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PREACHERS AND POLITICS

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By Robert L. Dabney<sup>1</sup>

**T**he appropriate mission of the minister is to preach the gospel for the salvation of souls. The servant who, by diverging into some other project not especially enjoined on him, nor essential for him to perform, precludes himself from his allotted task, is clearly guilty of disobedience to his master, if not of treason to his charge. Now, questions of politics must ever divide the minds of men; for they are not decided by any recognized standards of truth, but by the competitions of interest and passion. Hence, it is inevitable that he who embarks publicly in the discussion of these questions must become the object of party animosities and obnoxious to those whom he opposes. How then can he successfully approach them as the messenger of redemption? By thus transcending his proper functions, he criminally prejudices his appointed work with half the community, for the whole of which he should affectionately labour.

God has reserved for our spiritual concerns one day out of seven, and has appointed one place into which nothing shall enter, except the things of eternity, and has ordained an order of officers, whose sole charge is to remind their fellow-men of their duty to God. Surely, it is a tribute small enough to pay the transcendent weight of eternal things, to reserve the season and the place sacredly to them, which God has set apart for them. This surely is not too much for resisting the tendencies of man toward the sensuous and toward forgetfulness of the spiritual life. But when the world sees a portion or the whole of this sacred season abstracted from spiritual concerns, and given to secular agitations, and that by the appointed guardians of sacred things, it is the most emphatic possible disclosure of unbelief. It says to men, “Eternity is not of more moment than time; heaven is not better than earth; a man is profited if he gains the world and loses his soul, for do you not see that we postpone eternity to time, and heaven to earth, and redemption to political triumph—we who are the professed guardians of the former?” One great source, therefore, of political preaching may always be found in the practical unbelief of [the preacher] himself; as one of its sure fruits is infidelity among the people. He is not feeling the worth of souls, nor the “powers of the world to come,” nor “the constraining love of Christ” as he should; if he were, no sense of the temporal importance of his favorite political measures, however urgent, would cause the wish to abstract an hour from the few allowed him for saving souls. We solemnly protest to every minister who feels the impulse to introduce the secular into his pulpit, that he thereby betrays a decadent faith and spiritual life in his own breast. Let him take care! He is taking the first steps toward backsliding, apostasy, damnation.

Weak defences of this abuse have been attempted. It is asked, “Is not the minister also a citizen?” The answer is, “He is a citizen only at the hustings, and on a secular day. In the pulpit he

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<sup>1</sup> From “Political Preachers,” *The Texas Presbyterian* (May 4, 1894): 1 and “The Gospel Idea of Preaching,” *Presbyterial Critic* 1:7 (July 1855): 315-319.

is only the ambassador of Christ.” It is urged again, that Peter, Paul, and the Lord Jesus Christ, taught political duties. We reply: Would that these pests of modern Christianity had truly imitated them; had taken not only their texts, but their discourses from them, instead of deriving the latter from the newspapers. Let them do as the sacred writers do: teach the duties of allegiance from the Christian side and motive only, “that the word of God and his Gospel be not blasphemed.” Another plea is, that Christianity is designed to produce important collateral results on the social order of nations; as that the social order reacts on Christianity. The answer is twofold: that these secular results are the minor, the eternal redemption of souls is the chief end of God in his Gospel. He is a criminal servant who wilfully sacrifices the less to the greater. Second, the only innocent way (as the most efficient) in which the minister of religion can further these secular results, is so to preach each man’s own sins and redemption to him as to make him personally a holy man. When society is thus purified, by cleansing the integral individuals who compose it, then, and then only, will the social corruptions of commonwealths be effectually purged away.

If the example of Christ and his apostles were correctly weighed, it would be a sufficient guide to all other ministers. They lived in a time of intense party agitation. The Jewish commonwealth was then divided by a question, the most momentous that could fire the heart of a nation—whether their divinely-ordained constitution was compatible with their subjugation by a Pagan empire? This question was everywhere hotly debated; it was rapidly growing into that war which a generation later brought the end of the Hebrew commonwealth. We know that neither Jesus nor Paul was insensible to patriotism. The former wept over the approaching ruin of his country; the latter declared himself ready to die for his compatriots; yet, such is their reserve on the question in their religious teachings, that the unlearned reader of the New Testament is left in actual ignorance of its existence, except that at once it is forced upon our Saviour’s attention by a direct inquiry. And then so small does this great secular interest appear beside the eternal errand which he came to subserve, he devotes only a part of one sentence to the former, reverting even before he ends it to the more absorbing concerns of the soul. Let his ministers imitate him.

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**T**he preacher’s business is just to show the people what is in the Bible,” as God has there set it forth. This principle cuts up by the roots the whole fashion of “preaching up the times,” as it was quaintly called by our Scotch forefathers. If the preacher’s business is the redemption of the soul, and his instrument is the Bible truth, it is plain that he has no business in the pulpit with Nebraska bills, Abolitionism, politics, Eastern questions, and all the farrago of subjects with which infidel ministers of Christianity essay to eke out, as they suppose, the deficient interest and power of the message of salvation. The preacher’s business in the pulpit is to make Christians, and not to make free-soilers, Maine-law-men, statesmen, historians, or social philosophers. His message from the pulpit is that which God has put into his mouth, and nothing else.

The question may be asked: “Are Bible principles never to be applied, then, to the correction of the social evils of the day by those who are the appointed expounders of the Bible?” So far as God so applies them in the Bible, yes; but no farther. Let the preacher take the application of the principles, as well as the principles applied, from the word of God; let him take, not only his starting position but his whole topics, from God’s word, and he will be in no danger of incurring that sarcasm, as biting as it is just, directed against those who “take their texts from the Bible, and their sermons from the newspapers.” Many preachers seem to think that if it is a scriptural prin-

ciple which they use, it matters not how unscriptural or extra-scriptural is the use which they make of it. They forget that it does not follow, because a man has drawn his weapon from the king's armory, that therefore he is fighting the king's battle; soldiers have sometimes used the sovereign's arms to fight duels with each other.

It may be asked again: "Is the preacher to forego and disuse all that influence for social good which his Christian intelligence gives him? Has he ceased to be a citizen and patriot because he has become a minister? No. But when he appears in the pulpit he appears not as a citizen but as God's herald. Here is a very simple and obvious distinction much neglected. The other channels of patriotic influence are open to him which other citizens use, so far as he may use them without prejudice to his main calling. To cleave to this alone is made his obvious duty by three reasons.

The importance of the soul's redemption is transcendent. All social evils, all public and national ends, sink into trifles beside it. Hence God's ministers owe this practical tribute and testimony at least to this great truth; to devote all the machinery and power of religious ordinances—that single domain into which the all-engrossing world does not intrude—to this one grand object. That minister is false to truth and to his Master who says by his conduct that there is anything on earth important enough to subtract one atom of sacred time or sacred ordinances from their one great object.

Again, by securing the redemption of the soul, the preacher will secure all else that is valuable in his hearers. Let him make good Christians, and all the rest will come right without farther care. If we have a nation of Bible Christians, we shall have without trouble all the social order, liberty, and intelligence we need.

And last, he who undertakes the work of the social philosopher, the legislator, the politician, will diminish his energies, zeal, time, and influence for promoting his higher object. He will waste on the less those energies of head and heart which were all needed for the greater. He will shut up his access for good to all the minds which are opposed to him on these secular questions, and thus incur a hindrance which will incapacitate him for his own Master's work, by undertaking work which belonged to other people. What is this but treason?