

God and Government: Preaching and the Election of '92

D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, Virginia

Political polls are becoming a substitute for democratic process. The election of '92 is reminding us yet again that the content of our democratic discussion is reduced to what the polls can tell us. What they tell us is that almost everyone is irritated with professional politicians. What they tell us is that this candidate or that candidate is so many points ahead or behind the other candidates. What they tell us is that a certain percentage of voters are concerned about this or that issue which is a matter of special interest to them. Everything is reduced to the metaphor of the market: how many people will buy this candidate or that candidate; what preferences do the largest percentage of a given population have, and how can a candidate be "packaged" so as to be "sold" to that constituency.

Thankfully, thoughtful people have questioned what our political process is coming to in these developments. Preaching in the context of Election '92 will do well to join the questioners. For there are some distinctively Christian, theological concerns in all of this which we ought to consider. While we are constantly bombarded with polling data about who is preferred by whom, we are rarely given clear information about what vision and plan of action any particular candidate has for the life of our society as a whole. As Robert Bellah has said in *The Good Society*, "American politics is an arena of power in which competing interests battle without responsibility for or a conception of the common good."¹ This constitutes a special problem for Christians whose scriptures teach that God gives a definite role to civil government and that faithfulness to God involves holding civil government accountable to its commission.

This election year brings us face to face with a discernibly greater degree of voter dissatisfaction than has been evident in the recent past. Whether that dissatisfaction will translate into a strengthening of the democratic process, a recovery of the vocation of government, and a deepening of commitment throughout the society to the common good, is yet to be determined. Preaching which leads the Christian community to think about ways in which we can hold government accountable to its divinely given purpose may contribute to such an outcome.

I

In case some worry and wonder about the matter of separation of church and state, preaching does well to recall what the First Amendment to the Constitution of the U.S. says. What it denies is that the state can give any special privilege to any particular religious group. But what it affirms is that the state cannot interfere with the free exercise of religion.² Part of the free exercise of the Christian religion is to define its understanding of God's purpose for civil government, to educate the people of God in that understanding, and to encourage them to work as Christian citizens to hold the state accountable to its true vocation. The First Amendment does not prohibit us from addressing this matter. The First Amendment protects our obligation to address this matter.

Romans 13 is the classic text in which Christians have found part of their understanding of what God expects of the state. Though often read with an emphasis upon the obedience required of the Christian when the state exercises its God-given commission, it is also important to emphasize this God-given commission itself. "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good" (Rom. 13:3-4a). Christians have had to remind themselves at different points in human history that it is not always necessarily so. Paul's perception of the Roman governmental authority was that it clearly fulfilled the role of God's servant for the good of all. Thus he counseled grateful acceptance of that authority. But the basis of that counsel is unmistakably clear: the government seemed to fulfill the commission, "God's servant for your good."

In the twentieth century the world has gone through at least one shattering episode when Christians were called upon to make the opposite judgment about their government, warning that unless it held to its divine commission, it could not be obeyed in Christian conscience. In the mid-1930's a group of church leaders gathered in Barmen, Germany to respond to the national crisis in their land. They produced what has come to be known as *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*. It simultaneously expresses the conviction that "the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace," "acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before God," and "calls to mind ... the responsibility both of rulers and the ruled."³ For many who signed the declaration in 1934, the time was not far off when they would have to enter into active resistance against Hitler's government. But their premise was the same as Paul's premise in Romans: civil government is divinely commissioned to be God's servant for the common good. When it fulfills the commission it is to be gratefully obeyed. When it fails the commission it is to be reformed. When it willfully distorts the commission it is to be resisted.

In our time and in our setting in the U.S.A., we can be grateful most of us do not find ourselves where Christians eventually found themselves in relation to the Third Reich - that is, we are not called to resistance. But neither is it clear that we are in the same place Paul perceived his fledgling Christian community in Rome to be in relation to civil government - that is, we are not merely called to grateful obedience. If the malaise of this election year is any kind of indicator, there is serious question whether civil government is embracing its commission as God's servant for the common good. Thus we are likely called to reform if we are going to be faithful Christians. We are called to hold government accountable, requiring it to acknowledge and work at its commission in meaningful ways.

II

But there's a rub here. "They is us." In a democratic society the government is of, for, and by the people. To speak of holding it accountable to the divine commission is to speak of holding ourselves accountable, of disciplining ourselves as participants in the democratic process to have more in mind that our own narrow interests; to join in a larger conversation about the common good for society in which our personal interests have to take a secondary place.

No one seems to have known the difficulty of this kind of political self-discipline better than Ambrose Bierce. Bierce was an American writer, adventurer and

curmudgeon at large who delighted in identifying the pretense, hypocrisy, banality and self-deceit to which humans are prey. One of his most famous creations was something called *The Devil's Dictionary*. Among the outrageous, yet telling, definitions he penned is this characterization of politics: "Politics, n. A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."⁴

This is the phenomenon which the Bible and theologians call sin. And we do well to hear Bierce's warning if we undertake to hold our democratic government to its commission as God's servant for the common good. For we always have a tendency to define and understand the common good in a way which protects our interests at least a bit better than anybody else's. "A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."

But acknowledging the danger is at least half the battle here. If we approach our questions of political governance with a clear sense of what God commissions government for, and with a readiness to be self-critical about how our own interests intrude on the judgments we make about what really is the *common* good - then we may find ourselves at least in the remote company of three courageous young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who struggled with the true vocation of government. They refused to yield obedience to political authority when it had lost touch with its divine commission. When called on to worship the whim of King Nebuchadnezzar, rather than obey civil authority which failed to seek the common good, they were willing to face the fiery furnace. Notice that they expected God to deliver them: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let [our God] deliver us" (Dan. 3:16-17). But their determination to call government to account for distorting its true commission was not premised on their personal interests being preserved. For they reckoned with the prospect that this call to accountability might cost them dearly. Having just said that they would trust God for deliverance, they added: "But if not, be it known to you O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up" (Dan. 3:18).

To most of us, our situation does not appear so sinister. No king asks us to worship a statue representing him in lieu of worshipping God. But many forces ask us to worship - to give complete allegiance to - our particular interests. As we do so we succumb to a subtle temptation, to a false worship which undermines God's purpose for civil government.

Thus our task in this election year is not so simple as "throwing the rascals out." For it will not matter greatly who is in *unless* we reshape the conversation to deal with fundamental concerns of our society as a whole: how we shall deal with cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity; how we will see to housing, health care, and work for all citizens; how we will compose a society which does not acquiesce in a more or less permanent underclass; how we will revitalize our educational system at every level; how we will repair our economic system without worsening the already worst conditions in our society and without corrupting the environment in which we live and move and have our being. Only when our government makes a determined effort to be God's servant of the common good by addressing such societal concerns in a sustained way can it fulfill its divine commission. Surely our personal interests are greatly at stake in all this, but our first summons is to deal with the common good and seek our own good in that context.

III

If we are going to make more out of this election year as Christian preachers than inconsequential bellyaching that only mirrors the general discomfort abroad, we will need to challenge our hearers to undertake some particular disciplines. A partial list might include the following:

1. Try to ignore most of what is seen and heard via paid, political advertising on radio and T.V. We can be sure that 15-30 second images and sound bites can do little more than tempt us to worship our particular interests rather than seeking the common good.
2. Communicate to candidates that attention is being paid to platforms, not to just a few items in which we may have a personal interest, but to overall approaches to basic concerns with which our civil order must deal if we are to care for justice, peace, and well-being of the citizenry.
3. Participate in public discussion and debate - perhaps organized through congregational education ministries - but debate and discussion which avoids a stress on merely private interests and earnestly asks how we can build a future which includes the underclass of L.A. and Ourtown, U.S.A.
4. Pay taxes cheerfully! Government deserves and needs our support if it is to be the servant of God for the common good. To be sure, take all the breaks the law allows. And certainly undertake to reform tax laws where they are manifestly unjust or inequitable or just plain wasteful. But then be glad that we can fund a government which seeks to be responsive to its divine commission.

The clear teaching of Christianity is that government deserves our respect insofar as it fulfills its commission to build a society grounded in truth, goodness, and justice. In our democratic society, we have only ourselves to blame when government fails in this purpose. Our preaching should help people rejoice that God has given us government as a servant of our good. Should preaching contribute to reclaiming such a vocation for government, it will have done a good service in Election '92.

NOTES

¹ Robert N. Bellah, et.al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 133.

² Ibid., 179-180.

³ *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1983) 8.22.

⁴ Bruce Watson, "Who Was It Wrote the Devil's Dictionary?" in *Smithsonian* 22 (March 1992): 104.