

CHURCH AND STATE

Paul writes of Christ, 'And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence' (Colossians 1.17-18). Church and state might not seem a very exciting subject but we have learned in the last fifteen years just how important it is for each of our daily lives in home, work and society. Laws passed at Westminster affect the life of the unborn child, what marriage is understood to be by the generality of folk, the days of the week that people are required to work and, it appears, what passages of the Bible can be quoted in Christian worship in prisons and in street preaching. I was born at a time when the life of the infant in the womb was protected by law, marriage was understood to be between one man and one woman until death should part, businesses were closed for a day of rest on Sundays and the Bible was publicly recognized as the Word of God as at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. We can be sure that the relationship between Church and state affects the lives of every one among the 65 million folk in our country in a variety of ways. We disregard the subject at our peril.

I. Supreme authority in Church and state

Who is ultimately in charge, church or state? The Pope and secularism have both staked their claim and, in the case of the pope, very successfully for centuries during the Medieval period but the Bible concedes to neither. Christ is king! Supreme authority regarding everything is invested in Jesus Christ. He is the head of the Church (verse 18), 'all things were created by him' (verse 16), and it is God's pleasure 'that in all things he might have the preeminence' (verse 18). Christ has not conceded absolute ecclesiastical or civil authority to pope or king.

A. No pope can be the head of the Christian Church or of nation states

The Ephesians 5 analogy of Christ and his church is that of *marriage*. Paul counsels wives, 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your

own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as *Christ is the head of the church*: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore *as the church is subject unto Christ*, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing' (verses 22-24). Paul also counsels married men saying, 'Husbands, love your wives, even as *Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, *That he might present it to himself a glorious church*, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself' (verses 25-28). No man could thus *love* the Church, *redeem* it by his own blood and therefore *possess* it as his own purchased possession. The Westminster Confession (Chapter 25.6) affirms concerning Christ's headship, 'There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof...' In nature a two-headed man would be a monstrosity. It defies reason to suggest that there can be two rulers of the Church, Christ through his Word, the Bible, and also a pope through ex cathedra pronouncements. It was not out of religious hatred that the Confession added of the pope that he 'is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God'. Christ extends a gracious welcome to sinners, free pardon, and justification by faith. The pope says, NO, you must add works of personal merit in order to be saved. He sets himself up against the Christ of the Bible and contradicts his teaching and free offer of the Gospel. Regarding his atonement for sin, Christ said, 'It is finished' but the pope says, NO, it is not finished but must be added to by the sacrifice of the Mass in which, it is claimed, by the miracle of transubstantiation, the wafer becomes the body of Christ and the wine comes the blood of Christ so that Christ *once* offered is offered up *again*. The pope's doctrines contradict Christ's teaching and are put in the place of Christ as Saviour and Lord. This accounts for the strong language of the Confession following Scripture. The pope's claims of theocratic sovereignty over national rulers and nations fail with his claim to be the supreme servant of God. Christ *alone* is *the* Servant of the Lord, Head of the Church and ruler of the kings of the earth.

B. The kings of the earth do not have authority over spiritual things

Paul explains that the risen and ascended Saviour has given church officers for the government and instruction of his church. Ephesians 4.8, 11-12 are to the point: 'Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men... And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ'. With the termination of the foundational age of the Church with its apostles and evangelists, the Church is now ruled by ministers ('pastors and teachers') and ruling elders (1 Timothy 5.17). This is why the Westminster Confession denies spiritual authority to civil rulers when it says, 'The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven' (23.3). These things are beyond the prerogative of civil rulers. We are not opposed to state recognition of the true Christian church but we reject an Erastian establishment of state control in the church such as we have with the Church of England, where the monarch and prime minister influence the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury. (The term Erastian is from the name of *Thomas Erastus*, a German physician who denied to the church any authority in matters affecting civil rights. *Erastianism*, however, has to do with state control in the church.)

C. The kings of the earth do not have any *absolute* authority in moral matters

In Revelation 19.16 we read of the Saviour, 'he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS'. Morality by bureaucracy is never a success because conscience speaks louder than men even as tyrants have learned. At the last judgement the law by which we will all be judged is the law of God. The kingly office of Christ reminds us that the supreme court is not in London or Strasburg but in heaven! Someone might be well within British law and European law but the ultimate question is, Am I compliant with God's law? Divorce on any ground

other than adultery or desertion is a putting asunder what God has joined together and God will require it on the Day of Judgement. Abortion is the taking away of the life of the unborn child contrary to the sixth commandment and God will require it on the Day of Judgement. It is so with every commandment of men contrary to the Law of God. Man's law does not even reach to thoughts until they can be known by word or deed but Christ showed in the Sermon on the Mount that God *takes note of* and *punishes* evil thoughts whether unkind or unclean. In Matthew 5.21-22 we read, 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, *That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment*'. In Matthew 5.27-28 we read, 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart'.

II. Ultimate issues in Church and State

A. Though temporal benefits are our lesser need the natural man prioritizes them in church and state

Paul's teaching in Colossians cuts across the prioritization of this world. The saints are indeed in this world but they are not of it. Paul writes to 'the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse' (verse 1) but he sees their earthly life in the light of their eternal hope in heaven (v.5). We are not against civic involvement but that of John Newton and William Wilberforce arose from spiritual principle and Christian compassion. We must get our spiritual priorities right.

B. Spiritual welfare is the ultimate need

A state may be effectively operated, just, and compassionate but cannot of itself address the spiritual and eternal interests of its subjects. Nor can officers of state perform their duty by seeking to be neutral. Psalm 2 requires them to acknowledge Christ's supreme authority in the words, 'Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be

instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him' (verses 10-12). A nation reaches its zenith in the recognition of Christianity as the true religion. God's message to the Church of Christ is, 'And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee: for in my wrath I smote thee, but in my favour have I had mercy on thee. Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and that their kings may be brought. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted' (Isaiah 60.10-12). I think that we can all see that Great Britain has peaked. The British Commonwealth stands as a testimony to former greatness but now nations that we taught Christianity, morality, government, industry are standing for principles and practice that we have forsaken and Evangelicalism in particular. How are we to respond?

C. Christ alone answers to our spiritual need as the great high priest of his people

Writing of Christ in verses 13-14, Paul explains that God has 'delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son'. Of Christ he writes, 'In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.' These are things beyond the jurisdiction and power of rulers but necessary for the total welfare of their subjects. Governments try to protect their citizens from invasion and terrorism but cannot set them free from 'the power of darkness'. Satan has his power because of sin and no mere man can deal with this spiritual problem. Paul explains that Christ is the answer. Believers know that in him 'we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.' The heart of Christ's priestly office was his self sacrifice. Paul sums all up by reference to blood, redemption and forgiveness. As the only man since the Fall who has fully satisfied the demands of God's law, the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself as the perfect sacrificial Lamb in the place of sinners. He bore the curse of the law and the wrath of God and made peace by the blood

of his cross. In him there is release from the bondage to sin, Satan and death. The experience of this deliverance through faith in Christ is so sweet because it involves complete forgiveness that is freely bestowed. All who enjoy justification by faith alone in Christ alone are translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son and have an invincible joy and peace in believing that casts out fear. In uncertain times such as our own this is a great blessing. Thirty years ago we were in Northern Ireland during a violent period of terrorism. We had to trust God. Now the situation is uncertain in London and other major cities if not most places. For those killed, economic policies, social welfare and Trident are irrelevant. One thing matters. Did they know the Saviour?

III. Working together and the prophetic office of Christ

Britain has had a good record for tolerance after the Stuart persecutions of Protestants. The Jews were made welcome by Cromwell but not to countenance or adopt their rejection of Christ as national policy. That would have been to undermine the foundations of the nation. We have seen that the Church has no theocratic remit such as medieval popery enforced and also that the civil authorities are not to interfere in the government of the Church in spiritual things. The civil magistrate, however, cannot remain religiously neutral because, to give but one example, he must either endorse monogamy or polygamy in the civil registries. He thus needs guidance concerning the spiritual and moral interest of the nation. The Westminster Confession Chapter 23 Section 3, gives some guidance concerning Christian civil magistrates in unsettled times. There are three general principles.

A. The Limit

'The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' We have already explained Christ's sole headship in his church and his rule through Scripture expounded by Gospel ministers and upheld by elders.

B. The Aims

The Christian civil magistrate has 'authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.' Here are five Biblical objectives:

(i) The preservation of unity and peace in the Church (Ephesians 4.1-3: 'I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.').

(ii) The truth of God be kept pure and entire (Jude 1.3: 'Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.').

(iii) Blasphemies and heresies be suppressed (Galatians 1.6-7: 'I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.').

(iv) All corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline be prevented or reformed (1 Corinthians 11.20-22: 'When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not.').

(v) All the ordinances of God be duly settled, administered, and observed (1 Corinthians 11.23a: 'For I have received of the Lord

that which also I delivered unto you').

C. The Method

'For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.' We must dismiss as nonsense two unfounded suggestions. (i) The suggestion that there are persecuting principles here is unfounded. That the civil powers are to *consult* and *encourage* settlement of these things in the Church according to the scriptures is both peaceable and in accordance with what the apostles did in Acts 15. The 'sword' is not involved, though rulers must act if crimes are committed such as the recent example of gun running by a (Armenian) Christian of Eastern Orthodox profession. (ii) The suggestion that this section gives church power into the hand of the civil power is equally unfounded. The first sentence of this section states that 'the civil magistrate may NOT assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' God has not invested any civil or religious leader with the Prophetic teaching rights of Jesus Christ through the ministers of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The fact of the matter is that our government is consulting all the time with religious representatives including Muslims, Jews, Roman Catholics, ecumenical protestants and others. Religion is such a key factor of community life that even in a secular democracy consultation must take place in the interests of all citizens. The best interests of UK citizens cannot be served by a situation of zero interaction between the true Church and civil rulers. We do not say that the Church is dependent upon civil power for its survival but we can see that even secular rulers are dependent upon the truth of God's Word to govern justly and morally. Evangelicals and Evangelical churches fail in their duty to their neighbour if they opt out of democratic interaction with the powers that be. The issues in 2015 are more serious than those faced by Wilberforce and his generation and we neglect them at our peril.