The Church and Politics: Some Considerations Concerning Christianity, Politics, and the Human Community

by ROBERT D. LINDER

Introduction

Americans love politics, but they do not necessarily love their politicians.[1] That is, they do not think highly of politics as a profession. This is revealed in the stories and jokes they tell. Take, for example, the true story of an incident involving Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania during an election campaign in the United States in the 1850s. Stevens was a well-known politician of the Civil War era. One day while crossing a mud-covered Lancaster, Pennsylvania, street on a wooden plank, he was confronted by his main political adversary coming toward him on the same narrow walkway. His rival called out in disdain: "I never step aside for scoundrels!" Stevens quickly jumped off the plank into the ankle deep mud and bowed, saying: "I, on the other hand, always do!"[2]

Such stories reveal that Americans have never had a great deal of respect for their politicians. Opinon polls confirm this, and they point out a rather schizophrenic public attitude towards politics in general. Most Americans recognize the importance of political activity, but most of them do not want their children to enter the political profession. It is likely that the same attitudes prevail among the British people as well.[3]

But what is the Christian's attitude towards politics to be? Perhaps more Christians, especially those who claim to be biblically-oriented, should be concerned with politics since political issues nowadays are often quite literally matters of life and death. And Christians since the time of Jesus have been concerned with matters of life and death![4]

I should not have to spend much time elaborating on the point that the world is in the throes of a great political and spiritual crisis. I use the words 'political' and 'spiritual' advisedly here because I believe that the two are related. Nearly all of the major crimes facing the world today have both a political and a spiritual dimension: war and peace, freedom and tyranny, terrorism and violence, racial and sexual prejudice, abortion and the right to life, world hunger and poverty, economic justice, the use and misuse of nuclear power, environmental issues — they all illustrate the link between

spiritual and political issues. Unresolved over a long enough period of time, any of these issues can bring a great civilization to destruction.

Writing in 1982, with remarkable prescience before the dawn of the current 'Age of Terrorism,' Ronald Higgins observed:

> *We have somehow created a world of profound and increasing inequalities, in which the top third of our fellow men and women live in restless affluence and the bottom third in degrading poverty. It is a world in which absurd expectations, compulsive appetites and human multiplication are exhausting scarce resources and endangering the land, the waters and the atmosphere. It is a world where deprivation and injustice have become so profound and so public that they make even more precarious the balance of nuclear terror which has become the extraordinary and permanent context of our lives . . . I believe that we must prepare ourselves for a world of rapidly mounting confusion and horror. The next twenty-five years, possibly the next ten, are likely to bring starvation to hundreds of millions, and hardship, disaster or war to most of the rest of us. Democracy, where it exists, can have little chance of survival. Nor in the long run can our extravagant urban industrial way of life. We of the rich world are probably the last comfortable generation. We could well witness the last act in the strange and in some ways glorious drama of modern materialist man. The evidence as a whole strongly suggests that an era of anarchy and widespread suffering is swiftly coming upon us.* [3]

In this context it is easy to see that the inter-relationship between religion and politics is very much a live topic today, perhaps even more so than at most times in the preceding several centuries because of the nature of the advanced technological world in which we now live. In short, if Christians believe that this world is God's creation, then the stakes are high indeed.

Before going further, it is necessary to distinguish between the issue of 'church and state,' on the one hand, and 'church and politics' on the other. The phrase 'church and state' refers to a differentiation between two kinds of institutions that have structured and defined the lives of human beings down through the ages. In this arrangement one of these authority structures — the state — has been primarily concerned with temporal life as an end in itself, while the other — the church — has been concerned with temporal life as a means to spiritual ends. Moreover, the term 'church and state' designates a certain kind of tension implicit in any society that contains these two institutions, even in those in which there is no attempt to separate them. [6]

On the other hand, the issue of 'church and politics' is broader than this, yet without the consideration, except perhaps in the final analysis, of whether church and state should be kept as separate as humanly possible. At issue here is the relationship of the church as an institution — as a collective body, whether international, national or local — to politics, that world concerned with the government of the civil order and with the actualities of daily life. In Western society in the twentieth century, it has

been quite possible for the non-Christian to escape the world of the church, but it is never possible for the Christian to escape the world of politics. It impinges upon him/her at every turn.

Further, in trying to throw some light on this subject, it is necessary to reach back into the history of the early Christian church for insight and instruction. Except for a few die-hard theological liberals, nearly all Christians share the view that the original intent of the founder, Jesus Christ, should be the basis of Christianity in any age and, moreover, that the best way to discover the founder's intent is to examine the pages of the Bible and the history of Christianity during its early years.

Key Scriptural Concepts of the Early Church

The biblical passages below, which provide the scriptural background for this analysis of the church and politics, have been selected with a view toward their historical importance — that is to say, they were highly influential in the early church and have been highly regarded by large numbers of Christians in subsequent years. There are many other appropriate passages, of course, but these have carried unusual weight in the study of political theology in the church.

First of all, there are the political implications of several important passages in the Old Testament books of Amos and Micah. Historically, these have provided the basis for Christian teaching concerning social justice, righteousness and kindness. Thus, according to the prophet Amos, God said: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24). Or examine the words of Micah: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-9).

In addition, Christians should consider the teaching of Jesus concerning God and Caesar. In Matthew's Gospel, it is recorded that the Pharisees came to Jesus with a trick question in order to trap him into giving an answer that was bound to displease either the religious authorities or the political officials, no matter what he said. They approached him, thus: " 'Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax.' And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then

he said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard it, they marvelled; and they left him and went away" (Matthew 22:17-22). Although down through history Christians occasionally may have been tempted to render unto God what is Caesar's, they more often have been inclined to render unto Caesar what is God's.

In addition to these, there is Jesus' great teaching concerning neighbour-love to consider. According to the scriptures: "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered right; do this, and you will live.' But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the inndeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back." Which of these three, do you think proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed mercy on him.' And Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise' " (Luke 10:25-37).

Further, all Christians must understand that their highest loyalty is always to Jesus Christ. When put to the test, the early believers made it very clear where their ultimate allegiance lay. According to the book of Acts, here is how the early Christians responded to an order to cease and desist in their teaching in Jesus' name: "And when they had brought them, they set them before council. And the high priest questioned them saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered. 'We must obey God rather than man' " (Acts 5:27-29).

In addition, the Apostle Paul pointed out that, as a rule, the state functions as a "minister of good." This is essentially what he taught in Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, for

he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrong-doer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to thom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due" (Romans 13:1-17).

But the Bible also reveals that the state can sometimes become a "beast." Consider the description of the evil "beast" (the state) as it apparently will function in the last days: "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a Lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' " (Revelation 13:1-4).

From these and similar passages of Scripture, the early Christians developed certain principles which, in turn, affected their outlook on the social and political issues of the day. Three such doctrinal principles are still valid for any discussion of the church and politics today. *First,* there is the early Christian teaching that every human being has intrinsic worth as a human being because of the Incarnation. The Apostle John wrote: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). What greater testimony could there be to the fact that God enormously values every human life than the fact that he gave his only Son so that those same humans might have the opportunity to embrace eternal life? The Incarnation itself certainly should speak to the Christian political conscience concerning such issues as pornography and poverty, racism and appalling prison conditions, for all of these things represent a process of dehumanization that is contrary to the value that God has placed on all human beings.

Second, and related to my first point, there is the early Christian view that "human life is sacred." I have tried to make a close study of this matter myself and I am absolutely convinced that this was one of the two or three commonly held social beliefs of the early Christians. It was applied to almost every area of existence where human life was at risk: warfare, abortion, and capital punishment. The shedding of blood was singled out as one of the most grievous of sins by the early church. Also, the believers of those early centuries stood firmly against abortion and capital punishment as contrary to the order of God's creation. As far as I can determine, the early Christian prohibition of killing was absolute. Although I am aware that not all scholars entirely agree with this assessment, especially on the matter of the early Christian attitude toward war and the military, I am persuaded by the weight

of New Testament teaching, and by the work of such historians as C.J. Cadoux, Roland Bainton, Jean-Michel Hornus, and Micheal J. Gorman, that the early church stood firmly against Christian participation in war, abortion and capital punishment. Of course, in that day, they had no recourse to the ballot box or the courts in these matters. However, they opposed these practices and used their influence wherever and whenever they could to work for their cessation.[7]

Third, there is the early Christian view that believers should champion the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. Any serious reading of the New Testament makes this a self-evident truth. Although Jesus never turned away a rich person simply because he was rich, his main concern was with the downtrodden of society. The New Testament radiates a vital concern for the oppressed, or what today would be called "human rights." The post-fourth-century church has not had as good a record on human rights as did the first Christians. For example, many English bishops and a great number of Southern Christians in America in the early nineteenth century argued against the abolition of slavery because it would have violated the principle of property rights, which, according to them, was inherent in the Christian Gospel — a strange view to hold for followers of the Son of God who had nowhere to lay his head. On the other hand, in both England and America, it was evangelical Christians who led the fight against slavery and finally presided over its demise in both countries. These men and women took seriously the Christian obligation to champion the needy and oppressed, and with history-changing results. Certainly, such a teaching should make Christians everywhere opponents of those who exploit other human beings for selfish and degrading purposes.[8]

The Key Historical Event in Christian History for a Consideration of the Church and Politics: The Constantinian Fall of the Church

But something happened to the Christian church which led it to attenuate, modify, and eventually abandon all or part of those early views so heavily laden with political implications. Although not all historians would agree, an increasing number — both Protestant and Catholic — are coming to accept an interpretation of Christian history which includes the notion of "the Constantinian Fall of the Church." This discovery of the significance of the fourth-century conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine I and the subsequent legalization of Christianity in the Empire provides analytical insights which enable one to understand in a large measure what is wrong with modern Christianity. Over the centuries since that valiant beginning nearly two thousand years ago, a great many harmful changes have taken place in the church, changes which historian Jacques Ellul has described as "the subversion of the church."[9] In this, one can see that the key event in

distorting the socio-political outlook of the church was, in fact, Constantine's conversion.

The motives for and nature of the Emperor's conversion are not important for this discussion. Whether Constantine became a Christian because of political considerations or because of sincere religious convictions has been hotly debated. Constantine himself probably did not know. In any case, after his rather spectacular decision to embrace Christianity at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine more and more pronouncedly acclaimed Christianity. Before the fourth century, Christians had been a despised and persecuted minority in the Empire. For various reasons, some internal and some external, they had remained aloof from the society about them, seeking rather to realize the ideals of Christ in small communities which at that time comprised the universal church. However, by the middle of the third century, thousands were pouring into the Christian fellowships. By the turn of the fourth century, when the last great official empire-wide persecution took place, it was too late to stem the tide. There were simply too many Christians and their influence was too widespread. After the conversion of Constantine, the flow turned into such a floodtide that by the fifth century Christianity was not only the sole official religion of the Roman Empire, but also the professed religion of the overwhelming majority of its citizens. It was one of the most spectacular success stories in history.[10]

But, as church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette has pointed out, this impressive victory of Christianity was mixed with a kind of defeat: "The victory had been accompanied by a compromise, compromise with the world which had crucified Jesus, compromise often made so half-consciously or unconsciously that it was all the more serious a peril to the Gospel."[11] For one thing, with the mass conversions which followed the turning of Constantine to Christianity came a relaxation of discipline in the church and the gap between the ideal and the performance of the average Christian widened. Nominal adherence to the Faith became increasingly common and, with it set in a decline in the quality of life among those who now called themselves Christian.

However, perhaps more important for a discussion of the church and politics were the specific changes introduced by Constantine after 312 which made Christianity a favoured — and, therefore, a popular — religion across the Empire. For example, the Emperor granted to members of the Christian clergy the freedom from all contributions to the state, a privilege previously given the priests of other religions that had been accorded official recognition. However, this soon led to a great influx into the Christian ministry of those from the curial class wishing relief from the heavy burdens which were crushing that once privileged stratum of society. This influx required the promulgation of a second edict limiting Christian ordination to those whose exemption would mean little financial loss to the state. In the process, the Christians were likely to get the worst of both possible worlds. Other changes included putting their Christian Sunday on the same legal footing with pagan feasts, and providing new converts to Christianity

with special protection under the law. Constantine himself built and sponsored churches and encouraged his civil officials to do likewise. He also had his own children instructed in the Christian faith, kept Christian clergy in his entourage, and provided Christian chaplains for his army. Finally, he himself took an increasingly active part in the affairs of the church, thus establishing a precedent which many of his successors would like to follow.[12]

The main point here, of course, is that Christianity was no longer a despised and outcast religion. It was now favoured, respectable, and, most important, growing in wealth and power. Favoured by the state, it also accumulated certain obligations to undergird the state. Soon Christianity was cheek by jowl with the state, encouraged by it and, in turn, supporting it. Before long, it became the religion of the status quo and the new civil religion of the Roman Empire. The stage was set for the corruption and deviations of the Middle Ages. Western Christianity would never be the same again!

The Role of the Church in Today's World

But what of the present-day church? Is it by and large Constantinian in outlook and practice? In my judgement, it most assuredly is. Can the church as a body or its various constituent parts shake off this crippling scourge, a scourge which mutes its prophetic voice and makes it difficult to deliver a word of judgment from God? It most certainly can. It has been done before in history and it can be done again!

But, in view of the continuing presence and/or threat of Constantinianism, should the church attempt to provide leadership or express views concerning political issues? That is, should a church body, or an individual congregation take a collective stand on political questions? I see no reason why, within certain limits, it should not. If the Gospel is relevant to the whole of human conduct, then surely the church has something to say about issues which affect so many spheres of human activity. Moreover, the fact that most of the political issues of the day have a spiritual dimension — many of them a spiritual base — makes it imperative for Christians individually and collectively to speak up. In any event, the church seems to be the only institution in Western society today with any kind of absolute values to serve as a basis for social and political reform in a world which desperately needs such reform.[13]

As indicated above, the early church had a great deal to say about the value of every human being, about the sacredness of human life, and about helping the poor, needy and oppressed. Surely, the present-day church needs to recover these concerns and speak out on them. A world gone mad with killing and violence surely needs to hear a word from people who are different, who claim to be "new creatures in Christ" (II Corinthians 5:17).[14]

But, it is also clear that, in order to avoid Constantinianism, there need to be certain limitations on the political activity of any Christian group or

church.[15] Let me suggest five which appear to be in order.

First, it is not wise for the church to participate in partisan politics. Identification with one political party or another or the creation of a Christian Party of some sort automatically alienates large segments of humanity which should not be given the impression that any particular party is God's anointed or that the policies of any particular party are God's policies. For instance, in America recently, the Fundamentalists have created the impression that God is a Republican — or at least that he heavily favours that party. During the 1984 presidential campaign, a joke circulated that *G.O.P.* ("Grand Old Party," a term jocularly coined by the Republican Party around the turn of the last century to describe itself) really stands for "God's Own Party." Of course, like many jokes, this one carries a bite because of its satirical implications. At any rate, it is not spiritually healthy for this kind of identification to take place. The Churh of Jesus Christ, by its very nature, includes all kinds of people from all social groups. Some of these people have a conservative bent of mind and some a liberal bent of mind, while still others are not doctrinaire at all when it comes to political thinking. This means that the church will often include a variety of political views in its ranks.

On the other hand, I know of no reason why individual Christians in a democratic society should not belong to and participate in a political party. Not only do individual believers have that right as citizens of their respective countries to do this, but, like most human institutions, the party most likely can benefit from a Christian presence in its ranks. At the same time, the Christian party member should be careful not to sacralize his/her party or its policies.

Second, the church should avoid the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in advocating political positions or when addressing political issues. These terms do not appear useful in determining a course of action for Christian bodies in the Western democracies nowadays. Often the Christian course of action defies such political labels; and the Christian position may be interpreted as liberal in some instances and conservative in others. For example, in Britain Christians may support prison reform and oppose pornography, because in both cases dehumanization and exploitation are at the root of the problem. Yet the anti-pornography movement is usually considered right-wing while prison reform is usually viewed as left-wing. In America, the peace movement is often considered a liberal cause while anti-abortionists are primarily labelled as conservatives. Yet both of these causes stem from the Christian concern for the sacredness of human life. The point here is that Christians should support a given political position because it is biblical and it is right, and let the chips fall where they may![16]

Third, the church should shun excessive political involvement because this can seriously dilute its religious or spiritual mission and turn it into just another political action committee or party. There is no hard and fast rule to apply here, and certainly there are grey areas where human judgment, based on spiritual sensitivities, must determine a course of action. The first

business of the church has always been evangelism — winning people to Jesus Christ; however, as stressed above, the Gospel has certain political and social implications which cannot be ignored. There is even a social and political dimension to conversion. Christians have never preached the Gospel and then left converts to shift for themselves. To put it another way, Christians should not stand on the Jericho Road handing out gospel tracts and assume that in so doing their faith has been fulfilled and their job done! There is far more to Christianity than that. However, political concern should flow *naturally* out of the preaching of the Gospel and the Christian worldview. There are political issues which naturally call for a Christian response because Christian believers live their lives out in the world. But this does not necessarily call for excessive entanglement in politics, and the church should keep this in mind.

Fourth, the church should never participate in the political process for the sake of power and/or privilege. Power, as Lord Action once warned, has a nasty way of corrupting even the best-intentioned human beings, and it usually whets the appetite for more power. This sort of arrangement, though long practised by many of the churches of Europe in past centuries, is repugnant to the nature of the Gospel. In addressing this question in the American context, prominent Protestant theologian John C. Bennett observed in 1958:

> *It is obvious that the Churches in America should not use their members as political pressure groups to get special ecclesiastical privileges for themselves as against other religious bodies . . . There is a large area here that calls for experienced awareness and vigilance on the part of many units of the Church. It also calls for a sense of fairness that refuses to take advantage of mere power to influence public decisions in the interest of a particular church.* [17]

In short, power and special privilege should not be the motivating factor in any decision by the church to involve itself in a political issue.

Fifth, the church should avoid being co-opted by civil religion. What is civil religion? Civil religion, often called political or public religion, refers to a people's widespread acceptance of perceived religio-political traits regarding their nation's destiny. It relates their society to the realm of ultimate meaning, enables them to look at their political community in a special sense, and provides the vision to tie the nation together in an integrated whole. It is the system of rituals, symbols, values, norms, and allegiances which function in the ongoing life of the community and give it an over-arching sense of unity. In so doing, civil religion stands above and beyond individual denominations and churches. Civil religion is unique in that it has reference to power within the state, but since it focuses on ultimate conditions, it surpasses and is independent of that power. Civil religion makes it possible for the state to utilize commonly accepted religious sentiments, concepts, and symbols — directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously — for its own purposes. It is the general faith of the nation, a faith which mixes

together piety and patriotism until it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the two.

From the point of view of the church and politics, the main danger of civil religion is that it identifies God with the national identity and in essence reduces the universal God of the Bible to the tribal God of a particular nation — like Britain or America. Civil religion appropriates God for national ends and purposes. It does not ask God to judge the nation but to bless its agenda. As American Senator Mark Hatfield, himself a devout Christian believer, observed at a National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. in 1973:

> *As we gather at this prayer breakfast let us beware of the real danger of misplaced allegiance, if not outright idolatry, to the extent that we fail to distinguish between the god of American civil religion and the God who reveals Himself in the Holy Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. If we as leaders appeal to the god of civil religion, our faith is in a small and exclusive deity, a loyal spiritual Advisor to power and prestige, a Defender of only the American nation, the object of a national folk religion devoid of moral content.* [18]

Since Christianity is an international religion which finds its most profound expression in personal faith, it would appear to be incompatible with civil religion — or with any kind of established church, for that matter. Moreover, the church should beware of being "used" by the state for its own ends by participating in civil religion. This point is particularly relevant in a Western democratic society where the government often takes the views of the church seriously and where the culture bears such a heavy Christian imprint. [19]

Conclusions

In summary, as far as I can determine, there is no reason why the church should not participate in politics. However, this has become complicated by the religio-political climate of the post-Constantinian world — a world in which church-state entanglements have been common, a world in which the church still often participates in civil religion, a world in which the church has abandoned its prohibitions against the shedding of blood and the taking of human life, and a world in which the church too often has failed to speak out against the exploitation of people and on behalf of the poor, the needy, and the oppressed.

Like any worthwhile undertaking, there is the danger of over-emphasizing the political aspects of the responsibility of the church to the world. However, there does not appear at the present to be any danger of the church's becoming too concerned about the threat of nuclear war or too deeply involved in championing human rights or too wrapped up in attempting to protect the unborn. Still, it is well to remember that the Church should temper its approach to politics with an exemplary non-partisanship that avoids excessive involvement simply for the sake of involvement.

Moreover, the church should never participate in politics with the aim of gaining power and privilege for itself, and it should avoid the spiritually-deadening effects of being co-opted by civil religion.

However, when all is said and done, the fact that the Gospel has a social and political dimension cannot be ignored. As noted at the beginning of this essay, the world today is long on problems and short on answers. The church does not have all the answers, but it certainly has a number which a secular world needs to hear and consider. To choose self-destruction after hearing the Christian message is one thing — to choose it without hearing it is another. The church should have something meaningful to say to the current world situation. At stake are the fundamental issues of justice, mercy, and peace that fill the Bible from cover to cover.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a lecture originally delivered at a meeting of the Irish Christian Study Centre, Belfast, Northern Ireland, April 25, 1986. I wish to express my thanks to the staff and members of the I.C.S.C. for making the occasion possible.
2. *Time*, Sept. 21, 1981, p. 4.
3. For example, see George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1972), I: 484, II: 1157, 1314, and III: 1927. For some rather acid comments concerning the lack of moral leadership among twentieth-century British politicians, see Matthew Parris' review of *The Gladstone Diaries* in *The Sunday Times*, May 4, 1986, p. 50.
4. For the argument that believers can and should be involved in politics, see Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, *Politics: A Case for Christian Action* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973).
5. Ronald Higgins, *The Seventh Enemy: The Human Factor in the Global Crisis*, rev. ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), p. 12.
6. For more information on the subject of the separation of church and state, see Robert D. Linder, "Church and State," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 233-38.
7. C.J. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headley Brothers, 1919); Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960); Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); and Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982). For an example of a historian who appears reluctant to accept this conclusion, even in the face of his own evidence to the contrary, see Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Thrust of the Christian Movement into the Roman World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 303-5.
8. For example, see Roy Joslin, *Urban Harvest* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1982); Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation and World Evangelical Fellowship, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (London: Paternoster Press, 1982); David Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983); and John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1984). For the application of the social dimension of the Gospel to Northern Ireland, see Sidney Garland, "Liberation Theology and the Ulster Question," *Foundations*, no. 15 (Autumn 1985): 31-33; reprinted in this issue of the *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre*.
9. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). Original French edition, 1984.
10. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 65-111, and F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (London: Paternoster Press, 1958).
11. Latourette, *History of Christianity*, p. 108.

12. For the full story, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), pp. 484-88, and 554-71.
13. For examples of how and why Christians, as individuals and in groups, can be active in politics in a democratic society, see Linder and Pierard, *Politics,* esp. pp. 17-51, and Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). For a stimulating discussion of the pros and cons of the involvement of the church in politics from a distinctly British perspective, see Donald Reeves, ed., *The Church and the State* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984).
14. The effect of the discipline of the Medieval Church on Europe in the days immediately following the disintegratioon of the Roman Empire, the impact of the Puritan movement on the development of moral self-discipline in personal life and the growth of individualism, and the influence of the Wesleyan Revival on the moral thinking of eighteenth-century British people are all examples of how Christianity has significantly affected the political growth of the West in the past. For excellent accounts of how evangelical Christians in recent centuries have contributed to social and political reform, see Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Norris Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work, 1865-1920* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977); and Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War,* rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
15. For a brief but helpful introduction to the problem of Constantinianism in the context of the New Religious Right in America, see Richard V. Pierard, "The Religious Right in American Politics," in George M. Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 161-74.
16. Related to this is the issue of joining with non-Christians in order to achieve some political objective important to Christian believers. Provided that one has a goal firmly based on biblical revelation, I see nothing wrong with cooperating with others of different faiths or of no faith at all to obtain the desired ends. After all, much of what Christians stand for is based on broad considerations of justice and social welfare which appeal to the consciences of many outside the church.
17. John C. Bennett, *Christians and the State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 272. I realize that this is also sometimes a difficult position to maintain, especially in borderline cases. As a matter of fact, most cases are not borderline, though some are. Moreover, in many instances there is a Christian inspiration growing out of the doctrine and ethos of the church behind the conscience of the community, and there is no problem if the effects of this Christian inspiration are shared broadly by the community. Further, the church should seek to educate the community on matters concerning which its conscience is dull or uninformed.
18. The text of this statement is reprinted in Mark O. Hatfield, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), p. 94. Senator Hatfield made these remarks with then-President Richard M. Nixon sitting at his right hand.
19. For a brief introduction to civil religion, see Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, *What is Civil Religion?* (Washington, DC: Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, 1986). For a full discussion of civil religion in the American context, including its benfits and dangers, see Linder and Pierard, *Twilight of the Saints: Biblical Christianity and Civil Religion in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978).