

2-1-1964

The Pastor's Role in Social Action

Norman Temme

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Temme, Norman (1964) "The Pastor's Role in Social Action," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 35, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol35/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Pastor's Role in Social Action

By NORMAN TEMME

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was presented to the Lutheran Pastors Conference of Greater St. Louis in January 1963. In the meantime the Rev. Norman Temme has been appointed the Director of Public Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Dr. Egbert DeVries, director of the International Institute of Social Studies at The Hague, Netherlands, addressing the third assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, India, declared:

It is utterly impossible for the Christian Church to stay aloof from social changes in the Twentieth Century. Christian churches today must make their contribution to the spirit and form of the new secular society. The world is not only at the doorstep of every church in metropolitan slum areas, but it knocks also at the doors of quiet, perhaps placid, village churches in Europe or rural areas in North America. The church cannot avoid the world because the social environment in which church members live shapes their aspirations, their attitudes, their behavior.¹

As the world knocks at the doors of the churches, however, it finds closeted within a sometimes confused, a more often unconcerned, congregation of Christians. It comes seeking help in the form of counsel and guidance, and ends up frequently giving out some advice instead.

The Rev. Dr. Fredrick R. Wentz, professor of theology and ethics at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, illustrates the standoffish attitude of the church towards the world like this:

¹ Religious News Service, Nov. 28, 1961.

The church runs between its source, Christ, and its mission to the world. If God is on the second floor and mankind as a whole is on the first floor, the church should be running the stairs between. However, too many Christians and much too much of the church's organized life remains on the landing—out of touch, knowing God only as footsteps above and knowing human needs only as so much sweat and outcry below.²

Expressing a similar concern over the church's present-day indifference to social and economic justice, the Rev. Thomas L. Basich, a parish pastor of St. Paul, Minnesota, said to the first Conference on Evangelism of the Lutheran Church in America:

Tell Christians that love means mutual affection and understanding and communication in the family circle, and that love should prompt us to do deeds of kindness towards those closest to us, and they'll shout "Amen!"

But tell them that one of the responsibilities of love is to work toward social justice, and make it specific by referring to fair housing laws, equitable taxation policies, and land reform—and large numbers of them will raise their voices and shout, "Let's have no talk of politics in the church!"

Christians have been willing to bind up wounds of the victims of social and economic injustice, but we have remained reprehensibly aloof when it comes to doing anything about the basic conditions which produce such victims in the first

² News Bureau, The Lutheran Church in America, Dec. 12, 1961, from a speech to a laymen's evangelism workshop in Chicago, Ill.

place. We give Christmas baskets and send out bundles of used clothes, and with appeased conscience assume that such acts of individual charity fulfill the demands and responsibilities of Christian love. Christianity's historic preoccupation with personal charity and individual benevolence and its blindness, its conservatism with respect to issues of social justice explains more than any other factor the irrelevance of the church in the modern world.³

THE PROBLEM STATED

It is specifically to the pastor and his role in social action that I address myself in this essay. Does he dare to speak out on social concerns and political issues? If so, what does he say, to whom does he speak, and to what extent does he bind the consciences of his members by the position he takes? If he remains silent, what is the effect of his silence? Does the pastor ever dare to join himself to pressure groups or power blocs in working for righteousness and morality? Should he ever permit himself to be a lobbyist, in the good sense of the term, or to throw his weight around for righteous causes? Answers to these questions, and others similar in nature, is my assignment as I understand it.

Officially, Lutherans have tended to answer all these questions with a loud and resounding "No!" The reasons for our position were probably as much historical as they were theological. We were an immigrant church. We were German, or Swedish, or Norwegian, or Danish, or Finnish. We were a minority group. We believed that we would get along best if

we just paid our taxes, obeyed the laws of the land, and had as little to do with the government as possible. The pitifully small number of Lutherans serving in political office and governmental positions today reflects the results of such thinking. We had all sorts of convenient excuses for nonparticipation in government affairs.

CONTEMPORARY ILLUSTRATIONS

In 1960, William Poovey of Wartburg Lutheran Seminary wrote in *The Lutheran Standard*:

One of our basic Lutheran tenets is — church and politics don't mix. We are firmly convinced that the pulpit should be kept free from political pronouncements, that it is not the business of the church to seek to dictate government policy. We prefer that our ministers leave the realm of politics as such to the enlightened conscience of individual Christians.

Exactly three years later Prof. Poovey was one of five persons deputized by President Fredrik A. Schiøtz of The American Lutheran Church to represent it officially in the civil rights "March on Washington."⁴ Obviously, he and President Schiøtz felt it necessary in that instance for the church to endeavor to "dictate government policy." For the purpose of that march was to influence public opinion, and especially to persuade the Congress of the United States to pass certain legislation included in the so-called civil rights program recommended by the President.

President Oliver R. Harms of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adhered to the traditional position, refused to identify his church body as such with the

³ *American Lutheran*, March 1963, p. 26, quoted from an address to The Lutheran Church in America's Conference on Evangelism.

⁴ August 28, 1963.

march, and defended his decision in a press interview reported in the September 17, 1963, issue of *The Lutheran Witness*, official publication of the Synod. He did, however, recognize the right of pastors and people to participate as individual Christians and concerned citizens.

Furthermore, Missouri Synod Lutheran pastors in Milwaukee last September resolved not to give "official endorsement" to the city's Conference on Religion and Race "because 'The Priesthood of Believers' means that every individual is a priest before God, and because of that the Lutheran Church does not act as a group in social or community activities."⁵ They contended that their role is to guide, direct, and inspire the laity so that each Lutheran will act individually as a Christian and thus make his contribution to the community.

Yet, the Synod's Commission on Social Action, brought into being by the last convention (Cleveland, 1962), in its first official report published in *The Lutheran Witness* (May 14, 1963) clearly noted that not only the pastor, nor only the individual Christian, but the entire congregation has a role to fulfill in necessary Christian social action. It cited race relations as a striking contemporary example, and contended: "If local Christian congregations would act in accordance with national pronouncements on the matter of racial justice and equality, there would be a vastly improved situation in the nation as a whole."

The report then quoted 1 John 4:20, 21, and concluded, "It is important, therefore, that the individual Christian and congregations

think, pray, speak, and act on behalf of righteousness and justice."

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Obviously, we have not completed our homework as to the insights Scripture gives regarding the nature and extent of the pastor's and the congregation's role in social action. The Honorable Paul Simon, editor of the Troy (Ill.) *Tribune* and now state senator, declared in 1957 to a group of Lutheran clergymen:

The fact that you are a pastor does not reduce your responsibility as a citizen. Pastors who avoid politics in order not to offend influential members simply are avoiding their duty. The pastor has the same responsibility that any citizen has—and some additional burdens. The pastor should remember the Old Testament prophets without exception spoke not only to the people, but also to the government. Sometimes it was difficult, sometimes it was dangerous, but these obstacles didn't stop the prophets from telling government when it was wrong. In the New Testament, John the Baptist did not hesitate telling the government and the heads of government when there was wrongdoing.—To preach Sunday after Sunday the Gospel of Christ without showing its relation to the community which is corroding at the church's feet is simple avoidance of very real responsibilities.⁶

It is true, as Simon says, that the prophets of the Old Testament spoke out in political matters with a directness and vehemence that surprises us. They addressed themselves forthrightly to the rulers of the state, challenging them to conduct foreign and domestic policy according

⁵ Lorraine M. Radtke, *The Badger Lutheran* (September 12, 1963).

⁶ "Your Post-Election Responsibilities," *The Cresset* (January 1957, p. 9).

to the will of God. But it is hardly honest to compare Israel with America. There is a fundamental difference between Israel and all other nations of the world. Israel was a chosen vessel of God, designed to be a people prepared for the coming of God's Messiah.

The problem was to keep the people religiously pure and steadfast in their service to God. Political independence was not important; religious purity was. A military alliance in that day involved more than politics. It meant the acknowledgment of false gods, the admission that God could not protect His own people. Thus Egypt would not come with military chariots alone but also with heathen gods and heathen customs. What the prophets were condemning was not a mere political move but an alliance that threatened to destroy the religious purity of Israel. In that day, politics and religion were inseparable. It is not fair to compare a modern preacher's giving his political ideas to his congregation and the Old Testament prophets' warning against everything that might upset Israel's divine mission. The two situations are not parallel.

Nor does the New Testament provide specific guidance. Karl Barth says this is because the New Testament "seems to speak concretely only of a purely authoritative State, and so to speak of Christians only as subjects, not as citizens who, in their own persons, bear some responsibility for the State."⁷ For Biblical guidance, therefore, we must depend more on broad Christian principles than on specific passages of Scripture.

In his book *Under Orders: The Churches*

⁷ *Church and State* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1939).

and *Public Affairs*,⁸ Dr. Roswell P. Barnes, executive secretary in America of the World Council of Churches, examines the Biblical grounds for political concern on the part of the churches. He finds many passages that discuss at length how the religious profession of the individual is related to his conduct in the community, what Jesus taught about man's relation to God and his neighbor, and what the apostles taught about the conduct of Christians gathered together into churches. In building his case for the churches speaking out on social, political, and economic matters because they are "under orders," he places great stress on Christ's second commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

A TIME TO SPEAK AND A TIME TO KEEP SILENT

A pastor who is silent on controversial issues with clear moral and spiritual implications is not true to his Lord. The old saying "Silence gives consent" applies here. The silent one says, in effect, "What is, is all right with me — and with the church. We have no message from the Lord in this situation."

Now, if there actually is no message from the Lord, the pastor perhaps should remain silent. Deliberate, planned silence may be an evidence of wisdom, courage, and fidelity. If, however, there is any part of the "whole counsel of God" to be proclaimed, the pastor should speak. To remain silent has the practical effect of endorsing the status quo.

Obviously, if the church is to have any real impact on our world, its leaders must

⁸ Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1961.

look at whatever issues are currently under public discussion. This means that pastors must keep up with the times and be posted on current events. Unless they do, it will be the world—perhaps prompted by the uneasy consciences of Christians—rather than the church which defines what is relevant and timely.

The pastor ought to evaluate timely topics to decide whether he can bring something of God's counsel to enlighten the discussions. Is only a portion of the truth being told? Does justice require support for a friendless part or cause? What other teachings of Scripture, either direct or inferred, can be focused on the issues?

SCRIPTURAL AND SCHOLARLY

Answers to these questions will help him decide whether to say anything, and what his message ought be. His testimony ought to have a clear Scriptural foundation. A concern merely for human welfare, however laudable that is, does not go far enough. Any message for the church from its spokesmen needs to make clear the foundation on which it builds its case. It should shout: "Thus saith the Lord."

There is always the danger that the pastor will make the Lord say what he wants Him to say—instead of being careful always to say only what God wants His servant to say. Responsible churchmen seek to avoid this human pitfall, but the danger remains. It is interesting to reread church resolutions of 30, 50, or 100 years ago, expressing views on then current social and political issues. One wonders how benighted or provincial today's church resolutions on the use of alcohol, or contraception, or on legislation dealing with civil rights and welfare, for example, will

prove to be when the tide of years has washed away the influence of personalities and prejudices often interwoven with these expressions.

Another imperative. Any pastoral opinion or expression should be not only Scripturally sound but also as competent, valid, and accurate as scientific scholarship and analysis can make it. In other words, the statement should be intellectually honest. Shoddy scholarship and distortions of data to prove predetermined positions ought not be associated with Christ's representatives.

TO WHOM SHOULD THE PASTOR SPEAK?

Granting all of these points and assuming that the pastor feels dutybound to speak on an issue, to whom should he speak? Should he address his words to his own members, to governmental administrators, to legislators, to the general public, or to whom? For this question there is no easy answer. Any of several procedures may be followed. Circumstances will determine.

For the most part, I prefer to see the pastor address his statement to the members of his parish. At least, he will be wise to begin here. As the Holy Spirit enlightens His people during the course of their study and discussion of the ideas offered, they can accept, modify, or reject the point of view expounded by their pastor. As Christians and as citizens they can use their constructive influence in personal accountability to God in service to their neighbor. They do so in the assurance that they are not alone but have the invisible yet real support of other Christians pursuing a like course in their separate circles of influence.

This approach avoids the danger of making the church an instrument of temporal power. It puts the church in the role of guide and counselor to its members. The members, in turn, in their role as Christians in the world become channels through which God accomplishes His purposes. This course avoids making of the church an ecclesiastical pressure group or lobbyist for causes its key executives hold dear.

PERSUASION, NOT COERCION

In an age of power and bigness, power and bigness tempt the church. For that matter, ecclesiastics down through the centuries have been tempted to twist power and bigness to their own purposes. Today we live in a world of large and powerful organizations — giant corporations, large labor unions, big government, mass communications. The church, too, is tempted to believe that to be big means to have influence. It becomes a temptation, then, to speak of the 100 families of our congregation, the two and one-half million members of our church, the eight million Lutherans in America, the 73 million Lutherans of the world. We imply that the significance of what we say should be multiplied by the proper number to give its true value. We seem almost to believe that the worth of an idea depends not on its intrinsic merit but on the support that can be corralled for it.

"Protestants probably have been more guilty than Roman Catholics in using pressure tactics to achieve objectives by legislation which they were unable to attain by persuasion."⁹ This statement by Dr. G. Elson Ruff, editor of *The Lutheran*, sur-

⁹ Religious News Service, April 17, 1961.

prised the Toledo Ministerial Association, whom he had come to address on the concern over the all-out drive by Roman Catholics to obtain federal aid for its schools. As examples of Protestant legislative pressure he cited prohibition, Sunday closing laws, and gambling bans. Even the anti-birth-control laws that most Roman Catholics are still defending against repeated efforts at repeal in Connecticut and Massachusetts, were enacted at the request of Protestant leaders who a century ago had regarded the use of contraceptives as wrong.

Organized religion in America has the responsibility to act as a moral critic of society, but it should seek to influence society by persuasion and not by coercion, economic pressure, or political threats. This is the primary conclusion of an 80-page statement of principles published November 12, 1961, in booklet form by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. The result of a four-year study by Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish laymen and clergy, *Religion and American Society*, concludes:

Persuasion is the proper form of action for American groups that would transform society. Coercion, direct or indirect, or the suppression of ideas is properly held anathema. Admittedly, persuasion is a long, painful process and not always successful, but the religious group that respects the canons of civic prudence will not take short cuts to success.

THE PRONOUNCING PROCESS IN THE CHURCHES

One favorite method of persuasion used by the church is that of a resolution or pronouncement.

Church councils and many pastoral con-

ferences turn out pronouncements by the score. The National Council of Churches has published its entire set under 30 different topics alphabetically. The United Lutheran Church published a 70-page book just before it went out of existence, which contains all the major official pronouncements issued by the denomination on social-political issues during its 44-year history. The National Lutheran Council has also compiled public statements from its constituent bodies.

The Commission on Social Action of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod cautions against "overestimating the influence and power of social pronouncements which are issued by national church bodies and commissions."¹⁰ It notes that the general public does not take these statements too seriously. It points out that sweeping statements on the burning issues of the day tend to be misunderstood and are therefore resented by many Christians. It further observes that the New Testament church, in no position to issue statements regarding slavery, despotic government, immorality, dishonesty, etc., nevertheless proved itself to be a powerful force for social good and righteousness within the pagan empire. Men take more note of our actions than of our words.

The Archbishop of Canterbury complained a few years ago that he was constantly being asked in the name of the church to denounce things. "Some are perfectly reasonable requests if it was my job to denounce evils," he said. "Some are completely lunatic, and I could not do what they ask without long inquiries as to the merits. There is a danger of peo-

¹⁰ *The Lutheran Witness*, May 14, 1963.

ple thinking that whenever anything goes wrong they have to ask the Church to denounce it. The right people to denounce evil are the citizens. We in the Church are here to train citizens to live. It is always a weakness to my mind when the Church itself has, in an official way, to denounce evil. It ought to do that only when the moral sense of the community is not strong enough to do it for itself. Christian citizens should be ready to bear witness."¹¹

Former Congressman Walter Judd, eloquent orator, Christian statesman, estwhile missionary to China, is still another who has expressed himself in like vein:

I don't want the church working in politics. I don't want political action by ecclesiastical bodies. I do want political action by Christians. It isn't the job of the church to say what you should do. It is the job of the church to change men and send them into society as Christian missionaries and into politics to help change the government. The longer I am in politics the less confidence I have in the pronouncements by ecclesiastical bodies telling Congress what to do. Occasionally it seems to me that ministers would rather come down and testify or pass resolutions than they would to preach because it is more comforting. It gives them a sense of greater importance.¹²

PUTTING PRONOUNCEMENTS INTO PRACTICE

Yet, there is something to be said on the positive side for church pronouncements. Ironically, it takes a secular person, John Ramsey, director of community re-

¹¹ "Church and Politics," *Eternity* magazine, September 1960, p. 28.

¹² From a speech at Wheaton Academy, Feb. 18, 1961.

lations for the United Steelworkers of America, to say it.¹³ He urges clergymen to take the leadership in bringing major social pronouncements to the attention of their parishioners. He lauds the efforts of Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews to produce statements which "are giving real thought and guidance to their people who live in these times," but he laments the fact that so frequently these resolutions stay between the covers of the book of reports and memorials, or are copied to be lost forever in the book of convention proceedings. He stresses the importance of getting these religious social statements down to the local level and letting the people know what these pronouncements say, so that they may be guided by them in their day-by-day activities.

Let us not think for a moment that a social pronouncement is equivalent to social action. The action comes later, as a natural outgrowth of the pronouncement itself. A study guide for the book *Under Orders* has been published.¹⁴ It is designed for use in congregational organizations as a way of getting the message through and implemented at the local level. Indeed, it is in local government that Christian influence is probably more sorely needed than at any other level.

The word of the hour is "dialogue." The desire for dialogue in religious circles is also becoming apparent in the church's involvement in public affairs. To promote an "exchange of views instead of recriminations" in current religious disputes, a

Council on Public Affairs and Religious Freedom was established a year ago by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. One of its most successful projects, to date, has been the sponsorship of national and regional "dialogues" on controversial issues where religion impinges on public policy. Discussions to date have included such subjects as federal aid to parochial schools, birth control legislation, Bible reading in the public schools, and Sunday closing laws. Dialogue has its limitations. In his summary statement at the First National Institute of the Religious Freedom and Public Affairs Project, Dr. Martin Marty aptly remarked "we find the transition from pluralistic ignorance to pluralistic awareness to be a rough deal."¹⁵ Nevertheless, dialogue can be and is proving itself in increasing measure to be richly rewarding. One need not be a prophet to predict that more and more dialogue groups, under NCCJ sponsorship, will soon dot our landscape. I have benefited greatly from my personal involvement in this program and I recommend it to others.

THE PULPIT A ROSTRUM?

Should the pulpit be a rostrum? The Right Rev. James A. Pike, Protestant Episcopal Bishop of San Francisco, eloquently defends the case for a preacher speaking out on political-social matters from the pulpit in an illustrated article in the *New York Times* magazine section of August 14, 1960.

His point of view is seconded by Methodist Bishop Richard C. Raines of India-

¹³ Religious News Service, Dec. 27, 1961.

¹⁴ By Margaret R. Bender (Cincinnati: Women's Division of Christian Service, Board of Missions, The Methodist Church, Literature Headquarters, 7820 Reading Road).

¹⁵ "A Report on the Local Dialogue" from *The Dialogue*, a publication of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (September 1963, Bulletin No. 25).

napolis, who advises the members of his pastoral conference that "the best laymen do not want a phonograph for a minister, one who merely reflects what they want to hear. Whenever a man has spoken from the pulpit things which compel people to re-think their religious experiences or to look again at their political interests, their prejudices, or their pocketbooks, there we have a struggle for freedom of the pulpit."¹⁶

Lutherans for the most part, however, have traditionally avoided the temptation to use the pulpit as a political rostrum. I am of the opinion that our guiding principle in this regard is time-tested and time-honored. On the other hand, I believe that a pastor should not hesitate to refer to political issues from the pulpit if the text warrants and the Word of God has light to shed on a burning question of the day.

Last year a New York City clergyman, Dr. Ernest R. Palen, took to task those in his Middle Collegiate Church audience who say to church leaders:

You stick to your religion, we'll take care of the politics. It will be a tragic day for our society when those who have no conscience, no religious scruples, no sense of morality, no zeal for integrity, take over in City Hall, in Albany, and in Washington.

But that is what is happening at far too great a speed for our comfort and our welfare. It is happening because the man on the street and the man in the pew are saying to the man in the pulpit, "You leave my sins alone and stick to the pleasant and easy things in the Scriptures. Don't be poking your nose into the way I live."

One of God's greatest challenges to the church in 1962 is that the church be the

church; that the church quicken the conscience of the man in the pew; that the church arouse the conscience of the men in City Hall, the State Capital at Albany, and the Government in Washington.

And believe me, it will take more than an alarm clock to awaken the conscience of many a citizen who today is following the road to ruin because it is so much easier to follow the crowd, so much more pleasant to live by the law of the fast buck, so much more satisfactory to be surrounded with material comforts, than to make the sacrifices necessary to be an honest politician, a God-fearing businessman and an alert citizen who measures up to his civic responsibilities.¹⁷

PERSONAL CONTACT

In considering the variety of approaches open to the pastor, let us not overlook the importance of personal contact. At the national level, a personal conference held by two members of our church with the Honorable John F. Kennedy on the day before he entered the Wisconsin primary may have had much to do with the statement he made during his candidacy regarding his position on federal aid to private education, and with his continued adherence to that position during his presidency; a telephone call from the then Missouri Synod Director of Public Relations to House Speaker John W. McCormack on the last day of 1962 may have helped him to clarify his stand on this same issue, as he announced it in a public release the next week. Incidentally, this telephone call led to an invitation to "come up and see me sometime"—an invitation cheerfully accepted a few weeks later.

Parish pastors, too, have the privilege

¹⁶ Religious News Service, June 1, 1961.

¹⁷ The New York Times, Jan. 8, 1962.

of making personal visits to their elected congressmen and public officials. Few have done this—even once. Recognizing the importance of such contacts, the Lutheran governor of one of our midwest states meets informally at breakfast sessions with church leaders to discuss with them problems of church and state and be guided by their suggestions. One month the discussion centered around the church and the problem of the Indian. The next month the topic was the family and its role in society. You will usually find that the doors of public officials open wide for you. Try them!

CONCLUSIONS

As I see it, then, these conclusions are defensible on the question of the role of the pastor in political and social affairs.

Should the pastor speak?

Declaring the whole counsel of God requires of the pastor that he speak out on certain international, national, and social issues of our day.

When should the pastor speak?

The pastor will be well advised to exercise caution lest he pose as an authority on every issue. It is possibly easier to err on the side of too much speaking than on that of too much silence.

What should the pastor say?

Whatever he says should be clearly

rooted in God's Word as revealed in the Scriptures and be in conformity with the Lutheran Symbols. The Scriptural orientation of his pronouncements is basic.

To whom should the pastor speak?

The pastor's chief role in the discussion of political issues will be that of guide and counselor to his members in their Christian citizenship. However, as situations permit or demand, he will not hesitate to speak to a wider public in proclaiming the Word of God as it relates to political and social problems.

How should the pastor speak?

The pastor will avoid the temptation to use his pulpit as a political rostrum. He will not hesitate, however, to speak from the pulpit on political issues where he has the clear mandate of God. He may occasionally join with other pastors, or the members of his parish, in bringing a matter to the attention of all the people of his community through a public pronouncement or resolution, or through personal contact with public officials.

There is a time to speak and a time to keep silent, a time to act and a time to acquiesce. May God give each of His servants the ability to recognize this fact, the wisdom to know His will in any given situation, and the courage to perform it.

New York, N. Y.