Sunday, October 26, 1975
LAW, ORDER AND JUSTICE
Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17; I Timothy 2:1-2

I don't know whether or not our new Chief of Police or any other government official for that matter thinks of himself in his job as a "minister of God," but that's the way the Bible in one passage describes government officials and that includes police-officers — as "ministers of God."

Why is this? Because as Chris tians we see the need for government, for the ordering of society. Now of course the three scripture passages just read do not apply directly to our situation, for when they were written, the state was the authority of the Roman Empire. The emperor and his delegates ruled the provinces. Thus, the early Christians did not have the same kind of political responsibility which we do in our time where we live in a country where the government is a representative one and that means that we share in the authority of the state.

Thus, we are not to make the New Testament a source of direct political guidance, but rather we are looking for the emphasis, the attitudes, the presuppositions, and in that sense the Bible does have some things to say about the role of government and our part in it as Christians.

1. Note first that Biblical writers see the state, government as a God-given necessity. We're not talking about nations or any particular form of government, but some form of ordering of human life. In the Bible there is the implication that God is ordering human life through government and that without government of some kind, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy and chaos.

In fact, the warning against anarchy because of the unruliness of people's sins is one of the most persistent themes in all Christian thinking about the state.

This means, that as Christians, we see the need for some kind of government, the necessity for referees, police officers, courts, grand juries and all the rest. Without some kind of order, society collapses. In fact, human beings cannot live, in the sense of physical existence, without some kind of order and authority. We have to have systems for adjudicating disputes and making judgments. Whenever any system of government collapses, some kind or other always takes its place, although the change may be violent.

At its best of course, government rests on some kind of agreement, explicit or tacit, a social contract which provides means of resolving conflicts without violence and where there is always some form of appeal. In our kind of government, the assumption is that we the people to save ourselves from chaos and insecurity, transfer some powers from ourselves to a government which we have created.

So, for example, we give up the right of individual retaliation for the sake of a governmental system that restrains and punishes crime. Persons in conflict, instead of fighting it out in the streets, contest with each other in courts and legislatures. Good government provides a just framework for the settling of differences.

Thus, the Bible reminds us that government is always necessary and so to be any kind of government official is therefore a high calling, for such officials are servants of the people and we hand over part of our freedom to them so that we may all live in greater freedom.

Now this does not mean that we are not to criticize government or to debate issues as to the proper function of government or seek to change laws. Just because a law is a law does not mean it is a good or just law. Government can become unjust, or too all inclusive; that's part of the reason for the revolution of 1776, and our breaking away from England.

And even now if some citizens do not believe that justice is being served, our way of government provides alternative means for seeking justice. This is going on right now in Lincoln, as some people are circulating petitions for the calling of a Grand Jury. That is our right and it needs to be protected. In our kind of society there will always be disagreements as to whether or not justice has been served.

No one with any sense maintains that democracy is an easy form of government. For those who like things neat, it is too flexible and unruly and slow. For absolutists, it is too accommodating of compromise. There is room for error and errors are made.

But consider the alternative. In the totalitarian state, the errors are never admitted or known. Every effort is made to cover them up.

Our form of government in spite of its imperfections, is based I believe, on a Christian realism which sees both sin in persons and institutions and good qualities. Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

But again, it needs to be emphasized, that as Christians we realize the need for some kind of government according to rules and laws. We need and will always need police officers, courts of law and such things as laws regulating speed, parking, taxes and all the rest.

In fact, as our society becomes more complex, more inter-dependent, more populated, the order-creating function of government becomes even more necessary. In a largely rural society, without major cities, large industries and other complex human affairs, there could be years ago, less government. Or think how the police officer's job would be different if there were no such thing as the automobile.

So now I want to introduce to you one of our city's new "Ministers," Chief of Police, George Hansen.

Chief Hansen, do you see yourself as a "minister" as the Bible describes it?

1. We hear a lot about some kinds of police work, drug raids, or tracking down a well-known criminal, but that's only a part of the job. Tell us about the more routine day by day work of police officers. I know that officers are often called to settle or intervene in family disputes, lost children, etc. Police officers are really ministers.

2. As I understand it, the main goal of all law enforcement is that we can have an orderly society with justice. What kind of training does that require?

3. I've heard you say that police officers to not prevent crime. Would you explain that? Mention the Kansas City experiment. What are some of your ideas for getting more citizen-police cooperation?

4. In reading a history of Nebraska this past week, I discovered that in 1926, the Lincoln Police Chief banned the dancing of the Charleston in Public Dance Halls.

5. As you look ahead, what are some of your goals for the Lincoln Police Department?

One of my goals would be that the department could shrink in size because of the decrease in crime and citizen cooperation.