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Public Justice and True Tolerance

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Politics in our day usually begins and ends with “The People,” perhaps in the form of “We the people of the United States . . . ,” or “The People’s Republic of China,” or “the will of the people . . . ,” or “return power to the people.”

Christian politics begins and ends with “The King of kings and the Lord of lords.”

Great and wonderful are thy deeds, o Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, o King of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, o Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed (Rev. 15:3-4, *RSV*).

Jesus acknowledged, as we know, that *people* do have political responsibilities and that *people* do indeed belong in certain political offices (cf. Matt. 22:15-22; Mk. 12:13-17; Lk. 20:19-26; Jn. 19:11). But in the biblical view of life, human responsibility in earthly politics is never a self-contained and self-sufficient affair of “The People.” Human politics is always God’s business.

The biblical perspective always places human political responsibility in the context of God’s sovereignty and Christ’s lordship. The Old Testament revelation placed human politics in the context of the anticipation of One who would come as the Prince of Peace, the Just King, the Righteous Lord, the Perfect Judge, the Mighty God (Is. 9:6-7; 40:9-11; Jer. 23:6; Ps. 82:8; 98:4-9). And when Christ did appear for the first time, He announced boldly that “All things have been delivered to me by my Father” (Matt. 11:27, *RSV*). All authority in heaven and on earth, He said, has been given to

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Me (Matt. 28:18). Christ has come to establish the rule of His Father over the whole earth (Lk. 4:1-21; I Cor. 15:20-28; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Rev. 10:1-16).

The Politics of Grace

The biblical revelation also shows us that the time between Christ's first appearance and His second coming is a time of great patience, long-suffering, and grace on God's part. He is not willing that anyone should perish, and so the call goes out for people to repent and to believe the gospel of His kingdom (Mk. 1:15; II Pet. 3:9). God's gracious patience has considerable significance for politics because Christ does not ask His people to administer any kind of forceful, political separation of non-Christians from Christians. In fact Christ gives the opposite responsibility to Christians. We are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). We are to look after the welfare of those who might do evil to us (Matt. 5:38-42; Rom. 12:20). We are to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is done in heaven (Matt. 6:10). In all of this we are to leave the responsibility for separating the wheat from the chaff in the hands of the King Himself (Matt. 26:51-54; Lk. 3:15-17; Rev. 5:1-14).

A biblical parable which brings to focus the gracious character of this age is the one in Matthew 13:24-30. Jesus told the parable this way:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn" (RSV).

In the entire context of the New Testament, this parable seems to suggest that Christians must not try to establish an earthly state or political community that would be for Christians only or that would be fully open only to those who confess Christian faith. It is not *Christian* justice for Christians to enjoy any political privilege at the expense of non-Christians. Non-Christians must be given every blessing in the political arena that Christians themselves enjoy. Just as the wheat and the tares enjoy the same sun, rain, and cultivation, so Christians and non-Christians should enjoy equally the benefits of God's grace given to the field of this world in the present age.

The Christian view of political justice should be built directly on this understanding of God's gracious patience and love. If this is done, then Christian politics will manifest itself not as the Church's selfish attempt to control the state, nor as an interest-group effort to "get" benefits primarily for Christians, nor as a campaign to flood political offices with Christians so that Christians can control the government for the enforcement of Christian doctrine on the populace.

The biblical view of justice for every earthly creature will mean instead that Christians will work politically for the achievement of governmental policies that will protect, encourage, and open up life for every person and community of people, whatever their religious confession and view of life. Justice in political life cannot be based on the biblical teaching about church discipline since earthly states are not churches. The state is not a community of Christian faith; it is a community of public legal care for all people which must not favor or persecute any particular group or society.

Our difficulty in grasping this biblical perspective is quite understandable considering the history of politics in the West since the time of Christ's first stay among us. The Roman empire did not promote an evenhanded justice which comes from God's grace, but frequently persecuted Christians and Jews. Later when Christianity was accepted by the Roman emperors as the established religion of the empire, these emperors frequently persecuted or discriminated against non-Christians instead of Christians. This was no more just in a biblical sense than the former Roman injustice. The Roman empire in both instances falsely identified itself with *God's* empire, and the emperors wrongly assumed responsibility for getting rid of heretics (rooting up the tares)—a responsibility which Christ gave to no human being.

Still later in history the church gained such strength and prominence that it became the chief power behind most of Europe's politics. "Christian politics" then came to mean "church-controlled politics," and the Roman church leaders assumed some of the same power and held on to some of the same ideas that the Roman emperors once had. Political justice reflecting biblical patience and grace was still not operative for the most part.

So much political debate, warfare, persecution, and turmoil occurred during and after the Reformation when most Christians were still confusing the church's and the state's responsibilities that many people came to believe that political life ought to be organized without reference to religion. Our American political roots go back to this period when people were trying to organize government and politics according to so-called "neutral," nonreligious principles. They believed that if they could only keep religion in their private lives and in the churches, away from the political arena

where all people participate in common, then religious conflict would not interrupt political life and everyone would enjoy peace and prosperity.

But this was no more “just” than the earlier systems of political organization because not everyone agreed that politics was “neutral” or that religion belonged only to private life. In the political arena, therefore, people were still discriminated against and frequently persecuted if they did not go along with this new idea of a common “religionless” politics.

New Political Religions

What we have seen in the last two centuries is that our supposedly “neutral,” “secular” political communities have given birth to the most passionate and unjust *religions* that now control most of these political communities. Nationalism, a religious faith in the nation itself, has become the dominant power in modern political life around the world. Various forms of Marxism, a religion of materialistic humanism, dominate many states, persecuting and discriminating against those who do not confess the party line. Many western democracies, including the United States, allow little or no room for minority participation in politics unless the minorities agree to play by the rules that supposedly keep religion out of politics (and out of the schools) and that keep the majority in charge of directing society. This means unjust discrimination against many people.

In reality what has actually happened is that American democratic nationalism has developed into one of the most powerful “civil religions” in the modern world. It is not Marxist; it is not Roman Catholic; it is not Protestant; it is not styled after the old Roman Empire’s elevation of the emperor to the position of God. It is rather a religion of secularized Christianity where the American nation has come to be seen as God’s specially chosen kingdom—the political community through which the world will be saved politically. God’s will is supposedly revealed through the will of a political majority, and all private religions have their primary place of honor as supporters of the nation’s common, unified progress through history as God’s nation.

The American civil religion not only leads to political injustice at home, but it promotes injustice abroad in so far as “American interests” dominate world politics and economics. “What is best for America is best for the world,” is a slogan in the minds of many American citizens and U.S. officials. On the world scene this attitude operates in much the same way that the dominance of one group operates in the internal life of a nation. It means injustice and discrimination against the poor in favor of the rich, against one class in favor of another class, against one religious group in favor of another religious group.

We can see, then, that politics does not exist as a neutral enterprise. Religion cannot be kept out of the life of states. If a Christian approach of patient, gracious justice does not rule human political life, then some other religious dynamic will control it. If all people are not cared for in an evenhanded way in the public legal domain, then another religious impulse will lead to injustice and discrimination. Christians must wake up to this fact today and recognize that if they are not serving Christ in politics according to the norm of biblical justice, then they are serving some false god that will lead to injustice. In America today we believe that we are doing justice to all people by keeping religion out of politics and letting the majority rule. But actually we are keeping a truly Christian work of justice out of politics only to have a democratistic religion of the people dominate majorities and minorities in a way that oppresses and discriminates against certain people and communities of people. The only answer to the present difficulties facing democratic political systems (as well as non-democratic systems) is to recognize that people are basically religious creatures and that religion can, therefore, in no way be kept out of politics. Political life must be opened up to the full diversity of human religious impulses, and evenhanded justice must be the norm by which this diversity is allowed to live publicly.

A Christian Political Response

In the contemporary world of injustice, both domestic and international, Christian politics will begin with the repentance of Christians who come to see that they have not always been ministers of God's gracious, patient justice to others. Christian politics will grow when Christians begin to take seriously Christ's command for us to love our neighbors. The love command will lead us to be dissatisfied with the unloving injustice of the American civil religion, of Marxism, of church-controlled politics, of nationalism, and of every type of organization of political life which discriminates against some to the advantage of others.

Christian politics will mature in America when Christians recover the biblical vision of the *communal* responsibility they have for others. When we begin to see that the body of Christ is not a "part time" or "private" organism unrelated to the political realities of human life on earth, then we will be able to break away from the *individualistic* conception of political responsibility which dominates our democratic political system. We will then no longer be willing to have the major political parties do all of our politics for us on their own terms—terms which presuppose the individualistic character of political responsibility, the rule of the majority for determining what justice is all about, and the neutral secularity of the political dimension of life. Instead we will be driven by the Spirit of Christ to begin working together as a *political community* and not just as an ecclesiastical community or as an educational community. We will see that politics is our business as a community with a distinct view of life unlike the views that other communities of people have. We will begin to do politics as unto the Lord.

Once we begin, as Christians, to take our political responsibilities seriously, we will be able to take up the complex issues of inflation, poverty, taxation, education, foreign policy, racism, and so forth, in order to examine present government policies and political processes in the light of the Christian norm of patient, gracious, loving justice. Then, as the Lord guides us into a deeper understanding of modern political realities from the standpoint of His merciful justice, we will be able to make the necessary tactical decisions about how we should organize our talents and energies for the service of justice. We may find that the present political system will allow us little room for unique Christian service besides writing and speaking about alternative policies. Or we may find that after considerable labor some significant avenues will open up for our organized efforts to restructure the system and to enact policies and laws of greater justice.

To develop a Christian political option, therefore, we must begin by studying the Word of God together in order to see what it teaches about the kingdom of God in Christ. We must pray and talk together in order to grasp the principles of that kingdom as they hold for earthly politics. We must grow up into Christ so that we can gain a *common Christian political mind*. It is not enough for us to say that we have Christ in common if our lives manifest a confusion of divergent approaches to politics. It is not enough for us to say that we all believe that Christ's kingdom is coming if we live in a way that shows no communal unity in our service of the King. If we are children of the light, then our lives should manifest the communal bond that the light gives to us. Politics is a major part of the life we now live by faith. We need the mind of Christ in us. We need to be renewed in all our thought and life by Christ, including our thinking and living in politics.

Right along with our communal growth as the body of Christ, we must also encourage particular ones among us to give leadership in working out the details of our Christian political option. What are the problems facing modern nations today? What can be done to reform our present systems and policies so that greater justice can be done? What is an equitable tax policy? What is justice in education, or in broadcasting? If we are to get answers to these and thousands of other questions, we will have to have economic, legal, historical, and political experts to guide us. They will need to work full time as part of a Christian team, developing the implications of the biblical view of God's rule in Christ over the whole earth. We must work and pray together for the Lord's guidance in our lives as we seek communally to fulfill our political responsibilities before His face. But to do this we must be sure to recognize the talents and gifts that God has already given to certain ones among us in the area of political understanding. If we do not seek to discover and encourage such men and women to do this special service, and if we do not organize for the support of them, then it will not be enough for us

to pray and ask God to help us in our political service. God is already richly blessing us with men and women able to give political leadership. Let us consider how we can be good stewards politically of what God has already given.

Christ is King! Will we now serve Him in our political offices or will we continue to limp between the part-time service of Christ and the part-time service of other gods? Christ calls us to His service with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13, *RSV*).