

January 2009

A Biblical and Theological Perspective is produced each year by the Washington Office to provide background information to advocates on why we, as Citizen Christians, address our elected and appointed officials about public issues.

PRESBYTERIANS AND POLITICS: Disturbers of Governments

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Francis Makemie, considered the father of the American Presbyterian church, preached in New York in 1707 without an official license to do so. Edward Hyde, third Earl of Clarendon, also known as Lord Cornbury, governor of New York, had him arrested and imprisoned for two months. Cornbury wrote that Makemie was “a preacher, a doctor of physic, a merchant, an attorney... and...worst of all, a disturber of governments.”

It has been said that so many Presbyterians followed Makemie’s role with the government that King George described the

Revolutionary War as the “Presbyterian War.”

It should come as no surprise that Presbyterians have a long history of engagement with the secular political order. In fact, well before Makemie, John Calvin understood the need of the role of civil authority. Calvin was opposed to any argument that tried to say that Christian liberty meant the absence of civil government.

In addition, The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

And because the powers which God hath

ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.

The Book of
Confessions, 6.111

At the first General Assembly in 1789, commissioners continued this engagement with the government by approving a

letter to President Washington that expressed their delight at his appointment to the “first office in the nation.”

So, on the one hand, it would appear that those of the Reformed tradition have been defenders of the role of government, and on the other hand, disturbers of governments.

Presbyterians have argued with the government about many issues, such as slavery, education, temperance, labor conditions, segregation, war, and the environment. At times, the General Assembly has spoken for the vast majority of the church, and at other times, the assembly has spoken a prophetic word to itself and the world.

In 1966, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) approved a short, well-written document titled “The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action.” The paper succinctly makes the case for the church’s role as a disturber of governments. Here are the

few gems from the document for our consideration:

Moreover, if the Great Commission is not simply an unfortunate necessity but a great privilege, then our responsibility to bear witness in word and action to this God in a social context is not a task we grudgingly and unwilling *must* accept, but one we are privileged to accept, thankfully and joyfully.

If we bear witness and serve the Lord, then, as a church and as individuals, we have a clear responsibility to concern ourselves with the social and political sphere also. To say nothing and to do nothing in this sphere is to deny our own Gospel. It is to say that there are at least some areas in the world and in our own lives where God is *not* Lord...

In the complexities of political, social and economic affairs, there is seldom any single unambiguously

“Christian” solution. The church and individual Christians will choose from the available solutions that one which seems most clearly to *point in the direction* of the will of God. To say nothing and do nothing because no single solution is perfect, is not to take a Christian position, but silently to support whatever status quo happens to prevail; or to leave change entirely to others – and thus refuse altogether to try to bring the will of God to bear on the life of the world.

To disturb governments, to speak truth to power, and to engage in the political context of the age has been seen within the Reformed tradition as an understanding of what it means to bear witness to the gospel. It is also how we in the Reformed tradition understand vocation: We – ministers, teachers, nurses, plumbers, all of us – serve God in and through our vocation and are called to a ministry of witness wherever we are.

Presbyterians are encouraged to support the mission priorities of their congregations. The Washington Office designs programs that aid local social justice ministries. To support our work, send a contribution to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Individual Remittance Processing, P.O. Box 64370, Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700. Designate the Washington office, ECO#865714.

LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT-ELECT

(The following letter was sent to President-Elect Barack Obama by the State Clerk on December 1, 2008.)

Dear President-Elect Obama,

On behalf of the 2.3 million members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I want to convey our hopes and prayers for you as the 44th President of the United States of America.

We are approaching Advent in the life of the church – a season of expectancy and hope as we prepare, once again, for the new King. As you know, this King did not come in any of the worldly ways, but as a very vulnerable baby born to very ordinary people. Even in his birth, Christ was showing us that the first shall be last and last shall be first.

As a country, we are in the midst of crises large and small. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has lifted up concerns about war, immigration, health care, globalization, care for the planet, racism, the Middle East, and justice in our courts. Now, it is an economic crisis that demands our attention. Our hope is that this current crisis does not become king, consuming us entirely and overshadowing the issues of ordinary people.

I have been told that every crisis holds a message. In my humble opinion, the message for this particular crisis is that our country and its economy cannot be built just on selling goods or even manufacturing goods. Our country's economy must be built on achieving good.

We are prepared to help you and your administration achieve that good. We will add feet, hands, and voices to our prayers to seek justice for the least of these. We will seek the Spirit's aid as we learn to sacrifice our own material wants for a society that makes its royal calling the well-being of every woman, man, and child.

Offering encouragement is something that Presbyterians have done to each of the forty-three Presidents who preceded you. Please know always that your faith and spirit are being supported with the individual and congregational prayers of the church all across the nation. Your job as President is lonely, but you are not alone.

I have enclosed a prayer attributed to Augustine of Hippo over 1600 hundred years ago. May you find comfort and courage in it as you approach your presidency.

Yours in Christ,
Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

*God of life,
there are days when the burdens we carry
are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down,
when the road seems dreary and endless,
the skies gray and threatening,
when our lives have no music in them,
and our hearts are lonely,
and our souls have lost their courage.
Flood the path with light,*

*turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise;
tune our hearts to brave music;
give us the sense of comradeship
with heroes and saints of every age;
and so quicken our spirits
that we may be able to encourage
the souls of all who journey with us on the road of
life,
to your honor and glory. Amen.*

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM PREVIOUS YEARS

Over the years, leading Presbyterians have written perspectives concerning the Church and politics. These powerful articles have been used as resources and inspiration by Presbyterian advocates to support their belief that religiously-based political work is crucial and necessary. The following writings from earlier years are available from the Washington Office in print or online at <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/theology.htm>:

- John M. Buchanan, "What Christianity is Not"
- Clifton Kirkpatrick, "2007 Biblical and Theological Perspective"
- Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, "Through the Work of Our Hands and the Meditation of Our Hearts: Defining Spirituality for Contemporary Justice Seekers"
- Roger J. Gench, "Peace Parades"
- Bill Moyers and Joseph C. Hough, "Why Should People of Faith be Engaged in Political Action?"
- Heide Hadsell, "For the Sake of the Neighbor, For the Sake of the World"
- Douglas W. Oldenburg, "On Working for Justice for the Poor"
- Barbara G. Wheeler, "Seek the Welfare of the City"
- Petor Pizor, "Reformed Christians in a Digital Age"
- Gayraud Wilmore, "Neighborly Fences and Hostile Walls"
- Cynthia M. Campbell, "Answering the Challenge of Political Life"
- Robert McAfee Brown, "Servants in Pharoah's Court"
- Elenora Giddings Ivory, "Service, Education and Advocacy"

Witness in Washington
Biblical and Theological Perspectives
is published annually by:
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Washington Office
100 Maryland Ave., NE
Washington DC 20002
(202) 543-1126
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GA_Washingtonoffice_@pcusa.org