

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH TO THE CHRISTIAN STATE.

By G. B. MOUNTFORD, Esq., M.C.

IT is desirable at the outset in considering the responsibility of the Church to the State in England to bear in mind the relationship that exists between them.

The great feature of this relationship upon which the Church's responsibility is primarily based is that the English State is Christian. This does not mean that every individual in the State is a Christian, it does not even mean that every minister of the State is necessarily a Christian. What it does mean is that the general trend of the State is towards the Christian standard, that as a State it professes Christianity, and that the desire and ideal of the State is Christian. Nevertheless it must also be borne in mind that though both Church and State are Christian their origins are fundamentally different—the Church is a divine institution, the State is a human organization.

Another feature of the relationship between the Church and the State is referred to by Mr. Albert Mitchell in his evidence before the Archbishops' Commission as follows:—"The intertwining of the Church and the State is part of the history of England." And he quotes later in support, the noble expression, "this Church and Realm of England." This means, as appears later in the same evidence, that there is between the Church and the State an intimate association.

The relationship may also be considered as a partnership. It is doubtless an essential of satisfactory partnership that a right understanding shall exist between the partners as to their respective duties towards the fulfilment of a common end. In the case of the Church and the State the common end is the carrying out in the world of the commandments or will of God. Christ's summary of the commandments is striking in this connection, for while it is the Church's supreme endeavour to love God and so observe the first and great commandment, it is the State's special aim to prove its love for man and thus carry out the second commandment.

Luther has been credited by a recent writer with holding a similar view—namely, that the civil power is essentially holy, formed for the purpose of fulfilling one great object of Christ's religion—the love of man towards his neighbour, which again is dependent on his love towards God.

Illustrations of the relationship between the Church and the State usually seem to lack something of the "intimacy," which, as has been seen, is, or should be, of the essence of the association. It is probable that Erastus shows the greatest insight when he says:—

"The Church is to the State as the Soul is to the Body." It is difficult to conceive of a closer or more intimate relationship than that which this beautiful image suggests.

The next consideration appears to be how this intimate association can be maintained, for whether broken by the State or by the Church the consequences must be disastrous; a break by the State might mean the abandonment of organized religion, and, on the other hand, a break by the Church would be a failure in responsibility. Mr. Mitchell elaborates this point in his evidence:—"The repudiation by the State of its age-long intimate association with the Church would partake of the nature of an apostasy, unless it were done on the ground of the unfaithfulness of the Church to its ideal."

This leads to the consideration of the actual responsibility of the Church to the Christian State.

The Church's responsibility may be regarded from several points of view which are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

The Church must give faithful witness, must have a high standard of morals, and must set an example of blameless conduct.

It is essential for the Church to give faithful witness to God's will, for upon this prime responsibility most others depend. There are at least two indispensable elements in the witness of the Church as to God's will if such witness is to be of any practical value, namely that it must be faithful and it must be explicit. William Law wrote that "To please God"—that is to do His will—"is the happiest and best thing in the world." Every man in the line of God's will knows the truth of those words; and if true for a man why not also true for the State, the individual's resulting peace and power being translated for the State into harmonious effort and strong united purpose?

This great responsibility of witnessing to God's will needs not to be stressed. It is a similar responsibility to that of the individual, for it is the duty of every Christian, as it should also be his delight, to prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

It is essential for the Church to maintain and to exemplify a high standard of morals. The Law of Marriage perhaps provides an instance of the type of opportunity the Church may have to apply a high standard of morals.

There is but one sure standard of morals and that is the Christian one. It is the Church's responsibility to uphold this Christian standard before the State, for without such guidance the State's moral standard might become little more than the reflection of the consciences of its counsellors, and if so, the standard might vary from time to time as the personnel of the State changed. The result of this might be moral deterioration.

It is essential also for the Church to set an example of blameless conduct. The performance of a contract provides an occasion when such an example can be shown; for instance, parsons obeying the Prayer Book which they have pledged themselves to obey, with scrupulous care, and otherwise obeying the law of the Church.

The writer to the Hebrews says, "Pray for us, for we trust

we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly." It is significant that the verse begins with the words "Pray for us." It is this close association between prayer and honesty which gives rise to the Church's responsibility towards the State in this connection. For it is the Church's duty first to show an example of sincerity, and secondly, by its prayers for the State to support it in its endeavour to be in all things willing to live honestly. Since it is true as none of us doubts, that we perish if we cease from prayer, it is also true that to cease from prayer is sooner or later to lapse from honesty in word and deed.

Not only is it necessary for the Church itself to be blameless, but it must teach the State by definite spiritual instruction, educate the public conscience, and exert its influence in maintaining a high standard of Christian public life.

The principal responsibility of the Church with regard to teaching is to teach the State "The way of God in truth." The Church has more opportunity of doing this than may perhaps be realized. This is especially evident in this Coronation year. The services which accompany many of the State's activities provide such an opportunity. If such occasions are not used entirely for the purpose of teaching the way of God that is to the spiritual detriment of the State.

The responsibility of the Church in matters of conscience exists though the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong is common to the Church and to the State. The conscience may be easily blunted, and the Church's concern is to live like St. Paul, "In all good conscience before God," so that it is able to provide an arrow point to conscience for the help and safety of the State.

It is the Church's duty to use its influence to bring about the recognition of the principles of Christianity in public life, and remove many blots which now mar our national and international affairs.

In fulfilling all these responsibilities the Church should endeavour to obtain the State's collaboration, and form, as it were, a joint trusteeship for the people.

The State, not seldom, endeavours to deal with moral matters by legislation. Great questions of this kind have been dealt with in the past and no doubt will in the future be so undertaken.

It is not the Church's province to take any official part in the legislative activities of the State, except through its representatives, but the Church can by example and teaching, so persistently impress upon the State the Christian virtues, that the laws which are the expression of the State, shall unmistakably bear the stamp of Christian ideals.

The Church and State are, as it were, trustees for the whole body of the people, the trust being the general welfare which is another name for the work of God in the world. The Church and the State both have a part to play. As the Report of the Archbishops' Commission truly says :—"There is no department of the common life of the citizens of a community into which both Church and State do not claim to penetrate and which they do not seek to direct or influence."

The Church's responsibility to the State is different from its responsibility to the Nation. The State is perhaps the people organized for government, administration, and shepherding, as distinct from the Nation as the people, as the flock to be shepherded.

What then is the conclusion of the whole matter? The truth is that the Church's responsibility to the State arises out of the relationship which exists between them. And this relationship of the Church and the State to each other depends in the last analysis upon their relation to Christ.

If this be so, then the whole question of the Church's responsibility to the State resolves itself into this :—That at the present day the Church's most pressing responsibility is to call the State to public recognition of Christ.

The Church must endeavour to persuade the State that Christ is its greatest need, that other things in the world, though lovely and of good report and well worthy of the State's ambition, are secondary, and that, as Mr. George Goodman has put it :—“To give one's life to the pursuit of them, to sell the soul to them, to let Christ go for them, is another matter and can only end in spiritual shipwreck.”

It is the Church's supreme responsibility to uphold Christ to the State as the Saviour of the world for the salvation of the State. Less than this the Church dare not do, and more than this it cannot do.

To support this great burden of responsibility, the Church must have a deep insight into the things of God and of His Christ, and pass on to the State its own rich experience. Little adaptation would be needed to make Henry Burton's hymn almost a summary of the Church's responsibility to the State :

“Have you found the heavenly light?
 Pass it on!
 Hold thy lighted lamp on high—
 And he may live who else would die.”

So by God's Grace will ever stand together this Church and State. The Church remembering its divine origin, always fulfilling its responsibilities to the State—as its Body—with most tender concern; and the State, holding fast to the Church—as its Soul—solemnly aware that what is true of a man's soul must also be true of a great community :—“For what is a *State* profited if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?”