



## CHRISTIAN SERVICE IS NOT A PARACHURCH ACTIVITY (Summer 1986)

By James W. Skillen

The prefix *para* means alongside of, or beside. It characterizes something that may be auxiliary or supplemental to something else. A paramedic is someone who assists a medical professional. A parasite is something that lives off something else.

In the New Testament, the believers in Christ are variously referred to as the people of God, the bride of Christ, the house or temple of God, the Church and the body of Christ. In this sense, the Church is the body of believers in an all-encompassing sense. Everything they are and do belongs to Christ. Their lives are being totally renewed and redirected as His new people. Therefore, when Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus or Corinth, he addresses their family relations, their business activities, their political responsibilities—everything.

Over the past centuries the word Church has come to have other meanings and designations. Most frequently today it refers to a building, to a denominational institution, or to a particular set of activities and functions connected with worship and church officials. This is far too restricted to bear the meaning of “the people of God,” or “the bride of Christ” or the “Church.”

Today we also use the word *parachurch* to refer to a host of organizations and activities including independent evangelistic and mission organizations, publications, youth clubs, and dozens more. All of these may be quite worthy of praise for what they do, but referring to them as “parachurch” helps to reinforce a very problematic mindset among Christians. We are in the habit of dividing life between “church-related” (or “sacred”) activities and “secular” areas such as our economic, political, educational and entertainment activities. This falsely divides human life into two worlds. Implicitly, if not intentionally, we disconnect Christ from a large part of His world. We deny the meaning of Christ’s lordship over His entire creation.

Then, when we want to overcome this false dualism, we try to connect a “sacred” part with a “secular” part of life. This is the origin of some of the so-called parachurch organizations. They arise from the felt need to relate Christianity to an area of life that is not very “sacred” in our experience. Yet most often the effort ends up being little more than

attaching prayer, personal fellowship, or evangelism to the “secular” activity without doing much to alter or effect the way we function in that arena itself.

As Christians, we do not, for the most part, distinguish ourselves in the way we carry out our economic or political or entertainment lives. We live as Christian “parasites” on the supposedly secular world. We take for granted our jobs, governments, newspapers, television shows and fast-food restaurants as if they have no specifically Christian meaning, no ultimate value before God. Hanging on like parasites and taking what we can, we give serious Christian attention to only a few “sacred” activities.

When we feel compelled to act as Christians in the “secular” world, we then try to attach something “sacred” to the “secular” activity. In other words, we attach a “Christian” parasitic organization to the university, or the business, or the media or the political institutions, while leaving those institutions themselves unexamined, unreformed and, in some cases, untouched.

Law and politics (or anything else in creation) should not be treated this way. Nothing in this world is truly disconnected from God, from His word, from His call to do justice. In everything you do, says Paul, do all to the glory of God. There is nothing “secular” in this world. Everything is religious in the sense of being directly open before the will and word of God—open to His judgment and blessing.

*Christian* service in the legal profession, therefore, ought to be offered by asking how the law should be made and used to serve God and neighbor according to his standards of justice. The law has to be taken seriously on God’s terms. It must not be treated as a disconnected “secular” activity to which we attach ourselves as “Christian” parasites along for the ride. Nor may we treat law as something that can be approached merely with “parachurch” activities, such prayer meetings, Bible studies, and fellowship meetings. Genuine Christian service in law and politics is simply the effort to obey God inside the full reality of law and government. Christian political or legal service should be the body of Christ acting obediently in the public arena of life.

A Christian family does not consist of a parasitic hour of devotions attached to a godless lifestyle among father, mother and children. Christian farming is not prayer and gospel singing on the tractor while the farmer destroys his soil, pollutes his water and sells spoiled grain. There simply is no honest and legitimate way to live before the face of God with a “para-” mentality. Either all of life is God’s or it is not. If it is, then we must live that life according to the standards God has given us for every part of it, taking seriously farming and family, business and entertainment, politics and law, each in its own right, each on God’s terms.

Churches or groups of Christians should not create “parachurch” organizations in order to approach politics, law, business and the media. All that is needed is for Christians to act together with communal responsibility in their legal, political and economic lives as direct servants of God, in direct response to his mandates. Such action is not “alongside” or “beside” anything. It is *inside* the reality of *being* God’s people in *His* world.

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