

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

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H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

The involvement of the church in social and political problems

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1. The church has been charged with only one commission by its risen and ascended Lord: to preach the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to a lost and dying world (Matt 28:18–20; John 20:21–23; 1 Cor 2:2; 2 Cor 5:19–21, etc), and to lead those who have heeded this message to a life of faith, love, and hope in the world, in which by their faith they have become strangers and pilgrims (Rom 12:1,2; 1 Cor 13:13; Eph 4:13–16; 1 Pet 1:11,12).
2. The proper ordering of the world in which Christians are strangers and pilgrims has been given by God to various structures of society, chiefly to the home and the state (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Tim 2:1,2; 1 Pet 2:13–15; Eph 6:1–3). In these structures all people are to participate in various ways, Christians included.
3. However, the functions of church and the structures of society are different in nature and in the way in which they are carried out. The church's function is carried out by the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments; the ordering of society by the exercise of reason and the use of power. Only harm can result if the different roles of church and state, different but also complementary, are not observed and kept distinct. Confusion of the two leads directly to various evils: either church or state becomes an oppressive power, or both do; the church loses its reason for existence (Matt 22:21).
4. The church exerts its influence on society through its nurture and instruction of its people, as it teaches them God's will concerning the state and society and as it relies on the power of the regenerate heart (the Spirit) in its people to lead them to appropriate action. Although it could be said that this influence is an indirect one, it is no less real and powerful for that fact.
5. The church as such has no special power to legislate on any political question or problem. Nor has it the right to endeavour to exert political pressure, for instance, by forming a political party or by lobbying or by instructing its members how they must

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vote in political elections or referendums. Its members must act together with all members of society to do what is possible in each political case on the basis of what reason suggests and the power available permits. The church as such can and should, of course, point quite distinctly to the will of God (the Law) to which all people, including all those in authority, should be obedient. This prophetic function the church dare not neglect (Isa 56:9–12).

6. This basic principle (i.e. sections 3–5) holds also in respect of social problems. Some of these involve the moral law and the church must not fail to bear witness to God's will where that will is quite plain. Many other social problems call for the exercise of love. In these the church as a corporate body, and not only through its members, can and should act when emergencies are there and when society as a whole in any particular place is unaware of the problem or incapable of action in relation to it. Examples of such action are church activities in providing education or health services and medical care, or poor relief in backward or temporarily disorganised and helpless areas. This work may become unnecessary as society becomes more aware of, or more capable of meeting, its responsibilities, and as a whole does what the church has previously done in a vicarious capacity.