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# Training the Parish for Christian Citizenship

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CITIZENSHIP is in the midstream of American thought. The Communist menace bids man review the foundations of government. Party politics utilizes radio and television in addition to earlier tools of press and propaganda. The great social problems of our time — public and social welfare, the racial question, the conflicts of capital and labor, control of economics — are all related to government and citizenship. Hence the questions concerning the Church's place in this program are more insistent than ever. More specifically: What shall the parish do to train its people for citizenship?

## I

### PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Several alternatives confront the local church. One is that it do nothing. "Preach the Word" can be stressed to signify that the business of the church is to speak the words of the Gospel and to fit men for the life beyond the grave. The difficulty with this alternative is that it does not do what it claims to do. It does teach citizenship. It can be the citizenship of quietism, which assumes that a Christian does not really live in this world at all and should withdraw himself from all participation in human affairs other than those demanded by staying alive. Or "saying nothing" can breed a citizenship that is actually unchristian. It can suggest a shuttle theory to the individual Christian believer, that he swings back and forth between a life at worship and in the congregation which is driven by Christian motives, and a life under government and in the State which is driven by worldly motives, fear of punishment, desire for security.

Other alternatives confront churches today. Much propaganda of the churches urges us to take sides concerning political theory. Many churches are embroiled at the moment in a debate on the principle of free enterprise as opposed to the State as the safeguard

of the public welfare. This debate is accompanied by much mutual name calling of "Fascist" and "Communist." Congressional Investigation Committees jump into the fray with gusto. What does the Church say about this? What should the local parish do for its people about it?

Since much of the area of citizenship is subject to personal opinion, not to say downright prejudice, a preliminary strategy needs to be formed at once. The Church, and this is true of the local parish, is a collection of Christians. The ministry of the Church directs itself to each of them and seeks to build and edify each one in his faith in God through Christ. Hence the Church has done nothing by merely passing judgment on political theories or praising or castigating individuals who speak on the Christian's task of citizenship. The Church is ceaselessly occupied with bringing the redeeming work and message of Christ into the hearts of its people. Hence the Church must first of all avoid the resentments and debates that stimulate and stiffen prejudice. On the one hand, it must speak of citizenship as a practical and genuine concern with the tasks of government, with taxes and obedience. On the other hand, the ministry of the Church to its people aims at their participating in the tasks of citizenship as the outgrowth and demonstration of their faith in God and their love to their fellow men. To that end it must remove the ignorance or the prejudice that bars such love and prevents such obedience. This is the major difficulty in the Church's training for citizenship: that it must deal with controversial questions and sometimes seem to take sides in them and yet must train its people to rise above prejudice and controversy and love other people.

This all implies that the basic problem of the Church in the training for citizenship is never merely the imparting of information or the laying down of manifestos. Rather is it the bringing of each of its members to confront his own place in community and society under government and to find the best resources of the Spirit of God for overcoming the prejudices which turn him away from people and for participating in the common labors of love which are Christian citizenship.

Hence the training for citizenship is not primarily a task for preaching in the services of worship of the congregation. There

indeed the broad outlines of Christian citizenship can be sketched, and the great dynamic for good citizenship, God's love to us in Christ Jesus, can be defined and applied. In the nature of the service and of the sermon political information, and especially elements that are controversial and may arouse opposition in the individual hearer's mind, have little place.

The place for confronting the controversial questions of citizenship, in the administration of the parish, is the discussion circle, whatever it may be: the catechetical group of children or adults, the Bible class, the discussion group recruited especially for the purpose or attached to one of the organizations of the Church. Here the misunderstanding, ignorance, or resentment of any member of the group can immediately come to the surface and be met. Here the function of a Christian group, to respect differences of opinion but ceaselessly to labor for the best spiritual power for the daily tasks, can be kept uppermost. Here that most necessary and yet most difficult of all processes of personal religion can steadily be stimulated: to apply the dynamic of the Gospel to the individual practical situation of life. Here Christians can counsel one another and share with one another their discoveries and insights on practical phases of their own citizenship and thus be led to that essential and salutary situation of being helpers of one another toward life in God.

## II

### THE BASIC THEOLOGY

The Christian's life under civil government is described in several selections from the New Testament. We need to take care in applying Old Testament materials in too direct a fashion to the situation of the Christian under civil government of his time. With the exception of days spent by Israel in exile, its government was, even under kings, basically a theocracy, and the people were in principle at least all under the covenant with God. The New Testament situation, on the other hand, is comparable to our own in that Christians lived side by side with unbelievers under the same government, and the agents of government not necessarily claimed to be believers in God.

The saying of Jesus which has sometimes been construed quietistically is John 18:36, 37:

My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is My kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto Him: Art Thou a king, then? Jesus answered: Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth My voice.

Here Jesus is sometimes assumed to say His rule over people will be in the life beyond the grave. More correctly, however, His words here mean: My rule over people does not operate with powers that the world uses, swords and force. I rule over people's hearts by means of the truth to which My living and dying bears witness. The truth is God's faithful plan to save and redeem the world. The person who comes under that plan and program of God is the person who hears My Gospel, the redeeming message of My work.

The most complete picture of the Christian's life under government is set before us in 1 Tim. 2:1-6:

I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

Note the elements of this statement, which are actually prescriptions for parish administration and a direct answer to the question: What do we do when we train the parish to good citizenship? Christians are to be tremendously concerned for their civil government to the point of being fervent in their prayers to God about it and grateful for its activities. The nature of civil government is that it has "authority," pre-eminence, position for rule. This position is to be used to the end that people, specifically the Christians, lead a quiet and peaceable life, one in which people in an orderly way go about their stated tasks, displaying to one another and to others their reverence for God and their usefulness for people. This display of reverence and worth carried out in a situa-

tion of order and peace has a purpose, which our Lord mentioned above in John 18: God has a plan that His truth, His program of salvation, should come before people, and He is anxious that "all men" come to that knowledge. This saving truth asserts itself in men realizing who God is and that God reaches man through one Agent alone, "the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all." This truth of God, this redeeming work of Christ, needs to be testified at moments which are proper in the life of every man who is thus to be brought to the truth. Christ's own incarnation and redeeming work was such a testimony, and so is the continuing witness of every Christian — St. Paul goes on to describe his own — throughout the world. The point of this passage is that witness functions as people live together in the orderly pursuit of their tasks in business and family, and government needs to do its work to the end that this witness will be so facilitated.

In Romans 13 the Apostle goes into more detail what it is that government does in order to preserve this order.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same; for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil (vv. 3, 4).

Note that repeated emphasis, "minister of God." Government carries out a task which is God's design and purpose, a purpose of good to men, that evildoers are kept in check and that a premium is placed upon well-doing. The Apostle repeats that accent in vv. 1, 2:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Who-soever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation,

and in v. 6, "they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing." The Christian citizen is not simply not to resist the power of government, but actively to contribute to its work: "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (v. 7). Respect for government and paying the taxes through

which it is able to operate is, for St. Paul's reader, the extent of citizenship.

How the Christian's life under government and participation in it expands because of a share in the democratic process is a major question. Obviously there are no Bible passages saying: "Use your franchise, choose men for office to represent you in legislative assemblies, in the law courts, in the carrying out of legislation and in the direction of armed power in police and Army; stand for office; engage in the processes by which you judge wisely as a citizen and bring your best influence to bear upon government." Those options were not before the Romans to whom Paul wrote.

That Paul would be interested in them, however, we can gather from his insistence upon what should be the motive for all of this citizenship. In Romans 13 he discusses this motive twice: "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake" (v. 5). After discussing the duty to pay taxes, as though to remind his readers that they are not to pay taxes simply because of penalties of government, he says: "Owe no man anything but to love one another" (v. 8). Here is the crux of *Christian* citizenship. For it is the characteristic of government that it achieves its ends by penalizing people or implicitly rewarding them for obedience in a physical way. It is the core of Christian behavior that it acts out of respect to God, "for conscience' sake," that it is prompted through the life of God in Christ to love the neighbor. Thus the Christian under government finds his opportunities to contribute to the welfare of his neighbor. That opportunity climaxes, as 1 Timothy 2 said, in his witness to him of the Gospel. But short of that, Romans 13 suggests, government as an instrument of God does a task which the Christian wants to see happen, that it is a terror to evil works.

These two accents, of 1 Timothy 2 and Romans 13, are interestingly brought together in 1 Peter 2:11-17:

Dearly beloved, I beseech you, as strangers and pilgrims abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your conversation honest among the Gentiles, that whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether it be

to the king as supreme or unto governors as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men; as free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

This is the first part of a much longer discussion in which Peter describes the activities of the called people of God, who are a royal priesthood (v. 9). He attacks two questions in the minds of Christians living in a scattered form out among people of the world. The one question is: "Is it right that we be persecuted?" The other question is: "If as Christian people we belong to God, are here only pilgrims, and are free even from God's Law, to say nothing of man's, what are we going to do with the many ways in which government seeks to direct our lives nationally and locally?" The two questions have the same answer. The life of criticism and unkindness which Christians experience from their world as well as the life of regulation and government under which they live is one great opportunity for demonstrating the "honest" life, the valuable and worthy one. Christians are God's people. If they do evil, the world says either that their godliness is a fake or that their God is evil. If they resist the ordinances of their community and nation, people will say that they are criminal or selfish, and their witness to the life of God will again be vitiated. Hence their good works are to silence the criticism and prejudice with which the people of the world meet the message of the Gospel. Actually when Christians, under the guise of "freedom," do withdraw themselves from government, they may be deceiving themselves, using their "liberty for a cloke of maliciousness." Rather should Christians think of themselves as the servants of God, people playing the great role of carrying out God's plan of life for men. Their behavior is to stop the mouth of criticism and prejudice. Then they can go on — St. Peter does not arrive at this part of the plot until 3:15 — to speak the Word to them, which will be a visitation of the Spirit of God by which men of the world realize the source of God's life in Christ and the source of good works in Christ's Spirit.

This passage is quite comprehensive in its "every ordinance." It meets the dilemma under which every Christian, also in a demo-



cratic society, finds himself: he is free from law, why should he yield himself to law? The answer is: not just to escape the discomfort of penalty, but to construct the total witness to the world of the man in Christ.

### III

#### THE SPHERE OF PREACHING

The unfolding of this theology of citizenship, and the applying of it to many levels of practical life and experience, is a process that must advance, we have said, through every front of the parish, most profitably in its group work. What place will citizenship have in the sermon of the regular service?

If we can take the writings of the New Testament as our cue, then we find that we can speak unabashedly of the various phases of Christian citizenship as *goals* to which the life in Christ is to lead and for which it is to equip. The New Testament goes into remarkable detail in this connection. It speaks of the calling of the man-at-arms. (Luke 3:14 ff.) It speaks of paying taxes and other financial obligations to the government. It depicts Christians living their life under law (Acts 22:25). Christian preaching today can be at least that explicit in defining the life of the citizen in his nation, his community, his neighborhood, for the law of love applies to all these goals (Rom. 13:7-10). The Christian will be led to look with sympathy and interest upon the efforts to maintain peace in the world through armed force and to provide for agencies of international discussion and comity, such as the U.N. The pastor need not be misled by the argument that since wars are promised to the end of time, therefore efforts to stop them are useless. We shall always have the poor with us, too, but that does not mean that we are to cease trying to equip people to make their own living. We shall have crime with us, too, but that does not suggest that we should allow criminals to run riot.

A corollary of preaching to the goals of good citizenship is the uncovering of the *malady* of bad citizenship. It is at this point that Christian preaching begins to show its unique Christian colors. If good citizenship is basically the exercise of love toward men, then poor citizenship is the withdrawal of the individual selfishly to his own ends. Here the Christian and non-Christian under government go separate ways. For the latter engages in citizenship for

reasons of self-interest. The Christian will not deny that he profits from good government, but its purpose is that God's truth be told. Hence the maladies that underly the sluggishness of the Christian citizen and his refusal to participate in the processes of his own government can be diagnosed as reluctance to share in the Christian witness and refusal to fulfill the mind of Christ. The current controversy concerning motives for citizenship, in the anxiety to outlaw Communism, sometimes in the literature of the churches, suggests motivations with regard to property and wealth which do not stem from the New Testament. The Christian preacher needs patiently to diagnose the lovelessness that is at the bottom of faulty citizenship, whether the faults be sluggishness, self-centeredness, a desire for party privilege, or prejudice and the refusal to work for the common good. As deficiencies in love these ingredients of poor citizenship are symptoms of sin.

Hence Christian preaching toward good citizenship can with clarity and directness preach the Gospel. The Christian preacher should not be caught in a false alternative: either preach good citizenship or preach the Gospel. The former is a goal of preaching, one of many. The latter is the *power* which the preacher applies to any and all of the goals of Christian life. The great passages on Christian citizenship, discussed in Part II above, exemplify the technique of talking about Jesus Christ and Him Crucified to the end that men might love one another and carry out their labors of love in the domain of Christian citizenship. This reminder is in place because, in the process of preaching from texts, portions on citizenship are frequently excised from those sections of the Biblical book which deal with the redemptive work of Christ and the power of the Spirit for Christian behavior.

#### READINGS

Of the works of Martin Luther, the following are of special value in the stimulus to citizenship: *On the Freedom of the Christian Man*; *On Civil Government*; *Concerning Soldiers, Whether They Live in a Godly Station*.

A sample of preaching on citizenship, of an able type but based on theological and liturgical principles not wholly shared by the present writer, is Harold A. Bosley, *Preaching on Controversial Issues* (Harper, 1953).

Useful discussion materials for group work on phases of Christian citizenship are available in *Christian, What About Society?* by Herman Keiter (Muhlenberg Press, 1951). The workbook of this item is useful for further sources.

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