

A Christian Action Manifesto

A Proposed Framework for Christian Political Action

By Robert Milliken

If some Christians are in danger of accepting the political and social status quo unquestioningly, others of us are subject to a different kind of danger. Assuming we are sufficiently sensitive to the evils of our government, we face the danger of a merely negative response. Our tendency may be simply to withdraw in order to avoid complicity with the evil we see. While this much is necessary (Ephesians 5:11), it would be a mistake to think it is enough. Should we fall into political monasticism, we will be guilty of disobeying Christ's will that we should be salt in the world. It is the old question of how to be "in the world" and yet not be "of the world." The danger is that we will either be "of the world" (because we fail to examine things critically by Scripture) or we will fail to be "in the world" (by our monastic withdrawal from political life).

In this essay, I will try to propose a plan for Christian political action which, if properly applied, should help us to avoid either error. This will not be an attempt to analyze specific situations of the day, but an effort to spell out the basic principles — principles upon which a Christian stance must be based if we are to be truly Scriptural.

The basic fact, I would say, is this: the status quo in our civil situation is always imperfect. Therefore, the Christian citizenry must continually interpret and react to it on the basis of Biblical principles. I propose the following concept:

The Negative Side

First, Christian Citizenship has a *negative* side. Passively, this means we shall have to *dissent* from the evil we find in political life. We speak of this as a "passive" thing because it means to withhold assent

or approval; it is a resolute refusal to conform. One cannot truly expatriate himself from all government and whatever evil it contains. To do so he would have to go to some other country, and then he would find himself in a similar position. In the nature of things, it is impossible fully to dissociate oneself from the evil of his society.

It is, however, sometimes true that we have a choice whether or not we shall actively identify ourselves with wickedness in high places. There are Christians, for example, who refuse to run for public office, or vote for those who are running, on the ground that the loyalty oath to the Constitution (which is a condition of office) is a sinful oath from which the conscientious Christian must recoil. The oath, as these Christians see it, binds the taker to use the name of God (in an oath) to pledge his support of a Constitution that deliberately is godless in its content and philosophy. To vote or not to vote is the choice the citizen has; when he chooses not to use this privilege for a reason like what we have just described, he is engaging in dissent. By withholding his assent to the oath that binds even voters (indirectly) to a secular Constitution, he is engaging in an act of purposeful dissent. At a particular point where he does have a choice, he is voluntarily and for the sake of Christ, refusing to take part in other men's sins.

So, while dissent is by its very nature both negative and passive, it is in certain circumstances a necessary form of truly Christian citizenship. Daniel had to dissent when his government commanded what he knew to be sinful; he refused to comply. In similar circumstances, so must we.

Active As Well As Passive

Actively, this negative side of Christian citizenship means that we shall have to *protest* against the evil we see in political life. It is not sufficient merely to dissent, to keep free of avoidable complicity with evil; we must also protest it. Protest is essentially active in nature; it means to object to, to speak out against something. Whereas dissent is the withholding of something, this is quite the opposite; it is holding forth a witness. Protest is crying aloud, it is raising the voice, it is exposing the wrong. The protester seeks to be a voice of conscience to his nation. The Christian protester does this by seeking to

apply the revelation of God to the evil he sees. This may be done by formal petition, by open letter, by letters to editors, by rallies—in short, by written or spoken or dramatized declarations of protest against evil to the persons in public office who have the responsibility to correct it.

Where we dissent we must also protest. Dissent is the necessary condition of consistency with the will of God; protest is what explains the dissent and enables people to see why. And there will be situations from which we cannot dissent in the sense we have defined it except by protesting or articulating our objection. If the Congress, let us suppose, should pass some legislation that violates the Word of God, it would hardly be sufficient merely to refuse to vote for any of the incumbents in the next election. Something like this would demand that we speak, write, cry out, call attention to.

Thus far, our view of Christian political action has been negative. This is not all, and cannot be all. Although it is a necessary part of the Christian citizen's responsibility in a wicked world, still a positive side is equally necessary.

The Positive Side

Second: Christian Citizenship has a *positive* side. And here we have to consider both theory and practice.

Positive Christian political action means that we must proclaim what government should be like and what it should do. It is not enough to be faultfinders. We are obligated to provide a better substitute, to offer something that will fill the vacuum that our dissent and protest will create if they are effective. We must outline an *ideal* which we want our nation to consider.

An accepted distinction between a "militant" and a "revolutionary" today is this: a militant believes the present establishment is hopelessly corrupt and must be overthrown. He does not have anything in particular to substitute for it, but is convinced that the status quo is so bad that no matter what takes its place, it is bound to be better than what now is. The revolutionary, in contrast, although he may agree that the establishment is incorrigible and must be overthrown, has a plan for its replacement. He has a "utopia" with which he hopes to displace

the present system. He also has a plan for accomplishing his goal. He is disciplined and aware of just what he wants to get and how he will go about it.

The Christian citizen must be not merely militant; he must *in a sense* be a revolutionary. Not that he will wish the violent overthrow of the present government, but that he will have something better to offer in the place of the evil he protests. The Christian "revolutionary" will in many ways be unlike the usual revolutionaries. But, like them, he will have something better to offer. He will not be satisfied to say, "I dissent from the Kingdom of Satan." He will also say, "I seek the Kingdom of God—and here is what I understand that to mean in political terms."

More Than Theory

Still we cannot be satisfied with the mere proposal of an alternative, a theory. We must include in our concept of political action some *action!* And here, of course, we mean action that tends toward the fulfillment of the ideal we hold in theory. Words must be backed with works. Theory must spur to activity. A theory must come first, but then a program of activism consistent with that theory, and tending to promote its realization, must implement it.

It is at this point that difficult and sticky questions arise, and they are difficult and sticky especially because we are Christians: shall we engage in reformational (or revolutionary) activities only within the limits of the present law, or shall we, and must we, at certain points violate the law?

Dr. Martin Luther King, for example, said that the law must be broken (in some cases, and non-violently) in order that justice may be instated. It was illegal for negroes in the South to eat in certain restaurants, but this law was unjust. Can it be said that King's theory (above) and his action program (sit-ins) were truly Christian, or were they truly unchristian? Can a Christian righteously engage in a program of political action that requires breaking the law? Or, can he justly refuse to do so in certain cases? In the last century, was it Christian on unchristian to help in the underground railroad, an illegal activity? Answers are not easy, but must be faced if we are to be truly Christian, and truly salty Christians.

Similarly, there is the question of whether political action is to be violent or non-violent, or both. Was it right for Christians to fight in the American revolution in 1776? On which side? Or the Civil War in 1861-1865? And again, if so, on which side?

These questions are anything but easy — but serious Christian political action requires that we face them. If you had been a German Christian in Berlin in 1942, would it have been your duty to join the Resistance Movement, or to expose it? Sometimes we are faced with such difficult questions whether we like it or not. And whether we are ready or not. It is far better to agonize over these things before we are caught in the agony of their happening. And also because it may be that we are now sinning by our mere inaction.

Well-Rounded Concept

Here then, I hope, is a well-rounded concept of Christian political action. To be satisfied with less is completely unsatisfactory. We in the CGM do not feel we have developed this sufficiently, but we feel keenly the need for doing it. It is necessary for all Christians to wrestle conscientiously with the problems this involves. It is imperative that we raise our voice to declare truly Biblical solutions and that we mobilize to effect them. Many ungodly solutions are being proposed and acted out. We dare not think it is enough simply to decry these wrong things. The world has a certain right to say to us: "Put up or shut up. Put your money where your mouth is. Put your life on the line, Christian." The world, after all, is doing just that.

Much needs to be done yet in forging a philosophy, negative and positive. Much needs to be done yet in developing a program of action that will provide a truly Christian alternative to what is now competing in the American market of political thought and activity. What we have proposed here is a mere framework, a skeleton, an outline. But it must be fleshed out. And that requires the talents, the work, the dedication and mutual help of many, many Christians. If toward that end the CGM can prove to be an enzyme, we shall have done at least something to promote the honor of the King of kings.

Here is a framework that can perhaps help us to achieve balance and to avoid neglect in plotting our

strategy. But we need help. What do you think? What do you suggest? What is your reaction? Write to us.

CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ACTION

The negative side:

Passively: dissent

Actively: protest

The positive side:

Theoretically: proclamation of an ideal

Practically: an action program at work

THE CHRISTIAN AMENDMENT

1. This Nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Ruler of nations, through which are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God.

2. This amendment shall not be interpreted so as to result in the establishment of any particular ecclesiastical organization, or in the abridgment of the rights of religious freedom, or freedom of speech and press, or of peaceful assemblage.

3. Congress shall have power, in such cases as it may deem proper, to provide a suitable oath or affirmation for citizens whose religious scruples prevent them from giving unqualified allegiance to the Constitution as herein amended.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

WRITE TO

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