

A STATEMENT OF PROTESTANT PRINCIPLES

Members of all religious traditions, and especially all Christians, should take interest in and encouragement from the recent “statement of principles” issued by fifty-five Catholic Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives [see “Catholic Statement of Principles,” also on our website]. The statement “documents how their faith influences them as lawmakers” (press release, February 28, 2006). It states that they recognize “the Church’s role in providing moral leadership,” while at the same time they acknowledge the “primacy” of conscience. They reaffirm a commitment to the separation of church and state, asserting that this commitment does not prohibit their faith from informing their public duties. The First Amendment to the Constitution, they believe, guarantees their right to live their own lives as Catholics while fostering “an America with a rich diversity of faiths.” While seeking “the Church’s guidance and assistance,” they affirm the possibility of “being in disagreement with the Church in some areas.”

This statement of principles by Catholic Christians understandably places emphasis upon the relationship between the lay person and the authoritative Catholic church hierarchy. It comes in the wake of the 2004 election when a bishop threatened to bar candidate John Kerry from participation in the mass because of his position on the issue of abortion. The statement suggests that Catholics are agreed on the sanctity and value of human life, but that the possibility of disagreement ought to be recognized as to the implementation of this belief, given the complexity of the issues. (It seems likely that the signers are drawing upon the 2nd Vatican Council’s “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” which asserts that coercion has no place in the realm of religious conviction.) Without saying so, the statement may be taken as a rebuff of the bishop’s tactics in dealing with the abortion issue.

Given this encouragement by our Catholic leaders and friends, Protestant Christians in general and Protestant lawmakers in particular might ponder the same questions: how does our faith influence us as lay persons or lawmakers, and what bearing do Protestant principles have upon public policy-making? The specific issues are somewhat different for Protestants; since the Protestant Reformation they have had a close identification with the principle of the ultimate authority of individual conscience. However, the equally basic principle of the primacy of Scripture raises other questions about religious authority. Instead of appeal to a churchly hierarchy, Protestants have appealed to the authority of the Bible, illumined, as many Protestants have held, by Christian experience and enlightened reason. Unlike Catholicism, Protestants do not have one body of authoritative “social teachings” that provides a moral framework for all Protestants. Specific denominations do provide documents designed for guidance on crucial social issues, and some subscribe to historic and contemporary creeds. But finally it is on the basis of Scriptural mandate that we Protestants support public policies that assist the poor and needy, the disadvantaged, and those most vulnerable in society; policies that favor peace over warfare, and consider the use of force as a last resort when

all other avenues have been exhausted; policies that work toward justice, equity, and fairness among all people. Protestant leaders, though not occupying positions of religious authority, have been in the forefront of those who maintain the need for social and political reforms in concert with reforms of personal behavior.

Like Catholics, we Protestants endorse and affirm the separation of church and state as rightly prohibiting both the ascendancy of one religious group or coalition of groups over the public arena and the domination of religious groups by the state. Such separation does not prevent individuals from contending in public for particular visions of the common good based upon religious insights. It does require sensitivity to the religious plurality of our society, where in a sense we are all minorities, and where we must always speak up for minority rights. Protestants learned the dangers of theocracy in the early years of our country, and ever since we have been strong defenders of separation. (Admittedly, some Protestants forget this hard-won wisdom.)

Some Christians professing a Protestant viewpoint focus exclusively on their convictions regarding personal morality, especially sexuality, and insist on legislation to enforce their values. We progressive Protestants also hold that there are ways in which religion can appropriately influence the public sphere, but we feel that Protestantism is too narrowly and restrictively defined when limited to issues of individual morals. Here we are convinced that careful judgment is required to determine which values should be put forward as applicable for the common good. Debates about personal morality, including sexuality and marriage and family, do raise important questions, where differences of opinion are possible; the Bible nowhere provides a code of ethics in such matters. To illustrate with one such issue, Jesus clearly held monogamous marriage in high esteem; regarding homosexuality, however, he was totally silent. Consequently, it has been necessary for Protestants to choose between emphasizing the isolated and infrequent Biblical references to homosexuality, which appear to be negative, or emphasizing the prevailing themes in both Testaments of love of neighbor and acceptance of natural and cultural differences (hospitality and generosity of spirit). Given modern knowledge and our heightened awareness of the damage done by discrimination, as well as the Biblical witness, we who are represented by this statement favor the latter choice. It is possible and necessary to affirm the importance of monogamous marriage to our society while at the same time finding ways to accord social respect and dignity to same-sex unions.

Progressive Protestants further contend that many social issues, such as poverty, health care, educational opportunity, issues of war and peace, etc., have a moral dimension and should be of central Christian concern. Some Christians, recognizing the perfectionist quality of Jesus' love ethic and his expectation of divine intervention, deny that New Testament ethics have any relevance to present-day politics. But this view flies in the face of Jesus' teaching that the Kingdom of God should come and will come "on earth." The quest for justice should always be subjected to the pull of the higher love ethic. Jesus can never be identified with any political party or program; but Christians should work together with all morally sensitive persons toward the achievement of a more just and loving society.

A general approach to the authority of the Bible is suggested here. As Protestants we affirm that a “word from the Lord” may be “spoken” and “heard” through the text of Scripture. The words of the text are fallible, human words. Only God is absolute and final; God, we believe, chooses to speak, and on occasion is heard, through the fallible text. The long consensus of the churches in their collective testimony serves in fact to correct those who “hear” in an aberrant way. Just as we have corrected earlier readings of the Bible regarding slavery and the status of women, so we now believe that the earlier justification for discrimination against homosexuality was misguided.

In summary, as Protestants we believe that government is properly secular, but that it can be made more compassionate, more just, and more humane. The churches and other religious institutions can, without crossing the line into theocratic coercion, serve as forces for moral advance in society. Of course all influence should be exerted through democratic means. In the public arena there is always room for civilized disagreement; therefore the religious voice should not be presented in absolutist terms. The religious value of humility should overrule claims of certainty. Like our Catholic friends we believe that the churches are “called to be in the vanguard of creating a more just America and world.”

Summary by Guy B. Hammond