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# THE CHURCH IN THE ARENA OF POLITICS

***Alfred Muli, Editor***

*The Nairobi Fellowship of Theological Colleges (NFTC) comprises eight theological institutions of higher learning in the Nairobi vicinity which meet together for fellowship during an annual sports day. They also conduct an annual symposium in which the institutions prepare various papers for presentation and discussion. On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1998 the NFTC convened their annual symposium at the Pan Africa Christian College in Nairobi. The topic of discussion was "The Church and Politics." Various position papers were presented and rebutted.*

*The following paper was presented by the students at Scott Theological College. The academic staff sponsor and editor of the paper was Pr. Alfred Muli. Hopefully, this symposium marked the beginning of a serious effort to grapple with the question, "What is the role of the church in Africa's political development?" The process has only begun. The following paper provides food for thought and further reflection.*

## INTRODUCTION

We believe the primary role of the Church of Christ in Africa's political development is to be "the voice of Yahweh on earth." The church is to be God's mouthpiece on earth. This role can be achieved through preaching, teaching and writing about the biblical instructions concerning different parties involved in a country's politics.

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A country's politics involves the church, the political leaders and the ones led. We strongly propose that the Church of Christ will fulfill its divine and sacred role in Africa's political development by becoming "the voice of Yahweh on earth."

We will now proceed to make four proposals on how the church can accomplish this task.

## **PROPOSAL ONE**

*The church must be aware of the biblical teaching about her role in the world if she is to fulfill her sacred role. Let us then consider the biblical teaching about the role of the church in the world.*

### **1. The Two Kingdoms**

The Scriptures reveal to us the presence of two kingdoms, existing at the same time side by side. One is the Kingdom of God whose subjects are all true believers in Jesus Christ. The visible representation of this kingdom is the church. The other kingdom is the dominion of darkness, which in part is visibly represented by government or state.

### **2. The Church in This World**

a) Although the Church of Jesus Christ lives in this world, the church has her "membership" and her true home in another world. The Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual body; it is the spiritual society to which persons are added when they become Christ's disciples.

b) Christians, therefore, must live in tension while they are, on the one hand, required to identify with the people of God (1 Pet. 1:15), on the other hand, they must also identify with the people of the world (1 Cor. 9:22).

c) God has called his people to "come apart" and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17). Yet Jesus also commanded his disciples to "go into the world" and "go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in" (Matt. 28:19; Luke 14:23). A person can not go into all the world and be a witness for Jesus and yet at the same time remain a hermit, completely isolated from people (Acts 1:8).

### **3. Evangelism Versus Social Action**

The modern debate over the role of the church in society often pits evangelism and social action against each other. Several views have been advanced.

a) Some say that the church should only seek to win people to Christ. They point to all the things that Jesus never did: He never founded a political party; never challenged the power of Rome; never sought political office; and never sought to change the laws of the state. If we would just win people to Christ, it is argued, then people would be transformed, and they would change the world around them. Being involved in social action is often seen as too much a substitute for evangelism.

b) Others advocate social action - active involvement in seeking to change the ills and structures of society. This often involves seeking to make changes in the laws, the government structures, the economy, etc. This almost always leads to some political involvement and confrontation with government. Persons who advocate social action sometimes see evangelism as not enough. They want to see the oppressed treated with fairness, unjust laws reformed, inhuman practices abolished, unrighteous rulers removed from power.

c) In reality those who emphasise evangelism and those who emphasise social action are not that far apart. They are emphasising two aspects of Jesus' commands to the church. The two need not contradict each other. The mission of the church in this age should involve both. This is the position that is advocated in this paper.

#### **4. The Role of the Church in the World**

a) First and foremost, the church should proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

b) Secondly, the church should build up believers in the faith and equip them for service in God's Kingdom. God wants the church to teach and train believers until they become mature in their faith (Eph. 4:11-13). This is the church's discipleship emphasis.

c) Thirdly, the church is required to have a strong moral influence for truth, righteousness, and justice in the world (Matt. 5:13-14). This call to be salt and light is the church's social action emphasis. The church should proclaim God's standards of righteousness and judgement, demonstrate God's righteousness and mercy in everyday living, and pursue social justice in government affairs.

d) Fourthly, the church should defend and help those who cannot speak out for themselves. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and the needy" (Prov. 31:8, 9).

e) Fifthly, the church ought to seek to rescue the innocent from destruction, to save people who will be killed without cause. "Rescue those who are being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, 'But we

knew nothing about this does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" (Proverbs 24:11-12).

f) Sixth, the church ought to relieve the sufferings of those who are oppressed, showing kindness to those in need. "Whoever is kind to the needy honours God" (Proverbs 14:31b; Amos 2:6-7). "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Hebrews 13:3).

g) Seventh, the church ought to call upon God to defend the afflicted and to judge the oppressor. "He [God] will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor... for he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight (Psalm 72:4, 12-14).

h) Eighth, Christians should pray for those in governmental authority (I Tim. 2:1-2). This activity of prayer is closely linked with the desire of God for all people to come to know Christ Jesus (I Tim 2:2-4). God wants His people to pray for government leaders so that the nation can have an opportunity to come to Jesus Christ.

i) Ninth, the Christian should also be a strong moral influence for righteousness. Jesus said that His followers should be "the light of the world" - driving out darkness; and "the salt of the earth" - preserving society from further decay (Matt. 5:13-16). The Christian should seek to exercise an influence for justice and righteousness in all areas of society, including the government. Various proverbs speak to the truth of the good influence of God's people (Prov. 11:11; Prov. 28:2).

## PROPOSAL TWO

*The church must preach, teach and write on what the Bible teaches about leaders in order for the government leaders to understand God's expectation of them and in order for them to lead the nation accordingly. Let us now examine the biblical teaching about the political leaders. We will do so by drawing some biblical principles.*

### **1. The Civil Government is a Divine Institution (Rom. 13:1,2).**

*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels*

*against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves.*

Civil government came "from God" ('υπο or *hupo*), and it is both "appointed by" (τεταγμεναι or *tetagmenai*) and "ordained by" (διαταγη or *diatage*), God. This points to the fact that the civil government owes its existence to God. It is God's establishment. God is the author.

This is the reason why believers must obey the rulers. It was an already familiar truth to the Jews, who constituted a great majority of Paul's readers. They knew it was God who set up and overthrew leaders, and that no one exercised authority unless God set him up (2 Sam. 12:8; Jer. 27:56; Dan. 2:21).

It meant that government rulers exercised, delegated and derived authority. Their authority was limited. This truth implied that the government is also given to the Lord Jesus (Mt. 28:18). Weaver in his book, *The Christian and Civil Government*, believes that to deny the fact that all civil government must be biblical is to deny the kingship and lordship of Christ. This biblical principle then must be viewed as God's standard or ideal which every civil government must pursue.

Peter refers to the government as a "human institution" (ανθρωπινη or *anthropine*),. This rendering does not seem to refer to "institution of God among men," as NIV translates it. The word for "human" is adjectival which has nothing to do with divine. Charles Bigg offers an excellent comment here when he says, "The idea involved is that, while order is a divine command, any special forms of civil government by consuls or kings, republican or monarchical, are mere means of carrying out God's design for the welfare of society, depend upon the will of man and are in themselves indifferent" (Bigg 1901:139).

So the civil government is ideally and objectively an ordinance of God but it is in reality and subjectively an ordinance of men. Hence in reality different governments respond differently to the biblical ideals of God depending on their relationship to God.

## **2. The Government Leaders are Established for a Divine Purpose.**

Government leaders are established for the divine purpose of administering justice. They do this in the following ways:

**First**, they are to be the servant of God (Rom. 13:4,5). The apostle uses two words to describe this purpose. He describes them as "servants" or "deacons" (διακονος or *diakonos*) of God for the good and well being of the people. Again the government is to be God's λειτουγοι (*leitourgoi*). This is a compound word of λειτος (*leitos*) meaning "public" and εργον (*ergon*) meaning

"work". Literally it means "public worker". It is a rare word in the *koine* Greek. Originally it was used in reference to the liturgical officials.

The term is used five times in the New Testament. It is used in reference to angels as the agents of God's will (Heb. 1:7) and Christ's high priestly ministry performed in the true heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 8:2). Paul uses the term to describe himself as the minister of God to the gentiles (Rom. 15:16). In this context the term may mean "ministers," "servants" or "agents" of God. The most important thing to note about the term, however, is the recipient of the service.

Strathman observes that, "It is not the word *λειτουργος* (*leitougos*) [in Rom. 13:6 and Heb. 1:7] which gives the expression its strong religious colouring but the fact that God or Christ is the recipient of the service. (Strathman 1967: 231). So government leaders are to be ministers unto the service of God.

**Secondly**, they are to give "praise," "reward," "recommendation" (*επαινον* or *epainos*) to those who practice good (Rom. 13:3).

**Thirdly**, they are to be an "avenger" (*εκδικος* or *ekdikos*) of evil doers. This is a compound word of *εκ* (*ek*) meaning "out of," and *δικει* (*dikei*), meaning "justice," "to punish the evil." It must be noted that in reality an evil government tends to punish the good and commend the evil. So Christians are not to allow their disputes to be judged by the non-Christian government (1 Cor. 6:1ff).

**Fourthly**, they are to lead and protect God's people (Isa. 49:23; 60:10). The rulers are referred to as the captains of God's people (1 Sam. 10:1, 2 Kings 20:5), "shields of the earth" (Ps. 47:9) and "public shepherds." (Ps. 78:70-71).

Hence, God ordained the government for the benefit of the people (2 Sam. 5:12). It is to maintain justice in two ways:

a) God wants the government leaders to use their God-given authority and power to set and maintain standards of right and wrong.

b) God wants the state to protect and defend those who obey the law and do what is right and to punish the disobedient. When the government becomes a means of corruption and fraud, it is explicitly not functioning in God's will.

### **3. The Worldly Rulers Must be Admonished to Serve the Lord Lest They Face His Judgement.**

Divine judgement is inevitable for heathen rulers who rule in rebellion (Ps. 2:1-12).

#### **4. There are Notable Reasons Why Civil Government Leaders are Prone to Evil.**

**a) Government deals with laws.** All law is religious. It is meant to determine the value of right and wrong. There is nothing like non-religious law. If the government judiciary rejects the Bible it will come up with pagan laws. For this reason Weaver believes, "The government is a theological issue" (Weaver 1991: 8) and so whoever determines ones laws is ones "God".

**b) Government naturally tends to perpetuate itself.** King Jeroboam introduced idolatry into the land because he was afraid that if people worshipped in Jerusalem they would return to King Rehoboam and he would lose power and be executed (I Kg. 12:1ff). Similarly, the government leaders in Christ's time were willing to crucify Jesus in order to maintain their power and position (Jn. 11:47-48).

**c) Government is force and power.** The fallen and corrupt man desires to manipulate and exercise dominion over people rather than the earth. All must either submit or suffer.

### **PROPOSAL THREE**

*The Church must teach, preach and write on what the Bible teaches about the ones led if they are to understand God's expectations of them and hence play their part in their relationship with the leaders. We will now consider the Biblical teaching about the ones led.*

#### **1. All People are Commanded to Subject Themselves to the Obedience of the Government Authorities.**

The people are to "be subject to," "obedient to" and "submissive to," (*ὑποτασσεσθω* or *hypotassestho*) the governing authorities. The word is a present imperative and hence a command to be practiced continually.

Such an obedience to the government ensures peace and security to the people (v36). It brings about a clear conscience. One will not live with a guilty conscience. On the other hand, resistance to the government for no apparent reason is resistance to the ordinance of God (vv 1-2). Such resistance awaits sure judgement from God (v2).

We agree with Weaver that this obedience is conditional. It is conditional upon the authorities functioning under the jurisdiction of God. Otherwise, "When any authority transgresses and leaves its lawful sphere of authority it loses its jurisdiction and authority" (Weaver 1991:10).



The actual referent of the word, "authorities" (εξουσιαις or *exousiais*) (Rom. 13) has excited heated debate among New Testament scholars. The word may mean "state" or "invisible angelic powers". Cullmann has written a long excursus on it to prove the second meaning. But it seems that he is influenced by his presupposition that civil government is not a "final institution". Cranfield and Morrison are right to argue that Paul has the "state" in mind in this particular text. The immediate context refers to them as "rulers" (v3) and speaks of the need to pay taxes to them (v7).

## **2. Obedience to the Government Requires Certain Duties from the People.**

**First**, the people are to pay the required tax (Rom. 13:6-7). Jesus directs that, that which belongs to Caesar must be submitted to him (Mk. 12:1). **Second**, we need to give our government leaders their due respect and honour (Rom. 13:7 cf Pt. 2:12).

**Secondly**, there is the burning issue in relation to this section which needs our attention and address. This is the question whether the Scripture makes provision for certain cases in which Christians may disobey the governing authorities. We will observe a biblical view on this issue and make a proposal on what to do in situations where the government is against the moral teaching of Christianity.

a) The Christian is to obey the government in accordance with the Scriptures. The nature of biblical government is covenantal.

i) It is a covenant between the ruler and God. The ruler agrees to rule according to the standards of God and God makes his promises (Deut. 28:1ff).

ii) It is also a covenant between the ruler and the people. The ruler commits himself to rule justly and faithfully, and the people to obey the ruler as he obeys God (Jos. 24:1; 2 Chr. 23:2-3; 2 Sam. 5:3; Eccl. 8:2).

iii) Also it is a covenant between the people and God. They agreed to obey the ruler as unto God (1 Sam. 12:24ff). We find that, "In biblical covenants, when one party violates or breaks the covenant, the other party is loosed from obedience to the covenant" (Weaver 1991:46).

We can draw a principle for today's Christian from the foregoing. If any government demands violation of the Scripture, the Christian is under no obligation to obey whatsoever.

b) We must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). As citizens of a nation we are required to obey the government as long as doing so is not in conflict with the Scriptures. When the state demands what belongs to God, such as totalitarian states often do, like the demanding of worship of the king, the

Christian is not to obey. Men of God refused to worship the king and opted to face severe consequences. Shadrack and friends were thrown into the burning furnace (Dan. 6:1ff). Daniel was thrown in the lions den (Dan. 6:1ff). The early church was persecuted for the same reason of saying "no" to the worship of the king (emperor). In the Roman government one could worship his god so long as he worshipped Caesar through an offering or proclaiming that Caesar was god and lord. Resistance to this decree was treated as treason. But for Christians it was idolatry. For Christians, treason is nothing essentially done against any human leader but any form of unfaithfulness to God. This calls for a maintenance of a critical attitude towards the state.

There are many more cases in the Bible where God's people disobeyed the state. Israel sought for freedom from the hand of Pharaoh (state) and disobeyed the order to pursue God's will (Exodus 1:15-21). The one-hundred prophets were protected by Obadiah against Jezebel's (state's) order to be killed (I Kg. 18:1-4). Jeremiah and Baruch rewrote, preserved and circulated the Word of God in disobedience to king Jehoiakim who burned the scrolls and arrested Jeremiah. When the Sanhedrin (high court) prohibited the disciples from telling the people about Jesus, they refused (Acts 4:17-19; 5:28).

Before the return of Christ, when the state (anti-Christ) will require all to receive the mark, and hence worship the antichrist, true believers will refuse (Rev. 13:13-18).

If a Christian finds that the state requires him to do what is morally wrong, then the same should seek to make a wise appeal. The following steps are based on the actions of Daniel and his friends in Daniel 1:3-21; 3:16-27 and 6:1-25.

First, the Christians should make sure that he is serving under the government authority in an attitude of submission, honour and respect. Next, Christians should calmly find out the reason for the state's action. Then, the Christian should humbly appeal to the state authority and propose an alternative to the state's action. If possible, the proposed alternative should help the ruler reach his objectives, without violating any of Gods moral laws or principles. The Christians should point out the benefits of the alternative - how it will help the state. Finally, if the state official refuses the appeal, Christians should calmly state their conviction of what God requires, that they must obey God and that they are willing to suffer the consequences for doing what God wants them to do.

## PROPOSAL FOUR

*The church has a specific duty to the evil political leaders in the African countries.*

In a case where the government is explicitly or allegedly evil, punishing good and rewarding evil, we wish to make the following proposals:

### **1. Do Thorough Investigation.**

The aim is to establish solid facts about the accusation. The church must not just act upon newspaper reports. Some tend to be biased and misleading.

### **2. Issue a Biblical Statement on the Matter.**

This is to be done in writing. The aim is to issue a warning to the leaders and the people of the impending and inevitable judgement of God. It will also help to show the position of the church on the issue to avoid neutrality.

### **3. Make Suggestions of What Must be Done.**

This is to be included in the statement. The proposal should not violate other biblical principles of Christian life. The aim is to arrive at a practical solution, using peaceful rather than violent means. The end should not justify the means, which is a wrong Marxist ideology.

The issue which confronts the church is this: By what means of communication will their proposals reach the affected leaders? The best mode is that which works in a given situation. Some practical options include, first: a group of church leaders going to visit the president of the nation and discuss the proposals; second: a private letter sent directly to the president with details of the proposals; third: through newspaper media; fourth: to preach it in church and allow newspaper men to report in the media.

## CONCLUSION

We wish to draw the following conclusions in regard to the role of church in Africa's political development:

1. The primary role of the church is not to bring about socio-political and economic liberation in Africa.
2. The church must provide a biblical definition for such easily misunderstood terms as "peace," "liberation" and other similar words.
3. In addressing any socio-political and economic issues in Africa, the church must draw its message from the Bible, using the hermeneutical procedure

which is the norm among evangelicals, namely, the Historico-Grammatical approach.

4. The evangelical church must actively and deliberately fight against the ever increasing influence of liberal theology, in particular, "Liberation Theology", which has continued to pose a dangerous threat to Christianity in Africa.
5. The Church of Christ must neither be sidetracked nor shrink from its God-given role in the society, namely, to be "the voice of God on earth."
6. The Church of Christ will play this divine and sacred role in Africa's political development by preaching, teaching and writing about the biblical instructions to the political leaders and the ones led.

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