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THE CHRISTIAN IN POLITICS

A Draft Speech Prepared According to the Instructions of
The Honorable Robert Dole

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History and Government Division
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THE CHRISTIAN IN POLITICS

Perhaps it would have startled some of you if I had entitled this talk, "Politics as an Aspect of the Christian Ministry." I do believe, however, that it would have been a fair characterization. You know, of course, that every Christian must, to some extent, be a minister. It is the duty of each one of us to try to spread the Gospel to those who have not heard its divine message, and to help and encourage our fellow-Christians in their effort to live good Christian lives. Not ordained ministers only, but all who profess the religion of Christ, have this privilege and this duty. It was, as is well known to members of this gathering, upon the enthusiastic following-out of this principle that John and Charles Wesley had their sharpest disagreement with the authorities of the Church of England.

I believe, therefore, that the layman, whatever his occupation or profession, must seek opportunities to serve Christ and his fellow-man, and thus act, humbly but as effectively as possible, as a Christian minister. It is my task, in this brief talk, to set forth some of my thoughts on the ways in which a politician, without violating either the practical rules of politics, or the American principle of separation of church and state, may thus serve. As you know,

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ordained ministers of various denominations have served in the legislatures of the various States, and in the Congress of the United States. Some are so serving now. It is my contention that these ordained ministers can be serving the cause of God, and advancing the Christian virtues among the people, in these political posts as well as when devoting their full time to a single congregation.

The first duty of the Christian, clerical or lay, is to set an example of Christian behavior in all things. Naturally, there is a pitfall for him right there. If he thinks he is setting such an example, in all that he does, it is likely that he is falling victim to the kindred sins of pride and hypocrisy. Which sin preponderates depends chiefly on how thoroughly he is fooling himself! A self-righteous pose is not what I wish to recommend, by any means. But virtue, for the Christian, is not any pose or posture. It is not a constant condition or nature, but a state of striving. If I am constantly trying my very best to do right, in my family life, in my business relations, and in my profession as a legislator -- then that example is worthy of imitation, whatever may be the flaws in my attainment of the moral goals I set for myself.

The second duty of the Christian is to be ready to speak out for his convictions. Of course, a representative body like a legislature, in our pluralistic society, is no place for any sort of denominational preaching. But it is the place for

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forceful speaking based on sound moral convictions. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," (Matthew, vii, 34). You need not, and you should not, sound "preachy," but all that you say, like all that you do, should be soundly based upon a firm moral judgment.

It is damaging to America, and it is damaging to the cause of religion in America, that so many people accept the casual judgment that politics is a dirty business; that a politician is not to be trusted; and that religion and politics, like religion and business, "don't mix." If your business can't stand the white searchlight of religion shining on it -- if it is not, in fact, conducted in accordance with the moral principles inculcated in the Christian religion -- then it is indeed a dirty business, and you had better get out of it, or go to work to reform it. This applies quite as truly to politics. A man in political life who proceeds with a firm determination to be honest and morally upright in every contingency may well, at some time in his career, come up against a moral decision where the right action means political suicide. A selection of such dramatic cases formed the substance, as you will recall, of President Kennedy's book, Profiles in Courage. But what is asked of the Christian politician is not simply that he go down nobly to defeat. That would be gallant, but ineffectual. These cases of political defeat for virtue's sake are like our cases of military defeat for the

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country's sake. These events are the Alamo's and Corregidors of Christian politics.

It is the duty of the Christian in politics to work effectively to advance the coming of the kingdom of God and His justice upon earth. He must work with the clear and bold realization that defeat is possible, of course, and with the acceptance of that possibility -- but victory, not defeat, is his goal. Edmund Burke once said that it was the duty of a man in politics, not merely to strive for the right, but to make the right prevail. The practical means of doing this will include measures that have, unreasonably, a bad odor among men -- bargain and compromise. Actually, bargain and compromise are the way, the only way, of reaching agreement among free men of differing opinions. To fight on to inevitable defeat in championing an unrealizable ideal is no service to either God or man, but an actual betrayal of a good cause. The Christian position in politics, like the position prevailing in the American tradition, is a position of give and take, of willingness to listen as well as to speak, ~~of willingness to concede to opponents, not only the good faith of their convictions, but the possibility that their opinions may be quite correct -- or~~ that justice may best be served by a modification of extreme positions.

and
the realization

To put it simply, I think a politician's Christian duty, in matters of disagreement and controversy, is to speak honestly,

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to listen attentively, to give humble ear to his opponents, in the realization that he may perhaps be mistaken, and to judge all matters that come to his attention on the combined basis of abstract justice, the good of the country, and the benefits of his district and State. In this, as in all matters of human life, a man will find plenty of occasions of doubt. There will be times when he will be undecided as to which of several possible courses is morally best -- or as to what moral good, clearly perceived as such, may be capable of attainment. But for the Christian, there is always open the refuge of prayer and meditation, and always available the strengthening aid of God's grace.

But the Christian politician is not always acting in politics, running for office, debating measures, or deliberating and voting. There are other aspects of life in which he may make himself seen and heard, and be fully effective, not only as a man of Christian convictions, but as an adherent and advocate of his particular denomination. I mean that, away from legislative halls and political occupations, he may speak as man to man among his friends, and as a father to his children, of Christian truths and principles. In such a context, a man may, without pride or boasting, use his prestige as a holder of political office, and his experience and ability as a speaker, in order to attain his fullest effect in giving his Christian message.

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I am deeply pleased that Members of Congress, in great numbers, take part in such activities as the Prayer Breakfasts sponsored by the International Christian Leadership, both for the Senate and the House, and that numerous Members teach Sunday school classes, either of children or of adults. This work of Christian self-improvement, in the fellowship of Prayer Breakfasts, and of Christian education, in the Sunday school classes, is a religious activity of a high order, and I am delighted to be able to report to you that many Congressmen engage regularly in one or both of these activities.

One of the rules about the Prayer Room in the Capitol is that no report is ever made, by anyone or to anyone, about who uses the room or how many people use the room. The room is there, however, provided by Act of Congress, furnished and decorated in accordance with the plan accepted by representatives of three major faiths, and available for prayer and meditation whenever a Member wishes to use it. I think it is quite right that no count is kept, of visitors to that room, and no identities recorded. We live too much with statistics, and perhaps the lack of statistics in such a matter will help us to realize that, in such a matter as man's relationship with God, statistics sink into complete unimportance. What is the value of one man's prayer? Multiply that unknown by the unknown number of those who pray, and you will have a meaningless answer. Let the count of prayers, and the count of

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people, belong solely to God, like the evaluation and the answering of prayers. This is as it should be. It is enough for us to know, as evidence of the value placed on prayer by Members of Congress, that enough men have wished such a place of quiet devotion, reserved for their use, to plan and work for its completion. It stands, in simple dignity and beauty, as a token before all men of the compatibility of prayer and politics.

Everyone is, in some sense, and to some extent, a teacher. Those of us who are family men are placed by circumstances in a position where teaching becomes of prime importance. It is necessary for the Christian politician who is a family man to watch his own behavior, and his own conversation, with super-alert vigilance, that his teaching of his own children, by word and by deed, may be worthy of the best ideals he knows. It is easy to slip, in the heat of a political campaign, into vindictive words, into attitudes of anger and hatred, into actions tinged with malice or dishonesty.

You who have families, and engage in politics, might as well reconcile yourselves to the fact that you will be surrounded by what I might call "assistant consciences." If you do not notice where you are going wrong, there are those in your family who will notice, and either think the less of you, and perhaps of the religion you have been trying to teach, or glide smoothly into the dangerous opinion that these moral evils are

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necessary, or not so bad after all, or otherwise to be excused in one engaged in a political battle. The fact is that the political battle, like any other battle fought by a good man, must be fought strongly but fairly. Your teaching of moral principle to your children will be undercut and vitiated by any failure to live up to it in practice, but will be immeasurable bolstered up and strengthened if your children see you taking these principles seriously enough to live by them in strict honesty.

The same thing is true, though of less immediate impact, of your teaching in Sunday school, of the Christian influence you may wield in any such organization as the Scouts, the YMCA, or various other recreational and youth-building activities. Much of our best teaching, certainly, can be done without mentioning a word of faith and doctrine. Living our faith is the essential for our own salvation, and living our faith is the way in which we can most effectively teach it to those around us. One who is a politician has put himself, for better or worse, before the public. His life is, to some extent, open and generally observed. This fact makes any evident wrong-doing, or even any failure to attain the highest and heroic virtue, harmful at once to his personal reputation and to the position, in the eyes of the world, of the Christian denomination to which he belongs. But, by the same token, the politician is in a position, by taking the difficult path of virtue, to make both

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his own character and the reputation of his church stand in good repute among his neighbors. Here is the danger, and the opportunity, of the Christian in politics.