

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 19, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

In America today we place great emphasis upon polls. The Gallop Poll, the Harris Poll and others are widely known throughout the entire population. A carefully selected cross-section of the people is asked to give its opinion concerning political candidates, political issues and many other matters. The techniques involved in poll-taking have been so carefully refined that the results suggest quite accurately the attitudes of the entire population of the nation.

But just why are we concerned here and now with the matter of opinion polls? Simply because these polls tend not only to measure public opinion, but also to foster public opinion. The results of this whole system is that many people check to see who the front-runners are in politics and then follow the crowd. Everyone likes to support a winner, so the polls actually help to determine the winner. In the realm of television, for example, the Nielson Ratings are widely influential. It is my conviction that when "Bonanza" was declared to be the most popular program on television, it then was even more widely seen because of the influence of the poll itself. In still another field, one automobile manufacturer advertises that its product has been first in number of sales for almost a score of years. When this fact is advertised, as it is from coast to coast, it tends to attract still other buyers, who want to buy the leader. My whole point is that public opinion polls tend to have significant influence in causing other people to "follow the crowd."

We are all aware that the news not only reports happenings, but also causes happenings. The behavior of certain people in one place (usually it is deviant behavior or unusual behavior, or else it is not news) is immediately known everywhere and immediately influences other people. As a case in point, we would cite the student uprisings around the world. They were widespread in South America a short time ago. Then, we read of them in Japan. The youth bands in Red China were reported to be powerful in their high handed destruction of that with which they disagreed. Students in Czechoslovakia had a primary role in changing the philosophy of government.

Then, we were startled to read of students closing down certain American universities for periods of time. More recently, staid, huge Columbia University in New York has had some of its students take over its administration building and reverse certain policies of the university. Now, this week, the most widespread student uprisings of all have occurred in Paris. Does anyone doubt that the present uprisings in Paris have been spawned by the uprisings in other parts of the world? "Everybody's doing it" is an old phrase, with an ever more significant meaning. People follow people. Man tends to do what he sees others doing. Now let us look at something else.

The Gracchi Brothers

One hundred years B. C., Tiberius and Gaius Graccho, prominent brothers in the Roman Republic, led a movement in revolt against the absolute power of the Roman Emperor and in the direction of democratic action. They choose as their motto "Vox Populi Vox Dei." Translated this says, "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Their meaning was simply that the voice of the people was right. The same slogan was used in the French Revolution and also in a revolution in England, led by "the Diggers and Levellers." Both were radical democratic movements challenging the divine right of kings.

We in America, in our vigorous emphasis on democracy and the rights of man, find this expression much to our liking. Actually, the most efficient and best form of government is a monarchy. This is the ideal, because of its efficiency and quickness of action, but there is one unsurmountable problem: the monarch soon becomes a despot, or a tyrant. Power corrupts. No man is wise enough and good enough to rule great masses of people. The world has seen such despots as Louis XIV and Henry VIII, as well as the dictators of ancient and modern times. So, the best safeguard is to lodge the ultimate authority with the people. In politics it is true, "the voice of the people is the voice of God."

However, what is true in the political realm is not true in the religious realm. When we leave the realm of human government, and move into the realm of ethical and moral and religious truth, we do not find that the opinions of the people determine that which is true and right. Here, the voice of the people is not the voice of God. The people have often been far from the will of God.

Biblical Examples

In thinking through the history of man as recorded in the Bible, we discover that often the people were in direct opposition to the will of God. In the early chapters of Genesis we read about the creation of man. Then, in Genesis 6: 5-6, we read, "And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented Jehovah that he had made man on the earth." Many centuries later, after Israel had become a kingdom, we find them in revolt against God as they fled from Egypt into the wilderness. Numbers 21:5 reads, "And the people apace against God, and against Moses. Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, and there is no water; and our soul loatheth this light bread."

A little later we read of further rebellious attitudes at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as the people waited for Moses to return with God's law, "And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him...And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt-offerings, and brought peace-offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play...And Jehovah said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiffnecked people." (Ex. 32:1, 6, 9).

Still later, when the Israelites had been brought into the promised land, they were enamoured of the customs of the nations about them. We read, "But the people refused to hearken unto the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations." (I Sam. 8:19). Later yet, Israel rebelled against God even further, until Ezra wrote, "But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon." (Ezra 5:12).

In New Testament times our Lord spoke of the waywardness of the people, "For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest haply they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and should turn again, and I should heal them." (Matt. 13:15). Jesus also said, "This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrine the precepts of men." (Matt. 15:8). Over and over again man's way was not God's way.

Issues of Our Day

All of this has been said in order to say that Christians in the mid-twentieth century must be alert to the fact that they cannot follow the multitude and still follow Christ. Notice some aspects of our modern world in which the voice of the people is not the voice of God. (1) The new moral premissiveness which is so widely proclaimed in our day is not the voice of God. Sensualism, encouraged by the entertainment media, books, magazines and immodest, suggestive dress, is making great strides, especially among the young. Pre-marital sex is openly defended. Extra-marital sex is also defended without shame or embarrassment. Though this trend is growing, God's will remains the same as it has always been through the centuries. The people are not the voice of God, but rather the voice of Satan.

(2) Materialism is another of our special modern-day sins. Never have so many people been so completely engulfed in the accumulation of wealth and the things that money can buy. The shallowness of this approach to life has been detected by many of the young people of our day and many of them have rebelled against it by "dropping out" into the hippie movement. While this is not the right answer to the problem, it does show the inadequacy of America's primary pattern of life--the making of money in order to live in luxury.

(3) Ours is a day in which the lack of respect for God, for law and order, for property, for life, and for the traditions of society is painfully apparent. Our newspapers are filled with evidence of the decline in all these areas. The F.B.I. reports on the rise in crime are further evidence. Here again, the voice of the people is not the voice of God.

(4) Still another area is that in which modern man shows his lack of concern for hard work, discipline and sacrifice. Self-control and saving are out of date. Here, again, the people are not going God's way.

(5) Lack of respect for marriage and for the home is still another area in which man is going away from God. As divorce and remarriage statistics rise we find man disregarding the plain teachings of the scriptures. In all of these areas it is obvious that we cannot follow the crowd and still be following our Lord.

God Hath Spoken

The hard fact is that the church is not a democracy. It is a monarchy, with Christ as our infinitely wise and infinitely loving monarch. Christians do not determine the policies of the church, nor the principles of Christian living. These are revealed in the inspired word of God. God has spoken in the Holy Scriptures. We must hear; we must heed. In the church Christ rules through a group of men who meet certain rigid qualifications--our elders. In this way the church avoids the disadvantages of political factions, sharp rivalries, and other evils.

Conclusion

In all things that pertain to moral, ethical and religious principles, we do not discover truth by counting the number of people who hold a certain position but by reading God's teachings in his holy word. In order to discover truth we do not read the temporary changing polls, but the eternal unchanging book of God. In the realm of political affairs, "The voice of the people is the voice of right." In the realm of religion, "The voice of God must become the voice of the people."

All that we have wished to say can be said in two very simple sentences from the Bible: "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death." (Prov. 14:12). Then, finally, there are the words of our Lord, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straightened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." (Matt. 7:13-14). The Christian is not a weathervane, pointing in whichever direction the wind blows, nor is he a sheep jumping blindly over the fence. Rather, the Christian heeds the directions of his Lord, irrespective of the way the crowd may go. "The voice of the people is not the voice of God."
