

July 4, 1978: Invitation To A Reformed-Anabaptist Debate

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One of the most significant issues with which every Minister of the Word must, in some fashion, come to grips is the relationship between the Church and the civil order, or in H. Richard Niebuhr's classic categories, the relationship between "Christ and Culture." Such an issue is anything but academic. How one deals with it has profound implications for the whole style and scope of one's ministry. From time to time, perhaps during this summer in preparation for preaching during "Christian Citizenship" month (July), a minister would do well to assess his or her own understanding of this "enduring problem of Christ and culture." This article is an attempt to stimulate such reflection.

For myself, and I expect for most of us who graduated from mainline Protestant seminaries in the past two decades, it has been almost axiomatic that the proper stance of the Church vis-à-vis the civil order is that described by Niebuhr in terms of "Christ the Transformer of Culture." Most of us have carried out our ministries within that basic model, however inconsistently we may have done so. We have affirmed that because Christ is Lord over all of life, the Church has a responsibility to act within the political, social, and economic structures of society so as to express through them God's sovereign purposes for human life. In one way or another, we have sought to "make our nation a more fit instrument for the accomplishment of the divine purposes in history." We have argued that to withdraw from the often messy world of political action, with its inevitable compromises, is to be irresponsible. It is to fail to live out our commitment to the lordship of Christ where it counts—in the world. In conducting our ministries in light of this "transformationist" model, we have been loyal sons and daughters of John Calvin. Calvin insisted that the elect were not chosen by God for personal purity or for salvation alone, but to be the human instruments for the accomplishment of His just and loving purposes in history.

In recent years, however, this understanding of the relationship of Church and civil order has come under serious question. In particular it has been challenged by representatives of a theologically articulate and politically radical form of the sectarian (or Anabaptist) tradition. Such theologians as John Howard Yoder, William Stringfellow, Jacques Ellul, and Jim Wallis have presented a powerful critique of the "transformationist" position.

We in the Reformed tradition need to take seriously their critique and enter into dialogue with it. The easiest way for a pastor to do so is by subscribing to *Sojourners* magazine edited by Jim Wallis. *Sojourners* is an attractively printed monthly magazine produced by the "Sojourners Community" in Washington, D.C. It seeks to offer a radical critique of American culture from the perspective of an evangelical Christianity that is committed to "the rebuilding of the Church by discerning the times through the life and faith of biblical people."

More systematic development of this position can be found in John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (one of the finest contemporary statements of the Christ-Against-Culture position) and *Agenda for Biblical People* by Jim Wallis.

One of the most significant features of these works is the way in which they raise the whole issue of what constitutes "responsible political action" on the part of the Church. If you thought the Christ-Against-Culture position was basically escapist and reactionary, read these books. These "new Anabaptists" (they would prefer to be called biblical Christians, but that is begging the issue) are absolutely insistent that Christian discipleship by its very nature is political. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God has profound political implications both individually and corporately. There is no such thing as a non-political stance of neutrality the Church can occupy. Jim Wallis puts it this way:

The Bible teaches that personal faith divorced from an active commitment to social justice is a mockery of the gospel. . . . When someone is converted to Christ, he or she does not receive an automatic pass to celestial bliss, but is called to take up a cross and follow in obedience the one who fed the hungry, healed the sick, was a friend of all manner of men and women, and was executed as a political criminal and subversive. This is the Christ of the New Testament. There is no other.

(*Agenda for Biblical People*, p. 49, 32)

The old arguments against the sectarian tradition, that it is escapist, other-worldly, indifferent to the social and political realities of history, are simply not valid in regard to this contemporary expression of radical Christianity. Whatever other criticism can be made of the new Anabaptists, they cannot be accused of an indifference to social ethics. Very often their discernment and prophetic critique of American society is right on target—uncomfortably so.

It is in terms of the issue of what constitutes "responsible political action" that the Anabaptists accuse us of what Wallis calls "Establishment Christianity." He levels these charges:

The accepted canons of political realism and economic necessity that prevail in the world's ideological systems have increasingly dominated the discussions of what would constitute responsible Christian action in the world. That the Christian community must live and act responsibly in the world is beyond question, as is the fact that Christians have a special and decisive responsibility to the ongoing life of the world. The critical question is: Who or what determines the shape of responsible Christian action in the world? Do our norms for action derive from what the world considers to be helpful, necessary, realistic, relevant, and responsible, or do the norms of Christian responsibility derive from the biblical witness and, most crucially, from the manner of the life and death of Jesus Christ, in the world? The shape of his responsibility was in adopting the posture of a servant and going to a cross. (*Agenda*, p. 122)

For those of us who have grown up theologically with the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr as our guide, those are important questions to ponder, even if we reject the Anabaptist position. From whence do our norms for social-political action come, and are those norms as radical as the gospel we profess?

No temptation is more subtle or insidious for the Church than the tempta-

tion to adopt uncritically the norms and values of its culture, especially if that culture is favorable to it. Hence, the discussion of political responsibility very soon turns to the issue of idolatry. Who or what is the center of our loyalty? How do we determine what is "responsible" . . . responsible to whom, by what criteria? Is our ultimate focus of allegiance the Christ who goes to the cross in radical obedience, or is it to the culture that rewards us so well with security and prestige and comfort?

The Anabaptist tradition challenges us to take a searching look at where our real values lie. Do we find ourselves in tension, if not in outright conflict, with the values of the State and culture, or has the Church "bought in" to those same values, values of conformity, success, consumption, the efficacy of violence, bigger is better, competitiveness?

No where does this issue come to a head more painfully than in regard to the concerns raised by "liberation theology." It is conceivable that what is called "liberation theology" is a fad that will pass, but the basic issues raised by "liberation theology" will not go away. They will continue to dominate the mission agenda of the Church for decades to come. The central issue is this: how are we as the Church of Jesus Christ, the Servant People of God, to relate ourselves to the desperately poor and oppressed people of the world? In particular, how are we in the affluent American Church to do so? If it is true, as the Bible so frequently affirms, that God shows special concern for the poor, the weak, and the helpless, and if He casts down the proud, the wealthy, and the powerful precisely because of their neglect or oppression of the poor, then how are we to respond concretely to the liberating God of Exodus and Easter?

Such questions expose painfully my own idolatry and that of the Church. The fact is we are so caught up in the economic idolatries of our society that we can scarcely imagine what it means to identify radically with the poor. And even if we could, from whence would come the power and courage to do so? To this idolatry Wallis speaks blunt but accurate words:

We must begin to face the harsh reality that everything the Bible says about the rich applies to us. No longer must our words put us on the side of the oppressed and our style of life put us on the side of the oppressors. Our overconsumption is theft from the poor. . . . Unless we are willing to stand with the oppressed by first breaking our attachment to wealth and comfort, all our talk of justice is sheer hypocrisy. . . . To live in radical obedience to Jesus Christ is to be identified with the poor and the oppressed. If that is not clear in the New Testament, nothing is. (*Agenda*, p. 94)

Ask yourself what that might mean in your local congregation with its colonial sanctuary, its 6 digit budget, its suave, well-dressed parishioners. The sectarians raise for us devastatingly hard issues that we would rather avoid, but can no longer do so. In a world of desperate hunger and poverty, where human beings are quite literally murdered by our indifference and our style of life, what will be the response of the Church whose Lord was born in an animal stable and had no place to lay his head? Even if we do not accept the sectarian approach, we cannot escape the questions they raise. Is the self-emptying Christ our model of "success" and "responsibility" in the Church and its ministry, or is the upward mobility, the "careerism" of our culture? The blunt fact is that however

much we may talk about ministry to the poor, most of us simply are not prepared to give up our comfortable manses, our Presbytery-guaranteed annual incomes, the adulation of our well-to-do members and neighbors. And that is idolatry! "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

But here let us return to our original question of what constitutes responsible political action on the part of the Church in our contemporary American situation. How does the Church most faithfully carry out the political implications of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God?

The sectarians argue that the Church fulfills its political task simply by being itself, by being that alternative community in the world that bears witness to a deeper reality than the politics of history. John Howard Yoder says, "the very existence of the Church is her primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the Lordship of Christ to the powers from whose dominion the Church has begun to be liberated" (*Politics of Jesus*, p. 153).

An editorial in *Sojourners* magazine echoes the same thought:

It is our belief . . . that authentic political existence requires an authentic personal and communal existence. Unless our sense of peoplehood is strong, unless the life we share as the body of Christ is rich and flowing, unless the gifts and presence of God's Holy Spirit are visibly evident among us, we can never hope to understand the meaning of biblical politics. This is why the building of community is a revolutionary task at the same time that it is a pastoral task. That is why we say that the *rebuilding of the Church is the single most politically responsible act men and women of faith can undertake*. (July, 1977, emphasis mine)

Those of us who have often seen our political witness taking place outside the Church need to ponder seriously such a call for the renewal of the Church. In a situation like ours, where the Church is almost indistinguishable from the remnants of "Southern culture," it may well be that the most politically significant act would be for the Church to take seriously the living out of its profession of faith, i.e. to be what we claim to be, a fellowship of reconciled and reconciling persons, who serve as salt, light, and yeast in our culture. But to do that requires a strong sense of our identity and integrity as the People of God, and that is exactly what has too often been lacking in our common life.

Until such a sense of identity and integrity is recovered, our attempts at "political realism" and "relevance" will have little significant impact. We are still playing the game by "Mr. Caesar's rules." The sectarians help keep us honest by reminding us how easily our attempts at "responsibility" can be co-opted by our culture unless we keep clearly before us the question: *Responsible to whom and by whose definition?*

Closely related to the issue of the identity and integrity of the Church's profession of faith is the issue of the Church's style of common life. However correct the Church's moral pronouncements may be, they will have little impact on a pluralistic culture until such pronouncements are backed up by a life-style consistent with them. Unless the Church can actually and concretely demonstrate in its common life the realities of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and empowerment, it will fail to effect any lasting change, for all of its fine words and lofty sentiments. Ron Sider puts the matter sharply: "To ask government to legislate what the Church cannot persuade its members to live is a tragic

absurdity. . . . Our attempts to restructure secular society will possess integrity only if our personal life styles—and our corporate ecclesiastical practice . . . demonstrate that we are already daring to live what we ask Washington to legislate” (*Christian Century*, June 8-15, 1977).

If at one time a concern for the renewal of the Church was escapist, it is clearly no longer so. The rebuilding of the Church as a confessing community is a highly political act. In a culture coming apart at the seams, it may well be the single most responsible act the Church can undertake. As the 1960's and 70's should have taught us, the Church can never sustain a prophetic witness and ministry in the world apart from a rich and vital life of corporate worship and sacramental fellowship.

One of the most helpful images of the Church coming out of the contemporary ecumenical discussions is that of the Church as a *sign*, the visible, first-fruits of the Kingdom that is to be, a “sacrament to the world” of the future that God wills for all humankind. If the Church is to be such a “sign to the world” of God's liberating lordship over all of life, it cannot allow itself to be merely a pale reflection of the values of its culture. It must rediscover and reclaim its own unique identity and vocation.

For a while in the 1960's it was popular to say that “the Church must let the world write its agenda.” In a sense that is still true. Our service must take shape around the world's concrete need. And yet, in another sense, such a cliché is highly dangerous. It tempts the Church to forget that its agenda comes from a different source, from the lively and shattering Word that calls it into being and gives it its identity, destiny, and vocation as the Servant People of God.

We in the Reformed community have much to learn from our sectarian brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, we also have much to contribute to an ongoing dialogue with them. For all of their obvious sincerity and willingness to pay the full “cost of discipleship,” the sectarian's witness can too easily degenerate into a narrow fanaticism or a humorless puritanism, unless it is balanced by a wider view of the lordship of Christ in the world. We, too, must affirm the radical difference between Christ and all forms of culture, but the line between Christ and culture, between the Church and the civil order, is never so clear and unambiguous as the sectarians assume. The common grace of Christ is operative in the world's political and economic systems, even where his power is not known or named. The reality of sin infects the redeemed every bit as much as it does those outside the community of faith.

Part of the appeal of the Christ-Against-Culture position is its logical neatness. It does cut through a lot of the ambiguities and complexities of life, and in a time like ours that is very appealing. Yet we in the Reformed community still need to insist that life in society is rarely neat and clear. Even our most selfless acts of obedience are tainted with self-serving. [That is why the Christ-Against-Culture position so easily slips into a Christ-Of-Culture form. One aspect of culture (in this case, counter-culture) is identified solely with the work of Christ.] No one acts in a messy world with clean hands, least of all those who are convinced they can.

Further, we in the Reformed tradition need to take seriously the sectarian's call for the renewal of the church as a confessing community, yet without falling into utopian illusions about the Church. The Church is, and always will be, an “earthen vessel.” Attempts to form disciplined communities of the “elect” al-

ways fall prey to pride. The Church is not only a visible sign of God's reconciliation. It is also the "mother of the faithful" (Calvin) and "a hospital for sinners" (Augustine).

Finally, we need to engage in a serious dialogue with the sectarian tradition on the issue of the use and abuse of power in the Church and by the Church. The creation of prophetic communities who live by counter-cultural standards can be a highly effective political act, or it can be an excuse for passivity, for quietism. Refusal to use the power entrusted to the Church can be every bit as unfaithful as using it wrongly. The moral ambiguity involved in the use of all power is no reason for inaction on the part of the Church. The Church, like its members, is justified finally not by the perfection of its actions or the purity of its motives, but by the grace of God. Confidence in His grace can enable us to act in light of our best understanding of God's just and loving purposes in history without falling into the fanaticism of those who must always be 'right' or the despair of those who know they are never wholly right. Reinhold Niebuhr has put it best:

Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not reward the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice. (*Nature and Destiny*, Vol. II, p. 284)

In seeking to focus this issue of the relationship between the Church and the civil order in terms of one's preaching ministry, it would be well to study I Samuel 8-12. In those chapters two radically different traditions are allowed to stand side by side. One tradition sees the development of centralized government, represented by the king, as an act of apostasy against God. The other tradition sees the kingship as a gift of God for the well-being of his people. Both affirmations need to be made. The civil order exists by the grace of God for just and orderly social life, yet such order can easily become an idol, usurping the central loyalty that belongs to God alone. At times God's people are called to affirm the importance of social institutions as one of the ways in which the common grace of God is present among us. At other times the people of God must voice their No and break with the idolatries of culture. I am increasingly convinced that we are in the early stages of such a time when our No will have to be uttered clearly. And yet even in so doing, we cannot retreat into our own private communities of faith. We cannot sit around reassuring one another of our "OKness." We must risk striving for whatever wider expressions of justice and mercy are possible in our society. We must seek to develop a style of life that is both critical and affirmative, both prophetic and pastoral. We must express radically God's judgment on all structures, systems, and institutions that oppress the weak and poor and that violate God's intention for human wholeness. But at the same time we must affirm and cherish those structures, systems, and institutions that by the grace of God do help to make and to keep human life human and humane, even in an apocalyptic time like ours. And that is a task that will require our fullest gifts and labors throughout the years of our ministries.