

“The Politics of God”

a sermon by

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Text: “Fear God. Honor the emperor” (I Peter 2:17).

Recently I came across a provocative book by Jim Wallis, entitled *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*. Jim Wallis is an evangelical Christian who for a number of years has been part of the “Sojourners Fellowship,” a group of Christian activists who live in the inner city of Washington, D.C., and who have done a great deal to champion the cause of the poor in that city and throughout the country. In his book, *God’s Politics*, Wallis criticizes both the “political right” and the “political left.” His criticism of the “religious right” is that it has hijacked religious language to prop up a political agenda. His question for the “religious right” is “Since when did believing in God and having moral values make a person pro war, pro rich and pro Republican?” His critique of the “political left” in this nation is that it has separated religious values from morally grounded political leadership. The result of this is a false choice between ideological leadership and soulless politics.

I.

The Christian faith has always exercised a certain tension between a person’s faith in God and the support of a particular government. That tension is contained in Scripture. There are portions of the New Testament that encourage Christians to support the Roman Empire. I Peter is

a case in point. The Letters of I and II Peter are traditionally ascribed to the disciple of Jesus who bore that name, though they may have come from a later source. The letters are written to encourage the Christians of Asia Minor, many of whom were experiencing persecution from the Roman Empire. Many believe that these letters form a testament by Jesus' disciple Peter that was written before his death in Rome.

In the scripture lesson this morning there is a strong urging of Christians in Asia Minor to pay proper allegiance to the Roman Empire. Christians are urged to "accept the authority of every human institution" (I Peter 2:13). That same attitude is expressed in Romans 13 where Paul writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1).

There is, however, another tradition within the New Testament that finds the church in conflict with the state. In Revelation 13 John draws a portrait of the Roman Empire as a beast rising from the sea. The situation in Revelation reflects the persecution of the church by the Roman Emperors Nero and Domitian and in the Book of Revelation Christians are called to a higher loyalty than the state and urged to resist the state.

So, on this Independence Day weekend we raise the question of how a person's faith in God and Christ informs their participation in political institutions and in the public order.

II.

In the first place, as Christians we acknowledge that there is a higher loyalty than the loyalty that one has for any nation or political party. That is certainly the thrust of the argument in I Peter. The author of this Epistle understands that we are all members of a state and that we must support the legitimate interests of the state. We are called to pay taxes, to obey the laws of the state, and to support those who are our elected officials. That is why in the Presbyterian Church we often pray for the President of the United States, the Governor of North Carolina, and our local elected officials. The laws of the state are enacted to punish evildoers and to reward those who contribute to the common good.

In the early years of the church's existence there were those who criticized the church because it had a higher allegiance than its allegiance to the emperor. For that reason Christians were often persecuted by the Roman government. But early on a man by the name of Justin Martyr argued that Christians were not the enemy of the state, but that Christians were, at their best, the best citizens of the state because they did answer to a higher authority. They were concerned about the poor, they supported the structures of the family, and they encouraged people to work hard and be productive citizens of the state.

There have been times, however, when Christians found themselves in opposition to certain governments because of issues of justice and fairness. In 1775 the citizens of Mecklenburg County signed the Mecklenburg Declaration in opposition to the hated British rule and taxation. King George III of England once called the Revolutionary War, "the Presbyterian Rebellion" because so many Presbyterian ministers and elders were opposed to British rule. The

only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776 was a Presbyterian minister, John Witherspoon, who later became president of Princeton University.

There have been those occasions when Christians have declared a “status confessionis,” that is, “a state of confession” when the church was called to act in terms of a higher loyalty. One of these occasions took place in this nation during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Frye Gaillard, in his brief book, *Charlotte’s Holy Wars*, details the role that some of the ministers of Charlotte and other leaders played during the turbulent times of the 1960s and 1970s during the period of desegregation and forced busing. One of the important people during these times was Judge James McMillan, the federal judge who was assigned to the case of *Swann vs. the Board of Education*. Judge McMillan was an elder in this church and a member of the Sanctuary Choir. I had a number of occasions to speak with him about his role in that historic decision. There was never any question in my mind that Judge McMillan’s faith played a large part in his decision. He felt compelled not only as a federal judge but also as a Christian to insure that all the children of this community had a fair opportunity for education and success.

III.

Then, too, as Christians we are called to affirm the worth of every individual without regard to race, religion, or any human condition. At that point there is an intersection between the Christian faith and democracy. Both are built on the supreme worth of the individual. Thomas Jefferson once wrote: “The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government.”

Almost every thing that Jesus taught was centered on the supreme worth of every human life. On one occasion he said, “It is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” When Jesus spoke of a lost coin, a lost sheep, or a lost son, he spoke about the importance of each individual. Once, when confronted by the Pharisees about the fact that Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, he replied by saying, “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that Western Democracy had its origins from two main sources: early Greek experiments with popular government and Christ’s emphasis on the worth of persons. That is where democracy came from in the first place. There its strength must forever be renewed.

In his book, Jim Wallis makes a point that all of us would do well to consider. “God,” he writes, “is personal, but never private.” Any religion that takes us away from the world that God created by his word, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and holds together by his spirit is less than the religion that Christ came to bring.

That is at the heart of what we do as a church in terms of our outreach ministries. Several weeks ago Katie Crowe conducted a funeral service for a homeless man who had spent a good deal of time at the Urban Ministry Center. He led a difficult life, filled with disappointment, substance abuse, and many failures. He had attended our Wednesday worship service on a number of occasions and when he died his friends asked if we could do the funeral here, which Katie gladly did. That, I am convinced, is at the very heart of the work of a church, caring for

those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” Every service program of our church is a manifestation of this principle--from the Lakewood Preschool to the Community School of the Arts--from Loaves and Fishes to Room at the Inn. These are not optional for the church. They are at the very center of Christ’s command for the church.

Sometimes the concern for individuals takes us into the public arena. Several months ago one of our county commissioners characterized the African-American community in Charlotte as “living in a moral sewer.” Over eight hundred Presbyterians in our city responded by signing a letter of protest to the County Commission about “demonizing” certain groups of people and the failure to realize that moral shortcomings are not the sole property of any one group in our community.

IV.

On this Sunday before the celebration of the independence of our nation we would do well as a church, to be reminded of what God has called us to do. As a church, we live under the Great Commission to “go into all the world making disciples of all nations.” But we are also commanded to baptize and to teach the commandments of Christ.

As Christians we live under the commandment to treat every person as a child of God. That means that we have a special place in our hearts for those who suffer in some profound way--the children of our city, but the children of Dafur as well. We have a responsibility not only for the welfare of this nation, but for the terrible hunger and infection of Aids in Africa.

This week I watched on the evening news an interview with Bob Geldof, the organizer of a number of worldwide rock concerts held in connection with the G-8 conference of governments to be held soon. He said something in the interview that caught my attention. He noted that several years ago he and a number of other rock musicians had discovered that the quickest way to change the world was not through governments, but through music. Rock music, he asserted, was the Linqua Franca (the language of the realm). It is, he noted, the one language that is understood in every part of the world today.

As Christians, we also bear a special responsibility for the environment of the world in which we live. As Christians we believe that God has created the world, but also as Christians we believe that we are given a special responsibility as stewards of the environment. Those of us who live in North Carolina ought to be particularly aware of this on this holiday weekend where beaches and mountains beckon us. Many scientists today are concerned that global warming will soon eradicate the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Already the awful reality of “acid rain” has turned some of the most beautiful mountains of our states into veritable “moonscapes.”

As Christians, we also ought to remind ourselves that each of us can make a huge difference in the community in which we serve. We need responsible county commissioners. We need responsible school board members. What if each one of us would promise to take on one responsibility in our community to aid the homeless, the at risk, the hungry and those without adequate resources for living. What a difference it would make.

At the conclusion of his book, *The Politics of God*, Jim Wallis makes some predictions about the new millennium in which now live. Here are some of his predictions:

Faith, he believes, will be defined more by action than words.

Prayer will be more important to people than it is now.

The “Spice Girls” will not be remembered; Martin Luther King, Jr. will.

Overcoming poverty will become the great moral issue as we move into the new millennium.

The unfinished agenda of racism will be impossible to ignore in the face of increasing diversity.

Those of us who are part of the First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte are living in a time of unprecedented opportunity, as the Uptown area continues to grow and expand.

The opportunities to be witnesses “*for Christ in the Heart of Charlotte*” are greater than they have ever been in the history of this church. So we are left with the questions: “If not Charlotte, where? If not First Presbyterian Church, then who? If not now, when?”

Amen!