The Trinity Review

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Editor’s Note: The Christian’s duty to help the widow and orphan is clearly stated in the Bible. The Bible also clearly states that the Christian is to use his own property in charity, and it clearly forbids stealing to help the poor. Yet there are some professed Christians who believe that stealing is a virtue so long as it is done in the name of "social justice." They advocate political programs to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. But governments, like all human beings and institutions, are subject to the moral law, and are specifically commanded not to steal. Not Yours to Give illustrates the difference between lawful and unlawful political action, and exposes the hypocrisy of those who pretend to help the poor through political action.

One day in the House of Representatives, a bill was taken up appropriating money for the benefit of a widow of a distinguished naval officer. Several beautiful speeches had been made in its support. The Speaker was just about to put the question when Crockett arose:

Mr. Speaker— I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased, and as much sympathy for the sufferings of the living, if suffering there be, as any man in this House, but we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy for a part of the living to lead us into an act of injustice to the balance of the living. I will not go into an argument to prove that Congress has no power to appropriate this money as an act of charity. Every member upon this floor knows it. We have the right, as individuals, to giveaway as much of our own money as we please in charity; but as members of Congress we have no right so to appropriate a dollar of the public money. Some eloquent appeals have been made to us upon the ground that it is a debt due the deceased. Mr. Speaker, the deceased lived long after the close of the war; he was in office to the day of his death, and I have never heard that the government was in arrears to him.

Every man in this House knows it is not a debt. We cannot, without the grossest corruption, appropriate this money as the payment of a debt. We have not the semblance of authority to appropriate it as a charity. Mr. Speaker, I have said we have the right to give as much money of our own as we please. I am the poorest man on this floor. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week’s pay to the object, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks.

He took his seat. Nobody replied. The bill was put upon its passage, and, instead of passing unanimously as was generally supposed, and as, no doubt, it would but for that speech, it received but few votes, and, of course, was lost.

Later, when asked by a friend why he had opposed the appropriation, Crockett gave this explanation:

Several years ago I was one evening standing on the steps of the Capitol with some other members of
Congress, when our attention was attracted by a
great light over in Georgetown. It was evidently a
large fire. We jumped into a hack and drove over as
fast as we could. In spite of all that could be done,
many houses were burned and many families made
houseless, and, besides, some of them had lost all
but the clothes they had on. The weather was very
cold, and when I saw so many women and children
suffering, I felt that something ought to be done for
them. The next morning a bill was introduced
appropriating $20,000 for their relief. We put aside
all other business and rushedit through as soon as it
could be done.

The next summer, when it began to be time to think
about the election, I concluded I would take a scout
around among the boys of my district. I had no
opposition there, but, as the election was some time
off, I did not know what might turn up. When riding
one day in a part of my district in which I was more
of a stranger than any other, I saw a man in a field
plowing and coming toward the road. I gauged my
gait so that we should meet as he came to the fence.
As he came up, I spoke to the man. He replied
politely, but, as I thought, rather coldly.

I began: "Well, friend, I am one of those
unfortunate beings called candidates, and--

"Yes, I know you; you are Colonel Crockett. I have
seen you once before, and voted for you the last
time you were reelected. I suppose you are out
electioneering now, but you had better not waste
your time or mine. I shall not vote for you again."

This was a sockdolager…. I begged him to tell me
what was the matter.

"Well, Colonel, it is hardly worthwhile to waste
time or words upon it. I do not see how it can be
mended, but you gave a vote last winter which
shows that either you have not capacity to
understand the Constitution, or that you are wanting
in the honesty and firmness to be guided by it. In
either case you are not the man to represent me. But
I beg your pardon for expressing it in that way. I did
not intend to avail myself of the privilege of the
constituent to speak plainly to a candidate for the
purpose of insulting or wounding you. I intend by it
only to say that your understanding of the
Constitution is very different from mine; and I will
say to you what, but for my rudeness, I should not
have said, that I believe you to be honest…. But an
understanding of the Constitution different from
mine I cannot overlook, because the Constitution, to
be worth anything, must be held sacred and rigidly
observed in all its provisions. The man who wields
power and misinterprets it is the more dangerous the
more honest he is."

"I admit the truth of all you say, but there must be
some mistake about it, for I do not remember that I
gave any vote last winter upon any constitutional
question."

"No, Colonel, there’s no mistake. Though I live
here in the backwoods and seldom go from home, I
take the papers from Washington and read very
carefully all the proceedings of Congress. My
papers say that last winter you voted for a bill to
appropriate $20,000 to some sufferers by a fire in
Georgetown. Is that true?"

"Well, my friend; I may as well own up. You have
got me there. But certainly nobody will complain
that a great and rich country like ours should give
the insignificant sum of $20,000 to relieve its
suffering women and children, particularly with a
full and overflowing Treasury; and I am sure, if you
had been there, you would have done just as I did."

"It is not the amount, Colonel, that I complain of; it
is the principle. In the first place, the government
ought to have in the Treasury no more than enough
for its legitimate purposes. But that has nothing to
do with the question. The power of collecting and
disbursing money at pleasure is the most dangerous
power that can be trusted to man--particularly
under our system of collecting revenue by a tariff,
which reaches every man in the country, no matter
how poor he may be; and the poorer he is the more
he pays in proportion to his means. What is worse,
it presses upon him without his knowledge where
the weight centers, for there is not a man in the
United States who can ever guess how much he
pays to the government. So you see, that while you
are contributing to relieve one, you are drawing it
from thousands who are even worse off than he.
"If you had the right to give anything, the amount was simply a matter of discretion with you, and you had as much right to give $20,000,000 as $20,000. If you have the right to give to one, you have the right to give to all; and, as the Constitution neither defines charity nor stipulates the amount, you are at liberty to give to any and everything which you may believe, or profess to believe, is a charity, and to any amount you may think proper. You will very easily perceive what a wide door this would open for fraud and corruption and favoritism, on the one hand, and for robbing the people on the other. No, Colonel, Congress has no right to give charity. Individual members may give as much of their own money as they please, but they have no right to touch a dollar of the public money for that purpose. If twice as many houses had been burned in this county as in Georgetown, neither you nor any other member of Congress would have thought of appropriating a dollar for our relief. There are about two hundred and forty members of Congress. If they had shown their sympathy for the sufferers by contributing each one week’s pay, it would have made over $13,000. There are plenty of wealthy men in and around Washington who could have given $20,000 without depriving themselves of even a luxury of life. The congressmen chose to keep their own money, which, if reports be true, some of them spend not very creditably; and the people about Washington, no doubt, applauded you for relieving them from the necessity of giving by giving what was not yours to give. The people have delegated to Congress, by the Constitution, the power to do certain things. To do these, it is authorized to collect and pay moneys, and for nothing else. Everything beyond this is usurpation, and a violation of the Constitution.

"So you see, Colonel, you have violated the Constitution in what I consider a vital point. It is a precedent fraught with danger to the country, for when Congress once begins to stretch its power beyond the limits of the Constitution, there is no limit to it, and no security for the people. I have no doubt you acted honestly, but that does not make it any better, except as far as you are personally concerned, and you see that I cannot vote for you."
"Well, I will be here. But one thing more before I say good-bye. I must know your name."

"My name is Bunce."

"Not Horatio Bunce?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Bunce, I never saw you before, though you say you have seen me, but I know you very well. I am glad I have met you, and very proud that I may hope to have you for my friend."

It was one of the luckiest hits of my life that I met him. He mingled but little with the public, but was widely known for his remarkable intelligence and incorruptible integrity, and for a heart brimful and running over with kindness and benevolence, which showed themselves not only in words but also in acts. He was the oracle of the whole country around him, and his fame had extended far beyond the circle of his immediate acquaintance. Though I had never met him before, I had heard much of him; and but for this meeting it is very likely I should have had opposition, and had been beaten. One thing is very certain, no man could now standup in that district under such a vote.

At the appointed time I was at his house, having told our conversation to every crowd I had met, and to every man I stayed all night with; and I found that it gave the people an interest and a confidence in me stronger than I had ever seen manifested before.

Though I was considerably fatigued when I reached his house, and, under ordinary circumstances, should have gone early to bed, I kept him up until midnight, talking about the principles and affairs of government, and got more real, true knowledge of them than I had got all my life before.

I have known and seen much of him since, for I respect him--no, that is not the word--I reverence and love him more than any living man, and I go to see him two or three times every year; and I will tell you, sir, if every one who professes to be a Christian lived and acted and enjoyed it as he does, the religion of Christ would take the world by storm.

But to return to my story: the next morning we went to the barbecue, and, to my surprise, found about a thousand men there. I met a good many whom I had not known before, and they and my friend introduced me around until I had got pretty well acquainted--at least, they all knew me. In due time notice was given that I would speak to them. They gathered up around a stand that had been erected. I opened my speech by saying:

"Fellow citizens--I present myself before you today feeling like a new man. My eyes have lately been opened to truths which ignorance or prejudice, or both, had heretofore hidden from my view. I feel that I can today offer you the ability to render you more valuable service than I have ever been able to render before. I am here today more for the purpose of acknowledging my error than to seek your votes. That I should make this acknowledgment is due to myself as well as to you. Whether you will vote for me is a matter for your consideration only." I went on to tell them about the fire and my vote for the appropriation and then told them why I was satisfied it was wrong. I closed by saying:

"And now, fellow citizens, it remains only for me to tell you that the most of the speech you have listened to with so much interest was simply a repetition of the arguments by which your neighbor, Mr. Bunce, convinced me of my error.

"It is the best speech I ever made in my life, but he is entitled to the credit for it. And now I hope he is satisfied with his convert and that he will get up here and tell you so."

He came up on the stand and said:

"Fellow citizens--It affords me great pleasure to comply with the request of Colonel Crockett. I have always considered him a thoroughly honest man, and I am satisfied that he will faithfully perform all that he has promised you today." He went down, and there went up from that crowd such a shout for Davy Crockett as his name never called forth before.

I am not much given to tears, but I was taken with a choking then and felt some big drops rolling down my cheeks. And I tell you now that the
remembrance of those few words spoken by such a man, and the honest, hearty shout they produced, is worth more to me than all the honors I have received and all the reputation I have ever made, or ever shall make, as a member of Congress.

Now, sir, concluded Crockett, you know why I made that speech yesterday. There is one thing now to which I will call your attention. You remember that I proposed to give a week’s pay. There are in that House many very wealthy men--men who think nothing of spending a week’s pay, or a dozen of them, for a dinner or a wine party when they have something to accomplish by it. Some of those same men made beautiful speeches upon the great debt of gratitude which the country owed the deceased--a debt which could not be paid by money and the insignificance and worthlessness of money, particularly so insignificant a sum as $20,000, when weighed against the honor of the nation. Yet not one of them responded to my proposition. Money with them is nothing but trash when it is to come out of the people. But it is the one great thing for which most of them are striving, and many of them sacrifice honor, integrity, and justice to obtain it.