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The Christian and Government

By A. M. REHWINKEL

(Conclusion)

VIII

The form of government under which we live is a democracy. "Democracy" means rule by the people. It means that sovereignty in a democracy is vested in the people, and "sovereignty" means supreme power. We, the people of the United States, are the sovereigns of this nation. The Government officials in Washington, in our State capitals, and in the seats of our municipal governments are our agents and delegates bound to respect the will of the people. But this also means that the people are responsible for the attitude and actions of their government. Every privilege has a corresponding responsibility, and God will hold the American people responsible for the exercise of this sovereignty. At the time of Paul there was no democracy left in the Roman world, and hence Christians had but one duty toward the government, and that was "to obey them that had the rule over them and submit themselves." This was also the condition of the world in which Luther lived, but this is not yet so in America. A Christian citizen, therefore, in a democracy has a double responsibility, one as sovereign and the other as subject; and for the exercise of both he is held responsible by God. Hence it is not sufficient for us to say that we are law-abiding citizens, that we submit to those who have the authority over us, and that we pay tribute to whom tribute is due. We have besides these duties also those growing out of our responsibility as sovereigns. The church must, therefore, instruct its members in respect to both functions and admonish them that it is their Christian duty to exercise their sovereign power in the same fear of God and as conscientiously as they perform those duties growing out of being subjects and of being under the law.

In times of peace this means:

1. That a Christian must realize that our democracy can survive only if the sovereignty of the people is scrupulously respected by each citizen and particularly by those in positions of influence and authority. And he ought to raise his protest against every form of

State absolutism and omnipotence. At the time of the Reformation, Luther freed the State from the bondage of the Church. Today the need is to deliver life from suppression by the State.

2. That a Christian uses his franchise wisely and in the fear of God, not merely as a blind party partisan or for selfish interest, but consciously in the interest of good government, justice, and righteousness for all. As a rule only about 50 per cent of American voters in national or local elections go to the trouble of using their franchise.³⁹

Anyone who has observed the political trends in the United States during the past two decades cannot have failed to notice a definite drift toward the consolidation of all political parties into a one-party system. But this means that political thought is forced into one pattern, and effective criticism and supervision of those in power will become impossible. The safeguard for political freedom and democracy is a healthy opposition party to act as an effective critic and check on the party that is in power. Nominally there are still two major parties, but not in reality. This is especially true with respect to our foreign policy. This affects our relation with other nations, which may mean peace or war. But by merging all parties into one on this issue, the safeguard of open criticism has been removed, and the American citizen has lost his check on those who control this policy. But that is the beginning of totalitarianism; and if these trends continue, the history of Europe and Asia will be repeated in America, and democracy will perish.

3. That a Christian will hold his representative accountable to representing him in the cause of good government, justice, and righteousness for all. The American Government is in the process of becoming a government by pressure groups.⁴⁰

4. That a Christian citizen will be willing to serve the good of society by holding public office if talents and circumstances permit. "It would indeed be good and profitable," says Luther, "if all princes were real and good Christians, for the sword and government as a special service of God belong of right to the Christians more than to all other men on earth."⁴¹

5. That he will use his influence to form public opinion in the cause of good government, justice, and righteousness. Christians

must be the conscience of the world. If the conscience is to be effective, it must function. Conscience becomes dull and insensitive through neglect. The religious press ought to be helpful to the Christian citizen in forming his judgments on the moral and ethical issues affecting society. If the religious press will not help him, where is the Christian to get his guidance so that he may function as a salt in the society of which he is a part?

6. That he will oppose every evil, injustice, and unrighteousness committed by his government at home or abroad. We have in mind particularly the evil which grows out of modern total warfare with its saturation bombing and violence against non-combatants; the unrighteousness of postponing the making of peace with the conquered nations;⁴² the injustice connected with racial discrimination. If Christians do not oppose evil and stand for justice and righteousness — who shall?

7. That a Christian citizen will oppose every form of grasping imperialism under whatever guise this might be practiced, and in like manner will he oppose the exploitation of the weaker and inferior races of Asia, Africa, and the islands of the sea.

8. In times of international crisis a Christian will be careful not to be carried away by hateful propaganda. This applies to the Church as well as to individuals. The government has no right to abrogate the Eighth Commandment. "Wars always need," says Mr. Wengert correctly, "an emotional delusion to justify the sinful irrationality of man, who refused to read in his associations either immorality of the group in action, which he would have repudiated as an individual."⁴³ This means that a Christian must do everything in his power to prevent war. War is always an evil. When David had a choice of one of three evils, he did not choose war. David was a man of war. He knew that war is the sum total of all national evils. Christians must not be carried away by pagan glorification of war. In America today everything tends to glorify war. Every soldier is a hero. Most of our public monuments commemorate men or events of war; our school textbooks make every war in which we have participated a war for freedom or a holy and a religious war. War is glamorized by song, picture, and symbolism. Even the toys we give to our children on Christmas, the birthday of the Prince of Peace, aim to popularize war.

War means shedding of man's blood, destroying homes, churches, man's creations in art and science. War kills women and children, the helpless and the innocent. A University of Chicago professor stated on a round-table broadcast that a handful of H bombs dropped hundreds of miles from any military target, by creating radio-active dust, would wipe out all life over an area approximately 1,500 by 3,000 miles.⁴⁴ That is genocide, a new crime of our age, a culmination of all crimes. A declaration of war by a government in itself cannot sanction wrong or turn savagery and genocide into a virtuous deed. God will hold a nation responsible for all the innocent blood it sheds. (See Amos 1 and 2, also Jeremiah.)

The resolution adopted by the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam is clear and to the point on this phase. It reads in part as follows:

We hold that in international, as in national life, justice must be upheld. Nations must suppress their desire to save "face." This derives from pride, as unworthy as it is dangerous. The churches, for their part, have the duty of declaring those moral principles which obedience to God requires in war as in peace. They must not allow their spiritual and moral resources to be used by the state in war or in peace as a means of propagating an ideology of supporting a cause in which they cannot wholeheartedly concur. They must teach the duty of love and prayer for the enemy in time of war and of reconciliation between victor and vanquished after the war.

The churches must also attack the causes of war by promoting peaceful change and pursuit of justice. They must stand for the maintenance of good faith and the honoring of the pledged word; resist the pretensions of imperialist power, promote the multi-lateral reduction of armaments, and combat indifference and despair in the face of the futility of war; they must point Christians to that spiritual resistance which grows from settled convictions widely held, themselves a powerful deterrent to war. A moral vacuum inevitably invites an aggressor.⁴⁵

Every Christian and every Christian minister ought to take to heart what Brunner has to say about modern war:

First of all, it is almost tiresome to remark that the same word is used to describe the local incidents which used to be called "wars" and the world-wide conflagrations which constitute the

only kind of war we envisage when war is mentioned today. Owing to the substitution of a national army for a mercenary army, to the introduction of mechanical and chemical methods of warfare, and to the close-knit character of all the economic spheres throughout the world, war has now become a method which cannot any longer be reckoned as an item in any political reckoning of gain or loss. The idea of "winning a war" still plays its old disastrous part in the popular mind, but it no longer has any place in reality. In modern warfare all are conquered and none are victors; in modern warfare there is no longer any "non-combatant population." If war were to break out at the present time, it is extremely uncertain whether the idea of fighting in "defense of one's country" would have any meaning at all. It is quite possible that in the "next war" the soldiers in the lower ranks would enjoy the largest measure of protection, compared with the rest of the population. Some decades ago war may have been an instrument which, although it was brutal, could be used to resolve intolerable international tension; but today, owing to the fact that it cannot be controlled, it has lost even this shred of utility. It seems highly probable that the "next war" would consume the whole of the material and vital energies of the nations of Europe, or of the civilized world, to such an extent that it would be no exaggeration to describe it as a process of "bleeding to death." In view of this fundamental change in what war means, it is unpardonably superficial to try to justify war by means of pictures of the wars of the past with all their glamour of romance. The Christian in particular has no right to live in the past. He in particular ought to know that modern warfare means such a complicated mechanism for the destruction of material, vital, physical, and spiritual goods, such an exhausting process of blood-letting, in which the most valuable blood of all the nations is wasted, such a technical business, which has become entirely divorced from all the ancient "manly virtues," and an international disaster of such vast proportions whose effects cannot be calculated, of equal horror for the victors and for the vanquished, and, through the fact that it involves the defenseless civil population — women and children — is such a radically unchivalrous method of international strife that all that used to be said in its favor, with some amount of justification, has today lost all validity. The development of the technique of warfare, the heightening of war's intensity, and its enormous extension has led to a point where war becomes race

suicide. War has outlived itself. It has become so colossal that it can no longer exercise any sensible function. To expect to establish any just order by means of a world conflagration—called war—has become a political madness. . . .

The nations are beginning to perceive—obviously before their theologians!—that war has begun to outlive its purpose, that war is a way of putting an end to international tension which the world can no longer afford, that the unqualified sovereignty of individual nations no longer corresponds to the actual conditions, that the only alternative to race suicide is the non-military way of settling difficulties between nations. Where war has reached this stage of development, it has lost every particle of ethical justification.⁴⁶

IX

In times of peace negotiations it means that a Christian must stand for justice and righteousness and do all in his power to prevent motives of selfishness and revenge to dominate a peace treaty.

A Christian's patriotism stands for justice and righteousness toward all men, whether they be of the same nation or race or of another. A Christian will stand for a fair distribution of the resources of the earth. He will apply the principle of "live and let live" to nations as well as to individuals. He will beware of vicious propaganda and slander of another nation and be mindful of the injunction of our Lord: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged," and "A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape" (Prov. 19:5). The Eighth Commandment also applies to nations.

The World Council of Churches at Amsterdam unanimously resolved that

Christians must examine critically all actions of governments which increase tensions or arouse misunderstanding, even unintentionally. Above all they should withstand everything in the press, radio, or school which inflames hatred or hostility between nations.⁴⁷

And again we read in this resolution:

Therefore it is the duty of the Christian to pray for all men, especially for those in authority; to combat both hatred and resignation in regard to war; to support negotiation rather than pre-

war reliance upon arms as an instrument of policy; and to sustain all national policies as in his judgment best reflect Christian principles.⁴⁸

A Christian cannot accept the slogan: "My country, right or wrong, my country." That is a pagan view. It is placing the State above the Moral Law, above conscience and above God, and such "patriotism is for nations what vanity is for individuals, namely, perfect self-complacency," says Renan. Jeremiah was extremely unpatriotic, or even an outright rebel in the eyes of the ruling party in Jerusalem in his day, and yet in truth he was the only true patriot, who sought the good of his nation.

Love of country and of people is a complex sentiment. It is innate in everyone; it is, therefore, a native instinct, but not necessarily ethical in the form in which it appears. Much of what men call patriotism or love of country is simply in its debased form a conceited egoistical nationalism. We called Japanese soldiers fanatics when they died rather than surrendered, whereas American soldiers who did the same we regard as heroes. We proved that all Germans are murderers and all Japanese apes, and at the same time insisted that we were fighting to unite all men in a common brotherhood.

It takes a broad- and liberal-minded individual and noble soul to be truly patriotic. Patriotism has become a religion with many in America today. A Christian will gratefully appreciate the blessings which God has bestowed upon his specific homeland and people, but he will also remember that other nations and people likewise have a right to love their homeland, to cherish, and to cultivate their own peculiar national traits, traditions, ideals, and culture.

A Christian has no right to absolve himself of his responsibilities in a democratic community; but as we pray for good government, so we must work for good government. In a democracy every citizen must be willing to sacrifice time and ability to participate in public affairs, as conditions, stations in life, and opportunity demand. We are to be a salt and a light in every social relationship. This must certainly include government. Our prayer for good government becomes meaningless and a blasphemy if we are not willing to do something about good government.

The form of our Government, as stated, is democratic. We Christians have reasons to be grateful for the kind of government we have been privileged to live under during the century that our Church has existed in this country. This form of government is in grave danger at the present time, as everyone knows who is able to interpret the signs of the times; and experience teaches that democracy dies when people lose their interest in it or when they are unwilling to work or sacrifice for its maintenance, when they take their freedom and all the blessings growing out of such freedom for granted. Experience teaches that democracy dies from negligence, apathy, general indifference, materialism, and selfishness, and it can survive only as the sovereignty of the people is scrupulously respected by every citizen and particularly by those in a position of influence and authority. And more specifically, experience teaches that the sovereign rights of the people will be preserved only if the people jealously guard the following seven fundamental rights or freedoms of man:

- a. Freedom of speech
- b. Freedom of the press
- c. Freedom of assembly
- d. Freedom of conscience
- e. Freedom to work
- f. Freedom of contract and enterprise
- g. Freedom from intimidation by police, government or other agencies, and various pressure groups

The three freedoms mentioned first, the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly, belong together. They are fundamental human rights and grow out of the free personality of the individual human being. They are basic for a free democratic society. Where they are lost, freedom is lost, tyranny has been established, and democracy has disappeared. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press imply that an individual is free to say and to write what others may dislike or with which they may disagree most violently. These freedoms also imply the right of criticism of those who are in authority and power. This is fundamental for the survival of democracy.

The freedom of assembly means that any individual citizen is free

to meet with any other citizen or with fellow members of the same faith or of the same political and social persuasion to deliberate together on matters which they consider of interest to their own happiness or to the welfare of their group or of society at large. The great decisions of history were frequently made in such free and open assemblies.

These three freedoms are basic for human rights, and their loss is catastrophic. The nations which in our day have become subject to totalitarianism have lost these freedoms and have been reduced to a new and a most hideous kind of human slavery.

In the world crisis through which we have passed serious attacks on these freedoms were also made in our own country. These attacks were subtle and therefore all the more dangerous. They took the form of "smear" and "whisper" campaigns, and they were used with telling effect to silence the voice of opposition to tendencies fostered by subversive elements in and outside the government. The enemies of freedom will use these tactics again when they will serve their purpose. The "smear" has been developed into a science by expert psychologists and has become the most dangerous weapon against freedom and democracy.

Freedom of conscience concerns our relation toward God. It is the most priceless of all our freedoms. Where this freedom has been lost, man's enslavement is complete. Countless millions have already lost this freedom in our age of "enlightenment." Governments everywhere are growing in power. As governments grow in power, they encroach more and more on the freedom of the individual. The situation in countries controlled by Communism is sufficiently known and requires no further elaboration here. But even in our own country the enemies of this freedom are becoming more aggressive and more daring. The McCollum Case, which made history about a year ago, in effect attacked our religious freedom. This attack was all the more serious because it was upheld by the Supreme Court.

Participation in war is a matter of conscience. We admit this in the 16th Article of the Augsburg Confession. But wars have become more sweeping in implications and consequences since the adoption of that Article. If it was a matter of conscience then, it most certainly must be now. But today governments conscript all citizens,

Christians and non-Christians, able to do war service and no one can escape from the support of war with his taxes. Once war is declared by those in power, Christian and non-Christian alike are compelled to kill, destroy helpless women and children, wield the most horrible weapons of destruction ever devised by man for the annihilation of entire cities, and he has no chance to inquire whether the cause for which he must destroy the lives and habitations of fellow human beings is a just and a righteous cause. To kill a man or a woman and a child without a just cause is murder, and no glamour of war can change that. To take or destroy the property of another is a violation of the Seventh Commandment, and that is still a Commandment in God's holy Decalog, and no government can abrogate God's own laws. With the coming of the atomic and the hydrogen bombs the question of war has become a most serious matter for the consciences of the individual Christian and of the Christian churches.

The freedom to work and the freedom of contract also belong to the basic rights of free human beings. These rights have been lost in the totalitarian countries, and we are in the process of losing them in the battle between capital and labor and the Government. The whole question of the freedom of the individual human personality and the industrial system of today should receive much more attention by Christian thinkers than it has in the past.

And, finally, there is the freedom from intimidation by the police and other agencies.

The Gestapo and other secret police forces are a horrible product of our age. Thus far we have been spared the frightful excesses of these diabolical instruments of oppression, but we have reasons to be on our guard. Evil does not stop at national boundaries. In the period before the war there was much intimidation by Government authorities in various and sundry ways; and if it was possible when the country was still at peace, it is possible again, when unscrupulous men control the government and force their will upon the people. The terrible experience of Europe and other countries ought to serve us as a warning lesson.

All these rights enumerated are foundation stones in our freedom and democracy. If one of them is removed, the whole structure will eventually collapse.

In a democracy like ours the sovereignty of the people can become effective only if the people are careful to hold their elected representatives responsible for their trust. This means that the people keep themselves informed on the domestic and international issues and carefully observe how their representatives administer the affairs entrusted to them.

Again, democracy can survive only if a party system of two or more parties is safeguarded as an essential element to our form of government. Every attempt to eliminate this system must be regarded as subversive of democracy. The opposition party is the only protection the minority has in a democracy. The opposition is necessary to safeguard honesty, integrity, and efficiency in government.

Democracy can survive only if government continues to be a government by law, and we must, therefore, vigorously view as undemocratic and dangerous every attempt to govern by arbitrary executive decree or military or bureaucratic order.

The welfare of our democratic society, in short, demands that its members:

- a. have due reverence for the deity;
- b. uphold the fundamental morals of human society;
- c. respect the dignity of the human individual and the fundamental rights of man;
- d. safeguard the institution of marriage and the home;
- e. uphold the rights of private property;
- f. provide justice for all;
- g. provide education for, and complete development of, the human individual;
- h. protect the weak against the strong;
- i. realize that participation in public affairs is a civic duty and a moral obligation;
- j. be willing to apply the same principles in dealings with other sovereign nations and people occupying the world with us, knowing that world order cannot be accomplished until power and right have become interchangeable terms.

Our democracy cannot and will not survive very long if any or all of these principles are lost.

It seems to me, therefore, that we as Christians consider well our

duties as citizens of a democracy, that we do not content ourselves by merely paying our taxes and doing those other duties commonly ascribed to good citizenship, but that we actively participate in all the activities devolving upon a good citizen in a democracy, that we carefully interpret the signs of the time in which we are living and work and pray that we may preserve the priceless heritage of free institutions for ourselves and for our children. In short, this is a time when more than ever we ought to heed the instructions which Paul gives us in his Epistle to Timothy, where he writes: "I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplication, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior" (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

We are to be a salt and a light in the world in which God has placed us. The greater the corruption, the more need for salt; the denser the darkness, the more urgent is the need for light!

FOOTNOTES

³⁰ In the 1948 national election some 35 to 37 million of an estimated 95 million eligible voters failed to register, and, roughly, one third of the registered voters stayed away from the polls. In New York alone approximately one million who had registered did not vote. Truman and the Democrats received about 20 per cent of the eligible vote, 25 per cent of the registered votes, and 49 per cent of the total vote cast.

⁴⁰ See: *Democracy under Pressure*, by Stuart Chase (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, N. Y.).

⁴¹ Luther, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁴² Read Freda Utley, *The High Cost of Vengeance* (Chicago, Ill.: Henry Regnery Co.).

⁴³ Wengert, *Quartalschrift*, January, 1949, p. 35.

⁴⁴ *Christian Century*, March 8, 1950.

⁴⁵ First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, Holland, *Findings and Decisions* (New York: World Council of Churches, 297 Fourth Ave.), pp. 55—56.

⁴⁶ Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press), pp. 470—473.

⁴⁷ First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

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