Sunday May 24, 1981

"IS THERE REALLY A MORAL MAJORITY?" Romans 3:23-25, Mark 10: 42-45

Last summer and fall before the November elections in this country, we heard more and more about a new group called the "Moral Majority." One of the group's founders and best known spokesman was and continues to be the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who is also the pastor of a very large Baptist congregation in Lynchburg, Virginia.

During the previous two years before the November elections, a vast amount of political organizing had been accomplished particularly among conservative Christians. Some of the issues which these conservative Christians were most concerned about and still are, are: opposition to the registering of women for the draft; opposition to legalized abortion; opposition to the proposed equal rights amendment for women; the restoring of regular prayer in the public schools; opposition to Federal and state interference in the operation of private Christian schools; opposition to what they perceive as atheistic, humanistic teaching in public schools, and more.

Although the Moral Majority, Inc., is one of the better known of such conservative Christian groups--there are many other similar groups which came into being about the same time, and each one has spawned other groups.

For example, Mr. Falwell also set up the National Christian Action Coalition which in turned spawned the Christian Voters Victory Fund. Another organization is the Christian Voice which in turn set up the Moral Government Fund as its political action committee. Another group was called, "ONe Nation Under God," which a little over a year ago organized the "Washington for Jesus" rally. All of these groups became part of the "Religious Roundtable," which hoped to find common ground for a shared political agenda.

These many and varied groups have made some positive contributions. For example, they have created an awareness of the inter-relationships between political issues and Biblical beliefs, reminding all of us that basic moral questions are almost always involved in political decisions whether those decisions involve defense spending, tax reform, education or foreign policy. These groups also worked hard at getting church members to register and vote.

On the other hand, the fact that such groups were organized as religious groups and the fact that they carried on extensive political lobbying, at times even implying that if one were a true Christian, he or she could not in good conscience vote for a particular candidate, or take an opposing position on a political issue; raised anew the matter of how politics and religion both mix and do not mix.

In the case of the "Moral Majority" the very name itself implies that its members are moral and in the majority, while the rest of us are part of the immoral minority. That's self-righteousness to the extreme. Some time ago someone gave me a button to wear which says, "IMMORAL MINORITY, CHARTER MEMBER."

This morning let's look first at what the existence and activity of such groups and for that matter other political activity by religious groups or institutions has to do with what we often call the separation of church and state in this country? And then later we'll look at what our Christian faith has to say about our political involvement.

You may be surprised to learn that much of such political activity on the part of such groups actually has little or nothing to do with what the U.S. Constitution has to say about the relationship of church and state.

The first amendment of the United States Constitution says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That's all it says--nothing more. Note particularly that the word "separation" is not in the constitution.

In fact, in the beginning, this amendment did not apply to the states, but only to the actions of Congress. It was not until 1923, that in matters of religious liberty, the guarantee of liberty by the 14th amendment was extended to actions by the states and following that it was later construed to be to all or any government subdivision--Counties, Cities, School Boards.

1. Note first, that the independence of church and state in the Constitution means that the State cannot control the church, or can it keep people from freely exercising their religion. It also means that no governmental entity

can show preference for one form of religion or church over another. Nor can the government or any of its subdivisions require religious devotion or practice. For example, prayer cannot be a required activity in our public schools.

Many people still misunderstand this and seem to believe that one cannot pray in the schools. Any individual can pray all he or she wants, but prayer cannot be required.

Incidentally someone recently pointed out that before the Nazis came to power in Germany, prayer was required daily in the public schools at the beginning of the first period and the prayer was written by an agency of the government. The practice continued after Hitler came to power, but the required prayer did not prevent the rise of Nazism, and may even have helped it.

And yet for reasons that seem to defy logic, there are still people who make the argument that society is plagued by bribery, alcoholism, rape, drugs, pornography, and almost every other social problem because prayers cannot be required in public schools.

2. A second reason for emphasizing the independence of church and state is to keep the church from controlling the state. But this does not mean that church groups or Christians or Jews or Moslems cannot or should not express political points of view on public issues--particularly points of view which grow out of their religious convictions.

It is furthermore the right of church members to agree or disagree with their church leaders on such issues. One can still be a committed Christian and be for freedom of choice in abortion, or totally opposed to abortion of any kind. One can be in favor of having prayer in public schools or against prayer in public schools and still be a committed Christian.

The danger we always face with such issues is for one group of Christians or religious people to imply that if one does not agree on a particular issue, that person is not a Christian, or not patriotic, or immoral. There may be a majority opinion on one or more of such issues but that does not mean it is the moral majority.

There have been committed Christians and will continue to be committed Christians who are conscientious objectors and refuse to take up arms or go to war. There have been other equally committed Christians who have submitted to the draft willingly or volunteered to serve in the armed forces of our country. There is no one totally pure Christian position on this issue. + on many other issues

I, for one, would not want to live under a government which was controlled by the church or any religious group. That's a large part of the problem with Iran, following the overthrow of the Shah's government.

Religious majorities can often be more tyrannical than non-religious majorities because they come to believe that God has given them the exclusive right to rule and that God is only on their side.

Some years ago when the Roman Catholic church was in the majority in Massachusetts and Connecticut, there were state laws in both of those states which outlawed any artificial means of birth control and even made it a crime for a physician to give birth control information to his or her patients. Finally in the late 1950's those laws were declared unconstitutional.

So it is that independence of church and state means that churches or religious groups should not have their particular doctrinal point of view on a subject enacted into law. To put it another way, no church no matter how powerful should bring pressure on the state to enact laws which are based upon principles that depend for their validity on its own doctrine or ethos.

We're facing this problem now in a new way in the move in many states including Nebraska, to have the state law require that "Creationism" be taught in all public schools. Creationism is based on a particular interpretation of the stories of creation in the Old Testament of the Bible.

A similar problem has existed in the past with Sunday closing laws. Sunday, the first day of the week is the day set aside by most Christians for worship and rest. I say most Christians, because our Seventh Day Adventists Brothers and Sisters believe that Saturday is the proper day for worship and rest, as do our Jewish friends. Is

it therefore right to have one religious group impose by law its particular belief and practice on all others?

There is no moral majority on such issues as these, and when majorities seek to impose their will on others they often become immoral.

But again, all of this is not to say that Christians and other religious groups are to totally refrain from all political discussion and action. The American pattern of the separation of church and state has never meant that churches or religious groups should not seek to influence the policies of the state. But we should refrain from trying to get our particular religious point of view in matters of doctrine and practice enacted into law.

But now let's turn the matter around and look at what our Christian faith has to say about political involvements. Thus far we've been looking at the issue primarily from the point of view of our constitution and tradition.

As Christians, we are to take the government and political issues seriously but not too seriously. We are not to make politics or political issue our god. After all our ultimate loyalty is to the God who transcends all nations and states and all politics.

We are to honor the government and goverment officials, but not worship them. Nor are we to let political goals or causes become our god. Jesus Christ always refused to let God be too closely identified with any national or political cause. God's kingdom and God's will are always greater than any of our human causes.

We honor and respect government and work for the best government possible because as Christians we realize that human sin and corruption are always at work, and because we realize the need for order and justice in society.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once said "Any church that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them. . .that kind of church I think would hear the Master's words. . .Scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites."

At the same time as Christians we know that government can never solve all our problems, in fact no human institution can ever solve all our problems and make society perfect.

As Christians we also know that sometimes our loyalty to God's Kingdom as we understand it, will clash with the demands of the state or the demands of society. When this happened in the New Testament of the Bible, the Christians politely ignored the state or society. Polite they were indeed, using the proper language of deference and respect, but this politness also expressed a firm refusal to bow to the state's demand.

Their politeness was like that of Rosa Parks who in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955, politely refused to moved to the back of the bus where black people were supsed to sit according the the law and she was arrested for violating the bus-segregation ordinance of Montgomery, Alabama.

Later many other people simply and politely refused to obey many similar segregation ordinances because they believed they were contrary to the higher law of God.

Morality is often found among minorities as much as it is among majorities.

Above all, we Christians are called to be continually working toward having our over-all society as moral as possible.

Here are some signs along the way to a moral society--

1. A moral society, basically and fundamentally will be compassionate rather than vindictive.

2. A moral society will express special concern for the powerless. Jesus Christ taught and lived this fact more than any other.

3. A moral society will be a society of participants rather spectators. The real sin is indifference, not caring at all.

4. A moral society will be a society that clings to hope rather than succumbing to despair.

5. A final characteristic of a moral society is that it is perpetually unfinished. We know that we have not reached perfection and will never reach it in this world. No victories in history are ever so securely nailed down that they could not unstuck.

As Christians God calls us to the highest morality possible in this world, but at the some time the Bible reminds us that all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We are saved finally and only through God's grace. More than anything else that should make us both thankful and humble.