



Don't Just Do Something; Sit There!

by James W. Skillen

"Don't just sit there; do something!" That is the long-standing American response to problems. That is America at its pragmatic best. But what if every little thing we "do" makes the problems worse? What if our *problem* is the very fact that we are too pragmatic, too quick to take action before sizing up the real nature of the crisis? Then, perhaps, the challenge we need to hear is, "Don't just do something; sit there!" In other words, maybe it is time for Americans, especially Christian Americans, to think deeply about the nature of our cultural, political, legal and educational predicament to discover what is missing.

This is certainly one of the challenges that will hit you if you read the new and highly enjoyable book by William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic* (Alfred Knopf, 1986). After wonderful chapters on Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Roger Williams, Miller surveys the last two centuries of American struggles over First Amendment issues. Up until very recently, the "WASPs" were basically in charge—those white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had a vision for a Christian America. What was their biggest failure?

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According to Miller, "the Protestant Christianizers of America did not have a social and political philosophy that admitted, or criticized, what they were doing. . . ." The characteristic contribution of American religion to American civic understanding therefore has been not perspective, wisdom, nor depth of insight, but the rousing of the sentiments and energies for particular acts of charity, generosity, and social reform.

We do not know what a Christian philosophy of law or politics demands.

Miller continues, "The characteristic vices, have been those of a vulnerably oversimple implicit social conception: a radical pietistic individualism of the change of heart, which knows too readily what is 'moral' and expects too easily to persuade people to do it—and topples into cynicism when that does not happen" (pp. 266-67).

The difficulty we face today is a that we can no longer take for granted a cultural consensus, a broad agreement on basic principles about the nature of law and politics in our society. In some respects, it is good that old errors are no longer taken for granted

and that new options are before us. On the other hand, we know that much of the pragmatism, relativism and secularization of life since late in the nineteenth century has left us in a serious situation.

Precisely now, therefore, we must be able to assess our circumstances with a critical historical and philosophical mindset. We need to know where we are and how we got here. We need to decide how to put forward a deepened Christian point of view for public debate—a point of view that sheds new light on the legal and political issues of our day. Yet here is where we find ourselves in the weakest position because we have been too busy acting for the moment, absorbing the spirit of our age, and not knowing what a Christian philosophy of law or politics demands. Our religious sincerity has been concentrated in personal piety and personal charity, but not carried into cooperative effort with other lawyers and citizens to discover and promote a more solid Christian approach.

Miller says that if you read nineteenth- and twentieth-century descriptions of the "typical American" and compare these descriptions with what is "characteristic" of Christians in the same time period, you will find almost identical words and phrases repeated again and again: "individualistic, voluntaristic, 'moralistic,' ahistorical, self-reliant . . ." (p. 272).

Not all of these characteristics are bad, of course. But note what is missing, at least by biblical standards: thoughtfully wise, patient, enduring, preoccupied with the neighbor's welfare, communally focused, expressing dependence on God, persevering and so forth. All too often, we Christians are as splintered in our opinions and as individualistic in our responses as everyone else. We are ready to act, ready to climb high on our "moralistic" horses to condemn evil and ready to urge some authority somewhere to solve our problems quickly. But are we helping to explain the full, comprehensive nature of America's predicament, or are we offering a better philosophy and program for public life as a community of people who obviously love our neighbors and our country?

Thanks be to God that some Christians are trying to do this. Let us give thanks that organizations such as the Christian Legal Society exist, and that its programs include efforts such as the Jurisprudence Project aimed at discovering the roots of a Christian approach to law. And yet, we must also fall on our faces in repentance before God, even as

Daniel did in exile, asking for the forgiveness of our sins and the sins of our people. Miller's judgments are all too accurate about the Christian, particularly the Protestant, contribution to American culture. We have been too quick to adopt the optimistic, pragmatic attitude of our fellow citizens—being convinced that we can solve any problem just by working a little harder with the same tools that were handed down to us. We have not *done* enough to step back and "sit there" long enough to hear a word from the Lord about the shape of our society, its laws, its political institutions.

*We are too pragmatic,
too quick to take action*

Now is certainly the time to act! It is time to *do* something! But what we need to do—the most practical thing we can do—is to go in search of the wisdom, intellectual depth and cultural substance that grow out of God's wisdom and God's will for the world. If we will do that, and do it *together* as a community of Christians,

then our light might shine brightly enough to help both us and our fellow citizens in the midst of today's crises.

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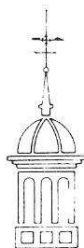
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