

Study-Research Group on Ethics and State Politics

November 16, 1965

POLITICS AS A CHRISTIAN VOCATION

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While I have given a good deal of thought to my assigned topic, I have not been able to give sufficient time to the thorough preparation of the research and writing of this paper. I am hopeful, however, that my random notes and thoughts may serve some useful purpose as a springboard for discussion and more constructive results. One more disclaimer: I can only speak from limited experience on politics and politicians. I am not an expert on either subject.

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In June my class at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) celebrated its 25th Annual Reunion, and I was asked to speak at the dinner meeting. Frankly, I was puzzled by the invitation. With all the talent and experience represented by the Class of 1940, why was I called upon to speak?

We had in our class experts in merchandising, manufacturing, medicine, education, banking, law, accounting, skin diving, racing, the ministry, advertising. Certainly we had members who had made more money, owned more property, belonged to more clubs, traveled more widely, had more influence, had more intellectual ability, etc.

So there appeared to be only one answer: No one else in my class seems to have had as much experience in politics and government as I had. Perhaps I was looked upon by some as a latter-day non-elective Terry Sanford...a wanderer in the never-never world of politics where the pay is low, the work is hard, the hours are long, and tenure by any name you call it is unknown. Yet, politics and government are subjects of interest, or at least concern, for most people today. So I made my speech to my fellow classmates and about the only wisdom which I gave them was Harry Truman's advice to all young politicians: "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen."

James A. Pike, in his book, Doing the Truth, says that "the first key word... in Christian ethics is vocation. It is the concept of vocation which distinguishes Christian ethics from any other ethical system. For vocation is a greater thing than law, no matter how nobly the latter may be conceived."

If God has a claim on us to take a vocation and do something useful in life -- and I think He does -- then I see no reason why politics cannot be a Christian vocation. In my opinion, politics is neither good nor bad. Politics, as we are concerned with it in this course, is primarily a mechanism, or a ways and means, for directing and controlling our various levels of government. Whether politics is good or bad depends upon the people who use, control or share in political activity. Politics can be a worthwhile and necessary means to carry out the will of the people, or it can be used for ruthless, unethical or dishonest activity which achieves the opposite results.

Eugene J. McCarthy, in his statement on "Compromise and Politics," said: "Politics has been defined as the art of the possible. It is not a science which determines the elements of the good life, but one which depends upon the findings of other disciplines. Strictly speaking, it is not an ethical science; yet it is, of course, related to ethics and is dependent upon ethics for its goals and for the determination of its standards of procedure. The objective of politics is to bring about progressive change in keeping with the demands of social justice. Politics is concerned with ways and means and with prudential determinations as to what should be done, when it should be done, in what measure it should be done, and how it should be done."

From time to time, I have been asked why people go into politics, or why they seek public office. This is difficult to answer. I have never seen any studies made on the motivation of political candidates or political figures, other than the biographies of individual political leaders, such as, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Roosevelt. As a matter of fact, after witnessing some of the ordeals to which politicians and political candidates are subjected, I have sometimes wondered why any responsible citizen enters the political arena.

Most of the political leaders with whom I have been associated were essentially pragmatic in their approach to politics and government. They were concerned primarily with providing leadership in specific areas of public need. They could speak and write effectively on specific issues, campaign programs, and party platforms. While they held strong beliefs in our American heritage of representative government, like most Americans, they found it difficult to express precisely their own philosophy of government. In fact, most American politicians seem quite willing to let their record of public and political accomplishments speak for itself. Certainly most politicians do not feel any pressing need to express, in depth, their motivation for participating in political activity.

In my case, I backed into political activity by accepting a job 18 years ago as Director of Public Relations for the State Highway Commission during the Administration of Governor R. Gregg Cherry. I had the good fortune to work directly for and with the Honorable A. H. Graham of Hillsboro, former candidate for Governor, a former Legislative leader and a politician of considerable ability. Working and traveling with him, I learned first-hand something about the political and administrative requirements for operating a statewide highway system. I discovered how sensitive most political leaders are to public opinion, and how effective political pressure from the County level can be in getting action when and where action is needed. The importance of party organization became apparent and I began to understand the opportunities which political organization can provide for those who want to provide leadership in the public arena.

I was intrigued with Max Weber's use of the word "passion" as one of three pre-eminent qualities which are decisive for the politician. A. Lawrence Lowell wrote in 1913 that public opinion is not necessarily the opinion of the majority nor, on the other hand, is it a unanimous opinion. He introduced the novel idea that the intensity of the opinion has weight in the ultimate consensus. Lowell said: "If forty-nine percent of a community feel very strongly on one side, and fifty-one percent are lukewarmly on the other, the former opinion has the greater force behind it and is certain to prevail ultimately, if it does not at once."

This is a major attraction to political activity for those who feel deeply and strongly that a wrong must be righted, a new course must be charted, the old rascals must be replaced with new rascals, or that he has a better program than the person in office. Working through a political party, and a political organization, a political leader can generate great intensity of opinion.

Certainly Christian principles should be as much involved in politics as they should be involved in banking, law, medicine, teaching, business, industry, and other necessary activities. McCarthy cautions, however, that "politics is a part of the real world. In politics the simple choice between that which is wholly right and that which is wholly wrong is seldom given; the ideal is not often realized, and in some cases cannot even be advocated... Prudence may require the toleration of a measure of evil in order to prevent something worse, or to save the limited good."

I agree with Weber's other two qualities for politicians — a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion (justice). Certainly responsibility means concern and action on behalf of others, or safeguarding the rights and freedoms of others. A sense of proportion is perhaps the most useful and important of the three qualities set forth by Weber. A political leader should have the ability to look objectively at all the facts available before making a decision which affects the public interest. He should be capable of equating the individual request, or need, with the broader policies of public interest. This calls for compassionate concern, unselfish interest and a genuine desire to do what is best for your fellowman. It is not an easy task.

I agree with Weber that political conduct is oriented to the "ethic of responsibility" rather than to the "ethic of ultimate ends." Responsibility is a major factor in possessing political power, and the politician understands the need for problem-solving in a materialistic, demanding society. In most daily affairs, he seeks to find the "right" answers to problems without too much thought about the morality, if any, of the issues involved. If he is a Christian and attempts to live by Christ's teaching, this is a part of the man's conscience, his attitudes and his way of life. Some will be more aware of their Christian principles. Others will be less aware.

Claude G. Bowers, former U.S. Ambassador to Chile, wrote a dissertation entitled "In Defense of Politicians" some years ago. He defined politics as "the science and art of government...the theory or practice of managing or directing the affairs of public policy or of political parties."

By Bowers' standards, he would have cited Thomas Jefferson as meeting Weber's qualifications. Jefferson was a businessman, in that he was a successful planter. He was a philosopher, thinker and writer, but there have been other good philosophers, thinkers and writers who did not know how to reach the public and put their philosophy and thoughts into effect. Bowers pointed out that Jefferson did not take refuge in his closet and whine his criticisms of the men in public life. "He sallied forth into the political arena with his battleaxe and became a politician. He knew that a philosophy tucked away among the cobwebs in the closet will remain a curiosity and never become a reality. And being a politician, he was a realist... Had Jefferson not been a skilled and practical politician working for the welfare, the rights and liberties of the people, our national destiny might have been vastly different from what it became."

Dean Wesley C. Clark of Syracuse University, a political scientist, said that there are five major factors contributing to the administrative climate of government. He listed them as: 1) the moral tone of the nation, 2) the machinery of administration, 3) the staff of administration, 4) the leadership which guides the staff and controls the machinery, and 5) the news spotlight in which government activities are conducted. He quickly pointed out that the moral tone of the nation generally sets the moral tone of government. In other words, he maintains, and I agree, that politics and government will generally be about as ethical as the general ethical atmosphere of the state and nation. With a few notable exceptions, American political leaders have not exerted exceptional leadership in moral issues. Frankly, they did not think this was their responsibility. They were much more involved in such materialistic subjects as national defense, agriculture, taxes, economic development, highway transportation, postal service, etc.

After reading Dean Clark's comments, I would suggest a revision of the major factors contributing to the climate of government as follows: 1) the moral tone of the nation, 2) the quality and depth of leadership, 3) the public interest and support, 4) effectiveness of news media, 5) educational growth, 6) individual integrity and character of leadership.

The role of the politician in establishing the moral tone or moral order of our nation does grow more important each year. John W. Gardner, the new Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, wrote in "Self-Renewal": "The moral order is not something enshrined in historical documents, or stowed away like the family silver. It is a living, changing thing, and never any better than the generation that holds it in trust. A society is continuously re-created for good or ill, by its members." He points out that each generation, presented with victories that it did not win for itself, must itself rediscover the meaning of liberty, justice-- "the words of the monuments."

In recent years, for many reasons, there has been more and more blending of government with the private sector of our society. This has injected social and moral issues of great complexity into the political arena. As might be expected, the politicians' response to this has been one of caution and uncertainty in most cases. A few find these dramatic changes a convenient platform for their personal ambition, while others rebel against what they consider to be an intrusion of non-political problems into the political arena.

Paul N. Ylvisaker of the Ford Foundation, in a speech on community action several years ago, said, "We are still practicing nineteenth-century notions of service and charity on a community whose life and aspirations are born of twentieth-century conditions and standards. The day is gone — if it ever was — when gratitude can be earned, conscience cleared, and the status quo maintained by unilateral acts of welfare or philanthropy."

He continued: "We are dealing with forces and problems of such magnitude — migration, automation, racial tensions, relaxing moral standards, exploring populations, accelerating technological progress and obsolescence — that it will take every ounce of energy and imagination we can muster, from both public and private sources, to make even small dents, changes and improvements. Which suggests the social application of the art of jujitsu: Of exerting smaller forces at points of maximum leverage to capture larger forces otherwise working against us."

One further Ylvisaker thought: "Ideas and perspectives, not money, are the scarcest commodity and, of all instruments of social action, the most powerful."

It seems to me that the politician, unhappily from his standpoint, is being thrust more and more into the role of leadership in moral and ethical questions and issues. McCarthy concluded his article on "Compromise and Politics" with these thoughts: "The politician and the moralist have a great deal in common. Moralists, said Maritain, are unhappy people — so are politicians. 'When the moralists insist on the immutability of moral principles,' continued Maritain, 'they are reproached for imposing unlivable requirements on us. When they explain the way in which these immutable principles are to be put into force, taking into account the diversity of concrete situations, they are reproached for making morality relative. In both cases, however, they are only upholding the claims of reason to direct life. The task of ethics,' said Maritain, 'is a humble one but it is also magnanimous in carrying the mutable application of immutable moral principles even in the midst of the agonies of an unhappy world as far as there is in it a gleam of humanity.'

"The task of the politician is, in a sense, even more humble than that of the moralist. Ours is not the responsibility of making the decision, but rather a more menial responsibility of putting it into effect. The politician, of course, must be a moralist himself, and he must harken to the voice of the moralist. As he proceeds in action, his general guide must be to make his decisions in the hope that by these decisions an imperfect world may become somewhat more perfect, or that, at least, if he cannot make an imperfect world somewhat less imperfect, he can save it from becoming even less perfect or finally from becoming entirely evil and perverted. He can try to prevent degradation; to prevent decline; and, if possible, to move things forward and upward toward right and justice. That is the purpose and the end of political action and of the compromises that go with that action."