Book 5

Sunday July 6, 1975

"THE CHRISTIAN AND THE STATE"

I Peter 2:11-17, I Timothy 2:1-6

A statement that is frequently made is -- "Religion and politics don't mix!" That sentence can and does have a number of meanings. One person saying those words may mean to imply that a Christian should not get involved in politics because it's often messy and dirty. Or others take it to mean that a clergyman in particular shouldn't get directly involved in a political contest. Both of these meanings may contain good advice from a practical standpoint, but they have no Biblical or constitutional basis.

The essential meaning of the statement that religion and politics don't mix, has it's origin in our constitutional separation of church and state which is spelled out in the Bill of Rights. Thus the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

A study of history shows that the intent of this amendment was not to put the churches at a disadvantage, nor was it the result of hostility to Christianity. It was the result of the competition of many churches and of the sincere belief of many church leaders that churches were better off when they were on their own and not supported by any arm of the state. Jefferson was not hostile to Christianity and he believed in the importance of a broad religious faith for the national life.

It should be noted, incidentally, that the word "separation" as regards church and state is not in the constitution. And sometimes when we use the term "separation of church and state," it's unfortunate because the writers of the Constitution never meant that there should be a kind of wall between the two. What was really meant was that the state should not play favorites and support one kind or brand of religion over another. In other words there should be no "official" United States religion.

Now if this is to be the State's or nation's attitude toward religion, what then is to be the Christian's attitude or relationship to the State, to government, to politics?

1. First of all, according to the Bible, we Christians are to see the State, that is government, as a God-given necessity. In other words, as Christians, we recognize the need for an ordering of society. We see the need for order and rules to govern us in our life together.

In the Biblical passages read from I Peter and I Timothy, there is the implication that God is ordering and structuring human life through government and that without government of some kind, even bad government, society would fall into chaos. In fact the warning against anarchy because of the unruliness of people is one of the most persistent themes in all Christian thinking about the state and it has its roots in the Jewish religion.

This means then, that as Christians we are to have a positive attitude toward government; a positive attitude toward the necessity of some kind of order in society. We recognize the need for referees, for laws and systems of justice to enforce those laws. In other words we need not only rules, but systems for settling disputes and protecting from one another and from institutions which would take advantage of us.

At its best of course, good government rests on some kind of agreement, explicit or tacit, providing means of resolving conflicts without violence. In our kind of government, the assumption is that people, to save themselves from chaos and insecurity, transfer some powers from themselves to government which they create. Our hope is then that persons and institutions instead of a gun-fight or some other form of slugging it out, will contest with each other in the courts and legislatures. Good government is that which provides a just framework for the adjustment of differences.

Now all of this means again that for the Christian, we affirm the necessity for government. We are not to think of government as an enemy, but as being ordained by God. In fact the Apostle Paul speaks of government officials as being ministers of God. Thus to be a politician is really a very high calling.

Even though as Christians we recognize the need for government, for order in society, this does not mean that we cannot criticize government. Rather we are to debate issues as to the proper function of government and the church has

a responsibility for being sensitive to issues that affect people's lives and freedom. The constitutional provision regarding church and state is not meant to prohibit the church or individual Christians criticising governmental actions.

In fact sometimes particular governments can become enemies of the people they are designed to serve and then sometimes measures are taken to change governments. That's in large part what the American Revolution of 1776 was all about. When and how this is to be done as far as Christians are concerned is really the subject of another sermon.

2. A second attitude that Christians are to have toward government is to recognize that no one form of government is holy or in particular ordained by God. Tc put it another way, as Christians we dare not identify the powers of God with the powers of any socio-political order.

Some forms of government are certainly more just, more humane, more moral than others, and may be more Christian all in all. What we know as Christians is that no one form of government and in particular no one in power is ever purely moral. Self-interest is always involved. Even in political martyrdom, there are psychological interests that function like tempters to corrupt the deed.

Every political arrangement is a moral trade-off; some values win, some lose. There is no "pure" place in politics. In all societies and in all parties there is some right. Even among thieves there is honor and community; when these collapse, everything collapses.

This does not surprise us as Christians because we know that human individuals as well as institutions are characteristically capable of being dishonest, weak, evil and selfish. Every individual is morally deficient at some times. Each of us betrays others, our causes, ourselves, all too often; others betray us. You cannot trust all of the people all of the time. Throughout the population, many persons are at any given moment acting immorally. Some of the time, the society as a whole is in the wrong; perhaps at every moment every society is partly in the wrong.

So again, as Christians we know that no one form of government is holy or in particular ordained by God.

3. Thirdly this is why we as Christians have to be particularly careful that we do not make an idol of the state. Our faith warns us against this false kind of patriotism. In other words, some forms of patriotism are unChristian. The state makes a bad idol, just as anything else does.

What we are talking about here is a kind of nation-worship and that kind of worship always betrays the worshiper. Always in the worship of something less than God there lurks the fear that the idol can be destroyed. Also it is in the nature of us as human beings to sense inwardly that misplaced worship never brings full satisfaction; hence, the neurotic search for reassurance that the object of misplaced worship is invulnerable.

From a Christian point of view we also are to reject that brand of patriotism which refuses to admit that our history, wonderful as it is, also contains some great ugliness which invites repentance and humility. There was a time in our history when many considered the United States almost on the border of the Garden of Eden before the fall, a land of pure innocence. How utterly false!

I agree with Peter Berger who said, "The people who would make of God an ideological weapon in our political conflicts are engaged in blasphemy. This cannot be said strongly enough. One blasphemes against God at one's own peril."

Another example of the wrong kind of patriotism is seen in the slogan which for a while was popular on bumper stickers, "AMERICA, LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT." The slogan was often used against those who opposed the war in Viet Nam, or who disagreed with some other governmental policies. It implied that if you couldn't always agree with your government, you ought to leave the country. A better and more accurate slogan would have been, "AMERICA, LOVE IT AND CHANGE IT." A true love for one's nation is the kind of love and loyalty that is able to see weaknesses as well as strong points and a true love for our country is one which continually is working for the betterment of the nation as a whole. Because some people lovingly criticize something does not mean that they do not love it. In fact, we are often the most critical of those we love the most because we want so much for them to be as good as possible. True patriotism is wanting what is best for our country, and

a narrow idolatrous patriotism is being blind to what is sometimes wrong with our country. Most people who want to change conditions do like it here; they love it here. They love it so much they cannot stand to see it suffer from imperfections, and want it to live up to its ideals as much as possible. It is the people who placidly accept the corruptions and perversions and inequities in our society who do not love America--they love only their status and security and special privilege.

Those who want to leave have a right to leave, but those who want to stay and work for what they consider a better society must be protected in that right--for without it, our nation would sink into stagnation, and the process of change would harden into repression by those who benefit by keeping things just as they are.

If all the settlers who came here, with high hopes for a new and finer social order, had been compelled to go back where they came from, we would have had no United States of America. This country was born out of dissatisfaction with the old scheme of things, and grew on the blood and dedication of people who were not afraid to speak and work for fundamental changes in the whole political and social structure.

4. There is a fourth attitude which Christians are to have toward government and the state. We are to pray for our government and for our governing officials.

This means that we are to pray for all those in authority, the President of the United States, the Cabinet, the members of Congress, judges in the various courts, the Governor of the State, the mayor, school Board members, members of the City Council, policeman, party officials and all others. Authority is widespread in our form of government. We are therefore even to pray for the opposition, because in our kind of government it's the opposition which keeps those in power more honest. So if you're a Republican, be sure to pray for the Democrats and if you're a Democrat be sure to pray for the Republicans.

We are called by our Christian Faith, not to a superficial patriotism, but rather to a patriotism which is based on a profound sense of gratitude to God for this country and government which is based on the consent of the governed.

Join with me now in a prayer for those in authority.