

# CHRISTIAN AND STATE

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*This article could well be called a personal confession of faith. It is based on certain passages of Scripture which, in the writer's opinion, are of crucial importance for understanding the role of the Christian individual and the Christian Church in their relationship to the State.*

The writer makes no claim to be an expert in exegesis. While convinced that his interpretation is solidly based on Scripture, and is an honest attempt to understand the will of God, he is not (he hopes) so arrogant as to assume that his interpretation alone is correct, and welcomes the prospect of frank discussion of his thesis — always provided that those who disagree also base their argument on Scripture.

## Reasons for writing

Also by way of introduction, it may well be asked what prompts the writer to his task at this particular time. The answer to that is in two parts. First, there is the conviction that recent events in South Africa compel South African churchmen to think clearly and decisively about the Church-State relationship. Secondly, the concern of some ministers with matters political has caused doubt in the minds of other ministers as to their motives and as to their faithfulness to the Word of God.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT:

A dominant train of thought in the Old Testament is extremely relevant to our purpose. That is the deep conviction that God is sovereign Lord, not only of the individual believer, nor of the Church only, but of the nation, whether the nation be a nation believers or not. Lord not only of the nation, but of all nations. It is to Him, and to Him alone that rulers and princes and whole nations are responsible. From Him comes their life. In his hands is the control of their destiny. To Him they look for judgment. To read the Old Testament with open eyes is to see quite clearly that God is Lord, not only of the individual conscience, but of the destiny of nations.

As one illustration of this conviction, consider the remarkable words from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Assyria has risen as a menacing world power and is ready to pounce on Judah. The problem with which the prophet deals is: how can God's sovereignty be reconciled with the devouring of Judah (God's people) by Assyria, a monster pagan nation? Isaiah gives the startling answer that Assyria, the pagan nation, is an instrument of God's purposes! God speaks:

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger,  
the staff of my fury!

Against a godless nation (Judah)  
I send him, and against the  
people of my wrath I command  
him,

to take spoil and seize plunder,  
and to tread them down like  
the mire of the streets.

But Assyria, a proud, boastful nation, is not aware that it is being used by God. Rather, it attributes all its success to its own virtue and power:

But he (the Assyrian nation) does  
not so intend, and his mind does  
not so think:

but it is in his mind to destroy,  
and to cut off nations not a few;  
For he says... "Shall I not do to  
Jerusalem and her idols as I  
have done to Samaria and her  
images?"

This national pride will not escape God's judgment. When God has finished what he intended to do to Judah he will in turn punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria:

Shall the axe vaunt itself over  
him who hews with it,  
or the rod magnify itself against  
him who wields it?

As if a rod should wield him who  
lifts it,  
or as if a staff should lift him  
who is not wood!

The inevitable result will be disaster  
for the haughty Assyrians:

Therefore, the Lord, the Lord of  
hosts  
will send wasting sickness  
among his stout warriors,  
and under his glory a burning  
will be kindled  
like the burning of fire.

If we are to get the full force of this disturbing passage, we should read it again. This time, for "Assyria" read, say, "Russia"; for the "godless nation", read "South Africa"; for "Jerusalem", read "Pretoria". Adapted from Brown: "The Bible speaks to you".

## God in control of history

This passage undoubtedly raises some difficult problems with regard to the Providence of God which do not fall within the scope of an article such as this. One thing, however, emerges quite clearly — that God and nothing and nobody else is in control of world history, and that, as a result, any large-scale neglect of his laws — by a nation — will lead inevitably to large-scale disaster — for that nation. Nor is it any safeguard to plead that the nation in question is a "Christian nation", or, as the Jews would have claimed, "the people of God", ruled and governed by men who are professed believers. On the contrary, if we are to believe Amos, that will only mean that our judgment will be all the more severe:

You only have I known  
of all the families of the earth;  
therefore I will punish you  
for all your iniquities

When those who, from their intimate relationship with God, should know better — when they go astray, when they disobey, then it is only just and right that their judgment, their punishment, should be more severe than those who can in all sincerity plead ignorance of God's will and purpose.

No state, no nation, no people, no race, can escape the judgment of God. The newly-independent African states, America, France, Britain, South Africa — all these are guilty on the charge of being "godless nations". We have served God by our words, and disobeyed him by our actions. We have exploited the underprivileged, we are rich while others starve, we are comfortable, while others live in dreadful insecurity, we have closed our eyes to the suffering of human beings. All these things come under the judgment of God.

## History has a moral meaning

To say that history is in God's hands implies that it has a moral meaning. If Judah (or South Africa) becomes a "godless nation", then Judah (or South Africa) must pay the price. When a crisis comes and Assyria is ready to pounce, this is no historical coincidence, no accident — it has moral significance.

It is easy enough to lay down principles and broad generalisations. It is not so easy to indicate how these apply to modern history. We are in dire need of the prophet who will, with sure voice, interpret to us the outworking of

the will of God in the current events of our time. But a venture must be made, otherwise we stand guilty of the charge of being irrelevant, of mouthing pious platitudes.

May we, then, not say that the rise of Communism is a judgment on the imperialistic arrogance of the so-called "Christian West", and particularly on the complacency of their ruling classes who had so little concern for the vast mass of working people? May we not say that the shattering decline of Nazi Germany was a judgment on the pagan cruelties inflicted in the name of National Socialist ideology? May we not say that the undeniable brutalities in the Congo are a judgment on the savage — and un-Christian — exploitation of the people of the Congo in the past century? These things are not pleas and to think about — but may not demand that God speak to us only in honeyed words.

## What was their sin?

The ancient people of God were charged with being a "godless" nation. What had they done to deserve such a description? Again and again in the Old Testament, the answer is given — that they are unrighteous, they are unjust, they have divorced their "religion" from their daily life. The places of worship may be crowded, the temple coffers may be full, the altars may reek with the sacrifices offered, but this is no substitute for righteous and just dealings between man and man. To take just one example, let us turn again to the book of Isaiah, where the people, having pleaded that God should be delighted with their worship, their fasts, their offerings, their religious duties, devoutly and zealously performed, receive this answer:

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with  
the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into  
your house;  
When you see the naked, to cover  
him,  
and not to hide yourself from  
your own flesh?

## Our Duty to the poor

A great deal could be said about this passage and its implications. Let us confine ourselves to one — the insistence that he who believes in God must have a deep compassion for the poor. This is so widely accepted by Christians that there is little need to argue about it here.

But we do not always see the implications. It is well-pleasing to God to give bread and blankets, medical aid and other assistance to those who cannot afford them. But surely it is even more well-pleasing to God, because it respects the human dignity of the people concerned, to see to it that the poor are given the opportunity of earning sufficient to care for themselves and their families? Where custom or tradition or legislation or just plain callous apathy prohibit the poor person from gaining skills and entering employment that would enable him to provide for himself and his loved ones, then it surely becomes our religious duty to work for the overthrow of such legislation or custom.

The generosity of a certain large city in our country has always impressed the writer. Every winter, when the appeal is made for blankets, that the poor may not die of cold, there is a willing and glad response. But inevitably the question arises: how would the ratepayers of this same city (or any other) react to a proposed increase

in municipal rates so that those employed by the municipality at any rates would receive wages enabling them to buy blankets for themselves?

## Men of power

Consider now another aspect of the Old Testament. Think of the situation which again and again faced the Old Testament prophets. When a man is put into a position of power and authority (as were the kings of Israel and Judah), then that power begins to corrupt him. It corrupts him even when he publicly acknowledges that he holds his position by the permission, even by the command of God, and when that acknowledgment is symbolised by for example a religious ceremony of coronation and anointing.

Power corrupts even when the men of power are the anointed rulers of God's chosen people. In such a situation, the prophets are called by God to rebuke the arrogance of the men who wield authority, to remind them that they are not responsible only to themselves, nor even to the nation, but to God who has appointed them to rule over the people, that they have been exalted, not to flatter their own vanity, indulge their love of luxury, and indulge their lust for power, but to benefit the nation, to deal out justice with an impartial and merciful hand, to ensure that the poor do not suffer because of the greed of the rich.

The prophets understood the temptations of power. They knew that men of power will do their best to keep the power they have, to increase it if possible, and to justify — if necessary by sinful rationalisation — their every use of that power.

## Judgment on the nation

But the prophets did not only rebuke the leaders of the people. They pronounced the judgment of God on the nation as a whole. From very early days in the history of Israel, we see God standing over against a sinful people, and calling them, through his chosen representatives, to repentance. The prophets diagnose not only individual sin but national sin as well.

Thus it is that we read of the judgment proclaimed on the house of king Jeroboam by Ahijah; of the sin of king Baasha denounced by the prophet Jehu; of the heathen worship of Ahab and Jezebel bitterly contested by Elijah; of Micah foretelling the defeat of the allied kings Jehoshaphat and Ahab; of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah denouncing national policy, warning against foreign alliances and exposing the social unrighteousness of the people.

Throughout the Old Testament, it is possible to see the tension between the "church" — as represented by the prophets — and the nation. Not only so. Because the official church has identified itself with the state, there is tension between the prophets and the official church also. The prophets expose the corruption of the people's worship; see beyond the smoking altars to the people's inner rebellion and selfishness and greed, beyond the crowds thronging the Temple to the neglect and indifference to the fate of the poor. Because the Church as a whole has failed to be a true instrument of God, the prophets begin to gather round them small groups of disciples who, by the zeal of their life and witness, also stand over against the nation. ★

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