

# LIGHT

Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention  
February 1984

## Civil Religion

by J. B. Fowler

Some students of religion in America say there are two broad types of religion in this country: particular religion and civil religion. Particular religion is identified with churches, synagogues, denominations, and individuals. Civil religion, on the other hand, is identified as democratic faith, societal religion, and the American way.

Particular religion we understand. It is expressed through one's personal relationship to God and through one's church or synagogue. But "civil religion," a term commonly used today, is less understood.

What then is meant by "civil religion"? It is that generalized form of national faith which mixes religious metaphors with nationalistic aspirations; it is the state's use of consensus religious sentiments, concepts, and symbols for its own purposes. Civil religion transcends specific denominations and mixes piety with patriotism and traditional religion with national life until it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

Generally the President of the United States is civil religion's leader. Currently, President Ronald Reagan is the high priest of American civil



Fowler

religion. Using bland and general religious terms such as faith, belief, sacrifice, courage, hope, renewal, and spirit, he projects the image of a priest comforting his people, assuring them of their basic goodness, and striving to enhance their self-esteem.

The key attitudes in this sort of civil religion are national pride and elitism. Passages from numerous Reagan speeches suggest that the President really believes that the United States is a chosen nation in the sense that Israel was chosen as

God's special agent to accomplish his purposes in Old Testament times.

Moreover, his interviews have been laced with similar allusions to America's chosen status under God, including occasions when he identified the "my people" of 2 Chronicles 7:14 as the United States rather than as the people of God in the United States.

America's civil religion expresses itself in many ways: "In God We Trust" on our coins; "One nation under God" recently added to our pledge of allegiance to the flag; the display of the name of God on our governmental buildings; the swearing to Almighty God in our courts; the employment, through tax dollars, of Christian chaplains in our Congress and state legislatures; and through governmental functions, such as state legislatures and sessions of the United States Congress, opening sessions with "official" prayer to God.

Civil religion is President Reagan's proposed constitutional amendment on prayer in the public schoolrooms and his vigorous insistence on tuition tax credits for parents of children in parochial schools.

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## ... Religion

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Civil religion is the mixing of religious metaphors with nationalistic aspirations and using those religious metaphors to sell political programs to the people. Politicians and administrations use the religious sentiments held by the majority of American people for their own purposes and for their own advancement.

Civil religion would renew America morally and spiritually and Christianize it by legislative power and constitutional amendments rather than by the biblical preaching of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

Civil religion has its god, but that god is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who became incarnate and revealed Himself in human flesh.

Rather, the god of civil religion is some kind of ambiguous, mythical, harmless grandfather in the sky whose character is so bland that it does not violently displease the Jews, the Muslims, the Yogis, the Hindus, the Christians, or hardly any of the some 1,300 sects which today operate in the United States.

One of the great dangers of civil religion is that it compromises the integrity of revealed religion by setting up an officially sanctioned public cult marked by the absence of heart devotion and authentic piety. It subtly undermines the voluntary, free-church tradition of American Christianity.

Civil religion courteously tips its hat to the deity, but that's all it does. America's civil religion would have the people believe, as the words printed on the back of the nation's great Seal of State declare, that "God hath ordained our undertakings."

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**“Civil religion makes God a national deity who blesses us and fights for us and our causes.”**

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From the earliest days of our nation, there has been a distorted sense of national messianic consciousness—the recurring notion that America is a nation peculiarly ordained by God; that America has a manifest, preordained, messianic destiny to save the rest of the world or at least to be preeminent in it. After all, it is reasoned, "God hath ordained our undertakings."

But in the name of this divine ordination of our undertakings, the American Indians were slaughtered or displaced, the Spanish were pushed out, Hawaii was overcome, the Philippines were drawn into our orbit, and the whole push westward on the American continent was accomplished on what was perceived to be a divinely inspired, preordained plan.

In the name of this divine preordination and in fulfilling this messianic role, the Blacks were enslaved, whole cultural societies of native Americans were trampled underfoot, vast wealth was accumulated and persistent poverty was ignored, the land was ravaged for her natural resources, a bomb was developed with the potential of destroying Planet Earth, and our whole atmosphere has been tragically polluted until the continuation of life is threatened.

In fulfilling the preordained, messianic mission that civil religion has given to America, America has set itself out to conform the world to its own political, social, and economic systems. All the while, civil religion pictures Almighty God as smiling

approvingly upon our activities, saying: "What good people you are"; and clapping his hands with joy as we carry out our foreordained destiny. And at the same time, all who oppose this unholy concept of American civil religion are branded as heretics and traitors before the nation.

To the civil religionists, war is the sacred instrument whereby the righteous protect themselves from the infidels of first one evil empire and then another. The civil religionist makes God into a superpatriot.

In civil religion, Almighty God becomes the God of America and her allies, not the God who loves and judges all nations including our own. And civil religion stamps "Well Done" on anything that advances our nationalistic causes because we are righteous and our causes are holy while our political opponents are evil and their systems doomed. Civil religion makes God a national deity who blesses us and fights for us and our causes. Civil religion, however, robs God of His holiness whereby He also judges us.

Civil religion would remake, remoralize, regenerate, and redeem America by composing government-prescribed school prayers, passing tuition tax credit legislation, banning abortion, inventing more pious slogans for governmental buildings, including ever more religious cliches in our pledge of allegiance, and composing ever longer and more sonorous legislative and congressional prayers at the beginning of each of their sessions.

Another classic example of civil religion at work is the so-called National Prayer Breakfast now held every January, and the Governor's Prayer Breakfast held annually in many of the states. To many, these prayer breakfasts appear to be

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**“After all, it is reasoned, ‘God hath ordained our undertakings.’”**

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praiseworthy piety. "Look," they say, "the nation is on its knees before God."

But the fact of the matter is that there is evidence that in some ways the church is actually on its knees before Caesar. Civil religion flatters whatever administration is in power, telling it that it is the panacea for all the nation's ills and that it has been divinely ordained by Almighty God to come to office.

Civil religion serves as the king's chaplain to flatter the monarch and approve of his whims. Civil religion tells the king what he wants to hear although, as Reinhold Neibuhr observed, "There is more truth in the king's fool than in the king's chaplain."

Civil religion expresses itself in words, platitudes, and slogans. It uses spiritual slogans to launch political programs. It is a "Let's-give-God-a-hand" culture, not a "Let's-give-God-our-hearts" culture.

Civil religion enthrones the nation and dethrones Almighty God. It has lost its sense of wonder and awe in approaching God. It gives an

abstract deity a little more respect rather than lifting penitent hearts to Almighty God for our sinful selves and our sinful nation.

Civil religion would break down the barrier between church and state for which Jefferson labored and which was incorporated into the Bill of Rights:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

But this current administration has done just exactly that, not just in the general ways dealt with already but now with the naming of an "ambassador" from our nation to the Roman Catholic Church. Shame.

And the Religious Right, blind to the dangers of civil religion, not seeing that it immunizes the American people against the real thing, has joined in leading this nation down the wrong road.

No matter how useful civil religion may be at its best, it is never as good as a particularized, personal faith rooted in history, working in time, and guided from above.

The hope of this nation is not civil religion that carves its platitudes on government buildings, prints its slogans on American currency, confesses its faith in America's pledge to the flag, or recites its officially composed and governmentally approved "prayer" in the schoolroom.

Rather, America's hope lies in honoring Jeffersonian democracy that would keep the state out of the churches' affairs and keep the church from attempting to run the government even while maintaining the obligation of the church to address the state when it is wrong and call it to repentance when it sins.

As Baptist Christians, we insist that God has shown us "a more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31).

**J. B. Fowler is editor of *The Baptist New Mexican*. This material was prepared for a public address at a Christian life conference sponsored by the Fruit Avenue Baptist Church in Albuquerque; and the author gratefully acknowledges numerous sources not cited here.**

## LIGHT Focuses on Moral Issues

*LIGHT*, a monthly Christian social ethics publication, was introduced about 30 years ago as a monthly publication of the Social Service Commission, the forerunner of the Christian Life Commission.

*LIGHT* was distributed only as an "occasional bulletin" after the early 1960s, but in 1978 it was reactivated as a regular publication.

The current newsletter format is designed to communicate information and ideas about current ethical issues and appropriate social action to interested pastors, students, church staff and denominational workers in the field of Christian ethics.

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# Peace with Justice

## You Are a Peacemaker

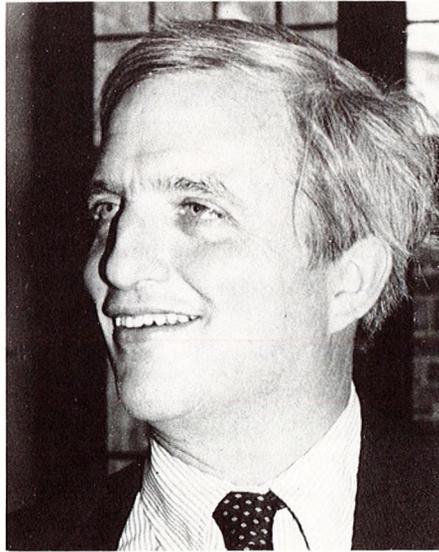
by Moorhead Kennedy

I want to share with you some ideas about the Peace Movement, something that has emerged only relatively recently, but which is here to stay, for reasons far deeper than its present focus on nuclear weaponry would suggest.

More and more people are part of the Peace Movement, whether they know it or not. It reflects a very deep popular apprehension, the suspicion that our present institutions, which took form and shape in the nineteenth century, are just not up to coping with the problems of the twenty-first century.

The Iranian hostage crisis, the takeover of the Embassy, the failure of the rescue attempt—all disturbed some very comfortable beliefs that Americans had about themselves and American power and, above all, military competence, and, indeed, respect for the institution of government itself, which was extremely high as late as the presidency of John F. Kennedy. That respect has not recovered from Watergate, nor from Vietnam.

This is not the first period in history when the prestige, the efficacy, and the relevance of social institutions have been called into question. When that happens, when you find a breakdown in social cohesion, the values that institutions inspire begin to lose their reinforcing appeal, and other value systems which are more centered on the individual begin to take their place. We have examples of, say, business executives reluctant to accept promotion if that requires a transfer, uprooting their families, or interrupting their wives' newly discovered professional opportunities. We see business executives or lawyers or academicians who are prepared to spend more time with their families even if it means fewer Satur-



Kennedy

days in the office and possibly less rapid promotion.

There are two factors at play here: first, the unwillingness to sacrifice that much for an institution whose purposes, values, and rewards no longer seem to be all that important and, second, these newer, more caring values. All these people, let me repeat, who are adopting a new system of values in our country don't have to stick "No Nukes" or "Peace Now!" on their bumpers in order to be part of the Peace Movement.

As we look at this extraordinary anti-nuclear phenomenon that has arisen, particularly since June of 1982 and the demonstrations in Central Park, I think we ought to bear in mind that we are dealing with something a great deal broader. The Freeze Movement, clearly, has been useful in making people aware of something which instinctively they denied—the overpowering nuclear threat—but sooner or later, the Freeze is going to have to confront what every movement and every politician has to face. Slogan has to be replaced with content. Hard ques-

tions have to be answered and positive positions taken.

For many in the Peace Movement, whose apprenticeship took place in the Civil Rights Movement or in the demonstrations against continued intervention in Vietnam, there has been a reluctance to recognize that the question of arms control is of a different order, requiring a different approach.

Civil rights and Vietnam had negative objectives. Civil rights were already in place. They were guaranteed in the Constitution in the thirteenth and fourteenth Amendments, in the Civil Rights Act of 1948, and in the many acts that followed. The Civil Rights Movement only demanded the removal of restrictions on their free exercise.

Our military intervention in Vietnam was also something to be eliminated. We had to pull the troops out, but there wasn't quite as much concern within the Peace Movement for the fate of the Cambodians or for the "boat people" left behind.

On the other hand, disarmament issues, where technology, national psychologies, and strategic interest all meet, require an ongoing concern. For the first time, the Peace Movement in our country and, indeed, the churches that have played such an active and important role in it have to address technical questions which are highly complex in nature and come up with solutions which will take a long time to apply and then only with very great difficulty.

As it begins seriously to address the difficult questions, the Peace Movement may find that its constituent elements are going to begin answering different and difficult questions in different ways, and a fragile consensus is going to break down. Indeed, the very range, psychological

and religious, of where people come from, let alone their different political views, would make fracture in the Peace Movement extremely hard to avoid.

For example: If your religious outlook tends to be Unitarian, toward the perfectibility of man, if your political outlook is more focused on where we should be going, on the kind of world we should create and how we're going to get there—that is, the classical liberal view—then your level of distrust of the Soviets is apt to be, relatively speaking, on the lower side.

If, on the other hand, you are more impressed with the flaws in human nature, the essential depravity of humankind—to use an old-fashioned expression—and the presence of evil in this world, then your level of distrust would be a little higher, and this would certainly affect your view of the entire disarmament problem. These questions are being asked today within the Peace Movement.

For myself, I am not about to alter my relatively gloomy view of the nature of humankind, reinforced as it has been by some rather intense personal experiences in the international arena. It tends to make me very skeptical, a skepticism which, needless to say, extends to a number of arguments put forward by the Department of Defense in support of their favorite kinds of expensive weaponry, as well as the apparent assumption that national defense consists only of weapons and not also of education or programs leading to greater social cohesion.

While I see a great deal of good in some of the proposals that come under the general rubric of the Freeze, especially the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, I cannot help but be troubled by a question raised in a very courageous letter from Andrei Sakharov, the great Soviet scientist and even greater dissident, published in the *New York Times* on September 10, 1982.

Andrei Sakharov notes the recent increase in the Soviet armed forces, saying: "While the countries of the

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**“In that context, talking about peace and justice is redundant. The two are inseparable.”**

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West have weakened their defense efforts, the SS-20 missiles have changed the equilibrium in Europe, though those who take part in pacifistic demonstrations seem not to notice this fact.” What Dr. Sakharov is trying to tell us is that strategic disequilibrium in Europe, if frozen into relative permanency, could occasion a war which could escalate into the nuclear destruction of life as we know it.

Whether you prefer the NATO two-pronged decision of December, 1979, to introduce countermissiles while at the same time pressing for disarmament negotiations, the ones going ahead now in Geneva, or whether you can suggest a better way, you simply cannot ignore the question put to us by Dr. Sakharov. You cannot fail to ask what, in a world governed by fear and self-interest as our world is, would stimulate the Soviets to withdraw all or part of their SS-20s, except a deployment or the threat of a deployment on the other side. If there is a better basis on which to reduce this terrifying confrontation with the Soviets in Europe, I think all of us would like to hear it. I'm not hearing it, not from the Peace Movement anyway.

As the Peace Movement goes ahead and as these awkward questions have to be addressed, what are the answers it should be coming up with?

A first step is to sort out what we really mean by the word *peace*, which has a great many aspects.

There is peace in our hearts. It is that peace which, as all good Episcopalians know, passeth all understanding, and because it passeth all understanding, I am not about to try to define it for you. I think we all know what it means. We've all felt that inner peace at certain moments. It translates into a goal for the world,

which is not merely the reduction of conflict and violence and war but, on the positive side, the ability of persons and nations to fulfill themselves to the extent that their abilities allow, so long as they don't impinge on the rights of others to do the same.

In that context, talking about peace and justice is redundant. The two are inseparable. Peace can never mean "leave me in peace; I don't want to be involved." You probably remember the Kitty Genovese case: the lady in Flushing, raped and murdered outside her apartment while scores of tenants slammed their windows down. They didn't want to be involved. They only wanted to be left in peace.

In the face—excuse another old-fashioned expression—of our sinful natures, there are distasteful measures that have to be adopted in order to keep the peace; therefore, to use *peace* in the sense that a sheriff is a peace officer is perfectly legitimate. This is peacekeeping—the Marine captain in Lebanon who climbed on an Israeli tank and poked his pistol in the face of an Israeli lieutenant colonel who was probing the American resolve to keep the peace.

There is also peace as a process, as at Geneva. If the goal is a world in which force may not any longer be necessary, that does not mean that, in the process—which is negotiations but backed up by at least the threat of force—force is not an essential ingredient. Hence deterrence, and hence a strong defense posture, but always keeping clear the distinction between goal and process and insisting that governments give and manifest the highest priority to both.

I sometimes think that the Peace Movement is so concerned with the goal that they forget the importance of the process, but by exactly the

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## ... Peacemaker

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same token, we see in Washington an obsession with process, to the point where the goal is almost forgotten. You have to have both.

This hard-line view of the world, this old-fashioned theology—does that leave us with anything more to look forward to than a continuing arms race? Or, to state it another way, must Soviets be born-again Christians or join the Society of Friends if we are going to avoid a nuclear holocaust? I would say exactly the opposite. This hard-line formula provides the most effective kind of framework for peacemaking. All of us, persons and nations, are greedy. We want more than to which we are entitled, and if we are naturally inclined to conflict and violence and even war to obtain what we want, we can also learn to trade away what we least need to obtain what we most want.

We are talking about conflict reso-

interest, or mutual fear with the Soviets, but a lot more than opportunity, negotiating technique, or strength is required. We need, all of us, each one of us, a change in attitude. We need an increased recognition that there are no victories. We have to give if we want to get.

We accept this, way deep down, this idea of compromise, but we still haven't mastered it; we still like to win, even in personal relationships. (I think a nearly 50 percent divorce rate shows how imperfectly we have learned this, as well as other, very fundamental lessons.) We can compromise, if we want to—we accommodate in the business deal; we accommodate when we buy a house, we offer less than it's worth and the owner holds out for more than it's worth; less often, we accommodate in labor-management relations.

The trouble is that we Americans have another, different value system that cuts across the instinct to negotiate, which is best demonstrated by the word *loser*. Americans are brought up to be *winners*. I want to

Harvard, has pointed out that Americans tend to see international relations as planting Old Glory on top of Mt. Suribachi.

We've all heard words like *winnable* and *prevail*. Dwight Eisenhower said once that our defense posture had to be "adequate," adequate to ensure that no one would dare attack us or our allies. Dwight Eisenhower also admitted that adequate was not a very popular word with Americans. No American male likes to be told that he is merely adequate. Between *adequate* and *prevail* there is a major difference in attitude. The problem is that there is another superpower that is not about to be prevailed upon. We're talking about the destruction of our planet.

The other side of it is that words like *prevail* and *win* and *victory* appeal to another very great weakness that we Americans have, a reluctance to admit that we cannot have everything our own way. We want the world on terms familiar to us. We want to make, for example, the world "safe for democracy." We are exporting America at every stage. Why is that? Because basically we are an isolationist nation. Americans are not comfortable in foreign situations which they cannot control.

The desire to prevail, to have everything on our own terms, is a reflection of the fact that we can't cope on a one-to-one basis very easily, because we are basically isolationist. This is very deep in the American character. Indeed, the Peace Movement, as often we hear it expounded—a reluctance to address complexity, a denigration of international responsibilities: NATO, Japan, or whatever—partakes of this tendency. We all want to be left in peace; we don't want to be involved.

In this mirror image—American supremacy or isolationism—both sides of the problem reflect a lack of maturity. One test of that maturity I take to be how anyone feels about Iran or felt about it during the time when we were hostages. Was it, in the final analysis, a humiliation? How many people did you hear saying, "We should have 'nuked' Iran,"

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lution, which does not require a common moral universe to be shared by the parties in negotiation, but rather an identification of areas of mutual interest. A classic example comes from the negotiations with the Revolutionary Government of Iran. By September, 1980, that was a government for which our government had only animosity, and vice versa. The two were not on speaking terms in The United Nations, but we Americans held onto something to which we had no right, which were the Iranian financial assets. The Iranians held onto something to which they had no right, which was your lecturer, and—admittedly with a great deal of difficulty, perhaps only by a hair—the deal was struck.

There is nothing we cannot negotiate on the basis of strength, self-

ask any of you here who have had children and even those of you who are still in the university or school ambiance: When people come home from an athletic event, what is the very first question you ask? "Did you know the coach on the other side?" "Were the other team nice guys?" No, no. "How well did you play the game?" No. There is only one question I ask; I've got four boys: "Hey, did you win?"

Winning is the basis of excellence. It is winning that produces the Nobel Prize winner, the top-flight lawyer, the drive to excel, the A, the cup. But when you apply it to "abroad," you are in real trouble, because "abroad" is not a football field, and our prestige is not on the line every time we get into negotiations. John Mack, professor of psychiatry at

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**“We are all equally capable of cruelty and torture, mayhem, mass murder, and all the rest, and we have a long way to go.”**

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should have “turned Qum into a parking lot”? The extraordinary thing about this volatile nation of ours is that, about a year later, there were all these people demonstrating in Central Park for peace.

Of course we were willing to nuke Iran; Iran couldn't nuke us back. But was there another view you could take of the Iranian problem: that it was an occasion in which, with quiet strength, patience, skill, and flexibility, we negotiated our way out of a bad situation?

Our own leadership will have to respond to that kind of maturity of expectation, because it is something that Soviet leadership will have to respect. How alarming we must appear to them today: vacillating, volatile, slogan-minded. Upon our growing up, our real strength, will depend their confidence in agreements they may conclude with us, in our ability to keep the peace.

So far, I have been talking about conflict resolution, man's flawed nature. What about the good news: the Gospels, hope, faith, love? Do these figure into the peacemaking process?

Let me give you one story. Toward the end of our Iranian captivity, a fellow hostage, a Marine, remarked about the students who held us: “I wonder, if our roles were reversed, if we were the captors, if they were the captives, whether we would have treated them as well as they have treated us.” This was an extraordinary remark from a young man 21 years old, not because he was 21, but because he had been a real pain in the neck, totally macho, absolutely scornful of our nation's failure to rain nuclear destruction down upon the Iranians (and myself being in the target area, I had profound theological objections to his view). It was extraordinary, too,

because our treatment, in many ways, had not been all that good. We had, you know, the mock executions, the isolation from our families, and lots of things I don't even want to talk about.

Still, that Marine instinctively recognized something that the American people are only too apt to forget: We are all creatures of the Fall. We are all equally capable of cruelty and torture, mayhem, mass murder, and all the rest, and we have a long way to go.

That Marine was trying to say something else, too; something that, if I had accused him of it, I would have been in great danger of having my block knocked off. He was expressing the most difficult of all the sayings of Jesus: that we should love

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**“I would suggest, however, that the greatest strength we have is our cohesion as a nation that comes from shared goals and mutual understanding. . . .”**

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our enemies. Now, Jesus never said that they cease to be enemies. He never said that they were nice guys. (And our captors in Iran did indeed spitefully use us. They did not wish us well.) But our Christian obligation is to try to understand our enemies: where they come from, why they feel about us the way they do, what there is about us that makes them react the way they do.

Certainly, as we ponder—as we have to, realistically—the menace that the Soviets and others continue to present, we must never dehumanize them. We must never stereotype them with negatives that raise barriers to our capacity to deal with them as human beings in order to work for peace. We must understand that

there are human beings there, that they have their portion of the fears that we share.

Now, how does this rather personal view of peace—peace at every level of human transaction, peace in our hearts, peace within ourselves, our ability to come to terms with ourselves, with our neighbors, with our community, within our own nation—how does that relate to international peace? Where is the link? I have heard so many times: “Well, it's very well if we are going to talk about changing attitudes about the Russians, beginning with ourselves; we realize it's very important, but we are at five minutes to midnight. We are under a terrible nuclear threat.”

I would suggest, however, that the greatest strength we have is our cohesion as a nation that comes from shared goals and mutual understanding, that comes from a more cohesive, more integrated society. It depends on each of us being a peacemaker, being willing to reach

out and understand another's point of view, to work our ways of reconciliation and accommodation among ourselves.

As we learn to do this individually and in communities, so gradually will our nation, strong and flexible, become itself a peacemaker, so will it guarantee to our grandchildren's grandchildren that they, too, can live in peace.

**Moorhead Kennedy is executive director of the Council for International Understanding. He was one of the Americans held hostage by Iran in 1980. This address was given at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York.**

# Decisions and Growth

by Bob E. Adams

## A review/essay on development and moral values.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child: now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11, ASV). There is a difference between a child and an adult. Paul accents this in the areas of speaking, feeling, and thinking. There was a time, we are told, in the not distant past, when children were looked upon as miniature adults and the only growing up they would do would be physical. We are now discovering that not only do children differ from adults in physical size and strength but in other ways also. Not only do these differences exist between the child and the adult, but they shade into one another in ways that can be called developmental. I want to follow one area of development from earliest childhood into adulthood, indicate other areas of development, and finally draw some conclusions that can challenge us as we strive along with fellow believers toward an increasing maturity in Christ.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss student of the human psyche, watched children at play. They made up games along with the rules that governed their gaming. It seemed that one purpose of the rules was to ensure fairness. Piaget observed that as children grew older, their playing and rule-making followed predictable, sequential patterns.

Among the many who thought that Piaget’s observations and conclusions were very important was a young American philosopher-psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg. He took Piaget’s ideas, devised ways of testing children to find out where they were in the sequential patterning, and over a period of years tested the same group of people, first as children, then as youths, then as adults.

Kohlberg relied heavily on a certain concept of “justice as fairness,” which linked Piaget’s ideas with those of John Rawls, a philosopher at Har-



Adams

vard. Kohlberg’s quest was that of ascertaining whether or not humans develop a sense of justice, and if so, how did that sense develop. Although he was interested in how people act on their sense of justice, his major thrust centered in how people reason about what is just and fair.

Kohlberg has concluded, along with many others, that humans do—or at least *can*—develop in predictable, sequential stages in their reasoning about what is just and fair in life’s situations. There is nothing automatic about the development. It can be neither guaranteed nor forced. The stages through which one goes in the development of moral reasoning are usually correlated with the chronological age of the individual. However, one may stop—be arrested—in his development and remain at that stage for the remainder of his life.

Development in moral reasoning takes place in real life as one is confronted with dilemmas. A dilemma is a situation in which a person must choose between, or among, alternatives and no one choice completely satisfies his sense of what is right. One is discontent not only with the choices, but with one’s own reasoning about what is the right thing to

do. Fairness, justice, is frustrated in spite of the best insights and reasoning of which one is capable at the time. This happened in the case of Piaget’s children and their play, and it continued to happen in real life as Kohlberg observed children and youth.

However, as those children and youth observed and interacted with peers who were a bit more mature, they were attracted to the solutions to the dilemmas that their more mature peers developed. The younger, more immature ones began to “catch on” to a more satisfactory way of moral reasoning, and gradually began to reason that way themselves. Now they could function as kinds of models for those less developed. However, they had not yet “arrived,” a fact which further dilemma situations made clear. Development did not cease. Indeed, it seemed to be part of a lifelong process. They always needed to be around those whose sense of justice and fairness, and their reasoning about it, were more developed. “Becoming a man,” in the sense in which Paul used the phrase, is not a completely attainable goal in this life, but is one toward which the Christian continually strives.

Others picked up on the idea of development. Their names are legion and great: Arnold Gesell, Erik Erikson, James Fowler, Abraham Maslow, and Robert Selman, to name only a few. James Fowler is of particular importance because he works within a perspective which interests Christians: faith and its development. Fowler defines faith in such a way that it includes the basic life orientation of all persons. Then he searches for the possibility of the development of faith in sequential, stage-like processes much as Kohlberg searched for development in moral reasoning. Fowler’s conclusions also form part of a challenge to Christians.

Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler and oth-

ers are convinced that human beings are involved in lifelong processes of development in reasoning about fairness and justice, right and wrong, good and evil, chosen basic values in life, "faithing," and relating to significant others. For them, all people are engaged in such lifelong processes. And, for them, these processes are observable, therefore empirical, and inductively reached conclusions (always open-ended) may be arrived at about the processes.

In light of these ideas, concepts, and conclusions, what critical and reflective questions arise for the Christian? Is the Christian faith, with its history, its God, its Savior, its concepts of right and wrong and good and evil, just one option among other equally valid and good options?

The conclusions of the people mentioned are that their observations about lifelong development are universally valid, at least in the universe which they have tested. This universe includes not only Christians of every variety, but also Jews, Muslims, atheists, agnostics and totally secular persons. This universe also includes North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. These people conclude that there seems to be nothing unique about the process through which Christians develop that distinguishes them from other groups. However, this lack of uniqueness refers to the *process* and not to the *content* of the Christian faith.

Then, a secular problem arises in ethics, as old as is reflecting on right and wrong, good and evil: in what way can descriptive statements also be understood as prescriptive? If moral reasoning does in fact develop in the ways described, why should such development be understood as right or good? Why should we say that the direction in which we *do* go is the way in which we *should* go? Furthermore, what peculiar or unique thing happens to a person's moral reasoning process when he or she becomes a follower of Jesus?

Both theological and ethical questions have challenged Christians since the birth of the Christian faith.

They seem to come up every time the question of the relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths arises. The fact that they do arise at this juncture also should not prevent Christians from utilizing to the fullest those insights of Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler and others that do seem to be valid.

In the education of Christians—whether this be in Sunday School, other specifically church-related functions, college and university, or seminary—developmental concepts can provide us invaluable techniques and insights.

First, they provide tools to help us understand ourselves and one another. If I can understand how another person is reasoning about right and wrong, I as a teacher and fellow-learner, can both be of help and be helped. I will not be so tempted to label him, for he is not static, set, but rather at a certain stage which can lead on to a more mature Christian character.

Second, these concepts challenge us to understand that the Christian life is a whole, and that we progress, or stagnate, as whole beings. We cannot compartmentalize ourselves and our lives.

Third, they can help us immensely in understanding and working with children. Southern Baptists do not baptize babies, but some are baptizing children at ever younger ages. If we can better understand what children understand, we can be of better service to them as they respond to what we present. We may see the need to take more care in what we present to them and the manner in which we present it.

Fourth, and last, as we look at moral reasoning about right and wrong, good and evil, we are presented with our own dilemma in Christian education (and, indeed, perhaps in evangelism and discipleship): we have structured what we do into the most homogeneous groupings possible, by age, sex, educational level, interest groups, and the list goes on. If the concepts presented here are valid, we develop best not in homogeneous but in

heterogeneous groups, in the midst of those whose way of reasoning is *not* like ours (at least, not as yet). We need the fruitful tension of being with those like us and of being with those not like us, all within the Christian faith.

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# A Baptist Witness

by John Buchanan

Paul in Romans 13 describes the civil authorities as ministers of God. History has demonstrated, of course, that this is not an inherent quality of governments. Yet this passage should help us to see public service for what it can be: a Christian vocation.

Christians involved in shaping the Constitution and Bill of Rights were greatly influenced by the value ascribed in the Scriptures to each human being. Baptist statesmen helped to secure the guarantee of religious liberty in the Constitution's Bill of Rights. Previously, Baptists had experienced in Europe and the colonies both the evils of a state church and the need of people for the free exercise of their religious beliefs.

It is just as necessary today that governmental policies be set by those who have respect for the rights of each individual and who have caring and compassionate attitudes toward people.

Today, fewer Baptists are elected to office in the Congress of the United States than are members of other major Christian denominations. The number of Baptists in Congress is diminishing rather than growing.

In the 97th Congress, Baptists, with 27 million members, held 51 seats. Episcopalians, with 2.8 million members, held 72 seats; Methodists, with 12.7 million members, 74; Presbyterians, with 3.6 million members, 57; Roman Catholics, with 49.6 million, 136; and Jews, with 2.7 million, 33.

In the 98th Congress, Baptist membership in Congress had declined to 47 seats. The Episcopalians numbered 61. All other major religious groups increased in membership in Congress. United Methodists now have 73 members; Presbyterians, 56; Roman Catholics, 141; and Jews, 38.<sup>1</sup>

Once the most underrepresented group, Catholics have now increased their membership in the Congress

beyond their percentage of the population as a whole. In 1961 when John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic president, Catholics made up about 19 percent of the Congress. Today they comprise more than 26 percent of the Congress.

The number of Jews in the Congress has also continued to grow. During the same 22-year period Jewish membership in Congress grew from two percent to seven percent while comprising about three percent of the population of the United States.

By comparison, Baptists, who make up over 12 percent of the population, hold slightly less than nine percent of the seats in the Congress.

What factors have contributed to these shifts? With Roman Catholics, several factors are apparent. First, anti-Catholic sentiment on the part of the electorate has declined in recent years. Catholics have begun to move away from heavy concentration in big cities, increasing the number of districts with support for Catholic candidates. Catholics also seem to vote as a block more than do most other religious groups.

Several factors have contributed to the relatively small Congressional representation of Baptists when compared with other mainline Protestant groups. One reason for this can be found in the professional makeup of the Congress. Two hundred sixty-one members of Congress are lawyers, while business and banking account for another 174 members. The Southern Baptist Convention has always had a sizable number of its churches in farming and rural sections of our country. But with the growing membership of urban Baptist churches and with urban emphasis on professional training, the number of Baptists seeking public office might be expected to be increasing rather than to be declining.

Probably the greatest contributing factor lies in the lack of emphasis in Baptist churches on the important social issues with which governments must deal. During the 1960s, notwithstanding the courageous leadership of the late Brooks Hays and other statesmanlike leaders, Southern Baptists remained in the background comparatively while other mainline Christian bodies (including other Baptist groups) became active in issues such as civil rights for minorities, equality under the law for women, and the need to bring those born in poverty into the mainstream of American life. Indeed, one could reasonably maintain that the civil rights movement in the United States was born in the Christian church, especially black Baptist churches of the deep South.

Young people growing up in a church environment which stresses these ethical issues more frequently regard a career in public service as a Christian vocation than those who have little exposure to these great ethical issues. Certainly if our young people are to grow up to be the leaven in political life, they must be encouraged to consider public service as a means by which a Christian can act out the commands of our Lord to care for his people.

Our country does not need a Baptist political party or a Christian political party. But Baptists do need to involve themselves more significantly as citizens of a free society in its politics and its government. The need is urgent. The time is now.

<sup>1</sup>"Religious Affiliations of Members of Congress," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1983, B6.

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# Cable TV: Dangerous to Health

by James M. Wall

The pollution of our natural environment is now controlled by strict laws and regulation. But still largely unchecked is the pollution of children's minds by television programs full of sex and violence. Ironically, those who have crusaded vigorously against corporate polluters of nature

are rated "restricted" by the motion-picture industry. Most cable services also piously promise that they will show no "restricted" pictures until after 9 P.M.—a ridiculous evasion, since late bedtimes and lack of parental supervision often make that time restraint a mockery.

companies are hiding behind a system that was not designed for them. A film labeled PG (parental guidance suggested) contains material that the film industry acknowledges may not be suitable for people under 17 and that almost always is unsuitable for young children. But such pictures will air over TV at all hours of the day. Unless parents have extraordinary control over viewing, films labeled PG may be watched by tots and teenagers alike. The R-rated films (restricted to those over 17 unless they are "accompanied by parent") are available on cable after the dinner hour. These pictures, as viewers of such recent films as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* can attest, often contain *explicitly* sexual scenes.

The cynical attitude of the cable industry is most visible in the so-called "guides" sent to subscribers each month. There are no references to the ratings in most of these guides and the short descriptions of the films are always "puffs" rather than explanations. Only "adult" channels clearly identify program content, doing so for promotional reasons. Parents who buy these channels know what they are bringing into their homes. But other cable networks pretend that their purpose is "entertainment" as they fill their 24-hour outlets with pictures that, in an increasingly competitive market, are increasingly violent and sexually explicit.

There is no serious First Amend-

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**“Because television gives unrestricted access to films, the cable companies are hiding behind a system that was not designed for them.”**

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have been reluctant to move against corporate giants who make enormous profits through what they display on home screens. This hesitancy is caused by a distaste for censorship.

It is time to recognize that those companies that supply movies and other programs to cable operators and that have established a monopoly over program content are hiding behind the First Amendment in order to push far beyond the bounds of common decency in what they sell as entertainment. Network and local commercial television, although no bastions of virtue, have at least functioned within certain restraints set by taste and community standards as they established their own standards of what is appropriate for public viewing.

But the major suppliers to cable companies—Home Box Office, Cinemax, Showtime—claim absolute freedom to put anything on the air without regard for the damage they may inflict on the human environment. HBO, the leader in the field, is owned by Time, Inc., and has filled the coffers of that publishing giant by giving us, among other offerings, nonstop profanity and sexual innuendo from nightclub comics.

HBO, along with its competitors, claims to meet its responsibility to the public by supplying a mild reminder that some of its pictures

Major suppliers sell their products to local companies, who in turn convince community leaders to let them have a franchise by promising channels devoted to local programming. Tempted by visions of having their eloquent city council speeches beamed into every home, few public servants can resist looking the other way when contracts are signed. The result: almost unlimited freedom for cable operators to flood homes with films and programs that were clearly not intended for such unrestricted viewing.

Motion picture ratings—G, PG, R and X—are designed to alert parents to the content of films playing in local theaters. *They are not intended as guides in home viewing.* By giving a rating to a picture, the film industry says that it may be displayed in theaters, provided that its proper audience is identified. First estab-

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**“Cable operators use the public airways, and polluting American homes with damaging material is not an unlimited right.”**

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lished in 1968, the system, for all its loopholes, at least gives people some indication of what to expect when they enter a public theater.

Because television gives unrestricted access to films, the cable

ment issue at stake here. Cable operators use the public airways, and polluting American homes with damaging material is not an unlimited right. The First Amendment may

(continued on page 12)

