) God is on the side of the oppressed; (2) in Latin America, oppression is systemic; (3) participation in liberation is a work of salvation; (4) the church must become the church of the poor; (5) theology is critical reflection on the project of social liberation.⁴

An engagement with the movement articulated by liberation theology can help Reformed Christians to: (1) rediscover their own history of political involvement with the poor; (2) rediscover the political dimensions of neglected portions of the Bible; (3) reexamine the connections between Calvinism and capitalism; (4) remember that Calvinist Christians are committed to social reform.⁵

Comparative reflection upon the Calvinist heritage and the emerging work of liberation theology, then, helps us to rediscover our own social ethic and to challenge our complicity with suffering and murder in Latin America. Calvinism has some cautions to offer the liberation theologians. Theology is about God and it strives for universality. The doctrine of sin is central to any theology and particularly to theologies of politics. In Reformed theology Scripture is primary; it informs experience.⁶ We can say with liberation theology that theology must include critical reflection on the liberation of the poor, but we must say it in light of the whole of Scripture.

Reformed theology in dialogue with liberation theology is helped to hear afresh its commitment to transform the world. Reformed theology will still insist that the Kingdom of God is always relevant to political change, but not the same as political change. It cannot give up its insight that politics is ambiguous, while calling for a theology of politics to serve the poor. Reformed theology insists upon a religious reservation about politics that disinclines it from affirming utopian politics while affirming a politics for change inspired by the Kingdom of God.

The New Religious Right

Religion thrust its way into American politics of the 1980's with surprising vigor. Religious rhetoric had usually been a part of political campaigning. In some regions of the country it was politically important to be religiously correct. Most successful politicians learned early that even if they were not religious, it was smart to appear religious near to election time. In the election of 1980, however, conservative, particularly fundamentalist, religious leaders organized voter registration drives, television political campaigning, political rallies, and direct-mail campaigning that startled the nation. The conservative religious leaders utilized all the tactics the moderate-to-liberal religious leadership had exercised over the years and added an in-

creased capacity to raise funds, a more sophisticated utilization of television, and computerized lists for frequent political and religious mailings that outshone the tactics of their opponents.

Liberal senators and representatives were defeated and the New Christian Right appeared as a political force to be reckoned with. How are Presbyterians, who appeal to the same God, to understand this new religious movement that opposes much of the social teaching of the Presbyterian Church?

There are two perspectives for understanding the fundamentalist contribution to these new right politics. The first perspective is that of seeing fundamentalism as a militant demand for a respected place in society by those whose values and views had been dismissed by the secularizing society. Fundamentalism was an almost irrational project of those whose America had changed from under them. The second approach is to see fundamentalism as an ideology with deep roots in the mainstream of Protestant evangelical theology. George Marsden suggests a synthesis of the two views.⁷ Yes, the fundamentalists who are now political activists are bitter that their country has become pluralistic, secularized, and, in their perspective, internationally weaker and sexually depraved. However, fundamentalism is also a complex belief system, as coherent as many others, with its own distinctive traditions and deep roots.

In the current scene, political fundamentalism is affirming the political activist side of the evangelical tradition, which is a modification of the Puritan perspective by the experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This perspective sees an America turning away from its foundations of Christian principles. God's blessing on America varies with the degree to which it obeys God's laws. Of particular concern to the religious right are laws to protect the nuclear family. Abortion, pornography, and homosexuality are evidences of the flaunting of God's laws, and America is receiving God's anger in its decline. The Equal Rights Amendment was seen as an assault on God's law of how the family should be structured.

The demands to counter evolutionary teaching and for prayer in the public schools are both seen as restoring America to its more Christian roots. The practice of the new religious right is part of the democratic process, but its program is a return to a perception of a prior order. The myth of a righteous-Christian America is used to change governmental policy in a time when the pluralistic-critical-liberal myth seems to be tottering.

Other elements of the purer America myth are a strong national defense and laissez-faire economics. More investment in defense is assumed to produce greater wealth. The myth then is of a religious America that will not demand sacrifice or tough decisions from anyone. Prosperity and security will flow with an opposition to the deviant sexual policies of others, the renewal of prayer in schools, the defense of creationism, and general moral revival.

The myth is not too strong, but in periods of great stress revolutionary myths may not need to be too

credible to exert influence. Particularly if the public is willing to accept slogans as guides to politics, then oversimplified television messages and mailings can undercut the information and debate needed to make a republican form of government function.

The commitment to political activism on the part of religious conservatives is to be welcomed. They certainly are correct that their faith impels them to participate in morally reforming America. Criticism that the new Christian right oversimplifies political issues must also be directed at many if not most of the politicians in the United States. The very reliance on television for political information oversimplifies the choice before the body politic. The organization of the Moral Majority, the National Christian Action Coalition, the Christian Voice Moral Government Fund, Religious Roundtable, and others is designed to avoid improper intrusion of the church into government.⁸ They are skillfully using voluntary association models of organization to impact public policy and politics. The critique of their politics is best joined at the level that it is unbiblical and immoral to support policies that hurt the poor. It is a violation of Shalom and Jesus' call for us to be peacemakers to support the increased building of nuclear weapons.⁹ Policies and programs that encourage moral and political absolutes are inherently detrimental to a political system that requires compromise. Religious conservatives' preferences for laissez-faire economics, Victorian images of family, absolute support for Taiwan and South Korea are not biblical imperatives. Prescriptions for and predictions of the future of the world are not available from The Revelation of John which was written in and for the Roman Empire. Genesis does not teach a theory of science about the origin of humanity or geology.

Voters will support right-wing religious leaders naively. Many have also supported progressive religious leaders and their candidates naively. Both forms of political naivete are to be deplored. But the challenge to a more serious religious political engagement should be welcomed by Presbyterians.

Church-State

The history of the church's engagement with the state shows that no one pattern of church-state relationships is absolute. Our American pattern of maximum freedom for the church to worship, teach, proselytize, and act in society is still not the predominant pattern among most of the world's population. The combination of the freedom of religion clause and no establishment clause in our Bill of Rights was a bold act at the time of its promulgation. It defied the commonly accepted patterns of Europe. Gradually, freedom of religion has become an increasingly accepted norm of humanity, but in practice it is severely curtailed throughout much of the world.

The history of the relationship of church to state in this country, even with the constitutional basis, has been an evolving process that has still not reached a final form.¹⁰ The churches in America have learned to

be thankful for their freedom from the state. This freedom has encouraged the health and vitality of the churches themselves, prevented discrimination against particular expressions of religious conscience by other religious groups, and left religious groups free to witness to society in terms of their religious convictions.

The people of the United States are a very religious people, as studies from de Tocqueville to the latest Gallup Poll have shown. It is inevitable that a civil religious spirit arises, and within limits it is appropriate for this common religious sense to be evoked at national ceremonies and in times of stress. The danger of civil religion inheres in its temptation to national idolatry. This danger is best avoided by the particular faiths criticizing civil religion if it becomes too nationalistic or too sentimental. Abraham Lincoln's skillful use of biblical faith is a good example of the biblical teachings of God's transcendence and justice correcting civil religion's tendency to become too provincial or partisan. The vitality of the churches' own teaching is the best protection against dangers inherent in civil religion.

The Supreme Court has only opened the door a crack to support for parochial education. The argument of supporters of parochial education that, in the name of fairness, their schools deserve more public moneys has some merit. However, the explosion of parochial education that could accompany any widespread system of supporting financially any education parents would choose would vitiate the public educational system. The religious education children need can be provided through church educational programs without entering into governmental support for church education. On both constitutional grounds and reasons of the public good, continued reluctance to open public moneys to church education seems a wise policy. The Supreme Court's rigidity on nonsupport for parochial education may have saved the country from a deeper crisis with the current explosion of religious schools.

The abortion issue has traditionally raised questions about the church-state issue. The power of the Roman Catholic Church to exercise political clout on this issue has been deeply resented by Protestants and secularists alike. It has seemed as if one church's theology has been overriding the theological positions of other churches. The emergence of the issue as the banner issue by the new religious right complicates the picture even more. After surveying the many denominations that oppose legislation outlawing all abortion, John Bennett warned: "An absolutistic law against abortion would force many people in these religious traditions to act against their consciences, but the absence of such a law does not force anyone to go against his or her conscience."¹¹ Still, because some regard abortion as murder, the struggle will go on. The struggle over a constitutional amendment will be a political fight reflecting deeply held religious beliefs. Presbyterians who may generally deplore most abortions will not want to see overly restrictive laws infringe upon conscience. They have recognized that in some situations abortion can be responsibly chosen. To justify

the demand for antiabortion legislation or the withholding of public funds for abortions for the poor, the argument will have to be established that such acts will produce less social harm than the present national policy respecting the privacy of the woman's conscience.

Roman Catholics and Reformed Christians discussed the abortion issue during 1976-1979 in Round III of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed Consultation. The Reformed commentary on the joint statement on abortion is here affirmed:

The separation of church and state in the United States should not be so interpreted as to preclude the right of the church to influence civil policy. However, the very separation of church and state places certain limits upon the manner of the influence which the church exerts. No limit is placed upon the church's right to influence civil policy by educational methods.

Nor would we seek legislation which curtails the freedom of religious expression for others. Accordingly, no legislation should require abortion where forbidden for religious reasons, nor preclude abortion where it is desired for religious reasons. Thus attempts to influence policy in the United States should focus on the secular aims of the legislation rather than the religious beliefs of those who promote or those who oppose it.

Moreover, single-issue advocacy is of exceedingly high risk for Christian activists, both to the state and to the church. It harms the credibility of the church as a transpolitical institution when the church appears to be no more than one more political pressure group, and it threatens the integrity of the state by weakening the broad base of political leadership.¹²

Voluntary prayer is an option in the public school system now. The issue is whether schools can recognize and encourage a form of prayer that does not move toward establishing a religion or that does not violate someone's freedom of religion. It is hard to conceive how a prayer can be addressed to God in particular words without choosing a particular form of prayer. If the Virgin Mary is addressed, or if the prayer is in the name of Jesus, it advocates a certain religious interpretation. A period of silence might be constitutionally acceptable, but then only minimal gains have been made for anyone's religious sensitivity. It is better for the sake of our pluralism and our freedom of religion not to coerce any youngster religiously in the schools. Parents and churches can present teaching in prayer and the child will pray and be reverent in all of life as it is appropriate in our culture. The types of prayers that might be adopted by our school boards or our teachers are bound to be offensive to some and in many cases not very religiously profound. Prayer may be left to the individuals, the homes, and the churches and out of the public schools in any formal sense.

Prayer in the public schools, like required teaching of creationism, is an important symbolic issue for the new religious right in its campaign for American nostalgia. The establishment of either would not add to the education or piety of our children.

The New Testament teaching about church and state can be summarized as: "Civil authority is seen as part of God's plan and ruling, but it is not in itself divine. Only God is Lord, never Caesar!"¹³ Peter put it for himself and the apostles: "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:30.) The church as God's

gathered people listens to its own sources of truth and goes its own way. This will inevitably, from time to time, bring the church into conflict with the state. In our day the conflict in this country that may be the most significant is over issues of war and peace.

The churches listening to their members in all parts of the globe cannot bow before the ideology of a nation's security. The Confession of 1967 put this truth as follows:

God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding. (*The Constitution of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Part I, Book of Confessions, Chapter 9, Part II, Section A. 4, b (9.45).)

As members of a universal community worshipping a God who has no favorites among the nations, Christians are not awed by claims of national interest or national security.

Confronted by ever-increasing expenditures and evermore fantastic planning for nuclear war, Christians are brought into tension with the state. As they choose to be faithful to Christ as peacemakers, the tension with existing national security policies increases. They are led to seek out new policies and to say no to militarism. Saying no to national policy may eventually change national policy, as it did in Vietnam. However, national policy may not change and it may cause suffering to faithful Christians. The gift of Christ's peace may require martyrdom.¹⁴

Biblical Resources

The biblical messages inform our total lives and our whole perspective on the relationship of faith to politics. For us Christians, such messages function as internal guides for our thoughts and action. We have grown up on the history of Abraham, the migrant man of faith; Moses, the prophetic lawgiver; David, the righteous and troubled king; Amos, the critic of the kingdoms; Mary, who sang of God tearing imperial powers from their thrones; and Jesus, the proclaimer and martyr of the Kingdom of God. However, we must move beyond the general way the Bible has informed the church to raise the issue of faith and politics specifically in relation to the Bible.

It is very difficult to relate the Bible to our politics. The Bible is so vast, encompassing wisdom about God and politics from a thousand-year period. Politics is such a broad abstraction, covering foreign policy issues between empires to conversations about street safety for our children. Our times are quite different from biblical times. A focus primarily on the farewell passages (Chs. 13-17) in the Gospel of John narrows down the problem. The ultimate issues are found where the commands of Jesus are most heatedly

resisted. The issue is between Jesus as King of Israel and the rulers of the world. To follow Jesus is to follow his way and the readers of the Gospel could clearly hear this might mean martyrdom.

Expanding beyond John to other New Testament texts, three answers to the relationship of the Bible to politics are excluded: apathy, "single-issue" politics, reduction of politics to voting. Faith calls for the total person's engagement with utmost seriousness in the arenas that resist Christ's peace. Certainly after a searching study of John 11-13, followers of Christ will not be able to rest in political apathy, or in self-seeking use of one-issue politics to gain power, or in thinking that Christian discipleship only means voting.¹⁵

The 117th General Assembly (1977) of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. adopted, as a contemporary but subordinate statement of faith, "A Declaration of Faith," which is cross-indexed to Scripture. The referenced Scripture to the declaration below indicates the relevance of Scripture to faith and politics.

The church exists within political communities.
Throughout its history the church has struggled to be faithful to God in political situations:
under persecution,
or as an established arm of the state,
or in separation from it.
God rules over both political and religious institutions.
We must confuse neither with the kingdom of God.
We must not equate the Christian faith
with any nation's way of life
or with opposition to the ideologies of other nations.
We hold Christians are to be law-abiding citizens
unless the state commands them to disobey God,
or claims authority that belongs only to God.
We should not expect governments
to impose Christian faith by legislation,
nor should we demand undue advantages for the church.
The church must be free to speak to civil authorities,
neither claiming expert knowledge it does not have,
nor remaining silent when God's Word is clear.¹⁶

The Scripture references are to: (1) 2 Samuel 12:1-15, describing the conflict between the prophet Nathan and King David over David's unjust orders for Uriah's death; (2) 1 Kings 21, detailing Elijah's prophecy against Ahab for the death of Naboth and the expropriation of his vineyard; (3) Isaiah 37, recounting Isaiah's role in interpreting to Hezekiah the defeat of Sennacherib; (4) Romans 13:1-7, in which Paul expresses the authority of God recognized in secular rulers, even pagan Roman emperors; (5) 1 Peter 2:11-17, exhorting Christians to live as free people and as slaves to God, putting ignorance to silence by good conduct; and (6) Revelation 14: 9-11, urging God's people to keep God's commands, remaining loyal to Jesus even in defiance of pagan political demands of worship of the state.

1 Samuel 8, in which Samuel agrees reluctantly to end the period of charismatic-religious leadership in Israel and to give Israel a king, underlies much of the political theology of this background paper. 1 Samuel 8 testifies that even kingship is given by God to humanity. Charismatic-religious leadership was preferable, but it failed in Samuel's sons, who took bribes and perverted justice. Kingship became necessary, but 1 Samuel 8 details the burdens of

taxation, the taking of children for the military, the seizing of the land, and the pretensions of government. Religious leadership concedes reluctantly to government, as government is awkward, expensive, and usually unjust. Yet government is necessary; even God wills it. I Samuel 8 captures the sense of the ambiguity surrounding politics that this paper affirms. It recognizes the religiously sanctioned need for government. It points to the need for continued critique and participation in the government as Samuel himself represented it. Historically we can see that here in Scripture religious-political leadership is succeeded in history by a more secular-political leadership that is still under God. There is not only a provisional separation of religion and politics in Israel but also a continuous engagement best represented in prophetic religion.

Our History

Presbyterian resistance to the church acting in society is rooted in ignorance of Presbyterian history. For the founder of the Presbyterian strand of the Reformation was continually involved in reforming society through prayer, preaching, organizing, and political action. John Calvin (1509-1564) adopted the inward faith of Martin Luther, but he articulated its ethics in a world-transforming direction.

His understanding of Christian ethics relied on the whole Bible, honoring the role of the Old Testament in norms as well as the New Testament. The summary of Christian life was found in the Ten Commandments, the double love commandment of Jesus, and in natural law under the guidance of Christian love. The church's role was to advise the political rulers as well as to pray for them. The correctness of God's law expressed in natural law could be perceived by human conscience. Because of the fall away from original righteousness, the conscience had to be guided by biblical law. The great strength of his developed social ethic was in its commitment to transform society; its weakness lay in a tendency toward legalism and severity of discipline when it was implemented.

The state had an honored place in the theology of John Calvin, who devoted the final chapter of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to explaining his theology of politics. The holders of public office were to be respected and honored, as their work was of God. Though Calvin knew of the foolishness of public officeholders and joined in campaigns to remove politicians, he wrote:

Wherefore no doubt ought now to be entertained by any person that civil magistracy is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but far the most sacred and honorable in human life.¹⁷

Calvin worked for a moderate government of regulated liberty in which the most meritorious of the citizens would exercise power. Though no advocate of revolution in his day, he knew the need for civil disobedience against idolatrous demands, and he opened Christian political theory to the overthrow of unjust

monarchs. The crack he opened to Christian revolution became a wide door in the development of his thought in the hands of French, Dutch, English, and Scotch followers.

He taught that the state had to regulate life to protect the poor from the rich. He personally participated in starting industries for the unemployed, in regulating commerce to protect the weak, and in establishing relief services for refugees, free education, and city-run medical services.

The church, though having its primary role in the spiritual realm, had to serve the public realm. It prayed for the holders of public office. It lobbied the leaders of the body politic to establish justice, particularly for the poor. It warned rulers when their policies were unjust. Finally, probably the only place where we would demur from Calvin's statecraft was in the role he assigned the church to assist the state in promoting true religion and in enforcing church discipline. In this view he was typically of the sixteenth century and not of the New Testament. Four centuries of historical experience have led his followers in this country to hope that while the state will not do anything to suppress true religion, we do not need its assistance in enforcing one strand of religious persuasion. We now affirm the teaching of the early church that the state is incompetent in matters of religious life and we ask to be left free from state interference.

The contribution of Calvinism to religious liberty did not find sufficient expression in Calvin's Geneva. It remained for John Milton and other Calvinists in England and in the Netherlands to work out Reformed grounds for religious freedom. However, James Madison, who learned his Christian social ethics at the feet of the Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon at Princeton, wrote: "Let not Geneva be forgotten or despised. Religious liberty owes it much respect, Servetus notwithstanding."

Though much has been written about the world view of Calvinism supporting the development of science and technology, its contribution to the American system of politics is even more evident. Whether we locate the direct influences in James Madison drafting the Constitution, or in the New England heritage of Puritanism, or in the Calvinistic insights present within the vaguely Christian deism of the founding fathers, the affinity of Calvinist ideas and the American political system is striking. The contribution of the Calvinists can be seen in: (1) the separation of church and state and the high value attached to both; (2) the recognition of the continual struggle to reform the society through law for human good; (3) the need for voluntary associations of people covenanting together for the health of politics; (4) the utilization of broad traditions of human wisdom for political ethics; (5) the value of a system of social ethics that includes standards of justice and processes of application of justice to cases; (6) the need for political systems to be constitutionally regulated and under law; and (7) the need for checks and balances within political systems because of the reality of human sin.

In the American experience Presbyterians have par-

ticipated actively in their church bodies and in their scattered ministries in the political process.¹⁸ The history of Presbyterian Church involvement in the revolution, in the abolitionist movement, in sabbath and temperance campaigns, in issues of war and economy does not reveal unanimity on significant issues. It does make the social-political activism clear, especially where major moral issues are seen to be at stake.

Presbyterians as a distinct religious minority in a secularizing and pluralistic nation cannot pretend their understanding of Christian ethics will be acceptable to the whole nation. There is a role for a self-conscious, theologically informed minority to play in the continued reform of the United States. The history of Presbyterian involvement in politics is full of fanaticism, ignorance, and complicity with evil. It is also a history of well-informed, theologically literate, wise policies in the public realm for the public good. This part of the history, particularly, needs to be affirmed.

Christian Political Ethics

A central question of political ethics is: "Why ought one to obey the state?" A Christian political ethic puts a different question: "How can we love God in serving our neighbors through politics?" The purpose of humanity is to love God and to help our neighbor know the love of God. Therefore, Christian political ethics cannot be autonomous; that is, Christians cannot think of the state as an order independent of God that they are free either to remold or to rebel against apart from God. Christian political ethics are not heteronomous; that is, the laws of the state are not obligatory on Christians apart from God. Christian political ethics are theonomous; they are the ordering of government for the purposes of God.

There is, of course, much human wisdom about political order founded in either autonomy or heteronomy or even in non-Christian religious traditions. But the Christian political ethic is seeking to understand the political dimensions in light of God's purposes for humanity. Human wisdom will be utilized, but it is to be evaluated in terms of the insights of Christian faith grounded in the revelation of God's nature in Jesus as the Christ.

For Christian political ethics, all human wisdom about political order must be regarded from the perspective of how it serves the concrete good of our neighbor. God wills the freedom and peace of the world's people. The Bible provides us with testimony to the occasion of God's struggle to realize shalom and freedom for the people of Israel and the church. This testimony of God's love being expressed in rulers, in legislation, and in movements of liberation, both spiritual and political, is the guide for contemporary formulation of Christian political ethics.

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* distinguishes between the spiritual realm and the political realm. They are distinguished but related. Calvin writes more about the ordering of the spiritual realm, but the ordering of the political realm is a clear re-

sponsibility for the Christian. In fact, no earthly vocation is of a higher calling than that to political responsibility. The ordering of the political realm is carried out by reference to the natural law. The natural law expresses the law of God in terms of justice which is the purpose and norm of all human laws. If laws express justice, it is not necessary in Calvin's political theory that they correspond to the particulars of biblical law. Biblical legislation was detailed for its day; in our day the standard of justice will inform us as to the detailed laws for our time.

In Reformed thought, liberty can be obtained in the spiritual realm without being realized in the political realm. Given the tyrannies most people have lived under, we are thankful that spiritual freedom can exist without social liberation. Freedom in the political realm cannot exist without freedom in the spiritual realm. Freedom, particularly Christian freedom, in the spiritual realm drives for expression in political freedom. It is a great thing to know both spiritual and political freedom; God wills it.

To quote Max Weber: "Politics is the slow boring of hard boards." A political ethic to be Christian takes cognizance of the human refusal to love and fear God and of the inhumanity neighbors render to neighbors. It acknowledges that people will misuse political power when they achieve it. In short, it takes account of sin. Sin basically is the refusal to trust and love God and the resultant disarray in human relations. Racism, sexism, militarism, and economic exploitation all have their roots in the human refusal to trust God. Humans violate the freedom of other humans and organize their political world in rebellion against God. Still, God works through the political world to protect humanity and to counter the results of human sin. Therefore politics remains ambiguous. It is both God's working to liberate humanity from human evil and an expression of human evil. The reduction of the human evil to manageable proportions is the never-ending task of anyone who, inspired by God's love, takes up the task of political responsibility.

The biblical term for the goal of the political life is justice. (Amos, 5:21-24; Micah 6:8; Jeremiah 22:15-16; Isaiah 1:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:18-20; Psalm 33:5; Proverbs 21:3; Luke 4:18; Romans 14:17.) A just order presupposes the denial of oppression and liberation from the oppressor. It involves the overthrowing of human evil. It is fair distribution of the earth's resources so that all have opportunity to flourish. It is the recognition of each person's right to be a free human being. Justice is the expression under conditions of human sin of the imperative of God to love one another. The Christian sense of justice is more than Aristotle's "To each his due"; it is to each his due as a loved child of God.

Many institutions of life contribute toward justice. The political order, however, as the central coordinating order of society, has particularly awesome responsibilities in securing a reasonable approximation of justice. Pure justice in either its philosophical expression or in terms of total equity is unattainable in history. God's love, however, requires the constant

struggle for justice and the removal of those who in their roles as public servants impede justice. John Calvin wrote of God's overthrow of intolerable governments and said: "Let the princes hear and be afraid." (*Institutes*, IV.20.31.)

The history of Western society since the Reformation has been a long, bloody struggle to achieve a tolerably just order. Reformed political thought, while seeking to realize justice as the social realization of love, has learned from this history. The Reformed churches were not, in their origins, tolerant; revolutionary movements never are. The failure of any one form of Reformed thought to carry the day within the sectarian controversies led it finally in John Locke, John Milton, and others to recognize that toleration was a principle of justice. God tolerates many errors and political society can tolerate error, encourage pluralism, and survive when people covenant together to respect diversity. The U.S. Constitution, in forbidding the establishment of religion and encouraging freedom of speech, assembly, and press, recognized the need for toleration. The Constitution also recognized that legislation had to be adequate to the social dynamics of a society. So while ignoring Thomas Jefferson's recommendation of frequent revolutions, it provided for the reform of constitutional order. The Reformed concern for proper polity and democratic procedures in church government reinforced the movement of government of the society according to democratic and predictable rules of behavior.

The distribution of the powers of government among different centers both protected liberty from tyrannical usurpation and forced governmental decisions to be acceptable to major interests within the society. It also slowed down the speed with which governmental decisions could be made and allowed considerations of prudence to exert weight on decisions. Though the distribution of powers was probably to avoid the perceived dangers of either mob rule or tyranny, it also reflected Madison's realism about the human beings who would actually administer the government.

The movement of large segments of the population into the political process of the country has increased the pressures for equality and liberty. Equality means the elimination of arbitrary distinctions in society. The basic recognition that people are equal in their rights and that each person is to be treated equally pushes the reforming agenda in society. The present degree to which one's opportunities are determined by the social stratum into which one is born is revolting, even if less obnoxious than at some previous periods. Given the recognition of equality in the 1776 Declaration of Independence, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the continued existence of oligarchic privileges on the basis of birth in Western society is a measure of the gap between ideals and reality. The resistance to the straightforward Equal Rights Amendment also bears stark evidence of the ancient and persistent privileges claimed by males over females.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, use of the text from Amos 5:24, "Let justice roll down like waters," was an

appeal to liberty as well as to equality. Liberation from the oppressive terror of the white population was the goal, as well as social and economic equality. Wherever oppression exists, liberty is to be struggled for and God, according to the Bible and Reformed political thought, does not use only the means of the ballot box or nonviolent resistance to change the mind of the oppressor. In America, the ballot box and nonviolent tactics of coercion may be the best tools and God may move people to their use, but they are not the tools of God for many other situations. Liberation is a principle of justice, as is equalization. But it is not a self-sufficient definition of the goals of Reformed political thought. Reformed political ethics are complex, requiring the ongoing struggle for justice as an expression of God's love. In the Western world equality and liberty are mediating principles of justice. They are guided by actions that will order a society toward justice through toleration, predictable rules, prudence, and personality.

To recognize personality as part of the meaning of justice is to honor the wisdom in all of the declarations of the rights of humanity and to resist tendencies to reduce personality to a thing. Basic to the meaning of justice is personhood and any movement that reduces people to less than persons is to be resisted. There is a spiritual freedom of the person even in situations of oppression, but that freedom is not justice. It is unjust to treat people with less respect than they have as images of God on which their personhood depends.

A Reformed goal is the maximum human liberty tolerable without harm to others. Calvin argued for liberty without licentiousness. Law is a bulwark against disorder. However, as law relies on sanctions, it can become oppressive. As the state legislates morality for the common good, it must exercise caution that is protecting liberty while legislating against truly harmful acts.¹⁹ Arguments for particular legislation must be grounded in the moral consensus of the nation and correspond to standards of natural law summarized as justice.

So Reformed Christians are called, out of a love for God, to be politically active. They are expected to recognize the political order as an ambiguous arena in which they work with God. Freedom in Christ is not dependent on political freedom but it contributes to political freedom. Longing for the Kingdom of God, the Reformed Christian does not expect worldly utopias but knows that God seeks just order for the children of God. A just order will practice toleration, government by rules, prudent politics, and the protection of personality. Liberty and equality are expressions of love to be striven for in societies, which will realize them according to their own history. God will, in God's own way, beyond our knowing, bring fulfillment in the Community of God.

END NOTES

1. Professor Anne Murphy analyzes the current problems in the American political system in her essay commissioned for the study volume, *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
2. Professor Dorothy Dodge sketched the changes in the political system of the USA in the last decade and argued that far-

reaching changes are possible in the 1980's in her essay for *Reformed Faith and Politics*.

3. See Paul Minear in *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
4. The Reverend Albert C. Winn explicated liberation theology for the volume *Reformed Faith and Politics*, and the comments in the background paper reflect his work.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The discussion of the fundamentalist approach to politics is dependent upon Professor George Marsden's research. See his essay in *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
8. See Peggy L. Shriver's descriptive essay on the new Christian right commissioned for *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
9. The exegesis of Professor Paul Minear's essay on the farewell discourses of Jesus in *Reformed Faith and Politics* supports this argument as do the repeated positions of the PCUS and UPCUSA in their endorsement of the nuclear freeze campaign and in their policy statement, *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling*.
10. The papers by Professors John C. Bennett and Jane Dempsey Douglas, and by William P. Thompson, Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA, in *Reformed Faith and Politics* are drawn upon in formulating the church-state discussion.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), pp. 27-28.
13. Jane Dempsey Douglas in *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
14. Paul Minear in *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
15. *Ibid.*
16. A Declaration of Faith (Atlanta: General Assembly PCUS, 1977), pp. 16-17.
17. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.20.4.
18. Professor Louis Week's research on Presbyterians in American politics forms the basis for the discussion of the background paper. See his essay in *Reformed Faith and Politics*.
19. David Little, "Legislating Morality: The Role of Religion," *Christianity and Politics: Catholic and Protestant Perspectives* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1981).

THE REFORMED VIEW OF FAITH AND POLITICS AND OF CHURCH AND STATE: A POSITION PAPER

The 121st General Assembly (1981) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States instructed the Council on Theology and Culture to prepare a paper on the separation of church and state in response to an overture from the Presbytery of Hanover concerning the use of Christian concepts to support or oppose political candidates and a communication from the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches regarding the "phenomenon of the 'Christian right.'" The 193rd General Assembly (1981) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, in response to an overture from the Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse about the "New Christian Right," referred the matter to the Advisory Council on Church and Society to deal with in its study of politics and religion. The Advisory Council on Church and Society and the Council on Theology and Culture have engaged in a joint study of Church and State and Faith and Politics and herewith present their findings in this policy statement and recommendations for adoption by the 123rd and 195th General Assemblies (1983) (or the reuniting Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)), and the reception by the 195th General Assembly (1983) or the

reuniting Assembly of the background paper, "Reformed Faith and Politics," as recommended by the Advisory Council on Church and Society. A volume of essays, *Reformed Faith and Politics*, commissioned by the joint study, has been prepared for study in the church.

Introduction: The Issue

The theme of these studies is the Reformed view of the relation of Christians and the Christian church to the political activities that are the distinctive mode of the operation of the state. The relation of the two institutions, the church and the state, has been varied and ambiguous in history; the relation of the two activities, Christian faith and politics, has been equally ambiguous. Many people have assumed that the constitutional principle of separation of church and state requires the separation of faith and politics. The involvement of faithful Christians in political action has seemed to some to violate this principle. The recent involvement in politics by the "religious right" has highlighted the issue of faith and politics. Often their opponents have inappropriately challenged the involvement of the church with the state. The Reformed tradition has understood that faith calls one to assume political responsibility and that the church is always in some relation to the state.

The Biblical Background

In the death of Jesus, faith and politics intersect. Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities, who saw in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God a threat to secular political rule. But in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God is revealed and political power, having done its cruelest deed, is captured for Christ.

For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied . . . Every power and authority in the universe is subject to him as Head . . . On that cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession. (Colossians 2:9,10,15 NEB.)

Yet the political power of local authorities and of the Roman Empire continued to persecute the followers of Jesus. Still the early church did not reject government but called for the support of authorities. The persecuted Christians addressed in I Peter are called upon to "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong . . ." (I Peter 2:13,14 RSV.) The Book of Acts narrates the confrontation by Peter and the apostles of the authorities in Jerusalem with the saying, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29.)

The early church thus continued in the tradition of the Old Testament, expressing a two-fold understanding of government. On the one hand, all government

is God's gift and a means of God's ordering of the created world. So Israel was given a king by God, even as they were warned of the perils of earthly kingship. (I Samuel 8.) The God-given character of the state and of political power is expressed by Paul in Romans 13:1-7 and also in I Peter 2:11-17.

On the other hand, government is to be challenged in the name of God when it no longer expresses God's rule. So David the king is confronted by Nathan the prophet (I Samuel 12:1-15), Ahab is confronted by Elijah (I Kings 21), Hezekiah by Isaiah (Isaiah 37), to cite only three examples from the Old Testament. Witness against injustice, even to martyrdom, is a key element in the early church, whose life and hopes are vividly presented in the images of Revelation 13 and 14.

In support of government and rulers, or in challenge of them, the Bible presents the call to political responsibility on the part of God's people. Hebrews 11 recites the names and deeds of men and women who through faith shaped the communal life and politics of the people of God. Biblical Christians cannot escape politics.

A Historical Note

The Presbyterian way of reading the Bible has stressed its political relevance, and our politics has been biblically informed when we were loyal to our tradition. The classical theological work of Reformed faith, John Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, begins with an appeal to Francis I of France to reform his country and concludes with a treatise on government. In days of political apathy and political freedom, when the republic is threatened, we could do far worse than to sit at the feet of John Calvin, a political-religious exile from France, a political-religious reformer of Geneva.

The great imperative to do justice, dimly perceived in natural law and made clear in Scripture, took precedence for Calvin over particular biblical legislation or injunctions that were applicable only to particular biblical societies and times. With great discernment he understood the relationship of particular forms of government to particular societies. The absolute of God's will was expressed in the way of love understood in society as justice.

No vocation was more sacred for Calvin than that of holding public office. The saints in Geneva were to participate in the reform of that society and in international society. Government owed obligations to God who ordained it and to the people it served. The Reformation centered in Geneva unleashed great political energy for the continued reformation of society. Calvinists, at their best, projected politics as a vocation that combined the realism of governing in a sinful world with a longing for the coming Kingdom which gave their politics zeal and imagination. There were political abuses, also. Yet a commitment of faith in God as creator, judge, and redeemer strengthened

people to reform their societies, sometimes revolutionize them, and struggle to regulate them for liberty with law.

In the United States, Presbyterians understood the biblical and theological mandate for Christian responsibility in the political realm. The Puritan and Presbyterian preparation for and support of the American revolution and their leadership in the formation of the new nation are marks of this understanding. The slavery issue divided Presbyterians, yet on both sides the support of Christian faith was accorded to political stands. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Reformed Christians took part in political action concerning moral issues, especially those of personal morality such as temperance, sabbath observance, prostitution, and the like, and often on issues of justice such as prison reform or child labor. In the last fifty years the General Assemblies have spoken, often not unanimously but clearly, on the major social, economic, political, and moral issues of the nation and the world, sometimes to support the policies of the government and sometimes, prophetically, to challenge those policies in the name of God.

The Political Vocation of Presbyterians

Presbyterian churches have two emphases that deserve to be highlighted. First, we have a comprehensive, complex social ethic that is demonstrated in the social teachings of each General Assembly. Second, we are committed to the idea of worldly vocations. We are obligated to serve God through the continued reform of the church and the world in all of our daily actions. We serve God in our vocations, all of which have political implications. So daily we are called to a consciousness of what must be done to act out in worldly terms the grace we have received. This sense of vocation and ethic can be summarized in a series of affirmations:

—God is the creator, the judge, and the redeemer of the whole world; nothing in reality is outside the sovereign, active rule of God.

—The church exists by the grace of One who is active in all history, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. No government or other human power legitimates or creates the church. It is the free creation of God.

—The Gospel and the Scriptures have meaning for the whole of human life. The ministry of the church, while beginning with "the equipping of the saints," must concern all those ties that link humans together in a society. God sends the church on a mission, to be light and salt to all society. Just as nothing human is outside the rule of God, nothing is outside the potential concern of the church.

—But the church is not government, which has its own direct relations to the true Sovereign of this world. Church and government are both called to "serve the Lord." They can each be used as God's instrument of guidance, judgment, and help to humanity; and if either becomes so corrupt as to be

unfit as a divine instrument, then God may raise up another instrument.

—The individual Christian serves God in both the church and the rest of society. Discipleship consists in the awareness that “during one’s whole life one has to do with God” (Calvin).

—But such discipleship is not only a personal, individual calling. The sovereign Lord works not only in the depths of individual souls but also in the organizations, the institutions, and the movements of human history. The struggle of Christians to glimpse and to obey the will of God must go on everywhere—in the church, in society, in the most secular of contexts.

All Presbyterians, therefore, have a political vocation. Beyond the general political vocation of citizenship there is the special political vocation of public office. Public officials are not to be despised but to be honored and to be challenged when they do wrong. We must be sure that the worthy calling of public service is not ignored or demeaned. To be realistic about politics is not to despise it but to learn how to use it as an instrument of justice.

We recognize and reaffirm the traditional role of the General Assembly in annually adopting public policy statements as fully consistent with the affirmative views of political authority and political vocation at the heart of our Reformed Presbyterian belief, and in our recommendations we rely upon certain General Assembly actions having particular relevance in the current political climate.

Problems in the Present Political Situation

The relationship of faith to politics in the United States has been characteristically fruitful. People of faith have contributed to the founding, nurturing and preserving of the political order. Though there is a history of religious-political fanaticism in the United States, the preference for the Calvinist option of liberty regulated by law for moderation has prevailed. The separation of institutions of church and state has been both spiritually and politically healthy. The state ought not to intervene in the church’s affairs or favor any particular religion, and the church ought not to seek to control the state. Of course, neither Calvin nor the Constitution support the intervention between religious commitment and the practical political consequences of those commitments. Positions taken by the church or religious people in the public arena need to be argued on the basis of criteria related to the common good and social justice. Particularized religious insights or particular biblical commandments ought not to be used in the public arena until translated into arguments for justice and the common good. Despite repeated failures in the American political arena, ours has been a relatively successful experiment in government when compared to other models. A person of Christian faith can affirm the American political system as a blessing of God. We may regard a

democratic system as one basically compatible with Christian social ethics.

However, there are areas of concern to our churches where political leadership is sorely lacking. Examples are the difficult problems of peacemaking, energy policy, migration policy, and urban policy. The churches have recently developed theologies and social policies in all these areas and we long to see positive direction in these and other areas. The methods for progress in all of these areas emphasize politics.

We confess that there are deep problems in our political life that threaten the possibilities of fulfilling God’s will.

(1) We observe in our neighbors and ourselves a political apathy that cuts the nerve of social reform. We still believe we are a socially reforming church committed to the transformation of society. Our apathy stems from the nature of a bureaucratic society, from recent disappointments over political scandals, from distraction with self-satisfaction, from a trivialization of political discourse, and from our reluctance to handle issues of political responsibility in the local church.

(2) Decisions by and about public officials more and more are being based on single issues. The American political party structure in the past has provided a means by which disparate views are melded into a consensus for the common good. Those structures now have broken down so as to impair the creation of consensus. Christians should seek ways to recreate the political party structures in order to allow for the better representation and resolution of important and complex issues facing the American people.

Decisions about public officials need to be in terms of their ability and performance in serving the common good broadly defined. It is neither wise politics nor wise ethics to defeat a candidate simply because of the candidate’s position on one issue, if on balance the person’s overall contribution is to the public good.

(3) The new religious right has built powerful coalitions bringing together political conservatives and religious fundamentalists. The political activism is welcome, particularly as it undercuts political apathy. However, the new religious right seems too often preoccupied with particular problems of personal morality and national security overshadowing the concerns of social justice. Justice for the poor and disarmament strategies for peace are neglected by this new political movement.

The religious-political enthusiasms of the new right have their own dangers. They will be disillusioned as their crusades are turned back. Many Christians will be naively drawn into political participation, disillusioned by the process, and returned to privatism without even having learned that the central political virtue for

(4) Church-state issues have become occasions for often bitter confrontations between Christian groups. The requests of the parochial school systems and the Christian academies for access to public funding

through tax support or some other means have been divisive. Prayer in the public schools, which seems to some to be appropriately excluded and to others to be a legitimate means of religious expression, becomes a matter for concern in an increasingly pluralistic society. The demand for limitation or exclusion of the use of public funds for abortion and the call for a legislative or constitutional declaration of a particular theological view about the origin of human life pit religious traditions against each other.

In the Reformed view no action of the state should enshrine a particular religious view in law or constitution. On the other hand, no action of the state should preclude the open discussion of issues and advocacy of views by people moved by religious concern to gain public acceptance of policies rooted in a Christian understanding of justice for society and for persons.

Recommendations

A. The Scripture, our tradition, and the urgency in our political situation lead the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the 195th General Assembly (1983) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, in responding to the political apathy prevalent among Christians and the citizenry, to:

1. Affirm responsible participation in politics as an indispensable part of the calling of all Christians and encourage individual Presbyterians to become active in the political process, including but not limited to being candidates for political office at all levels.

2. Urge pastors to interpret regularly to their congregations the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical ramifications of "politics and faith."

3. Urge congregations to study the relationship between faith and politics so that Presbyterians will understand their distinctive history and social ethic. (A valuable resource is *Reformed Faith and Politics*, Ronald Stone, editor, The University Press of America, 1983, prepared by the UPCUSA Advisory Council on Church and Society and the PCUS Council on Theology and Culture.)

4. Request that sessions or presbyteries study the voter registration patterns of their communities and consider, where appropriate, action to assure a greater level of registration and voting as a sign of minimal participation in the political process.

5. Call on each session and presbytery to promote public dialogue on the significant political issues of the day to assist in restoring a climate of civic discourse in the country.

6. Urge presbyteries to acknowledge individual Presbyterians within their bounds who seek or hold political office.

7. Ask that synod schools and other conferences develop courses on the relationship of faith to public policy formation.

8. Request the Program Agency and the General Assembly Mission Board to include additional materials interpreting the political vocation of Presbyterians in educational resources prepared for use in congregations.

9. Request the Program Agency and the General Assembly Mission Board to develop a program of study for local churches utilizing the resource publication *Reformed Faith and Politics*, published by the Advisory Council on Church and Society and the Council on Theology and Culture.

B. In responding to the potential breakdown of the political system and the indifference to politics, the General Assemblies further:

1. Affirm the party system and encourage individual Presbyterians to work within parties to revitalize them and make them more responsive to ethical and theological demands.

2. Decry the practice of "single-issue" politics and recommend a broad consideration of a candidate's position in determining whether to support the candidate.

3. Affirm coalitions of individuals to lobby for social justice issues and causes and call on the governing bodies of the church to take public policy stands on such issues.

4. Urge sessions and individuals to study and promote use of the national IMPACT and other networks to increase the involvement of Christians in politics and aid in affecting the political system. The development of state networks is also urged.

5. Request seminaries to develop courses on affecting the political system, including background in Reformed faith and politics, suggesting the study volume *Reformed Faith and Politics* for use in such courses.

C. In responding to the challenge of the new right by articulating a Reformed view of the relationship of faith and politics, the General Assemblies further:

1. Acknowledge human limitations, narrowness, and sin, which prevent any one political stance from being labeled exclusively "Christian."

2. Reaffirm our historical commitment for working for economic justice, peace and disarmament, racial and civil rights, and the promotion of social righteousness.

D. In responding to issues of church and state, the General Assemblies also:

1. Reaffirm the positions adopted by previous General Assemblies relating to public education, tuition tax credits for private schools, prayer in the public schools, the teaching of creationism, and the nature and beginning of human life.

2. Urge the undertaking of a careful study on the relationship of church and state in American society.

E. Finally, direct the Interim Co-Stated Clerks to send copies of the full report—the background paper and this position paper—and the study volume, *Reformed Faith and Politics*, to the President of the United States and to each senator and representative in the U.S. Congress.