Book 9

Sunday July 6, 1980

"HOW TO MIX RELIGION AND POLITICS" Mark 12:13-17

Two recent events have again raised the issue of mixing religion and politics. The first: not long ago Pope John Paul II, requested that all priests withdraw from active politics. Thus Representative Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest who is a member of Congress from Massachusetts, announced that he will retire from Congress at the end of his present, fifth term.

Indeed, the Pope has apparently decided that all priests are now to be asked to de-emphasize political activity, including involvement in controversial public issues. It is not yet clear if this suggestion from the Pope applies to nuns and others who are not ordained, but are full-time religious workers. Nor is it clear if the Pope's announcement applies also to those persons, priests and others who are working so hard to get a constitutional amendment in this country which would prohibit abortion. That certainly is both a political issue as well as a controversial issue. But no matter how inconsistent the Pope's decree may be, it does bring us face to face with the issue of how to mix religion and politics.

Another recent event in this country which raises the question of mixing religion and politics is the formation of a new "Christian" political organization called "Christian Voice." This group intends to mold Christians and other "Morally right-thinking people," into a potent political factor in American politics. About a month ago, the leaders of this organization held a rally in Washington D.C. They had hoped to bring one million people to the capital city. About 200,000 or less were present.

Some of the dreams of Christian Voice are these: It visualizes America as a Christian Nation again! When in the past we were a Christian nation, it doesn't say. Families going to church on Sunday. Children praying together to start the school day. Mothers nursing children instead of aborting them. No more yellow-front bookstores or X-rated movies to corrupt morals. No equal rights for women. Christian statesmen deciding national policy on Christian principles."

According to one of the leaders of "Christian Voice," the enemies are humanism, liberalism and immorality. Involve-

ment means fighting a holy war. "Christian Voice" also believes that such evils such as drugs, crimes, the holding of American hostages in Iran, and the invasion of Afghanistan, can all be traced to "expelling God from the classroom." It wants to create a "Christian republic."

When one reads the statements of the leaders of organizations like Christian Voice, they sound very much like the Ayatollah Khomeini, who wants to create an Islamic Republic. They are saying, "If only you let us good people be in charge, the true believers, then everything will be all right." "If Christians unite," said the director of Christian Voice, "then we can do anything. We can pass any law or amendment, and that's exactly what we intend to do." There's no room here for separation of church and state.

A reporter asked some of the leaders of Christian Voice what they intended to do about such things as the Supreme Court decisions against state enforced prayer and Bible reading in public schools. The answer: Support a religious amendment to the constitution.

How to mix religion and politics? It's an important question. So first this morning, let's look at some ways in which we are not to mix religion and politics and then later we'll look at some ways they are to be mixed.

I. Both history and the Christian faith suggest several ways in which religion and politics are not to be mixed.

1. First, do not write religious practices into any part of the constitution or state or national laws. History tells us that persecution comes, generally not from bad people trying to make other people bad, but from good people trying to make other people good. How ironic it would be if we lose our freedom at last--not because of leftists tossing bombs, but to Christians espousing slogans--"Christian Republic," "Faith of our Fathers." "Save our Sunday." "Put God back into our schools."

Some years ago in this country, the Roman Catholic Church succeeded in having written into the state laws of Massachusetts and Connecticut, a prohibition against practicing birth control. The law was finally declared unconstitutional.

In 1864, the National Reform Association was organized in Xenia, Ohio. It was committed, among other things, to enacting a religious amendment to the constitution. In 1888, with the backing of the Association, Senator H.W. Blair, introduced a national Sunday law into congress. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches supported the move for a proper Sunday observance. For awhile the objective of the reform group seemed attainable. In 1908, Samuel Gompers put the clout of the AFL behind observance of the Sunday rest day. During the closing decade of the century, Sunday laws in various States were strictly enforced. As a result, scores of 7th Day Adventists were jailed in the South as local authorities sought out Sabbath breakers. Fortunately, the amendment to the U.S. Constitution was never passed. But it's an example of how not to mix religion and politics.

We are a pluralistic nation with people from many religious backgrounds and having a variety of religious practices. To establish any one brand or interpretation of religion as the state religion or to write one kind of religious practice into law always leads to persecution and loss of freedom. That's why our forefathers and mothers had the vision of a government neutral in its relationships with all religions--a secular state. Thus George Washington in making a treaty with Tripoli in 1796, assured the Moslems that the new government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion or any one religion. That treaty incorporated the principles of the first amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Furthermore Article 6 of the constitution says, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Our constitution was not designed to perpetuate a Christian order. That's the wrong way of mixing religion and politics.

2. Secondly, we mix religion and politics in the wrong way when we see parties and candidates in terms of a single issue. This often is a moralistic issue in the narrow sense as it has to do with matters of personal behavior that are in an area with which the Church is most familiar. The crusade for prohibition is an example of this tendency. Church people often judged candidates only on this one

issue and neglected all of the broader issues of social justice and of foreign policy. There is a tendency today among some to judge candidates solely on what stand they take on the issue of abortion.

3. Thirdly we can mix religion and politics in the wrong way if we are concerned only about the personal peity or religion of a candidate without taking into account the forces which support him or her, or the wisdom of the candidate's policies. We forget that neither personal virtue nor sincere piety are any guarantee of social wisdom.

In fact I personally believe it is wise to have a healthy skepticism of political leaders as well as religious leaders who claim to have a special relationship with God. Beware of people who are completely sure and certain they know God's will for our nation, or who are certain that our nation has a special status above all others in the accomplishment of God's will.

In this whole business of how not to mix religion and politics, we can learn a great deal from our early history. Before our constitution was adopted, there was a tendency in some of the early colonies to mix religion and politics in the wrong way, and persecution resulted. For example, in the very early days of the Colonies, the Puritans in Massachusetts passed a law on October 19, 1658, which provided that every person of the "cursed sect of the Quakers" found within the colony "should be immediately imprisoned without fail, and being convicted to be of the sect of the Quakers, should immediately be banished on pain of death." We know that at least four persons were hanged in the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of the fact that they were Quakers.

II. The right way to mix religion and politics.

There is a right way to mix religion and politics according to the Bible and in line with our constitution and form of government. Our scripture lesson read earlier gives the guidelines. Some people asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" They were asking, is it all right to support a secular state? Jesus asked to see the coin, and he asked them, "Whose picture and inscription is this? They replied, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said, "Render

therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Note particularly that Jesus was not saying that he necessarily approved of or sympathized with the imperialism of Rome or that form of government. But Jesus recognized as does the Bible as a whole, that the state or government of some kind is necessary for the ordering of human affairs and human life on this earth.

Without government of some kind, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy and chaos. And 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 that as Christian 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.

So here is the first instance in which religion and politics mix. As Christians we recognize the need for government, and we support government. As its best of course, good government rests on some kind of agreement, explicit or tacit, providing means of resolving conflicts without violence. Our hope is that through government, persons and institutions will contest with each other in courts and legislatures instead of gun fights or each person attempting to take justice into his or her own hands.

2. Secondly, however, even though we Christians recognize and support the need for government and for order in society, we are at the same time called as Christians to make that government as just as possible. We know above all else that the state was made for man, not man for the state.

We know that sometimes the actions of governments can become oppressive and unjust and then efforts are to be made to change the laws. Many of the laws which supported segregated institutions in this country led to gross injustice toward people in minority groups. Thus the church and individual Christians often led in the civil rights movements. This was a most legitimate way of mixing

religion and politics. The goal was greater justice for persons who were often denied justice and equal rights and opportunity. The church was not seeking to put into law one of its own religious practices for its own self-interest. Nor were Christians seeking to establish one religion over against others.

Similarly, in Germany, when some of the churches and individual Christians opposed Hitler and the Nazi party, instead of being co-opted by the Nazis as some churches were, the opposition was an appropiate mixing of religion and politics.

As Christians we are called to be against oppression and injustice in any form and that opposition will often lead us to mix religion and politics. But that's quite a different form of mixing religion and politics than trying to get a constitutional amendment supporting prayer in public schools. Any individual can now pray anywhere he or she wants to. The present law now only says that no agency of government can require that prayer be said in public schools.

3. Thirdly, the proper mixing of religion and politics means that we are always careful not to make the nation itself a kind of god. There is a sharp difference between patriotism and nationalism. Love of country is proper and desired. That's good patriotism. Nationalism, however is the kind of belief that says our country can never be wrong or make a mistake and that we are better and more favored by God than any other nation.

4. The proper mixing of our religion and politics means that in addition to working for justice and peace and not making a god of our nation, we also pray for our leaders, even the leaders of the opposition. Join with me now in a prayer for those in authority.