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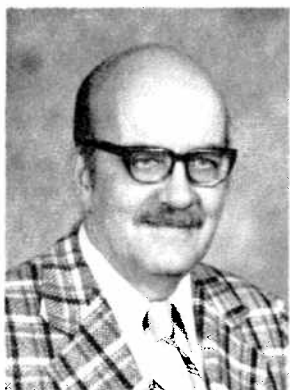
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U.S. Christians in Politics

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Dr. Russell Maatman received his Ph.D. in chemistry from Michigan State University. Prior to joining the Dordt faculty in 1963, Dr. Maatman taught at the University of Mississippi. He also taught at De Pauw University and has been a research chemist for the Mobil Oil Company. He is the author of two books and several technical and non-technical articles.

The interaction between Christians and politics in the United States is not what it should be. Christians are either indifferent or emphasize different elements of the Christian's responsibility in politics. Christian political responsibility should consist of four elements. Indifference or neglect of any one of those elements ultimately leads to failure; that is, there will be no effective Christian political program.

The four elements are: (1) certain *principles* of government hold for all places and all times. (2) But *conditions* regarding time and place must be taken into account. (3) *Attitudes on current issues* must be formed on the basis of these principles, but governed by these conditions. (4) *Christian political ac-*

tion on current issues must follow, but Christians must agree on what action is called for. In this article I shall analyze the political thinking and action in twentieth-century United States in the light of these four elements.

The present situation is not a healthy one. Some individual Christians and groups of Christians understand one or two of these four elements well but the others poorly. For example some Christian action groups loosely relate their programs to their understanding of what they refer to as "God's will for America," a will they would probably be unable to link to principles of government which hold for all times and places. On the other hand, some Christians have for-

mulated timeless principles well but are uncertain as to how they should be applied in twentieth-century United States. Two things must be said with respect to the relation between those who leap into action without much foundational thinking and those who spend virtually all their energy on timeless principles. First, one should not attempt to link principles to action without first going through the intermediate stages already indicated. Conditions must be taken into account and attitudes must reflect both principles and conditions. Only then can proper action be taken. Second, these two groups must work together. At present they are not only isolated because they use their own methods, but also because they do not have much contact with each other.

Principles

The principles arise because man was created by God and is responsible to Him. But, almost from the beginning man did not act responsibly and consequently this is a sinful world. The relation which man should have to God and the sinfulness of man are both reflected in certain timeless political principles:

1. *The authority to govern proceeds from God.* God instituted human government. Usually rulers have been called by human means to govern, whether such calling be by reason of heredity (as in monarchies), by seizing power, by appointment, or by election; but the authority of the office lies in its institution by God, not in the human means whereby the office was received.

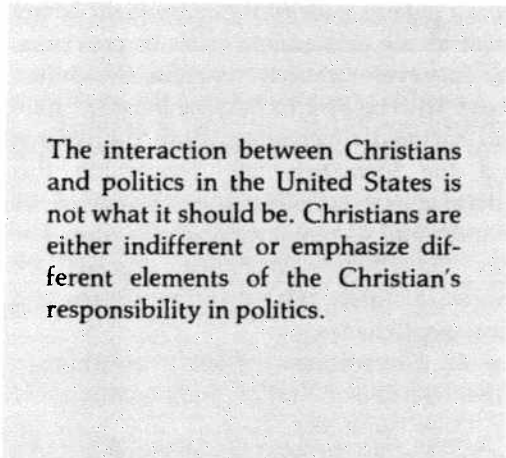
2. *The task of government is to obtain justice for that part of creation within its jurisdiction.* The justice that God demands is for people, institutions, and the land itself. Such justice reflects the justice which Christ obtained by His redemption of creation.

3. *Some authority has been given by God to institutions other than the government.* Justice demands that the government not infringe on the authority of other in-

stitutions which God has given authority.

4. *The government must assume that man is sinful.* Some of the task of administering justice arises because man is sinful. Men do oppress one another. The sinfulness of man exhibits itself in other ways which affect government. Thus, the government makes laws and sinful men break those laws. Government has the duty to enforce those laws.

5. *The government must obey Biblical law.* The law given in the Bible is addressed primarily to individuals but the government has an obvious role to play. For example, the government may not encourage idol worship. Nor may its agents plot murder or use



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fornication to obtain secret information. A government may not lie; it may not steal either from its own citizens or from other nations by, for example, seizing foreign territory.

Conditions

These conditions are some of the constants of modern United States political life:

1. *The United States is incredibly rich in human and natural resources.* Such wealth is not proof that God has singled out this nation for special favor. But possession of this wealth does mean that United States citizens have special responsibility to God.

Because of this responsibility, the next condition has special meaning.

2. *The United States has enough power to impose its will on individuals, groups, and often other nations.* A nation which has so much power can easily lose respect for those on whom it might exert that power. This holds true for both the government and large private institutions. Such power is not inherently bad, but its existence is an important factor when decisions on issues are made.

Part of the reason the United States is wealthy and powerful is that it is very large. Its great size must be taken into account in considering the next condition.

3. *The United States is a large country with a federal system of government.* Many countries are divided into states or provinces. But few even remotely resemble the United States with respect to balance between state and national sovereignty. Both the written and the unwritten law concerning this federal system are affected by the size of the country and the great number of states. The way in which government officials are chosen is closely related to the written and the unwritten law.

4. *Government officials are chosen either by popular election or by appointment by those who are elected.* The state of political mind in the United States is such that the alternatives to popular election, such as election by a small group of electors, are considered inferior to the present system. Rightly or wrongly, popular election is considered an indication of freedom in the United States. The desire for the continuation of this system is partially sustained by the diversity which exists in a country as large as the United States. Persons who view themselves as members of minority groups would not trust another system.

5. *Popular elections are carried out by means of broad-based political parties.* The base is broad with respect to both geography and the variety of interest groups within one political party. The nature of each party is affected by the size of the country. Thus,

even a single interest group, such as the rural segment of society, is likely to have different desires in different parts of the country. Since efforts are continually being made to alter the party system, this condition is not as constant as some of the other conditions of national political life. Christian political action might be more effective were there a significant change in the present party system.

The next three conditions are clearly undesirable; they cannot, however, be ignored by Christians as they consider how they must act responsibly in political matters.

6. *International communism, based principally in the Soviet Union, is spreading.* Existing communism is oppressive and its spread is one of the central tendencies, if not the central tendency, among the peoples of the earth in this century. There are various ways to react to the spread of this kind of oppression, but it is not permissible to deny the existence of this trend. No nation or political community should ignore it.

A communistic government is an extreme example of a government which acts outside its legitimate sphere of activity. The question of spheres of activity is taken up in the next point.

7. *Governments tend to exercise power outside the proper sphere of government.* This is worldwide tendency. It is found at the various levels of government in the United States. It is not enough to acknowledge, when the principles of government are given or discussed, that government and other institutions are limited in their spheres of authority. Citizens must cope with the unbelievably intense drive by many officials of modern governments to violate that principle. For example, even in the United States, where a separation between government and news media is considered essential, the Federal government and many states fund public radio and television news programs.

8. *Governments often use their power to favor some groups and to oppress others.* It was once the policy of the United States mili-

tary forces to treat blacks as second-class citizens. This policy contributed to the racist attitude widely held in the United States at that time. Sometimes officials favor wealthy persons just because they are wealthy; at other times they favor poor people because they are numerous and represent many votes. The lack of evenhandedness is so pervasive that it must be taken into account as the principles of government are applied.

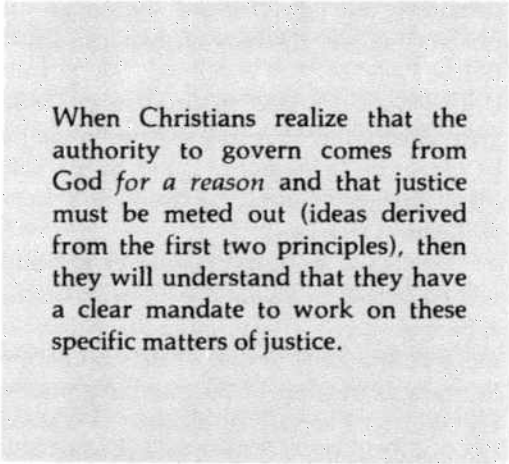
Current Issues

Current political issues ought to be approached using the principles given in the first section and recognizing the conditions just described. The following consists of an examination of some issues in the light of those principles and conditions.

The first two issues arise because sinful men tend to oppress each other.

1. *Government at all levels must actively seek justice with respect to modern political issues—issues involving man and other creatures, groups, institutions, and the land itself.* This general statement leads to many specific issues upon which Christians in the United States can agree, each time relating the specific issue to one or more of the principles given above and recognizing the conditions listed. Obviously, on many other issues they will not agree. There are, however, so many issues on which they do agree that those issues alone can occupy them for the rest of their lives. They can combat racism and sexism by legal means. They can fight for laws which will protect the unborn. They can work together against labor unions which deny the non-union member the right to work. They can work for laws which will protect land, air, and bodies of water against those who would vandalize them by pollution, spoiling, or stripping. When Christians realize that the authority to govern comes from God *for a reason* and that justice must be meted out (ideas derived from the first two principles), then they will understand that they have a clear mandate to work on

these specific matters of justice. Furthermore, the conditions existing in the United States, especially some of those listed in the previous section, enable Christians to achieve many of these political goals. The electoral process and the general attitude toward many matters of justice are such that politically-aware Christians have enough allies—both within and outside of the loosely-organized parties—to achieve many of their goals. Also, it is imperative that the changes be effected politically with the recognition of the size and diversity of the United States. For example, a suitable air pollution standard for Nevada is not necessarily suitable for Massachusetts. Issues must be approached with the understanding that the governmental structure in the United States is indeed federal.



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Christians can also help others understand that governmental action encounters difficulty whenever the principle of sphere sovereignty has been violated. The undoubted existence of the power of the government to impose its will has led many to use government for good purposes which are, however, not purposes that should be achieved by governmental action; the goals do not lie within the government's proper sphere. For example, some groups want government to invade the economy for any purpose that seems to be good. Others want

to control behavior by blue laws. Recognition of the integrity of the various created spheres can help determine the role of government.

2. *Society through its government must help those who need help and are not helped in another way.* Helplessness may arise because of sickness, injury, or genetic defect. It also arises when an individual is squeezed out of the main stream of activity in society when that society is impersonal, demanding, and highly industrialized. Although it is better if help to such persons were given by non-governmental institutions, the individual in need cannot wait until the question about who should provide help is settled. Christians should insist that it be public policy to help the helpless. This matter is principal: God gives power and authority to govern; He demands justice; He demands that government recognize the existence of sin, the root of injustice. In addition, one of the conditions in modern United States is that this nation possesses great wealth. For that reason help should not be niggardly. Christians cannot do less than insist that this nation be exemplary in its willingness to give.

The truly generous person or nation is willing to help those outside his or its normal sphere of activity. The United States must be more than willing to give of its substance to as many as possible of the miserable poor of the world. Everything needed to achieve these ends—other political groups who want to help the helpless, an electoral process sensitive to the desires of citizens, and political parties flexible enough to respond to this kind of demand—are in place. There is no excuse for neglecting this urgent duty.

The next three issues involve the principle of justice and man's sinfulness. In each case the system is sensitive to change because of several conditions existing in modern United States—the nature of the electoral process, the possibility of working with like-minded groups in the existing loosely-organized parties, the effectiveness of a government organized on a federal system,

and the strength of the government.

3. *Our economic system must take into account man's sinful nature.* Twentieth century United States citizens have been asking fundamental questions about the economy of this country. Should our economic system be capitalistic free enterprise? Socialistic? A modification of one of these?

Perhaps the main difficulty preventing agreement on this issue is many assume that man is basically good. Christians, however, insist that man is basically sinful. Proceeding from that assumption, they must discard some of the options. For example, unrestricted capitalistic free enterprise tempts small groups of people to monopolize parts of the market. Such a market is then no longer free for anyone outside the small group. The reasoning of those who approve of this development is flawed because they assume that the small group possessing the monopoly will make beneficial decisions for society. But without some external check men will tend to make very bad decisions, not enlightened ones.

Socialism is unchristian for the same reason. In this system government officials constitute the small group which exercises power over the market. Here there is bureaucratic inertia and relative insensitivity to outside influences, and so here too the decisions made tend to be bad, not enlightened. Socialism is simply another kind of monopoly. If one insists—as Christians should—that government and other institutions have their legitimate spheres, it is difficult to understand how the sphere of government could be defined so that a monopolistic control of the economy is included.

The answer to the economic question is not an easy one, but it seems that the most just system is any modification of the capitalism-free enterprise system which guarantees that free enterprise will continue to exist. Monopoly of any kind is bad; it has been said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The "unseen hand of the market place," which exists

when there is competition, is, of course, no panacea; the unseen hand can still be a greedy, sinful hand. But this hand does tend to minimize the bad effects of flawed business and management of the economy for greedy ends.

Furthermore, in a climate in which the continued existence of free competition is guaranteed, it can become possible for people to work together as equals. The concept of community, so important in Christian living, is more easily developed in a society in which there are no groups—either private or governmental—which yield absolute power.

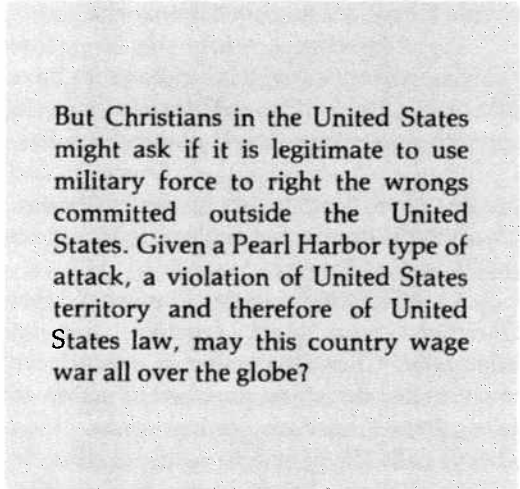
4. *Those violations of the Biblical law of which government alone can be guilty should be combatted by the Christian citizen.* Just because governments have authority and often, as in the United States, have considerable power to impose their will, they are sometimes guilty of violating Biblical law in a way that only governments can. There can, for example, be miscarriages of justice, inhumane treatment of prisoners, and certain kinds of stealing. Concerning stealing, sometimes a government steals by direct seizure of property and sometimes by more subtle means. One of the more subtle means of stealing, a particularly modern problem, arises when a government continually spends more than it receives. The penalty for chronically unbalanced budgets is eventually paid in some way. Those who pay unwillingly lose property; it would be difficult to say that such property has not been stolen.

To the extent that government is wasteful it is guilty of breaking Biblical law. Just as it is the duty of government to keep people from despoiling the land and wasting resources, government itself must consider government property and the working time of government employees to be resources that may not be wasted.

5. *Government must, if necessary, use force to guarantee that its laws are kept.* What laws a government may have are partially defined by the limits of its legitimate

sphere of activity. In any case, government at various levels must forcefully repress murder, rape, stealing, and other crimes. "Law and order" should not be a code phrase: such a phrase must designate exactly what government is to maintain. Men are sinful and justice must be obtained. The United States can impose its will and so there is no excuse for any weakness on this matter.

May a country use force outside its geographical jurisdiction? That is, may a country engage in a foreign war? Surely a government must use force, if necessary, to prevent and punish violations of law *within* its jurisdiction. Thus, a government may wage a defensive war on its own territory.



But Christians in the United States might ask if it is legitimate to use military force to right the wrongs committed outside the United States. Given a Pearl Harbor type of attack, a violation of United States territory and therefore of United States law, may this country wage war all over the globe?

But Christians in the United States might ask if it is legitimate to use military force to right the wrongs committed outside the United States. Given a Pearl Harbor type of attack, a violation of United States territory and therefore of United States law, may this country wage war all over the globe? There seems to be little doubt that the World War II effort of the United States was justified; after all, this country is not isolated. In the same way, international communism and other examples of large-scale violations of human rights are real and cannot be ignored.

Perhaps the use of force on foreign soil

is justified if there are prior treaties which have the force of law, or if another nation requests aid on the same basis that aid to one city's police force can be given by another city. What does emerge, however, is that the United States may never use force simply because it is able to use it. Force should be used only in the context of obedience to and promotion of law.

Action

Theorizing without action is a luxury Christians cannot afford. It is possible for Christians to work in politics in spite of the prevailing political mind and power structure. But such work will not be easy. How should Christians go about this work?

1. *Christians must decide that theorizing is not enough.* Christians do have principles. United States Christians can, in spite of opposition, work politically. Furthermore, they can link their principles and present conditions to many current issues. There is no excuse for neglecting to act on the issues listed above.

2. *Christian action means that Christians must work together, not individually.* Christians acting in concert can make better decisions about what action to take than Christians acting alone. God always calls His people to work together; in politics it is simply impossible to do otherwise. Existing Christian political organizations, which at present tend to emphasize different aspects of our political responsibility, ought to work together. They are all part of the body of Christ, only one body, and they should display this unity. Christian officeholders ought never to be considered lone Christians working against the system. Such officeholders should seek advice from and give advice and support to Christian political organizations.

3. *On specific issues Christian groups should cooperate with other groups wherever possible.* As Christians attempt political action, they will discover that many nominal Christians and even some non-

Christians share their views on specific matters. Often such persons will desire the right kind of action for wrong reasons. But Christians and non-Christians interact with the same creation and so both know some created laws. Christians can work with each other and with non-Christians to end abortion, government waste, discrimination, and unbalanced budgets; they can work to help those who cannot help themselves; they can work for an economic system in which there is neither private nor public monopoly, and for government action restricted to its proper sphere.

4. *Although the form which Christian political action takes may vary, it must be consistent with Christian principles and have some possibility of success.* Political conditions in the United States permit a wide variety of political actions. But some kinds of political action, such as forming a tiny political party, would probably not help Christians shoulder Christian political responsibility. Such action might be only an excuse for not engaging in more significant activity. On the other hand, working within existing large parties or other large groups could lead to unacceptable compromise. Thus, the path is not easy. But it would be incorrect to maintain that there is no path.

In fact, one more condition of United States political life is favorable for Christian political action, namely a high level of interest in politics. Consider the attention paid by the media to every imaginable opinion that is expressed by individuals or groups. Christians can teach the public *if their teaching is associated with political activity.* For example, Christian groups working to eliminate monopoly in the economic system can show that they do so because of the fallen nature of man. Again, as Christians advocate helping those who need help they can show how their political positions are not based on self-interest, but rather on love as exhibited by Christ. Christians working together harmoniously in politics have opportunities by their words and actions to witness to God's redemption.