

Statement on the Christian Right

For the past several decades, the course of political discussion and public policy in the United States has been marked by a movement of religious people collectively termed the Christian Right. Some of its leaders claim that it was decisive in the last presidential election. Whether that is true or not, the movement is one of major consequence in our public life.

Protestants for the Common Good pursues a vision of justice radically different from the political purposes of the Christian Right. This difference is not exhausted by disagreements in political judgment but, rather, extends to understandings of the faith by which Christians are authorized in their political activity.

For these reasons, responsibility to the larger Christian community and respect for our fellow citizens require that we clarify our differences from the Christian Right and the reasons why we find our vision of justice more appropriate to God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

As we use the term, "the Christian Right" means "the Christian Political Right." It refers, in other words, to those Christians who affirm a particular understanding of how faith relates to politics and who, guided by this understanding, pursue a particular political agenda—and we describe the understanding and the agenda below. Thus, the Christian Right is not equivalent to Christian evangelicals or Christian conservatives, and we are grateful to share with many Christian evangelicals and Christian conservatives the political purposes we call our own.

All Christians agree that God calls them to be honorable members of the wider community and to seek the good of all. Summarily, our difference from the Christian Right is this: For the Christian Right, political purposes derive from their conviction that God's will is focused on salvation through the church, and God provides the world as a stage for the church's distinctive mission; for us, political purposes should express the conviction that God's will directs concern to the human community as a whole, and God provides the church as a servant to the beloved community.

The difference is profoundly consequential for justice and the good life, as we will make clear in this statement. We will first explain the two understandings and then show how the choice between them matters.

I

The Christian Right: Focus on the Church

On the Christian Political Right, the larger social setting is seen as a stage for the church, in which salvation is proclaimed and worked out. This view certainly affirms that the whole creation is God's, and Christians are to serve the needs of all people. But love for those outside the Christian community cares, above all, that they, too, should accept Jesus as their Lord and become members of the community of believers. Typically, salvation is seen to express itself in

a pious life that anticipates and prepares for another world, eternal life in heaven. Some combine this with belief in a more or less immediate end to the present world.

Thus, the center of moral concern for those who take this view is the Christian community itself, and moral exhortation primarily directs Christians to practices through which the integrity and growth of the church and its members are sustained and pursued. God's will for the creation is centered on the community of believers, and the political responsibilities of Christians are defined mainly in relation to it. The principal aim of political activity is to foster a larger community that does not hinder the distinctive task of the Christian community, because God provides the civil order as background for the higher purpose of the church.

In reading the New Testament, therefore, the Christian Political Right emphasizes the church as God's new creation in Christ and how Christians make ready for eternity. Thus, Paul's exhortation to accept the governing authorities as ordained by God (Romans 13: 1-2) describes the best relation of Christians to politics, although it also implies that ruling authorities should provide a peaceful and supportive setting for the Christian community and its witness. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12: 17) is read in the same way, with the implication that Caesar must not interfere with the church.

In line with this view, political activities are chiefly concerned to create a proper background for the practice of "true religion." A pious life exhibits a certain personal character or certain virtues, those that subdue or conquer temptations to find happiness in the things of this world. For those on the Christian Right, our society is hostile to such virtues, being so pervasively corrupted by secularism and its permissive sanction for life aimed at satisfying worldly wants. A society of this kind impairs human well-being and is itself displeasing to God but is especially intolerable because it tempts church members to impiety and, by corrupting those outside the church, impedes the work of evangelism — and there is special concern about the young. Thus, the Christian Right seeks to reform a social and cultural context taken to be decadent and inimical to the church's distinctive purpose.

This is why political purposes of the Christian Right concentrate almost entirely on so-called traditional values, which include virtues of family commitment and sexual control, taking responsibility for oneself, readiness to work with diligence, obedience to the law and local mores, charity toward the victim of misfortune, and religious piety itself. We, too, wish to affirm the importance of personal virtues. Our basic disagreement comes because, for the Christian Right, these so dominate the things with which politics should be concerned. Guided by this concentration, the political agenda of this movement is centered on issues such as abortion, same-sex relationships, educational curriculum, prayer in the public schools, the discipline of law and order, and governmental accommodation of religion.

Although they consider American secularism morally corrupt, some on the Christian Right also believe that America has a divine mission to exercise international control. But this belief can be for them a short step from seeing the world as a stage for the church, if one further premise is endorsed. It holds that American democracy was originally designed to be friendly to Christianity, and despite the growth of secularism, American ideals remain the political model for God's purpose — and this premise is more easily accepted when one believes that current rulers share one's moral agenda.

We recognize that some Christians who disagree with the Christian Right's political agenda nonetheless share the view that God is concerned above all with salvation through Jesus Christ and the church, and we are grateful that these Christians sometimes act for political ends similar to our own. At the same time, we believe that seeing the world as background for the church easily leads to the Christian Right's concentration on the personal virtues. For us, in any case, the witness to Jesus proclaims a different view of God's will and, on this basis, leads to a vision of justice and the common good radically different than that of the Christian Right.

II

Protestants for the Common Good: Focus on the Human Community

Protestants for the Common Good presents a different understanding of the New Testament witness: The church has its distinctive importance as a servant to God's will for the inclusive human community and, therefore, is not itself the center of moral concern.

The God whom we experience through Jesus loves all the world, and God's purpose calls all humans to accept God's love as their only ultimate assurance. Salvation *is* this acceptance and expresses itself by loving all others as oneself. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12: 30-31; see also Matthew 22: 37-39; Luke 10: 26-28). This is the fundamental commandment for all humans, encompassing all other moral responsibilities, and every person is the neighbor for each of us. Thus, God's central purpose is that the whole human community should be, insofar as possible, a community of love.

In this fallen world, we humans are prone to rebel against God's love and purpose and to seek ultimate meaning in some narrow self-interest or group interest. We do not love our neighbors, thereby debasing ourselves, and the human community is corrupted by exploitation and injustice. The church, therefore, is commissioned to proclaim the decisive revelation of God's love through Jesus Christ and to pursue among all people a beloved community. In this light, the meaning of "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" becomes clear. We should relate to politics in the ways needed to make the whole human community acceptable to the all-embracing love of God.

In earlier times, Christians lived under the Roman empire or the feudal structures of medieval society, when it was taken for granted that political rule belonged to the one or the few, so that the many could not participate in government. In those contexts, special concern for the church, combined with a commitment to seek the good of all people wherever possible, was a fitting way to pursue God's purpose for the human community. But the birth of modern democracy, we believe, changed everything. Political authority now belongs to "we the people." Hence, seeking the good of all now includes acting as democratic citizens for the sake of a community of love.

The key to a vision of the beloved human community is God's love for all humans. The command to live together in love is given because God wills that all people should live abundantly, have a flourishing life. A community of love is, therefore, the worldly basis of true

happiness. Other people give to each of us the conditions of creative achievement — through intimate relationships, neighborhood and voluntary associations, institutions of work and culture, and the larger structures of our common life. Flourishing, in other words, depends on the mutuality God makes possible by giving us life together; each is fulfilled when she or he is both the beneficiary and the benefactor of others.

Mutuality, then, is the purpose of the whole human community, stretching from family and friendship to the widest social and political forms. Wider communal patterns ought to provide and promote general conditions of creative achievement, as the setting in which local associations may more fully provide and promote specific conditions of creativity, so that, through both, mutuality is maximized — and our life together becomes a mosaic of associations that foster the flourishing of all.

Politics is concerned with the most general context of mutuality. Principles of justice assign to politics its part in the community of love. The Christian vision of justice, therefore, includes laws and policies that provide or promote for all the most general conditions through which people are empowered to enhance their communities. Conditions of safety, health, and self-respect; material provision and opportunity for work; education; cultural richness; beauty and integrity in the environment; a favorable pattern of associations, including freedom of association; and a community of democratic rights, including religious freedom — these are the general sources that empower people to achieve, and they are the business of justice.

In the beloved community, the flourishing of all deepens insofar as all contribute. We are all equal in God's vision and thus equal in the sight of justice, and the encompassing principle of justice is this: Make available to all people the greatest possible measure of general conditions for achievement. Politics should aim to maximize the general sources of empowerment equally available to all. Insofar as this principle is honored, society creates what Christian faith means by the common good.

We cherish the United States' commitment to democracy and the freedoms it has secured. Measured by the encompassing principle of justice, however, the United States today remains far short, and we are especially sensible that injustice in other respects is magnified by widespread poverty and by the persisting legacy of racism. We further believe that mutuality is also a principle of justice for the community of nations, calling citizens never to assume that the United States is unambiguously good in the world.

III

How the Difference Matters

Focus by the Christian Political Right on the personal character of individuals as if the communal sources of empowerment do not matter violates the community of love and distorts the gift and demand of God's love revealed through Jesus Christ. The result is a callous neglect of social and political inequities and the suffering they cause, as well as the loss to our common life when human potential is denied just access to conditions of achievement. On the Christian Right, moreover, concern focused on private virtue has too often led to narrow and rigid ideas of morality and thus a call for government to impose parochial standards of behavior that stigmatize

or oppress legitimate differences, barring some from their full chance for distinctive contributions to their communities.

Beyond this, there is a threat to democracy itself. Seeing the world as background for the church, many on the Christian Right believe that political choices should be based on biblical authority and advocate laws and policies solely by appeal to revelation in scripture. But government by the people means government by all the people, so that laws and policies should be decided through full and free discussion and debate. The assertion of religious authority as the sole basis for those decisions is incompatible with both democracy and Christian commitment. Since God's purpose is, for Christians, focused on all humans, we affirm that principles of justice and the common good we see through Jesus Christ are also authorized by common human experience. Hence, we embrace the democratic discussion and debate and believe that our vision of the beloved human community, derived from our experience of Jesus, can appeal to reasons grounded in common human experience.

With this vision, we also stand against another false view of human life that is widespread in our culture and widely shapes public policy. Happiness, this view says, means maximizing the satisfaction of a person's private preferences, and all wants are permitted so long as they are not illegal. The main measure of a good life becomes the "standard of living" a person enjoys, so that a better life is one having more wealth and income with which to satisfy wants. Economic prosperity and growth become the overriding social purpose, to which all else must be subservient, and the goals of economic institutions set the principal social agenda. As a result, politics becomes largely a process of bargaining among economic interests, and those already poor typically lose further. This is an idolatrous vision that fails to measure human life by a divine purpose and distorts human community.

We, therefore, agree with many on the Christian Right for whom this idolatry is hostile to important private virtues. With them, we affirm the need for personal character because mutuality is gravely threatened when dedication to intimate relationships, taking responsibility where one can, and charity for those who suffer are widely missing. But the true ideal is not, as the Christian Political Right believes, a common life in which private morality is sufficient. We are called to maximize the common good because God wills the highest happiness for all through a human community of love and the requisite virtues include a passion for justice. One can no more love God and lack this passion than open a window without letting in the wind.

We do not say that politics alone creates this community. Our gifts to each other occur through all forms of human association, including the Christian church as it nurtures faith in and empowers witness to God's love. Nor do we believe that all Christians will agree about which specific laws and policies are wise. Political decisions require good judgment about complex situations and probable consequences and, therefore, careful and honest deliberation among citizens. But we are convinced that maximizing for all access to general sources of achievement is the principle of justice for our public life. We commend the beloved human community both to our sisters and brothers in Christ and to our sisters and brothers in the democratic public as the fullness of God's purpose and, therefore, the "last, best hope of earth."