

SECTION 5

EVALUATION OF REASONING, LOGIC, AND APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS

1. NEUTRALISM

The concept summarized on page 8 of the Report, which is basic to many of the specific recommendations, concludes that a State not only IS but MUST BE neutral on "religious matters". The latter phrase, in its context, must relate not merely to neutrality as between denominations or sects, but as between belief in God and agnosticism or atheism. The word "neutral", to be meaningful, must at least include indifference and immunity from influence. (This evaluation is clearly affirmed in the concept of pluralism developed by Dr. Littell¹ and in the discussion of "pluralism" and "secularism" in the Study Guide, which utilizes the phrase on page 6, "neutral to the influence of religion".) In other words, to be neutral the State cannot be influenced by the superior authority of God, let alone the corporate church. Yet the Report has a second and contrary thesis which is that the corporate church, with its special religious insight and by its expression of judgment on civil affairs, can bring the State into a more effective compliance with God's will - that is, that the State can be and ought to be influenced out of the status of neutrality. These contradictory positions are self-defeating: that which the Church feels "ought to be", from its sole standpoint which is religious, cannot, by the "Report's" own definition, be permitted to have any influence on the State which must be "neutral".

We interpret the concept of neutralism with respect to religion as a de facto denial of God's total sovereignty and the basis for moral law, and therefore an artificial concept unsupported by Scripture or the realities of life. To sustain this concept of neutralism, one is forced either to create some other shadowy force which establishes ground rules for morality, justice and good

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F. H. Littell, From State Church to Pluralism

("What is truth?"), or else to assume that there are no such standards of value beyond the whims of the current political power. Chapter 19 of the Confession, previously quoted in Section 3, completely denies either of such possibilities. Apart from God's standards, such phrases as "welfare of the whole society" (used in several places in the Report to describe the "proper" function of the secular state) become completely meaningless. The destruction of the family unit in the Communist Chinese social order would be a valid definition of welfare, if there is no one above the state to say otherwise.

2. RELEVANCE AND FREEDOM

The Report speaks often of the need for the Church to be "relevant" and to be "free to preach the Gospel" - both being truisms too obvious to debate. It then proceeds, laying false scriptural foundation,² to define relevance as applying primarily if not exclusively to "concrete realities", to "specific, earthy commands" and to all manner of avowedly secular matters which might be combined under the broad term "human justice". But what do the scriptures tell us about the relevance and freedom of the Church? Here we find a completely contrary viewpoint, for as already shown in Section 2, we see that not only Jesus but also the Apostles concerned themselves very little with the political and economic injustices of their day (even such obvious ones as slavery), but rather preached a message of spiritual rebirth and eternal life to slave and free, rich and poor alike.

The profound study of Scriptures by Karl Barth in his essay on "Church and State," which the Report does not quote, clearly and simply summarizes the true meaning of both relevance and freedom in the statement that the mission of the true Church is nothing more nor less than to preach divine justification. He shows clearly that this preaching alone renders "the best

² Supra, Section 2, "Critique of Report's Exegesis."

possible assistance to the establishment and maintenance of human justice and law. No direct action that the Church might take (acting partly or wholly politically, with well-meaning zeal) could even remotely be compared with the positive relevance of that action whereby, without any interference with the sphere of the State, the Church proclaims the coming Kingdom of Christ, and thereby the Gospel of Justification through faith alone; I mean that its action consists in true scriptural preaching and teaching, and in the true and scriptural administration of the sacraments. When it performs this action the Church is, within the order of creation, the force which founds and main-³tains the State.

A less theological but equally penetrating refutation of the concept that relevance requires direct involvement by the corporate church in political and economic activity is provided by C. S. Lewis in his little book "Mere Christianity". He says, "When we say the Church should give us a lead, we ought to mean that some Christians should be economists and statesmen, and that all economists and statesmen should be Christians. -- The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever, and we are asking them to do a quite different job for which they have not been trained. The application of Christian principles to trade unionism or education must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters: just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists - not from the bench of bishops trying to write plays and novels in their spare time."⁴

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Karl Barth, op. cit., pp 146-147.

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C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (MacMillan Co., New York, 1960) p. 65.

The confusion and misdirection evident in the Report as to the relevance of the Church was recently stated in this capsule form by Dr. Peale: "The truth is, you can't save souls by reforming society. You have to reform society by saving souls."⁵

Still another easily demonstrated fallacy in the Report's application of the principle of relevance, is the plea that they are motivated from a "passion for justice and an appeal for the fulfillment of humanity" (p. 39). Do not adherents to Communism, Moral Rearmament, Christian Science, and dozens of other non-Christian groups make precisely the same claim? If it is true that "the world at large may see in our activity in the political realm only an effort to fulfill the ethical teachings of the New Testament" (p. 38-9), and if the locus of authentic Christian witness is indeed "compounded of specific bills before Congress, and particular candidates running for political office" (p. 36), does the Church not then reduce itself merely to the status of a political organization - publishing slates of recommended candidates, agitating for the passage of particular laws, and in general defining the "correct" Christian position on every political matter, all under the halo of the lordship of Jesus Christ? Is this really the witness to which our Lord directs us? Yet this is no exaggeration, for a specific step in this direction has already been taken. One of the authors of the Report, a Professor of Theology at San Anselmo, has recently published an article in an official Presbyterian magazine in which, after developing his own peculiar and highly debatable definitions of political liberalism and conservatism, makes the fantastic assertion that "Christians must decide for the liberal side of a given issue or candidacy"⁶. The next obvious and inevitable step is simply

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N. V. Peale, "Can Protestantism Be Saved?", Readers Digest, Sept. 1962.

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B. A. Raist, "Decision at the Polls", So. Calif. Presbyterian, Nov. 1962.

for the Church to identify by name the particular candidates or issues which are "liberal" and which Christians must therefore support!

3. CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

We cannot accept the arbitrary definition of a Christian Society on page 7 of the Report as being "the property of medieval Christianity (which) required that the laws of the nation conform to the laws -- of a single official church." If one construes a "Christian society" in its plain and simple meaning as nothing more or less than a "society composed of Christians", then it suddenly becomes - not a posture which modern Presbyterians must reject - but rather the obvious and necessary fruition of our Lord's commandment to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations". It is a goal devoutly to be pursued, rather than shunned, if correctly defined. It is one thing to say that pluralism - the co-existence of believers and atheists - is a present fact of our world; it is quite something different to infer that this condition is a proper and desirable manifestation of God's plan for the world which Christians should actively encourage and with which they should be satisfied!

4. QUESTIONS OF LEGALISM RAISED BY REPORT

The fundamental difficulty with any attempt to "discover what it is that we must do" (p. 41) in "the realm of concrete specific human decision" (p. 36) is substantially the same as that encountered by the Jewish leaders who attempted to put the law of Moses into practical application by prescribing rules for behavior and action in specific situations. Each application inevitably generated an exception, which in turn required a new and more elaborate rule which generated further exceptions ad infinitum. The difference in the current report in describing the conclusions as "guidelines" rather than "rules", is certainly only one of degree rather than principle.

Their application will inexorably lead to further, more elaborate, and more specific "guidelines" until we will have exactly the legalism and moralism which the Report so earnestly denounces (p. 33).

A. "Public prayers tend toward indoctrination or meaningless ritual and should be omitted for both reasons." (p. 11) -- Isn't an acknowledgement of God's supremacy a prayer? Doesn't the recommendation apply to all public activities and personnel in addition to schools? Doesn't it apply to words sung or printed as well as to words said? Should we not therefore recommend deletion of the last stanza of "America" in a school or public function? Should public officials be prohibited from including a prayer in statements made in an official capacity, such as the President's inaugural address? Should those phrases in the Declaration of Independence such as "endowed by their Creator" and "divine Providence" be deleted? Should "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" be excluded from band concerts performed on municipal property? Should prayers be prohibited in connection with official legislative and judicial functions?

B. "The association of seasonal activities with religious holidays -- tends to pervert their religious significance". (p. 11) "Churches actively strive to recapture from popular custom the observance of religious holidays". (p. 11) "Once profession of religion becomes a worldly advantage, danger of impure love of Christ is increased". (p. 8) "The church should not seek, or even appear to seek, the coercive power of the state in order to facilitate Christians' observance of the Lord's Day." (p. 14) -- Should Presbyterians seek through civil action to delete or re-name national holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas? Should we protest the use of public funds for street decorations and tree lights during the Christmas season? Does not

the tradition of closing public institutions on Sundays constitute a worldly advantage? Should we not therefore promote the revision of the traditional work and school week so as to have rest periods occur on days other than Sunday? Should we not design a new calendar which will use as a reference point something other than the Lord's birth? Is it wrong for commissions in the Armed Forces of the United States to contain a dating reference to "year of our Lord"?

C. "The church must regard special (tax) status or favored position as a hindrance to the fulfillment of its mission. -- It renders its witness ambiguous by its continued acceptance of special privileges from the state in the form of tax exemptions." (p. 19) -- Does the Committee have knowledge of any significant cases where tax exemption has in fact hindered its mission or made its witness ambiguous? If so, should these not be included in the Report so that individual Christians can more readily understand the necessity for the position recommended? Does the Church feel that there exists a similar hindrance to the proper functioning of tax-favored educational and charitable organizations?

D. "United Presbyterians vigorously oppose the use of civil authority to censor on religious grounds privately promulgated material offensive -- to any religious groups". (p. 17) -- What grounds does the Committee suggest, which can qualify as non-religious under the most rigorous secularistic test, that can be used by civil authority to control pornography, vile language, etc.

E. "Medical professionals be free of legal restraint in therapeutic procedures generally accepted by the medical professions." (p. 13) Since the principal area of application relates to birth control, has the Committee determined that such medical consensus shall be determined by majority vote?

If so, and if at some future date, a majority of doctors should be Roman Catholics, does the Committee recommend that their medical consensus be adopted by Government and thus all the people?

F. "Support of the principle of federal aid to tax supported elementary and secondary schools under properly controlled conditions -- be reaffirmed."

(p. 16) -- Has the Church devised a system of controls which offers absolute assurance that no federal direction or control of the use of the funds will occur? Has the Church determined the tax system by which such funds are to be raised, and is the Church qualified to weigh the political and economic ramifications of the alternative use of such additional taxing resources directly at the local level?

G. (1) "The Constitution of the Church rejects civil authority as a means of accomplishing its ends." (Study Guide, p. 9)

(2) "The solution must be sought in state action. -- American Protestants now had to find how they could relate themselves to state power as the instrument by which Christian responsibility -- could be met." (p. 27). "The problems of -- specific bills before Congress, and particular candidates -- and concrete attempts -- to support a proposed school tax increase -- such must be the locus of authentic Christian witness." (pp 36-7)

Is there not, on the surface, an absolute contradiction between the two viewpoints presented? If so, which is to be discarded? If not, how are they to be reconciled?

H. "Loyalty to Christ may on occasion put the Christian in clear opposition to certain demands of the state. (We should not) allow the equivalence 'a good American is a good Christian' to seize the public mind." (p. 9) --

Is it not also true (in the light of C of F XXV (5): "the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error") that loyalty to Christ may also put the Christian in opposition to certain demands of the Church? Can the Church quote any responsible person who has made the assertion that a 'good American' is automatically a 'good Christian?' Is there any reason why loyalty to country cannot be essentially compatible with loyalty to Christ? Would it not be more appropriate to suggest that a good Christian ought to be a good American, under the scriptural commandments to respect the governing authorities, as well as a witness that "he that is faithful in little will be faithful in much"?

I. "Public schools are creations of the whole society operating through civil authority -- to nurture the cultural, social, and material advancement of all citizens -- and to stimulate a free search for truth within this discipline." (pp 10-11) In the light of the recommendation that civil authority be neutral on religious matters, how does one reconcile a search for "truth" in a neutral setting against the clear scriptural assertion that "wisdom is folly without God"? Does not our whole mission program rest on the assumption that meaningful education must have a religious foundation?