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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Politics Providence and the Kingdom

John Gladwin.

Introduction.

It would be all too easy and doubtless highly entertaining to take advantage of this paper by sharing in the populist mud-slinging game against politics, political institutions, and politicians. We must resolutely set our face against all such temptations – increasing as they may be in these days. Christian leaders have a duty to engage in a sympathetic criticism of our contemporary political problems.

It is not an overestimate of the seriousness of these problems to centre our attention upon such words as ‘confusion’ and ‘disillusionment’ when probing our present political situation. It would appear to our people that our inherited political institutions increasingly creak and groan under the pressures of the day. We live in a dangerous vacuum created by the swiftness of change. On the one hand we have institutions of power which appear less able to cope and to proffer solutions which are practical, and on the other hand we suffer from an almost total loss of any sense of direction in our affairs.

Consider the situation which many are in. The working man has a host of institutions to which he has to relate. At work he is an employee and a union man. As a citizen he is subject to at least three levels of political government. As a parent he relates to the school authorities. He may have a landlord to deal with. If he is also a Christian he relates to the church as an institution. It is hardly surprising, therefore, in the face of such complexities many choose not to get ‘involved’ – especially when it appears to make little difference to what happens. Power in our society is diffused and complex and often appears to be emasculated by the growing pressures from without.

If there is increasing confusion in society at large there is certainly confusion among Christians concerning God’s call to them as citizens of today’s world. How are we to interpret the meaning of obedience to the ordained powers set over us in our community (Rom. 13:11ff?) What are we make of the voice of the Third World calling us to share with them in the Gospel fight against oppression and captivity – is there not a Gospel note of truth for us here? What is the church meant to be – salt in a rotting

Churchman

world, a model of the divine order for society, a sign of the Kingdom of God – or what?

Institutions and the Kingdom of God.

When thinking of the exercise of power, and the duties and responsibilities of the institutions of power, ought we to do our Christian thinking around themes of the Kingdom? Much modern theology would give an enthusiastic 'yes' in reply. The Kingdom of which Jesus speaks, and for which he died, is a Kingdom still to come. It is a Kingdom which offers genuine rather than illusory hope for the oppressed, the poor, the captives, and the blind. (Luke, 4:18) It speaks of the liberation of the oppressed peoples of the world from the powers which keep them in deliberate subjection. The liberating power of the Gospel is experienced in history in the removal of the visible causes of oppression. Christians are doing the work of the Gospel when they unashamedly identify with the fight to overthrow the incumbents of power – and to establish a new economic and political order which will evidence the justice and the love of the Kingdom of God. Whether you turn to the themes of liberation theology coming from North and South America or to the dialectical theology of Moltmann within the Protestant tradition,¹ the message is fundamentally the same. Jesus has pointed us to the Kingdom to come, he suffered at the hands of the authorities in seeking to establish it, Christians are called to share in the contemporary struggle of the Kingdom by identifying with the political and economic causes of the oppressed peoples of today's world.

Whatever we may think of this way of doing theology – and I shall express my own disquiet in a moment – we are bound to say that unless we have a word from God which understands and ministers to the genuine plight of millions in the face of the contemporary balances of economic and political power we shall stand condemned as possessors of an inadequate Gospel. We shall be among those who say to our brothers across the world 'be warned, be filled' only to send them away empty of all but our own hypocrisy.²

Yet, the Kingdom theme can be a dangerous place from which to begin in thinking through a Christian view on the exercise of power in the present age. It has a tendency towards political idealism and utopianism. By giving the political order a duty in relation to the Kingdom of God as preached and lived by Jesus it can do one of two things which have dangerous consequences. First, it can demand too much of institutions of power. By pressurising the political order to create a political, economic and social system which reflects the ethics of the Kingdom it frequently asks for more than these powers can actually deliver.

There are obvious distinctions between the working of the state and the ethics of God's new creation in Christ. The state governs by law-making and law enforcement. It carries the sword in society. When its citizens slap its left cheek it cannot afford to turn its other cheek. Not so in the Kingdom of God which is under the free rule of God's grace leading to forgiveness. The ethics of the Kingdom do teach us to turn the other cheek, to give the cloak as well as the coat, to go the second mile. If we are asking the powers in society to operate on the basis of these principles are we not asking them to do more than is possible in this fallen world? The failure of the political order to deliver the goods expected of them can lead to disillusionment, frustration, and even to the collapse of order in society. Surely one of the causes of the present malaise in our own society is the continual failure of our political institutions to deliver the goods promised. That is a dangerous game to play.

Second it can demand too little of the political order. Realising the inability of the politician to carry forward his task in terms of the Kingdom the Christian can assign the political orders to the powers of darkness. They become the representatives of the oppressive evil powers manifested in the world which we must all resist. There are at least three possible courses open to the Christian if he accepts this reading of the situation. He can submit and suffer, waiting for the day of God's intervention; he can seek an alternative society within the fellowship of the Church; or he can stand up and fight.³ All these responses seriously underestimate the reality of God's present control over his world. Despite human sin and wickedness, God's hand is still upon the destiny of the world which he created. Furthermore, there are serious practical dangers associated with detaching Christian people from involvement in the political world. Such a view sets Christians over and against the powers. It tends to encourage Christians to take only a minimal role in the contemporary political world. Policies which counsel inactivity, escape into ecclesiastical ghettos, or open resistance to the political order, are a discouragement to Christians to penetrate into the social order to wrestle from within with the agonising decisions in the exercise of power. When Christians vacate the field others quickly take their place, for there can be no escape from the ever present need here and now for society to be governed. Such a negative policy by Christians can only have a damaging effect upon the mission of the church. We have only to see the struggles of churches in countries where Christians will not or cannot participate in the full range of the contemporary social and political life to realise that the political environment affects the growth and the witness of the church.

The Kingdom of God as Jesus speaks of it is not to be directly associated with any human institutions. It was Jesus who said, "My kingship

Churchman

is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world my disciples would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews, but my kingship is not from this world" (John 18:36). The Kingdom of God does not arise out of this world's institutions.

The discovery of the Kingdom of which Jesus speaks is the discovery of faith. When we know of *that* kingdom through faith in the Son of God then we also begin to see that the form of *this* world is passing away and is to give place to the new creation and the new life which God has for us in Christ. Christians, therefore, are pilgrims and strangers to this world travelling on their way to the heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. Thus all present institutions of human living are subject to decay. They are temporary, meeting the needs of the present, but destined to give way in the final day of God's redemption. The Christian, therefore, is not in the position to baptise any contemporary social order and arrangement. He expects the institutions of power to be continually evolving, growing, and decaying. He expects the power to be continually falling way from those who hold it in the present. The Christian is a man who has to bear his testimony in any and every social order, not without criticism even to the point of opposition, but certainly without any suggestion that the present orders have eternal and permanent significance in God's order. There is a very interesting comment of a leading Christian in the German Democratic Republic, Dr. Falke, as he responds to the state's claim that socialism is primitive Christianity restored

The need to struggle against injustice and lack of freedom also applies to our own society, for all of history is subject to the judgement of the Cross. But this is a worthwhile task, for history is also subject to the promises of the liberating Christ. These promises remain valid even when a socialist society proves to be a disappointment or where socialist ideal is distorted or becomes unrecognisable. Because through Christian eyes socialism cannot be expected to lead to the reign of freedom, our disappointment at its performance will not lead us to reject it totally. Nor will we compare the ideal and the reality and lapse into cynicism . . . rather we shall resolutely continue to believe in a socialism which is capable of improvement.⁴

The Protestant Church in East Germany is happy to live and work in a socialist society but not willing to see socialism as the medium of the Kingdom. They expect to have a role of continual participation, criticism, and development in that particular social order.

Does all this mean that we have no proper Christian way of understanding the role of institutions of power in society in the present? If we are not able to think this through from the perspective of the Kingdom

can we do so more effectively from the perspective of creation? There is another way.

Politics and Providence.

Christian people would all profit from a fresh consideration of the providence of God. It is true that this doctrine has been much abused in evangelical circles in the past. Any and every form of wickedness, disaster, human failing, and gross injustice has been seen as coming under the providential hand of God. Providence is not fate. It has to do with our profound conviction that God loves and cares for his world today despite its sin, its weakness, and its decay. He makes his rain and his sun to bless the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:44-45). In Christ by the Spirit he upholds the life of the world in the present (Col. 1:16-17). We need to resist those who tell us that the world is God-abandoned. There are many aspects of human life which still reflect the loving hand of a good creator. Family life, community life, cultural expression can all be seen in this way. God has provided further that the fabric of the world's life should not be destroyed by human wickedness. Those who carry power in the community are to be ministers of God encouraging good conduct and restraining the evil doer. It should not surprise us that God provides for our temporary needs. The Lord's Supper in the church has that character. We do it until he comes. So there is great gain in seeing the needs of the wider community relating to the love of God. There is a need for good law and its equitable enforcement. There is a need for the ordering of our material and social environment. Taxes must be raised and the sword carried. We do well to see these tasks as done inside God's order – as part of his providential and loving care for us all here and now. By seeing it in this way we are given a standard of judgement and criticism of all institutions of power. They are to be judged less by their faith than by their works in fulfilment of their functions. Caesar has a place in God's order and has appropriate responsibilities.

When we talk of the functions of government we need to remember that our comments must apply to the contemporary need. We have a habit of thinking only in terms of central government. What we say must apply to our developing political situation in which power is increasingly shared. Westminster is having to share its power upwards with the bigger institutions in Europe and downwards with local communities and other power groups in society. Even within these power groups there is a growing demand for participation and power-sharing. This trend is likely to grow and will even affect what happens in church where congregations are going to be less and less settled under authoritarian ministries. There are no gods in our public institutions. Exposure to the media means that the whole community knows

Churchman

the weakness and fallibilities of those who have positions of authority. We don't have to wait for the publicised memoirs to find out how frequently decisions are taken on inadequate information under excessive pressure. If we learn from the providential love of God we shall be looking for the following in the institutions of power.

First, for equitable law making.

It is not enough to say "law making" because what some powers would describe as law we must call oppression and injustice. God, in his love and care, has provided for the needs of all his creation. Those who have authority in the community must pattern their law-making by this principle of divine activity. Law must relate equally and without discrimination to all members of the community. Justice presupposes the equal dignity and value of every man and woman – all of whom are made in the image of God and come under his loving care. Law provides the opportunity for everyone to pursue their vocation without hindrance, and law protects the weaker members of the community from the abuses of the strong which hinder a man in the pursuit of his calling. Law provides the community environment for human people to engage in fully human living.

Governments have a positive duty to justice. Whatever framework of economic and social life they create must provide for the needs of everyone who makes up that society. Governments fail in their duty in God's order if they persist in allowing manifest and known injustices to continue. In the Scripture God is set against those who 'grind the faces of the poor' who destroy justice in the market place, who cast nations into slavery, and who take advantage of the defenceless.⁵ It is the duty of those who carry authority in society to punish such anti-social and unjust behaviour – to seek to banish it through just and equitable law.

In these days of our complex industrial and technological age with the international ramifications of our political and economic choices we cannot avoid asking the meaning of equity and justice in terms of the economic and social structures of society. Those who wield power have a duty in these respects. Because we live in a democracy in which we all participate in the exercise of power none of us can escape attention to such far-reaching questions. What form of economic and social arrangement in this age in these circumstances best serves the interests of justice?

Second, for equitable enforcement of law.

There is a need in society for the sword to be carried. Law must be enforced for the sake of peace and the protection of the neighbour. Once again, the Christian would wish to underline the need for manifest justice

in the way law is enforced. The courts are not the tools of party or sectional interests. They are not the means for political or ideological repression. The Christian cannot and must not be silent in the face of any such abuse. We need to say clearly that those who resort to torture, to violence, to pressure, who pervert the law to trample upon dissident groups and stamp out the voice of protest against injustice, have abused an office given to them by God. The law must apply to all – governed and government alike – without difference.

When the Christian community sits in silence under known injustice it fails in its prophetic role towards the whole community. It fails in an essential aspect of its duty to be leaven and salt in God's world.

Third, for the duty to protect the Peace.

There is an inner and outer aspect to this. Inwardly the community must be protected from those who would destroy its life and peace by anti-social behaviour. Outwardly the community must be protected from unsolicited invasion. Those who oppose legitimate government from within or without must be resisted. The community has a right to defend itself. By reverse it has no right to intrude by force upon the affairs of those for whom it has no constitutional responsibility. It is the constant tendency of those who have power to extend it illegitimately. Corruption in politics – be it at a local, national, or international level – eats away at the fabric of the community's life. Short term advantage may be but a step to long term ruin. One must say to Christian people in our sort of society, in which all of us are involved in this business of the exercise of power, that failure to speak and to act is failure in a basic responsibility towards God.

Power is to be exercised in relation to justice. That poses searching questions for us all, since all of us today – to greater or lesser degree – participate in the exercise of power. As at the wider level the community must ask what forms of economic and social life meet the demands of justice, so at the narrower level of the factory, the school, the local community, we have to seek to create structures of community life and action which are manifestly just in relation to the present need.

Continuity of Government and the right of protest.

The exercise of power can never be absolute. The absolute belongs to God alone. The institutions of power in society are to be judged according to the exercise of their functions. The right of criticism can never be removed. To say that political institutions carry an office as from God (Rom 13) is not to say that this puts their exercise of power above criticism and protest.

Three things which apply to government generally.

Churchman

First, where those who hold the office have lost the power to create and maintain law, then the community has a right and a duty to find others to take their place.

Second, the institutions which fail to meet the requirements of justice in the execution of their office undermine respect for the institutions of God's order and may well create seeds of discontent which will lead to the destruction of genuine law and order. When the law promotes racialism, factionalism, and party interest, it creates discontent, division, and even violence in the community. The temptation of power in the face of such a situation is to make use of repression as a means of maintaining its authority. In some such situations violent revolution is the result.

In the terms of our own democratic participatory society we need to warn against the authoritarian use of power. This affects the small community such as the factory, and the larger community of the nation. We have to get used to the techniques of the exercise of power by consent and participation. This requires a maturity of informed opinion on the part of every member of these communities. Maybe one of the biggest ministries which belongs to the church today is to help develop such critical maturity throughout the whole Christian community. The authoritarian use of power in our society which demands uncritical obedience can only serve to create stiff and harsh reaction. We have educated people for democracy – for critical participation. For the sake of order in a plural society – apart from any other consideration – we cannot afford power structures which prevent full participation. Leadership has to be on the basis of consent.

We might be tempted to say that our form of democratic arrangement is Christian. It is a temptation to be resisted. There isn't an ideal Christian form of society. Every social order must be judged according to its success in carrying forward the functions which belong to it in God's order. Political, social, and economic structure will be continually developing and changing at the patterns of our community life change. We must ask in every generation whether our arrangements are appropriate to our needs. We might say that in our situation constitutional forms of the use of power are more appropriate because they allow for protest and for change without violence and disorder. Such arrangements provide for accountability in the exercise of power. This must be applied not only to political life but also to all forms of power in our society. Again, this requires a greater maturity throughout our society than has been the case in the past.

What then of the Kingdom?

We have come to know Christ as the Lord both of creation and of the church. We also know that the form of this world's life is passing away and

is ultimately to give way to the new creation. We know that in the present the life of the world is maintained by Christ's word of power. We have seen that questions of social order are to be seen in terms of Christ's providential care of the world. As Christians we also belong to a Kingdom whose consummation is still to come. It is a Kingdom discovered by faith in the redeeming love of Christ for us. Because of this we have a life to live in two worlds, – in this present world which is in decay, and in the world to come which is ours in Christ and guaranteed to us through the Holy Spirit. When we understand our position in this way we understand the paradox of Christian life. We have both to submit to God's order now and witness to the new creation which is ours by faith. We can see the New Testament coming to terms with our life as seen from these two positions. It recognises, for example, the need for law and for the enforcement of justice in society. Yet it also points out that Christians ought not to appear before unbelievers in court in disputes with their fellow Christians.⁶ We ought to have discovered a new way of thinking about human relationships. At one level we must share in the task of encouraging the whole community to maintain the fabric of its life according to the demands of law and justice. At another level we are called to be that uncomfortable presence in the world which speaks of God's new creation with its new ethic in the Kingdom which Christ brings through faith.

This is a Kingdom which offers practical hope for the poor, the oppressed, the outcast people of the world. Such groups are with us until the consummation. They are part of the ever-present reminder of the failure of the present orders to create the community which in its complete experience is the fulfilment of the creative purposes of God. Christians are called to witness to what we know to be true in Christ by identifying with the real needs of such groups.

Christians can never be satisfied with simply maintaining the fabric of the world's present life. We must also witness to its limitations and to the new life which Jesus leads us to. It is not enough to be a good citizen. In our ethical values, in our life-style, and in our community interests, we must tell the world another story – the Gospel story of the hope which we are given in Christ.

If we seek to avoid this essential paradox of Christian life, either by retreating into the church and playing no part in sustaining the life of the whole community, or by simply accepting this world's life as it is and never witnessing to the fact that it will pass away in the day of the consummation of the Kingdom of God, we shall fail in obedience to the Lordship of Christ in his world and in his church.

These two sides of this paradox in our Christian experience are held

Churchman

together in the creative and redeeming love of God in Christ. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, created the world and us to live in it, and he sustains it and us within it in his love. This is still the case in spite of human disobedience, sin, and the fall. Out of his love for his world, God has so acted in Christ to redeem it. Through the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, through his Cross and Resurrection, God has redeemed mankind from the disastrous results of disobedience. In the midst of this decaying order God has established his Kingdom of redeeming love. Out of the old, in the risen life of Christ, God calls into being a new heaven and a new earth as the place in which his people may once again live in harmony with Him worshipping him with their whole being.

A number of conclusions.

1. Politics in its own terms in God's order is an aspect of life which calls for respect, for prayer, and for participation.

Through respect Christians recognise the godly office of government. In prayer Christians understand the vocation of this office and seek for the fulfilment of these callings in ways which please and honour God himself. In participation Christian people seek a sympathy with the complexities of government and expose themselves to the agonies and pressures of having to decide what to do with the lives and goods of others.

2. Democracy works through participation. It needs informed and mature thinking by all sections of the community. Christians, who are members of the different groups which make up the nation, can witness to God's love through their concerned sharing in the contemporary political debate about the practical demands of justice and of right dealing in society. Such involvement ought to permeate every level of power in the community thus bringing the values of Christ into the whole political arena.

3. The work of ministry in the church can help in developing the right values and critical perspectives among Christian people. Ministry can have an eye to our common responsibility towards society at large by encouraging Christians to see the political side to Biblical truths and to learn from God's self-revelation in the context of human history and the ebb and flow of a nation's political development. Preaching must be political in the sense that it should lead Christians to think and act politically in response to what they learn of God's love through His word and what they, therefore, discern of his action in their community.

4. Accepting that the Kingdom of God does not arise out of the actions of the political order, we must, nevertheless, seek to put flesh and blood around the frame of the Kingdom of God as we know it in Christ. The continual loving concern of Christians in the crisis and trials of the weak, the

poor, the oppressed, and the outcast members of society, is the witness to "the love of Christ which constrains us". There must be a political testimony to the Christian truth that this world and its present forms of life is passing away and giving place to a new world created out of the redeeming love of God in Christ. There is hope in Christ in the midst of the compromises and difficulties and failures of the present age.

Footnotes

1. In North America, Liberation themes are very strong in "Black" theology. The writings of Professor James Cone evidence this. See particularly *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In South America, Liberation themes are most strong evidenced in the writings of G. Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* and J. Bonino *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*. J. Moltmann's *The Crucified God* forms an interesting European contribution to this way of doing theology. Paul Lehmann's *The Transfiguration of Politics* reveals of theological sympathy with contemporary revolutionary movements suggesting that they provide unique opportunity for the humanising of human life. At the same time he makes it clear that revolutionary movements cannot succeed in this desire without the Christian story to inform and support them.
2. Jas. 2:14-17.
3. The history of sectarianism reveals these types of attitude. The gathered church is identified with the Kingdom and the world outside assigned to Satanic dominion. Occasional attempts are made on creating communities of the 'new Jerusalem' as, for example, in Munster in the 16th century. The attitude of Jehovah's Witnesses towards politics today would evidence the traditional sectarian attitude. They do not participate because the world is under evil government and godly people should be separate.
4. T. Beeson. *Discretion and Valour*, 185f.
5. Isaiah 3:11-15. Amos 1:3-2:8.
6. 1 Cor. 6:1-11.