

# THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE STATE

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The issues raised by this paper are wide-ranging and practical. We live within a state system which guides as well as frames our lives. In a way the state sets the milieu in which we live and move and have our being. This does not mean that the state is some uncontrollable monster and we but blind victims. In a democracy we have a particular responsibility within the structure of the state. For the Christian the issues raised include the whole relation of Christianity to culture; the fundamental question of the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

When this paper was suggested two particular issues were prominent: the question of capital punishment and the activities of the Greenham Common Peace Women. In both issues it seemed that an individualistic ethic was being applied to what the state should or should not do. The issues were often presented in terms such as: If I as an individual would not or should not act in such and such a manner, then neither should the state. Thus, at one fell sweep, if carried through, this removes the police, armed services and judiciary. Indeed, it is a subtle recipe for anarchy. The commandment — thou shalt not murder — was taken as a prohibition of any action by a lawful government to take any action that would threaten life. This clearly ignores the context of Exodus 20.

These issues are still with. Further events help sharpen this for us. There was the NGA dispute with Eddie Shah at Warrington and the miners' strike. Here we have crystallised the area of where limits should be drawn in terms of resistance against authority. Or we can think of the GCHQ dispute — the rights or otherwise to belong to a trade union.

## 1. PRESSURE POINTS.

Each historical period has its own features which must be considered. Obviously a paper dealing with the "individual and state" written in Russia has different parameters to deal with than one written in the UK. Yet perhaps it is we, and not the Eastern bloc Christians, who suffer most in this area. We are often less aware of the subtle pressures of the state in the West. Have we really faced up to the situation where the state has declared tacitly that its line is officially pluralistic, religiously neutral? Let me briefly sketch in some of the pressure points on us.

(a) We live in a global village in which world-wide communication is instant. Faults of government are placarded around the world calling for instant emotional reaction rather than national assimilation. The media engenders impressed reaction as opposed to considered reply.

(b) We live in a technologically governed society. Increasingly government is ruled by the technocrats. Reflect on how Margaret

Thatcher studied computer analysis of the local election results before going to the country in 1983. As man develops technologically so does his power to manipulate (advertising) and destroy.

(c) We live in a society of attitudinal paradoxes. Increasing sophistication marches hand-in-hand with growing barbarity — such as abortion and infanticide. It is now conceivable that the state legislate that parents have the right to passively murder their child.

Another paradox lies in expectancy. While on the one hand the media engender a false expectancy of a higher standard of living in the face of diminishing resources; there is a reversal to a diminishing expectancy where the unacceptable is blandly accepted — 3 million unemployed. Instant desire is coupled to bland fatalism.

(d) However there is one particular problem I would highlight. It is structural sin. The individual can be caught in structural sin induced by society. Think of Jeremiah caught up in the sinful foreign policy of the nation. Think of Daniel identifying himself with the sin of the people — when there is no indication that he himself was guilty (cf. Dan. 9:4f).

There was an interesting article on this issue in *Third Way* (8 Sept. 1977) by George Carey. Carey's article was a response to two earlier contributions: one by John Gwyn-Thomas against the ideas of structural sin, and one for it by Ronald Sider. Carey noted that evangelical strength and weakness revolves around the personal. There is a stress on personal faith and individual responsibility. Yet the Bible also talks about community, and the corporate responsibility of community.

Sin has invaded all of life. It may have seemed unfair to some of Adam's children that they should suffer because of their father's sin. It may have seemed unfair to the family of Achan that their destiny should be bound up with his sin. But such is the solidarity concept of Scripture. Hitler built evil into the structure of society. And today many repent of these evil structures (cf. Daniel). That is an extreme example. But what about the subtle structures built around us by the state, big business and industry. Carey writes:<sup>1</sup>

We reflect, by and large, the traditions and expectations of our culture. The way we spend our leisure, the political ideals we live by, the prejudices we adopt, are given us by our society... "I" is thus submerged in the mass of humanity.

We might protest that this overstates the case — but is there not an element of truth here? Carey goes on to say this about children brought up in our society and faced with the issues of belief.<sup>2</sup>

The response of the children, humanly speaking, is already fixed and controlled by their society. People are quite right in saying that "it is more difficult to believe in Christ these days", not because it is more intellectually difficult but because the sinfulness of unbelief is now built into the way people live and think and it is hard for them to shrug off the influence of society.

Today we face all the horrors of state recommended materialism. We are reminded of Jules Henry's two modern commandments. The first:

Create More Desire. The second: Thou Shalt Consume.<sup>3</sup> Is this not a reality in our society?

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF THE STATE.

This is no place to delve into the philosophically chaotic confusion as to the nature and function of the state. I take the state to be comprised of a nexus of law and government whose will is executed by the judiciary, police and armed services. The individual, of course, may well be in government, moving for legal reform, or employed in the execution of the will of the state. Let me say a word about the man and the office. The two are distinguishable. Today the party line tends to control the man in office and thus denigrate the office. Someone might have no respect for Margaret Thatcher, but have respect for the office of prime minister. But I believe we are in danger of losing this distinction. We need to take heed to Calvin when he said:<sup>4</sup>

I speak not of the men as if the mask of dignity could cloak folly, or cowardice, or cruelty, or wicked flagitious manners, and thus acquire for vice the praise of virtue; but I say that the station itself is deserving of honour and reverence, and that those who rule should, in respect of their office, be held by us in esteem and veneration.

Those within office today seem in practice to operate in a closed universe. God may be acknowledged — but not in the affairs of state. Shades of Lord Chesterton who in the eighteenth century remarked: “It’s a sad day when religion interferes with a man’s private life.” But the Christian asserts that the state is not autonomous; it is answerable to God. This is not an abstract concept for it implies that each individual who holds office is answerable as to their faithfulness before God in carrying out the task delegated to them by God. God ordained the state as a delegated authority. Oh that this idea were ingrained in the minds of all politicians! They are not autonomous, they have a charge in trust from God. Listen to Abraham Kuyper as sets forth one of the contributions of Calvinism:<sup>5</sup>

In politics also it taught us that the *human* element — here *the people* — may not be considered as the principal thing, so that God is only dragged in to help this people in the hour of its need; but on the contrary that God, in His Majesty, must flame before the eyes of every nation . . .

What then is the function of the state? John Whitehead tells us that the function of the state is twofold: to protect and promote the good of society, and to deter crime and bring to punishment those who foster evil.<sup>6</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd suggests that the basic function is rooted in the power of the sword.<sup>7</sup>

In whatever way we consider the matter, this foundational function of the geno-type “State” can nowhere else be found but in an internal monopolistic organisation of the power of the sword over a particular cultural area within territorial boundaries.

We can unpack this power of the sword in a little more detail. There is the sword in justice — to operate and control man's sinful tendencies in the civil and criminal spheres, bringing to justice and meting out punishment. There is the sword of war — the right of a state to defend itself from invasion of its territory. The sword of order — to thwart rebellion and anarchic forces within society.<sup>8</sup>

The function of the state is well summed up by Calvin:

Its function among men is no less than that of bread, water, sun and air; indeed its place of honour is far more excellent. For it does not merely see to it, as all these serve to do, that men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm, even though it surely embraces all these activities when it provides for their living together. It does not, I repeat, look to this only, but also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offences against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among men. In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.

This definition of the state sees it operating not only as the integrator of public justice, but for the positive promotion of the welfare of humanity. This is perhaps a needed balance against the reduction of the function of the state to the power of the sword alone!

Having said this, a caveat: the state is a legitimate authority ordained for man's benefit in a fallen world by God, but the legitimacy of the state is conditioned by its promotion of its ends. The state has authority. But viewed biblically, authority is always an avenue for service.

### 3. ESSENTIAL TENSIONS

3 (1) *The Tension Between the State and the Individual.* The title of this paper would seem to indicate a sharp cleavage between the state and the individual. Yet in reality both are polarised abstractions. Neither the state nor the individual exists in and of themselves. When God gave the Law to Moses we find an interwovenness between individual behaviour (the ten commandments) and corporate responsibility (the calling to exercise justice). Confusion abounds due to this interwovenness. Think of the way in which the ten commandments have been used in the nuclear debate — an individualistic application to the corporate area. Perhaps we could make a rule of thumb distinction here and say that, for the state, the primary function which will qualify its activity is justice; whereas for the individual the primary function which should qualify behaviour is love and faith.

But where are the boundaries between the two? When does the state transgress into what properly belongs to the individual? Equally are there areas which belong to the state which *per se* are not the prerogative of the individual? Is it legitimate for the state to have a policy of conscription? As one who was not involved in the years of conscription I would say that

I believe the state has a right to call upon its citizens to serve the state (cf. Joshua 1:12f). On the other hand we have the invasion of the state into areas which are not its primary concern. We can think of the duty of the state to provide a framework for education — but its intrusion where it dictates against parents' wishes what should be taught. Or there is the intrusions of the state into the family. These intrusions undermines the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Would it be going too far to say that the Welfare State, while on the one hand a valuable demonstration of the first part of Calvin's definition, also contributes to a sapping of the individual will?

The tension between state and individual is sharply seen in the issue of human rights.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that in the name of human rights equally atrocious behaviour often results. Paradoxically men are prepared to kill to promote human rights. And such behaviour is not confined to the left-right conflict of Central America. We can think of the equally atrocious behaviour on both sides in many industrial disputes. We need to affirm afresh that a state never grants human rights — it can only recognise them and seek to live in the light of them. Also we need to affirm that no right is in itself ever absolute. The state has a nexus of responsibilities — and so does the individual. All rights are correlative to responsibility. And the biblical emphasis would be on responsibilities rather than rights. To hold to a right as an absolute is a recipe for anarchy.

The state and the individual have different spheres of interest — the former justice, the latter love. It belongs to the state to engage in the national defense of its territory and the provision of law within society to promote justice and peace. The individual does not seek to take the law into his own hands but seeks redress at law.

Yet the individual is part of the state. The individual is involved in the state. He is not some abstract being in distinction from the state. In a democracy the individual has responsibilities within the state. Not just to live in conformity to authority, but by taking his due part in the process of standing for election, voting, serving the community within office. In a democracy we help mould public opinion and form consensus.

But beware — to think that a democracy is necessarily more open and responsive to the Christian interest could well be a dangerous illusion. To hold that the West is in its democratic structures of state more conducive to the Gospel could well be a delusion. Is it not true that even our democracy is at heart an expression of humanistic man? It stands today for an official humanistic-pluralistic viewpoint<sup>10</sup>. and so as Kuyper indicates:<sup>11</sup>

All transcendent right in God, to which the oppressed lifted up his face, falls away. There is no other right, but the immanent right which is written down in the law. The law is right, not because its contents are in harmony with the eternal principles of right, but because it is law. If on the morrow it fixes the very opposite, this also must be right.

Biblically neither state nor individual is sovereign. But in our modern world there is an oscillation between these two poles. We even now have the spectacle of a Conservative government that exercises increasingly

centralist control.

*3 (2) The Tension Between Form and Freedom.* There is often an unhealthy polarisation between two streams of thought — state absolutism where the freedom of the individual is lost; and an anti-state absolutism where the starting point is an idea of absolute right belonging to the individual.

On the one hand there is a push for freedom which tends to chaos for freedom becomes unrestrained. There are no tracks, no order or form, within which the freedom is contained. Camus quotes Chigalev as saying: “Beginning with the premise of unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism.”<sup>12</sup> While Camus himself says: “Every human freedom, at its very roots is therefore relative.”<sup>13</sup>

Wary of unrestrained freedom, and holding to a God of order we tend to cast our vote for form and order. We can cite:

Exodus 22:28. Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler . . .

Eccles. 10:20. Do not revile the king even in your thoughts . . .

Titus 3:1. Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities . . .

1 Peter 2:13f. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.

There is no word about obeying these authorities because we agree with them or because they are uniformly on our side. It is a call to respect authority at a human level. Order is better than chaos.<sup>14</sup> We obey, whether the authority is good or bad. As Calvin puts it: “If . . . you conclude that obedience is to be returned to none but just governors, you reason absurdly.”<sup>15</sup> Calvin builds a strong statement of our duty to obey those in authority. But it is not a blank cheque for he also writes: “But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception . . .”<sup>16</sup>

We obey out of regard for God — not men. But we must ever be open to that point where the state must be resisted. We live in a time when the state becomes increasingly pagan and claims increasing control over all of life. And there are limits beyond which the state must not go *or resistance becomes our responsibility*. There is a real tension here between form and freedom; between order and liberty. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks: “Am I right when I suggest that the danger of Calvinism is always to over-stress order?”<sup>17</sup>

*3 (3) The Tension Between Idealism and Reality.* When we look at the problems generated by the state there is often a swing away from form to freedom. An *ideal* of freedom is embraced. But there are no ideal answers in a fallen world. There are no final solutions to the problems of a fallen humanity at a purely human level. So the ideals of many concerning freedom are in tension with the reality of life — the reality of sin. Paradoxically idealism often leads to violence — think of the student riots of the 60’s; the warcries of the Greenham Common Peace Women. Udo Middleman notes that so often idealism leads to a point where men are willing to fight injustice with injustice. He tells how when Lenin was in Lausanne in 1917 and was speaking about the ideal of the classless society he said: “When the Revolution comes, we must have no compassions. We must destroy without pity.”<sup>18</sup> An ideal can be a powerful driving force within society. But as Camus has noted: “In the twentieth century, power

wears the mask of tragedy.”<sup>19</sup>

3 (4) *The Tension Between Caesar and God.* The most famous text on the tension between state and individual is Jesus word: “Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” It is a simple formula — but the question remains as to where the legitimate extent of Caesar’s claims begin and finish. And surely God has a claim over every area of life? The text helps to highlight that the Christian is a citizen of the state, and also a citizen in God’s Kingdom. The question is: when do the demands of the state impinge on the call of God?

In Acts we seem to have a ready solution. When the state interfered with the preaching of the Gospel it had overstepped its bounds. Peter *et al* replied to the Jewish authorities: “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29). Yet against this we can set Romans 13:1: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” It seems a clear standoff.

Indeed the Bible can be tantalisingly ambivalent on this whole question. While Elijah is in hiding we find a godly man called Obadiah continuing to serve Ahab. We find that Naaman is permitted to return home and bow down before Rimmon! So here are two civil servants who do not seem to be called to fight a battle for God against Caesar at this particular point. However, we also have the example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. They do not bow down but stand on principle against the state. But even to say that may be naively simplistic. Daniel and his friends were in high office in the Babylonian court. Surely on a day to day basis they compromised in certain areas? Further it would be simplistic to say Shadrach was right and Obadiah wrong. Different situations call for different positions. There is a time to stand up and speak out and there is a time for compromise. We need to learn which battle to fight and when. Are we perhaps, as Christians, guilty of merely reacting to issues? Are we guilty of failing to work out criteria to decide where to do battle? What are the issues on which to battle — evolution; abortion; genetics; Scripture?

We face a subtle Caesar today. Caesar was an obvious issue for the early church. It brought conflict. Francis Schaeffer writes:<sup>20</sup>

Let us not forget why the Christians were killed. They were not killed because they worshipped Jesus . . . Nobody cared who worshipped whom as long as the worshipper did not disrupt the unity of the state, centred in the formal worship of Caesar. The reason the Christians were killed was because they were rebels.

Such is the modern subtlety of Caesar that the issue is less well defined. Caesar asked for worship on the basis of an assumed divinity. Is not the state still a divinity in its own eyes? We see this readily in Communism where the Party demands worship and obedience. But is this not also true of the West? The state makes a tacit claim to be the total sovereign order.

Indeed this near divinity seems implicit in the unqualified biblical texts which we see calling for submission to the authorities. But a warning. Speaking to those temporal authorities who have forgotten the God on whom their existence and power depends, Luther writes:<sup>21</sup>

[God] has a word to say in this wickedness: "You know well that you are gods and have power; that you have learned and grasped very quickly. But when will you learn from whom you have it? What becomes of Me? What becomes of My commandments which I have given you?"

Having acknowledged their authority Luther can nevertheless also say:<sup>22</sup>

You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls.

Caesar or God — it is a difficult question. There is no ready guide as to when we step out against Caesar. There is a tension here that will have to be worked-out step by step.

3 (5) *Tensions — A Preliminary Conclusion.* At this juncture I would like to make some preliminary conclusions.

(a) It seems to me there is no simple biblical definition of the state. Any attempt to make a simple transposition from the OT Theocracy to the modern situation is fraught with problems. We do not live in a Theocracy. Therefore attempts to apply God-given regulations for the Theocracy are not germane in a one-to-one correspondence. For example: Ronald Sider makes appeal to the OT principle of Jubilee and suggests that if we are to move to a more equitable society we should consider the application of this principle. But this fails to take into consideration that the principle was given within the context of the Theocracy. It further fails to consider the urban-exemption clauses attached to the principle in the OT.<sup>23</sup>

(b) While we live in two commonwealths (citizens of the Kingdom of God and also members of an earthly state) and while there may be occasion where these two are in conflict — it does not follow that in principle they need be. It would be unbiblical to blindly regard Caesar as always antithetical to the Christian interest.

(c) Having said this, it is clear that the ethos of our state presses in an anti-Christian direction. The structures of our nation may have been built on the concept of a God who exists and who has revealed Himself. But today this ethos is gone. Francis Schaeffer does a splendid exposé of this in "A Christian Manifesto". In that work he quotes a former Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court as saying: "Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes."<sup>24</sup> God is merely given a token nod and man makes his own morality and law.

The tragedy is that when the significant shifts in ethos were taking place the voice of the church was largely silent. Schaeffer writes:<sup>25</sup>

And those Bible-believing theologians who did see the theological danger seemed totally blind to what was happening in law and in the total culture. Thus the theologians did no better in seeing the shift from one world view to a totally different world view. Nor did Christian educators do any better either. The failed responsibility covers a wide



swath. Christian educators, Christian theologians, Christian lawyers — none of them blew loud trumpets until we were a long, way down the road toward a humanistically based culture.

(d) We also have to guard against the idea that there are certain aspects of life that are neutral. For example the idea that it is permissible for a Christian to be involved in politics, but that there is no such thing as a Christian stance on political issues. This is a dangerous neutralism. Bernard Zylstra writes:<sup>26</sup>

Those who pay homage to the fiction of neutrality maintain that many segments of modern culture are merely technical. It is then thought that a corporation, a union, a school, a government can be run by making exclusively factual, technical decisions which have no relation to one's ultimate perspective on the basic issues. . . . Neutralism is the view that man can live wholly or partly without taking God's Word into account.

(e) The Christian must be prepared to face up to the possibility of coming into collision with the state. If the state becomes increasingly centralist; if it acquires domination over the details of life (family, education, etc.) if it, with a humanistic mentality, legislates in moral areas — then conflict between the Christian and the state is not only possible but inevitable. The Christian prophetic voice needs to be raised against our all pervasive state. Is our policy one of uneasy acquiescence to the state or that of a prophetic word?

(f) Yet in calling for a prophetic word a caveat must be entered. When we desire to press against the state and call for change, is our desire a self-centred human ideal or is it focused on God as the centre of all?<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. THE QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE

The thorny question that lies behind the words of Jesus: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" is a simple one. To what extent can the Christian engage in civil disobedience? Despite a heritage that includes both Puritans and Covenanters I think our Calvinistic blood makes us instinctively recoil from such a thought. Let us explore this a little more deeply.

4 (1) *A Review of Christian Resistance.* Let us adduce one or two examples from Scripture which might help as pointers. As we look at these examples can I say that I believe those examples taken from situations where godly people are outside the Theocracy are particularly pertinent.

First of all Exodus 1:17: The situation is the people of God in Egypt. Pharaoh, worried at a possible source of rebellion, takes preventative measures and instructs the Jewish midwives to kill Hebrew males at birth. Then we read: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live." The midwives had a specific injunction from the king — the representative of state power — and quite simply disobeyed.

Think of the reign of Ahab: we find Elijah and Micaiah fearlessly

standing opposed to the injunctions of the state. It reaches the point of a personal vendetta against the prophets as Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah, and Ahab has Micaiah carried off to prison. But note an interesting thing: Elijah knew when to stand up and confront Ahab and he knew when, under God, to keep a low profile. There was a time for confrontation and a time for hiding. We must not be naive and think that because there is an issue the only course of action is a frontal attack. Further we need to note the role of Obadiah, a civil servant in the pay of Ahab. He also appears to be within the will of God as he keeps a low profile in the very courtroom of Ahab. He knows the issues — but he ventures no silly confrontation that is going to weaken further the cause of the Lord.

Again, think of Jeremiah complaining to the rulers of God's people that their foreign policy was all wrong. His complaint was no little point made in the safety of the debating chamber. It was a stand that brought oppression and prison for Jeremiah.

Or think of Daniel. Throughout the book of Daniel we have examples of civil disobedience. It starts in chapter one over a question of diet. It goes on through the larger issues of bowing down before a gold statue (ch. 3); and an attempted ban on prayer (ch. 6). Darius issues his decree. The state had spoken. And we read:

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room . . . three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed. (Dan. 6:10).

The state said one thing. And Daniel went straight ahead and disobeyed. Perhaps we need to note that Daniel and his three friends, when they had disobeyed, had no complaint against the state which demanded punishment for the breaking of its law!

Coming to the New Testament we find that the charge against the early Christians was basically a political charge. In Acts 17:7 we read: "They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

So the Bible has many examples of individuals who stood out against the state, who were willing to disobey the clear decrees of the state. But in a sense it is much more dramatic than that. In Acts 5 we find God Himself defying the actions of the state. Remember the story: the apostles have been arrested by the Jewish authorities and put in the public jail. "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. (Acts 5:19).

Similarly in Acts 12 we have Peter's escape from the prison in like manner. In other words God intervenes directly to thwart the actions of the state! He defies the local authorities to free the apostles, and later to free Peter again. Such action is, humanly viewed, highly illegal! The authorities had acted. God Himself calls for respect of the authorities. But here God thwarts them!

Turning from Scripture to history we find that the Reformation has been seen as a massive resistance movement against the lawful authorities. Calvin notes that rulers are not above the law, but subject to it, and commenting on Daniel 6:22 writes:<sup>28</sup>

For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy them — (conspuere in ipsorum capita — “to spit on their heads”) than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of His rights, and, as it were, to seize upon His throne and draw Him down from heaven.

Schaeffer, in the work already mentioned, draws heavily upon two giants of our Scottish tradition — Knox and Rutherford. He notes that Luther and Calvin reserved the right of rebellion basically to the civil rulers, but that Knox went further. And he cites Jasper Ridley as saying:<sup>29</sup> “The theory of the justification of revolution is Knox’s special contribution to theological and political thought.”

Schaeffer goes on to argue that the necessary consequences of Rutherford’s position is that citizens have a moral obligation to resist unjust and tyrannical government. Could it be unjust to try and ban a trade union? While we are subject to the office of government, we are not to be subject to the person in office who asks that which is contrary to Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

Could I commend Schaeffer’s work in this area. It is a frightening call that he issues, but a very relevant one. I was intrigued to find him quoting Charles Finney talking of “The right *and duty* of revolution.”<sup>31</sup>

4 (2) *The Principle of Resistance*. Let me stay with Schaeffer’s thesis. His argument is that our attitude towards the state must not be governed by pragmatism, but by principle. He writes:<sup>32</sup>

Please read most thoughtfully what I am going to say in the next sentence: If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been made autonomous, and as such, it has been put in the place of the Living God.

There is no power, no individual, no state — that is ultimately independent of God. All things are relative within creation — relative to the God who created them and sustains them in being. The New Testament, even when it calls us to respect authority, brings out this relativity by imposing limits upon the relevant authorities. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4 we find that the call to pray for the authorities is contextualised by the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the flourishing of the gospel! In 1 Peter 2:13-17 we again find an implicit limitation. The authorities are those who punish wrong and commend right. In other words it goes beyond a mere exercise of justice to the praise of the good.

Traditionally the state has been seen as worthy of regard as long as it remains broadly within the limits of maintaining the right. But what is the right? Who decides? Tyranny has been defined as ruling without the sanction of God. Rutherford, for example, held that a tyrannical government is always immoral. He considered it a work of Satan and that.<sup>33</sup>

A power ethical, politic, or moral, to oppress, is not from God, and is not a power, but a licentious deviation of a power; and is no more from

God, but from sinful nature and the old serpent, than a license to sin.

John Whitehead argues that the implication of Rutherford's thesis is that the "vast majority of civil governments in the world today (are) illegitimate."<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may: if we can establish a principle that not all authority is to be blindly obeyed; it is also clear that just because an authority is not godly, it does not necessarily follow that we should press for change. Change does not of necessity mean improvement of government. "Change", as Spurgeon said, "is not necessarily good as the pigeon said when it was taken from the nest and put into the pie." Luther tells two fables to make this point, of which I quote one:<sup>35</sup>

We read of a widow who stood and prayed for her tyrant most devoutly, asking God to give him long life etc. The tyrant heard it and was astonished, because he knew very well that he had done her much harm, and that this was not the usual prayer for tyrants. People do not ordinarily pray such prayers for tyrants, so he asked her why she prayed thus for him. She answered, "I had ten cows when your grandfather lived and ruled. He took two of them and I prayed that he might die and that your father might become lord. This is what happened and your father took three cows. I prayed again that you might become lord, and that your father might die. Now you have taken four cows, and so I am praying for you, for now I am afraid that your successor will take the last cow and everything that I have . . .

Do you understand these fables? There is as great a difference between changing a government and improving it as the distance from heaven to earth. It is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better, and the danger is that you will not.

So, if we have a principle that makes civil disobedience a possibility, we also see that to press for change is not necessarily going to improve anything. Let us always remember that God tolerates a sinful fallen world. He could blot it out at any moment. But in His sovereign will He chooses to allow evil to continue. One of the problems of our day is that people press against all sorts of injustice and the Christian response lacks cohesion, it becomes diffuse, disorganised and ineffective.

There are perhaps three responses to a situation where the state is pursuing an ungodly course. There is revolution; there is reaction; and there is reformation.

4 (3) *The Practice of Resistance*. The danger of *revolution* is, that insidiously the end tends to justify the means. It is intriguing to find a Marxist like Marcuse commenting that: "Every revolution has also been a betrayed revolution."<sup>36</sup> The problem of *reaction* is that it has no goal. Would it be unfair to suggest that this is perhaps the major position adopted by Christians? Something flares up into the limelight and we react against it. We react against some individual ethical issue — say abortion — but fail to see the whole world-view involved. Constructive *reformation* is the need both within our churches and within society. We can put this another way by looking at Samuel Rutherford. Rutherford outlined three levels of resistance.<sup>37</sup> These courses of resistance are for the individual

rather than the church.

1. He must defend by protest. In our society this would be by means of the due process of law and petition. There are still many issues where appropriate action can be effective through the individual right to make their point of view heard.
2. We must flee if possible. We might tend to think that this may have been a viable option in the past — say for the Reformers to flee from one country when life otherwise became impossible — but does not pertain today. But we can think of the so-called “draft-dodgers” in the USA who fled to Canada to avoid the draft into the Vietnam war because they sincerely held that that was an unjust war. Think also of the Russian dissidents who have fled to the West.
3. He may use force if necessary to defend himself and others.<sup>38</sup>

We need to note that force is the last option — not the first. Valid protest is undermined if it is to be readily associated with force. The Greenham Common Peace Women and Trade Unions have often radically undermined their position by the illegitimate use of force.

4 (3) 1. *Selecting the Battlefield.* Is it possible that Christians sometimes fight the wrong battles? Is it not easy to become engaged in some internal matter of great significance — as to whether there should be some major expenditure on a new carpet for the chancel — and miss out in the battle for the worldview of our society? We need to pick and choose the issues upon which to take a stand. We need to learn the art of compromise — and also where not to compromise. We can compromise in the crucial areas and dig our heels in about the trivial. Again, we need to accept that not everyone is called to fight on the same front.

Let me go back to Elijah. Remember Elijah’s tactics. A time to stand and confront Ahab and a time to run away. (Not his disobedient running away, but his obedient low profile period after he announced the drought to Ahab). We tend to think of the prophets always courageously confronting society and evil. But not so! Elijah knew when to make a strategic withdrawal. There were also one hundred prophets in hiding (1 Kings 18). There is a time to stand out and a time to wait patiently. Nevertheless endless patience is suicidal. Endless patience merely avoids the reality that calls for confrontation. We can think of Israel become too patient under the yoke of Egypt and virtually being driven into the position of confrontation by the Lord.

Elijah is a good example. On the one hand he speaks against blind zealotry, for he knew when to retreat. On the other hand he speaks against endless patience, for he knew when to produce the moment of confrontation. Let us also note that it is Elijah — or God working through His servant — who is in control of the situation. Elijah is not reacting. He selected the moment; he selected the battlefield. Have we something to learn here?

4 (3) 2. *The Strategy of Resistance.* We need to think more on this issue. It is not just a question of pious resistance to the evils of society and state. We must seek to think through what we are doing. We need to be aware of strategy. Often the short term frontal attack — which we are prone to

pursue — is not going to be the most effective. Remember that the early church did not rise up against Rome. Undoubtedly there were evils in the Roman Empire. But the church set itself to a long term strategy. Paul did not make a frontal attack on slavery — but he sowed the seeds that spelled the end of it. We need to get that mentality where we see ourselves building and praying for the future generations. (Cf. Daniel as an old man wrestling in prayer for the generations to come!)

Again we need to learn to work together. Though paradoxically often the protest of an individual can be more effective than a crowd: think of the Black Band Women in South Africa, or Victoria Gillick. Often the mass demonstration can be counter-productive.

4 (3)3. *The Attitude of Resistance*. Today when protests are carried out it seems to be part of the protest to gain political capital out of being arrested. Arrest is seen as a further example of the injustice of the state. But biblically we must accept this if we step outside the law of the society in which we live. Daniel, for example, makes no protest against the sentence passed upon him.

That is one aspect of attitude. Another is the need to be positive resistors. A great problem of the church is that it is seen as a negative resistor. We need to be positive. We need to stand for the sanctity of life — not just against abortion etc. Gary North writes:<sup>39</sup>

A resistance movement which is strictly negative cannot hope to survive. But a positive philosophy of resistance which does not acknowledge the inevitability of a decisive public confrontation between God's representatives and Satan's is also futile. Those who are unwilling to prepare for a literal, historical, risky confrontation with a rebellious society are as suicidal as those who refuse to enter a cave temporarily during a time of danger.

### 5. CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The function of the state is the promotion of justice and the welfare of those within its boundaries. Any drift away from this is a move towards godlessness. Whitehead claims that once a society has been established and developed upon a biblical basis, such as ours, and then deliberately turns its back upon that basis, then that state is even less legitimate than pagan Rome.<sup>40</sup> If this is true then we are needing a much deeper prayerful concern for the state to which we belong. We are needing to deepen our appreciation of the issues around us and seek to be salt and light. We are needing to identify with our nation, just as Daniel so passionately identified himself with the problems of his nation.

Having said that let me identify what I believe are erroneous responses to the problems raised concerning this issue. Let me suggest five responses to the issues of the state which I believe are unhelpful.

1. It is wrong to claim that the state is simply the god of this world and therefore decide to have nothing to do with it. Apart from the biblical error I believe in such a position it is a practical impossibility. We can not avoid living out our lives within some form of state.

2. The opposite view is also dangerously unhelpful — namely to see the state as divinely ordained *and therefore* grant it absolute obedience.
3. This might seem nearly heretical — but I believe it is not a good idea to actively resist all injustices within a society at the same time. We need to pick our fights. I do not mean that we do not oppose evil where it is found — but that we do not seek to make mountains out of molehills. We must beware of glorious victories in minor areas while the overall battle goes against us. We must with limited resources be careful not to so dissipate our energies on a wide front that we are found wanting where the battle is most crucial. One thinks of the social reformers who tended to concentrate on a single issue. Elizabeth Fry sought for prison reform; Wilberforce sought the abolition of slavery; Shaftesbury fought for the right treatment of children.
4. Again, and here we have another converse, we must beware of a total fragmentation of the issues which causes us to lose sight of the overall picture. It is easy to become so involved in an area in which we are interested to become unsympathetic towards our brother who is fighting on another battlefield.
5. Finally, it is wrong to rebel against the state without taking into account what we produce in revolt. For example, thinking in this consequential manner, take prohibition in America which simply gave birth to bootlegging and gangsters. Have we weighed the consequences of a certain course of resistance? I am not saying that there may not be a time for force — but when we do will we have considered the consequences?

A word in conclusion: we need to confess with shame that part of the problem of our day lies in a failure of theological nerve coupled with a social irrelevance on the part of the church. We have failed to be salt within society. We have failed to develop a coherent social and political theology. The evangelical voice in this field has all too often been either a simple reaction or a thinly disguised version of the political left within our society. What is needed is a coherent and radically prophetic biblical stand. Having said that I believe there are signs of hope within our evangelical culture today as we see a steady increase in social thinking and activity.

The Christian, living before the watching eyes of the world, in all of life including his response to the state, must seek to bring the salt of the Gospel to bear on the issues of our day. Albert Camus has said: “The question of the twentieth century . . . has gradually been specified: how to live without grace and without justice.”<sup>41</sup> The Christian must stand for both grace and justice. I think Camus has it right. We live in a world devoid of grace and justice — apart from God. The Christian in seeking to live out the reality of a life transformed by grace must show forth grace; and at the same time stand for justice. But he must be realistic for there are no easy solutions; he must not look for some ideal life in a fallen world; he must seek to have a realistic view of history. He must be prepared for struggle — and above all he must pray.

## THE SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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9. T. R. Ingram, "What's Wrong With Human Rights?", in *North C & C*, p 133f.
10. See *North C & C*, pp x-xi.
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23. Cf. Leviticus 25:29ff.
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25. *Ibid.*, p 50.
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27. Cf. Middleman, *op. cit.*, p 117.
28. Calvin, quoted in Harrison, *op. cit.*, p 25.
29. Schaeffer, *op. cit.* p 97.
30. *Ibid.*, p 101.
31. *Ibid.*, p 67.
32. *Ibid.*, p 130.
33. Rutherford, quoted in Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 10.
34. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 10.
35. Luther, quoted in Harrison, *op. cit.*, p 12.
36. Herbert Marcuse, quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death*, IVP, 1973, p 114.
37. Samuel Rutherford. See Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, p 103ff.
38. See the useful chapter on "Violence and Force" in Os Guinness, *Dust of Death*.
39. Gary North, *op. cit.*, p xvii.
40. Whitehead, *op. cit.*, p 6.