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Where Should Church
Draw Line On Its Use?

(Editor's Note: This is the first of four articles dealing with forces which would use the churches. In this one, the writer surveys the field and names several groups by name.)

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Should pastors be asked to read Labor Day messages or preach sermons about highway safety?

Should the church permit community organizations to insert promotional articles in the church bulletin?

Should a church building become a civil defense shelter?

To what extent should the spiritual and physical resources of a church be lent to the support of society's causes?

Churches are clearly "useful" to many forces in society.

The Texas State AFL-CIO, for example, distributed a "Labor Sunday Message for Baptist Churches" with the request that it be "read in the churches" on Labor Sunday.

Similar efforts have been made by management.

The National Association of Manufacturers, through its Clergy-Industry Relations Department, publishes a monthly newsletter featuring news from the religious world subtly interspersed with conservative economic philosophy.

Other NAM bids for pulpit influence are made through the organization's Clerical Advisory Council.

The last presidential election saw both major political parties attempt to use the churches to gain votes. Although it was widely denied, there is little doubt that the religious issue was inserted by Democrats and Republicans alike.

During the heat of the 1960 campaign, a visitor in some churches might have thought he was witnessing a gathering of one of the political parties for prayer!

Numerous other examples could be cited to reveal society's efforts to use the churches. "Soil Conservation Sunday" is observed, complete with a suggested sermon from the federal Soil Conservation Service. The National Safety Council urges pastors to preach sermons on safety. Various social service projects are promoted through bulletin inserts.

Community charity drives, civil defense programs, anti-Communist organizations, citizens councils, temperance movements, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts--all these have used some church facilities.

What principles should guide cooperative ventures between the church and the culture in which it exists and to which it bears its witness?

The basic concern here is the church's relationship to society. The gospel must be preached in specific cultural situations; the problem is to ascertain the will of God concerning the approach.

Throughout Christian history, the relationship between believers and the world has been a continuing problem.

The early church experienced considerable tension with society because of the single-mindedness of the early disciples in declaring the judgment of God on the world's values. Obeying God rather than men, the early Christians never expected all men to speak well of them.

This tension with the world was redemptive in nature. The disciples' purpose was not just to be an unpopular irritant in society, but to be used of God to transform mankind. It was by their rigid and radical refusal to conform to the world that the first believers transformed their world.

Men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, William Boothe and the early Baptists in Virginia were in the New Testament tradition when they created a redemptive tension with the world. Society reacted against these radically committed Christians and rarely attempted to use them.

The Roman emperor Constantine was one of the earliest to recognize the propaganda potential of Christianity. Weary of the long history of persecuting Christians, the wily emperor embraced Christianity and sought to use the church for his own purposes. He succeeded remarkably, and the Dark Ages followed.

Throughout church history, other forces have sought to give the impression of divine sanction on their causes by using the churches. Kings asserted their "divine right" to rule and received their crowns from bishops. Henry VIII sought to use the church to justify his divorce and remarriage.

Hitler used many of the German churches to propagate his Nazi theories. Mao Tse-Tung attempts to bend the churches in China to the sinister purposes of communism.

In contemporary American life, vested interests have tried to use the churches to lend sanction to an oppressive status quo in race relations or to propagate a particular economic theory. A magazine called Christian Economics seems to equate a conservative economic view with the will of God!

The modern politician is prone to use the church to gain votes, the salesman or professional man to use the church for "prospects" and the humanitarian to use the church for needed support.

A fundamental conclusion is that every church should continually reexamine its relationship to the society in which its witness is given. Is that redemptive tension mentioned earlier a reality?

Perhaps the best index of the real church-society relationship is to be found in the ways the culture seeks to use the church.

The fundamental problem is not inserts in the church bulletin, Girl Scouts in the church basement or sermons on safety in the church worship service.

The larger consideration is whether the world looks at the church of Jesus Christ as a means to some more important end.

In a day when religion is popular but Christianity subversive, believers need to remember that the goal of the church is the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. This is infinitely more than promoting worthy causes or even defending "the American way of life."

Though it can never fully succeed in accomplishing it in history, the church seeks to create a society which approximates the divine ideal. To allow the church of the living God to be used for anything less is to be guilty of blasphemy.

Next article: "Is the church a donkey or an elephant?"