

F C Peters?

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Folder

CHURCH AND STATE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION

It is quite noteworthy that after centuries of struggle the problem of church and state is by no means settled today. On the contrary, it would seem that there has been a greatly increased volume of discussion on this topic in recent years. For someone to venture into a discussion of the entire subject without first confining himself to a certain aspect of the problem, is perhaps somewhat foolhardy. Yet, I have come to believe that such general, broad approaches having meaning in terms of paving the way for more thorough and meticulous research. The more inclusive study becomes direction-giving and points the way for the studies which are to follow.

This problem has been approached in our Mennonite circles from two general viewpoints. The one is that of the political scientist whose studies have given him a particular understanding of the nature of the state and its function in society. Even though the social scientist may be a professing Christian, his view often reflects his secular orientation. Most often he is optimistic with regard to the contributions of the state and his bias is in the direction of qualified or unqualified participation in the affairs of the state. The other view is that of the theologian, and in our particular setting, the Anabaptist theologian, who in general tends to a more pessimistic view of the state and this in particular when the matter of participation in state affairs on the part of the Christian is discussed. The theologian, not so well versed in political science, often accepts a more categorical application of the New Testament principles to the problem of church and state.

The student of the New Testament who ventures to investigate the biblical teachings on this subject is confronted with serious problems. On the one hand, there is the scarcity of explicit teachings on the Christian's relation to the state in the New Testament, and, on the other hand, there is the great diversity of interpretations of the passages which have a direct bearing on the subject.

The procedure followed in this paper will be to present the problem first from the historical perspective. This is done in order to bring the issues into sharper focus. History cannot settle the issue at stake, but it can cast significant light on the development of the problem. Secondly, we shall attempt a definition of church and of state. Thirdly, we shall proceed to the New Testament passages which have more direct bearing on our problems. Lastly, we shall draw some conclusions or inferences for the life of the Christian whose ultimate authority is the Word of God as finally revealed in the New Testament.

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THE PROBLEM OF CHURCH AND STATE IN HISTORY

In the time of the New Testament and of early Christianity, the state as such was hardly distinguished from the world, or from the entire non-Christian sphere of life. In the context of early Christianity the problem might well be rephrased in Johannine terms of Christian and world. The answers offered were also strictly in such a context. In that day there existed an inevitable state of tension between church and state as between church and world, a tension which could never be resolved as long as these represented two distinct spiritual entities in conflict.

During the early Christian centuries and up to the time of Constantine because of the spiritual conflict in persecution, the church and the empire stood for distinct and opposite ideals. The church was pursuing its mission of preaching Christ to the lost without regard for the social and political consequences of such preaching. Several biblical references show that the consequences were often quite staggering for the culture and the political life of the nation.

The government gradually began to see in the growing strength of the church a movement hostile to its own existence. With this growing awareness as to the "threat" of the church, the state took on the role of the persecutor, suppressing the church sporadically with vigor and again leaving it in comparative peace. Such an attitude of the state called forth a response by the church of relative approval and relative disapproval.¹ These differing attitudes toward the state appeared side by side with approval predominating in some periods and disapproval in others, depending partly upon the degree of persecution which was current.²

It is most significant that the church claimed no rights for itself. It took the attitude of suffering for righteousness even as the Master had suffered. No release from tension through political negotiation was sought. The state was the world and one could never come to terms with the world. This attitude is clearly revealed in the writings of the apologists (110-180 A.D.) who send forth a barrage of "acid criticism against political institutions in general and the Roman Empire in particular."³

¹ Cecil J. Cadoux, The Early Church and the World (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1925), 181 ff.

² Erland Waltner, "An Analysis of the Mennonite Views of the Christians relation of the State in the Light of the New Testament." (Unpublished Th.D. Thesis, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1948) p. 3.

³ Cadoux, op. cit., p. 247.

A change came with Emperor Constantine. A union of the church and the state was initiated and slowly finalized. Herring refers to this union as the "fall" of the church.⁴

It was Augustine who gave the problem of church and state careful consideration. In his great work, "De Civitate Dei", he drew a sharp contrast between the civitas terrena and the civitas Dei. The civitas terrena, which he almost identified with the state, was sinful and temporal. The civitas Dei, which he identified with the church, was holy and eternal. Here was born a distinct dualism with reference to church and state which was so in keeping with the current philosophical (Greek) dualism of the day. The church related to God was good and the state related to the earth (material was evil). However, Augustine believed that the most desirable conditions for both the church and the state could be achieved in a state governed by Christian rulers.⁵

Thomas Aquinas (13th. Cent. A.D.) gave the state a well-defined place and function in the vast organism of the Christian social life. He made the state a necessary part of the corpus christianum. The church and the state together formed the Kingdom of God, that is the Church and the state worked like the right and left hands of God.⁶

This Thomistic philosophy of the state reigned supreme for centuries and was, with minor changes, accepted by the reformers. I believe that Herring is right when he says: "Both for the medieval Catholic church, and for the Reformers, the State and Church, social, cultural and religious life formed a unity of thought, an organization regarded as Christian, a corpus christianum."⁷ The leading reformers all regarded the political state as in some way an ally in the work of the Kingdom of God.

⁴ G. J. Herring, The Fall of Christianity (New York; Fellowship Publications, 1943), 33.

⁵ St. Augustine, The City of God (London:Griffith Farran Oheden & Welch n.d.), 1, 177.

⁶ Edward Yoder, "Christianity and the State" Memmonite Quarterly Review, XI (July, 1937), 178.

⁷ Herring, quoted by Yoder, Op. cit., p. 178.

Of interest here is the view of Martin Luther. While the reformer protested vigorously against the absolute authority of the papal hierarchy, he held an exalted view of the authority of the state. According to his view, church and state are two domains (Regimente) in the corpus christianum. The spiritual domain which involves matters pertaining to man's soul, is to be controlled by Christ alone, through the Holy Spirit, without interference by the state.⁸ The secular domain, which involves man's outward life, is to be controlled by civil rulers, without interference by the church.⁹ It is clear that Luther's earlier view called for a complete separation of church and state with the Christian responsible to both.

The Anabaptists of the Reformation held the New Testament to be the chief guide for the Christian and for the church. For them the church could have no connection with the state at all. The state's work was recognized as part of the providence of God, but entirely outside the Kingdom of Grace. The church does not need the arm of the state at all in its work and service. In effect, they turned back to the early church attitude of indifference to the state and to the political arrangements of society. If all men would live by the gospel, there would be no need for a state with police and military power, and they proceeded to live that way. The state was for the world and represented the world to the Anabaptists.

The problem of church and state takes on a particular dimension in the American political economy. The arrangement whereby church and state operate in their individual spheres seem almost ideal. In practice such an arrangement has many good points, but also its dangerous aspects. It needs to be emphasized that the church must not and dare not accept any defined status from the state. Only too frequently does this tie the hands of the church in completing her task on earth. It would seem to me that Yoder is correct when he defines the situation which has developed in America thus: "The state agreed not to molest the church in her doctrine and worship. Then the church tends to feel perhaps that it would be ungenerous of her in turn not to let the state alone in its policies, or not to support the state in a time of its crisis and danger."¹⁰

THE NATURE OF THE STATE AND THE CHURCH

The Nature of the State - In general, two emphases have predominated in definitions setting forth the nature of the state.

⁸ Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Co. and Castle Press, 1915 - 1930) III, 251.

⁹ Ibid., II, 70.

¹⁰ Yoder, op. cit., p. 182.

One emphasis stresses the fact that the state is there to promote cooperation and mutuality among the peoples of the world. Those who stress this aspect of the definition, says Rutenber, tend to see the state as being something inherently good. Through the state new ways of enriching and encouraging the common togetherness are discovered.¹¹

The other emphasis, one which the Anabaptists stressed and perhaps overstressed, is the restraining power of the state on evil. Those who stress this emphasis tend to look upon the state as a necessary evil, made necessary by the sin of human nature. If there were no sin there would be no need of the state. But given the facts of human sin, a state is an indispensable part of human life. Such seems to be the emphasis of Romans 13 where the powers are restrainers of evil in man which evil must be checked for the larger good.¹²

The term "state" has been defined in this paper in the general sense of meaning "politically organized society." The authority of this "politically organized society" is expressed and exercised through what is called its "government".¹³ It is also said that the state is "an aggregation of free individuals united for collective action" but this is quite definitely a democratic definition of the state.¹⁴

The states function is to administer justice. However, the state does not create justice, it is rather the instrument for implementing justice. In order to do this, it becomes necessary that the state have coercive powers to enforce law and justice. With this in mind, Rutenber says correctly that the sine qua non of the state is not justice, but power.¹⁵ This concept of power, coercive power if necessary, is symbolized in Romans 13 by the sword. By way of this sword, or power, the state becomes the promoter of justice.

¹¹Culbert G. Rutenber, The Dagger and the Cross (New York: Fellowship Publications, 1950), 74.

¹²Loc. Cit.

¹³William Anderson, American Government (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), 69-70.

¹⁴Yoder, op cit., p. 173.

¹⁵Rutenber, op. cit., p. 75.

This view assigns to the state a certain status in the plan of God. P. K. Neufeld in a recent article describes the state as a "Notordnung." He goes on to say: "Die Welt, die gegenueber der Gemeinde Jesu hier stets die erdrueckende Mehrheit bildet (Matt. 13-14), die sich aber nimmer zur Waffenruestung Christi bequemen wird, wuerde diesen Planeten bald zur Hoelle machen, wenn hier keiner Ordnungen herrshten. Darum hat Gott in der Welt Obrigkeiten mit fuer sie entsprechendes Ordnungen zugelassen. Die schlimmste Obrigkeit ist immer noch besser als keine Obrigkeit."¹⁶

The Nature of the Church. The nature of the church has been discussed in a paper read at one of the previous study conferences. In this particular study it becomes imperative that we focus attention on the functions of the church in contrast to the functions of the state. J. Howard Yoder describes the business of the church as being that of being the church. "If we believe there is a Kingdom of darkness and a Kingdom of light, and that, whatever the virtues of the one and the shortcomings of the other, they are different in essence, then our first duty as Christians is to belong fully to our Kingdom."¹⁷

In discussing the nature of the church in terms of its functions as established by God, three basic elements seem to stand out.

1. The church is God's community of Grace and Discipleship. This describes the vertical dimensions involved.

2. The church is God's community of Faith and Love. This would deal with both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. It would describe faith working through love.

3. The church is God's community of Witness and Service. This would deal with the horizontal dimension. It could also refer to the church as a community of preaching and witnessing.¹⁸

CHURCH AND STATE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Since Mennonite Brethren are by their own confession bibli-cists, they have thereby committed themselves of the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice. In this case, as in

¹⁶P. K. Neufeld, "Die Stellung des Christen zum Staat," Mennonische Rundschau," LXXXLLL (June 3, 1952) p. 2.

¹⁷J. Howard Yoder, "The Nature of the Church's Responsibility in the World," (Unpublished Manuscript, Goshen College Historical Library, 1959).

¹⁸Erland Waltner, "The church in the Bible," "Proceedings of the Study Conference in the Believers Church (Newton: General Conference Mennonite Church. 1955) 66-70.

others, we follow the hermeneutical principle of recognizing the New Testament as the final manifestation of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. The approach which we shall follow is that of first exegeting certain passages and then formulating certain principles.

Several passages in the New Testament have definite bearing on the problem of church and state. Four such passages will be dealt with in this paper.

John 19: 10-11. This passage presents a direct statement of Jesus with regard to the Roman State as it is presented by Pilate. The important statement in this passage is: "Thou would'st have no power (exousian) against me, except it were given thee from above." Pilate had just challenged Jesus with the power of the state and that in a rather absolute context of power. "Knowest thou not that I have power to release thee and power to crucify thee." The term "power" which Pilate used twice and Jesus used once in this passage is derived from the Greek word meaning "Power of choice" or liberty of action."¹⁹

It is well to note that Jesus not only recognized the judicial authority of Pilate but also called attention to the source and limitations of this authority. According to Jesus, Pilate's power was derived, not absolute. It had been given to him "from above." The expression "from above" (anothen) is most naturally interpreted as meaning "from God." It cannot mean "from the Sanhedrin" because this would be contrary to historical facts. It hardly means "from the Roman Emperor" because this would have no vital significance at this point. Lange would, therefore, seem to be correct in making it equivalent to "from God" or "from the father", expressions which Jesus did not use because Pilate would not have understood them."²⁰

From this it seems clear that Jesus recognized civil authority as existing by divine institution.

John 18: 33-38. One of the three charges which the Jews laid against Jesus was that He had set Himself up as a King. This caused Pilate to wonder, Did Jesus intend to establish a Kingdom on the same plane as the Romans and perhaps one that stood directly in

¹⁹J. Moulton and G. Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (2nd ed., New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), on "exousia."

²⁰J. P. Lange, The Gospel According to John (New York: Charles Scribners, 1871) 568.

opposition to it? What was Jesus' attitude toward the Roman State?

The counter-question which Jesus posed was: "sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" This might well mean: "Are you speaking to me from a Roman or from a Jewish context? Pilate was quick to answer: "Am I a Jew?" His frame of reference was definitely Roman. Jesus then answers: "My kingdom is not of this world." The kingdom anticipated and inaugurated by Jesus was a Kingdom of truth. Obedience, or hearing His voice, admitted one to this Kingdom.

From this a second principle emerges, namely that Jesus' ministry was not to earthly kingdoms. He called people who were citizens of earthly states into a spiritual kingdom of truth.

Romans 13:1-7. Because of its profound influence upon Christian thought concerning the state, this passage has been called "the most important pronouncement about political science written during the first 17 centuries of the Christian era."²¹ It has been the main court of appeals in discussions on the Christian's attitude toward the state, not only during the Protestant Reformation, but also in the present time.

Commentators differ in their approach to this passage. Some stress, or overstress, the historical situation reflected in the passage. They would say that Paul was attempting to quiet a seditious spirit at Rome. He would probably have written quite differently about the state at a later time of his life or if he had witnessed the beginnings of the persecution.²²

An opposite view is taken by Lenski who holds that Paul was here not influenced by local conditions at all but that he was laying down great positive principles for all time.²³

Scholars feel quite certain that prior to the writings of Romans, some exhibition of a rebellious spirit against the state had occurred.²⁴ This fact together with the possibility of an

²¹Albert Hyma, Christianity and Politics (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott Co., 1938), 12.

²²The Abingdon Bible Commentary (New York: Abingdon Press, 1929) 1161.

²³R.C.H. Lenski, Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1945), 785.

²⁴W. Sanday and A. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1920), 370.

undercurrent of antipathy toward the State on the part of the Christians may well explain the reason for the introduction of the subject of a Christian's civic responsibility in the book of Romans. The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed exegesis of this passage. Suffice it to list several definite principles which are taught by the passage.

1. The apostle here explicitly teaches that the state has come into existence by the agency of God who has set civil government into this place.

2. Paul does not explain when and how God set the civil power into its place nor does he indicate the particular form which civil rule should take.

3. It is clear that civil power bears a subservient relationship to God and in the discharge of its functions is answerable to Him.

4. It is also clearly taught that Christians have a direct obligation to the state in terms of dues, etc., so that the state can carry out its functions.

I Peter 2: 13-17. If it is agreed by some that Paul took a favorable view of the civil government because Roman rule was advantageous to Christianity at the time he wrote, this certainly cannot be said of the statements of Peter. First Peter was probably written after the persecution of Christians had already begun.²⁵ One can easily find a striking similarity between Peter's statements concerning civil government and those of Paul. Both admonish subjection to the civil powers and both speak of the same functions which these powers have to perform.

From the context of this passage we note that the apostle here admonishes the Christians to "live Down" a false report which had been spread concerning them. They were spoken against as "Bad Actors" (kakopoion). According to Peter, one of the motives for subjection to the state was to quiet these false charges that the progress of the Kingdom be not hindered.

It would seem that the emphasis of the entire section is upon a submissive attitude toward those who may cause the Christian to suffer. Quite obviously the state is something separate from the church and the Christian expects to suffer because of the rulers.

²⁵ Note here I Peter 6:7; 3:13-17; 4:12-19.

Having discussed several New Testament passages, we shall proceed to certain principles which become normative for the Christian in his relation to the state. Here I would refer to the article by J. A. Toews, Can the Christian participate in Government? Three basic biblical principles are set forth in his article.²⁶

1. Christ and the apostles recognized the state as existing by Divine Providence. This would mean that a Christian could never be an anachist.

2. Christ and the apostles did not participate in the government of the state. Jesus ministry was strictly unpolitical.

3. Christ and the apostles recognized specific duties toward the state.

The article also sets forth three basic historical principles not entirely unrelated to our problem.

1. The Church's participation in government has led to the loss of her vision and mission.

2. The church's participation in government has led to the church's subservience to the state.

3. The church's participation in government has often led to an identification of the church with a certain political system or party.

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATION

Although it is often said that "the Bible is practical" this expression should not be taken to mean that the Bible speaks in a direct way to every temporal problem which the church faces. This still means that the Bible is the guide to faith and practice. However, the explicit application of the Biblical principles to current problems must be made by the church and the Christian.

In this section we shall refer to some of the everyday issues which arise from this tension between church and state. The answers are presented as possible solutions to be considered by the brotherhood.

Participation in Government - From the purely biblical viewpoint, it would be quite correct to say that Jesus first interest was unquestionably a religious one involving the personal redemption of the souls of men. However, such an interest did not exclude

²⁶Voice, VII (Jan.Feb., 1958) 4-7

a concern about social and political problems. The question was, and is, how to implement such concerns of social and political reform. Jesus' method was the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and endeavor to win men into a "divine society" in which the will of God could reign.

While this does not conclusively repudiate a proper use of political methods, such as the ballot, it does suggest that evangelism must be in the vanguard to the Christian's approach to the social and political needs of our day.

A passage frequently used in this context and which points to a Christian's non-involvement in political activity is I Peter 2:11. Here the believers are addressed as strangers (paroikous) and pilgrims (parepidemous). Both terms emphasize the "Other-worldly" relationship of the Christian, but it is significant that in the immediately succeeding context Peter speaks of the believer's responsibility toward the institutions of this world, including the state. This seems to indicate that Peter did not consider the Christian's heavenly citizenship as something which annulled his responsibility to earthly rule.

Here it might be advantageous to speak of two spheres of political activity, higher and lower politics. By "higher politics" I mean the affairs of legislating and executing laws on a city, provincial, or federal level. By "lower politics" I mean the administration of such functions as school boards, municipal offices, and other local offices which are not directly related to party politics. Since the Christian's witness is primary concern, the latter services allow for a more personal, community-related expression of the Christians convictions.

Participation in "high politics" in a democracy usually means participation in party government. I share the concern of J. A. Toews when he says: "No political party is dominated exclusively by Christian ideals and principles. Whether the Christian can remain true to his biblical convictions under constant social and political pressure is very doubtful. The only escape out of the dilemma would be to accept the "lesser evil" doctrine of Reinhold Niebuhr."²⁷

Duty toward Government - The New Testament is clear concerning certain duties which the Christian has toward the state.

1. The duty of submission. Jesus taught submission to the state by His own example.²⁸ He was accused of breaking the Jewish ceremonial law but this charge was never made in the realm of

²⁷Toews, op. cit., p. 7

²⁸Mark 1:44; Luke 17:14

civil law.²⁹ Even though the government under which Jesus lived left much to be desired, He refused to align Himself with the revolutionary movements of His day. The apostles emphasized this submission by direct teaching.³⁰

2. The duty of support. One of the specific duties of the Christian toward the state, according to the New Testament, is the payment of taxes in support of the civic government. This was taught by Jesus Himself in His answer to the question, "is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?"³¹ The reply, "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" meant, at the very least, that the poll-tax should be paid, and that not in a spirit of resentment, but as a recognized obligation toward civil power.

3. The duty of prayer. The Christian's duty of prayer for the state is enjoined in I Timothy 2:1, 2.

4. The duty of service. During World War II, upon request of government, various types of alternative service were rendered by those who could not conscientiously respond to the call for military service. The passage which appears to be most pertinent to this issue is Matt. 5:41. The Romans maintained the right of conscripting people into the service of the state. The word "compel" (aggareusein) originally meant to "put to compulsory service".³²

To argue that this passage justifies military service is unwarranted. While it is true that Roman soldiers used this type of measure to extract compulsory service from the Jews, the practice itself was justified by Jesus. The Master spoke to His disciples who were confronted with the evil and had to have an answer in terms of their obligation toward this demand of the state. The passage teaches that a disciple of Christ should be willing to render conscripted service, but it does not teach that a Christian must render every kind of service that may be asked of him. Here the emphasis is definitely upon the spirit in which the service should be rendered.

Here would we point to the inconsistency of the absolute pacifist who refuses to render any service whatever under compulsion. However, even though Mennonite Brethren have not generally taken such a position it would be well to emphasize the necessity of finding a positive approach to the problem of service rendered to the state.

²⁹Mark 2:23-3:6; 7:1-5

³⁰Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17; Titus 3:1-2

³¹Matthew 22:17

³²Moulton & Milligan, op. cit., p. 3

Report by Findings Committee

Committee members: A. E. Janzen, Chairman; H. H. Dick, and E. J. Lautermilch.

With reference to the excellent paper "Church and State in the New Testament" the Findings Committee wishes to submit the following suggestions:

1. That the last sentence on page one read "Lastly, we shall draw some conclusions or inference for the life of the Christian whose ultimate authority regarding the church and state is the Word of God as finally revealed in the New Testament."
2. On page two, paragraph two, the first sentence to read as follows: "During the early Christian centuries and up to the time of Constantine, the church and the empire stood for distinct and opposite ideals which found expression in the persecution."
3. That on page three, paragraph 2 the omission be inserted: "The church related to God was good and the State related to the earth (material) was evil."
4. That on page four, paragraph two, with reference to the Anabaptists the expression "the left wing" be omitted.
5. That on page five, paragraph four, the first sentence to read "The State's function is to administer justice."
6. That on page eight, the first paragraph to read: "From this a second principle emerges, namely that Jesus did not come to establish an earthly kingdom. He called people who were citizens of earthly States into a spiritual kingdom of truth."
7. That on page nine the statement "If a Christian goes into government, he does so without New Testament precedent," be omitted.
8. On page 10, paragraph three, line four, omit the word "necessarily".
9. That Brother Peters re-write paragraph three on page ten in the light of the discussions by the Study Commission. This is a request.

The Study Commission accepted the report by the Findings Committee.

The following findings have been incorporated in the re-typed paper.

H. H. Dick, Secretary

Continuation Committee