

First Amendment

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Taking The Right To Task

WHEN THE CHRISTIAN Right came charging into the presidential and congressional campaigns early this year, telling people they weren't good Christians unless they voted for the B1 bomber, the MX missile and against the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, it seemed for a time the movement would overwhelm the political process.

But time has proved that the nation's Christians are as diverse a lot as any other segment of our society, and that a few beguiling preachers with tremendous financial and communication resources cannot deliver the votes of all whom they claim as their followers.

An increasing number of voices is being heard in response to the new right leadership. As those voices are being heard, the intensity of the Christian Right movement seems to be subsiding.

Rev. Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and now president of that denomination's Radio and Television Commission, is one of the latest to speak out forcefully in opposition. Speaking at the national executive council meeting of the American Jewish Committee, Allen said there has been "a total capitulation of a segment of the evangelical Christian movement to right-wing politics and sword-rattling jingoism." He described the new right leadership as "the same old faces, voices and ideas working on a fertile new field of self-appointed political messiahs

with a dangerous combination of television access and political naivete."

The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, the nation's second largest Protestant denomination, called the rise of the new right and its emphasis on single-issue voting a "disturbing phenomenon." The bishops noted that "persons with long histories of public service, people who have waged lonely battles and made singular contributions to the well-being of their communities and nation are being singled out for defeat." They called upon Methodists to evaluate political candidates on the basis of their life-long commitment and contribution to the general welfare of the nation.

Yet another response came last week from the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, an organization of 17 major churches, which called the new right "unjust, simplistic and self-righteous." The conference in a resolution adopted unanimously warned against "religious partisanship which . . . threatens American religious freedom."

Individuals and some political leaders themselves have sought to counter this religious-political movement. But the most effective opposition had to come from within the churches themselves, from the leadership which has achieved respect through years of service to the churches and their members. It has taken courage on the part of these leaders to speak out so forcefully because the new right seemed able even to lead the people out of their old churches. But they are providing it now and that is commendable.

THE NEW RIGHT has had its opportunity to present its case to the people. The people have turned out by the thousands to hear what they had to say and have tuned in by the millions to see and hear what they have been preaching through the airways. Now those people are hearing the other side from those they have known for many years and have respected. The decision as to which element of the religious community of the nation they follow may be as important to religion in the future as it will be to the government of this nation.

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