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God and the Nations

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing flux of contemporary debate, all concepts are under critical examination. The philosopher's self-consciousness about language, the political student's delicate nose for the slightest whiff of propaganda and the general suspicion (not without cynical detachment) which greets any kind of instinctive allegiance, spiritual commitment or ideological adherence all combine to form a powerful attitude of critical detachment, a fear of being 'conned', which causes the more intelligent citizen swiftly to react to religious, patriotic or other enthusiastic affirmations, whether to the stream of political indoctrination east of the Iron Curtain or to the stream of commercial advertising west of the Iron Curtain. A wary defensiveness is almost *de rigueur*.

Yet any kind of Olympian detachment is impossible by virtue of our human condition. We are born and bred in time and space with a particularity about each one of us. We are men of a given age and culture and we belong to a given community. In our own case we have to reckon with the idea of nationhood which is woven into the texture of Western European thought. This concept is deeply rooted in the history of our social institutions and our political development over many centuries. Yet some sort of objectivity *is* possible to the evangelical Christian. There *is* a way in which we can scrutinize ideas and institutions, a dual perspective both from inside and from outside. This perspective is rooted in the Incarnation. The New Testament displays a Saviour who is both true Israelite Son of David, suffering servant, the one who fulfils the Law and the prophets, and yet at the same time is the Word made flesh, not of this world, the Man from heaven. This incarnate God is our perfect wisdom. The teaching of his apostles is uniquely authoritative p. 84 and free from error. Thus if we follow Holy Scripture our feet are upon a rock and there is a given firm standpoint from which we may engage in cultural scrutiny of events and ideas which concern us. What is involved in every stage of any such investigation is Christian thinking according to the mind of the Spirit in Scripture. We shall accept some of the received ideas around us (as our Lord and his apostles did) because they are good and true even though they are deeply embedded in contemporary culture. We shall likewise reject other prevalent beliefs and practices because they are clearly condemned by the teaching of Scripture. At other points we shall not so much accept or reject, but rather adopt a different perspective or emphasis from our contemporaries. Our chief task is therefore to establish the Biblical parameters of the concept of a nation.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

It was to an already chosen and favoured nation that the Messiah came. God's Son was an Israelite by birth, education, speech, place of work and ministry, death and burial. He did not suppress or apologize for his national culture; his own mission and teaching were rooted in Old Testament Scripture. Likewise the great Apostle agonized for his brethren, his 'kinsmen by race' to whom belong 'the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises and the patriarchs' ([Romans 9:3-5](#)).

Language, a common location and, above all, religion had held Israel together, a sociologist might tell us. In Biblical thinking it is indeed ‘the gifts and call of God’ ([Romans 11:29](#)) which had marked them out: election had constituted them God’s people—the people *par excellence*. It gave unparalleled strength and persistence to their national consciousness, and such consciousness was God’s inscrutable will and in no way dependent upon their merit or goodness.

By contrast with Israel, Jesus and the New Testament writers (like their Old Testament predecessors) see the other nations as *not* chosen, shadowy entities beyond the gracious light of God’s special revelation in Scripture and in the Person of the Messiah. They can be referred to as ‘the nations’—translated often as ‘the [p. 85](#) Gentiles’—i.e. simply non-Jews. The behaviour of his followers would contrast with that of the Gentiles, Jesus taught ([Matthew 5:47](#); [6:7](#); [Luke 12:30](#)), and the Twelve were not to go to the Gentiles ([Matthew 10:5](#)).

But the scenario of redemption was soon to be dramatically widened. Simeon in the Temple has seen the Son of Mary as bringing a ‘salvation prepared in the presence of all peoples’ and ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles (nations)’ as well as ‘the glory of Israel’ ([Luke 2:31–32](#)). This was only to take up those Old Testament prophecies which saw blessing flowing out through Israel to every family, tribe and nation—promises adumbrated as early as Abraham ([Genesis 18:18](#)) and made clearer by Isaiah (e.g. [55:4–5](#); [56:1–8](#); [60:1–14](#)). Hinting at this also were the events in the Gospels which point beyond Israel—the visit of the Magi ([Matthew 2](#)), the healing of the centurion’s servant ([Matthew 8:5](#)), the Canaanite (or Syrophenician Greek) woman whose daughter was cured ([Matthew 15:22](#); [Mark 7:26](#)) and the Samaritan leper who was cleansed ([Luke 17:16](#)).

The dark pivot on which this wider blessing to the nations hinges is the rejection of the Messiah by his own people. Solemn statements about the greater willingness of Tyre and Sidon to repent ([Luke 10:13](#)) and Nineveh’s greater responsiveness to Jonah ([Matthew 12:41](#)) are followed by parables and explicit predictions of the coming repudiation of Jesus by the great mass of Jews, as a consequence of which the good news of the Kingdom will be given to ‘a nation producing the fruits of it’ ([Matthew 21:43](#)). After the resurrection the command is explicit—‘repentance and remission of sins’ ([Luke 24:47](#)) and the message of discipleship based on the Gospel ([Matthew 28:19](#)) are now to be proclaimed ‘to all nations’. [Acts 10](#) and [11](#) show the crucial breakthrough in apostolic thinking and practice in the case of Cornelius—the Gentiles are now ‘granted repentance unto life’ ([11:18](#)) because God’s people are to be found ‘in every nation’ ([10:34](#)). In Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas ‘turn to the Gentiles’ ([13:47](#)) and in Lystra Paul affirms a Gospel for all, though prior to the coming of Jesus God had ‘allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways’.

On this basis the elect are now a new multi-national community, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’—the very terms used of Israel, now applied in a spiritual and eternal sense to those who are born again by God’s Word and Spirit, adopted into his [p. 86](#) family and sure of a heavenly inheritance. Every man, woman and child who believes, from whatever cultural background they may come, shares these blessings which outshine differences of age, sex, social status and earthly nationality—‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ ([Galatians 3:28](#)). This is our common standing in grace, since ‘the blessing of Abraham has come upon the nations (Gentiles)’ ([Galatians 3:14](#)).

Yet the children of God through faith still bear the marks of different cultures, still retain sexual and related personality distinctions, still exist in given communities with particular social structures. Grace is more wonderful and more important. But grace does

not abolish nature. What can we say of those persisting differences of history, language, culture, historical destiny and physical constitution which together we identify as 'national'? What of the providence of God beyond the sphere of the Gospel—his inscrutable ways with races and communities? If Paul was proud to assert his 'secular' citizenship in given situations ([Acts 22:25–28](#); [23:27](#)) as well as boasting of his racial and his spiritual nationality ([Romans 9:4](#); [11:1](#)), and if all events are significant in the providence of God, then the persisting modes of human group consciousness and group interaction cannot be irrelevant.

III. SCRIPTURE, HUMANITY AND THE NATIONS

There is throughout Scripture a given pattern of human existence which is often assumed rather than taught, implicit rather than formulated. God's world is fundamentally good—its fallen quality is seen in those distorted, incoherent and rebellious elements specified in Scripture. This pattern is what is sometimes known as the created order. Today's restless secular humanist strand of social analysis has caused us to question as never before those tendencies and forces, often below the level of conscious acceptance or rational principle, which have hitherto caused particular modes of behaviour and social organization to persist, and to change only slowly and almost imperceptibly. Sexual roles, status roles and national identity—precisely those three orderings which according to [Galatians 3:28](#) the Gospel transcends!—are a matter of intense discussion in many circles. Yet, as the rest of the New Testament makes clear, **P.87** these three dimensions of human existence remain and bring particular duties and responsibilities. They are not abolished.

The broader question is therefore: is there, explicitly or implicitly, any divine ordering for the human race besides those of the family, the Church and a certain necessary organization of political power over larger groups to restrain evil in communal life and to secure life and property and the maintenance of order?

A convenient starting-point is the well-known statement of Paul at Athens which seems to hold in tension the two parallel principles which this paper wishes to affirm. The Apostle asserts that the Giver of life and breath to all

- a. made of one (sc. man/blood) every nation of men, and
- b. fixed or determined appointed (allotted) seasons and the boundaries of (their) habitation (dwelling place).

The statements here are given in an evangelistic context, and the emphasis is upon the unity of mankind as descended from 'one' (Adam) and upon the fact that all men possess—despite their diversity—a desire to seek God, their Maker and Sustainer; this search is over when men hear the command of the Gospel to repent. But it is noteworthy that even in this context of a universal Gospel for the one human race, the national factors of historical change and geographical differentiation are mentioned. The principal thrust would seem to be the assertion of God's providential control over all the manifest differences between tribes, nations and races, and over the rise and fall of cities, empires and civilizations. It is a *Sovereign* God who is being preached to the Athenians.

Clearly this passing reference is to a whole series of beliefs and assumptions to which Paul—or Luke the reporter—can only allude briefly. But the roots of these beliefs lie firmly where we might expect to find them—in Old Testament Scripture.

(1) *The unity of mankind* is clear from [Genesis 1–3](#) and from the commentary on it in the light of redemption in [Romans 5](#). Furthermore, the new start after the Flood reiterates and expands the principles of God's dealings with mankind as a whole, and with the realms of nature ([Genesis 9](#)). Immediately afterwards follows the 'table of nations'—the

tribes and individuals springing from Noah's three sons, from whom 'the whole earth was peopled' ([Genesis 9:19](#)). Humanity is reconstituted after the Flood into a manifold world of nations. Three times we note the distinguishing marks of the differing p. 88 groups which emerged over the centuries—land, language, family and nation ([Genesis 10:5](#), [20](#), [31](#)).

(2) *Linguistic diversity* is announced in [Genesis 11](#) as a phenomenon of judgement to confound and to humble man in his arrogance. At Babel men were separated by incomprehension and scattered abroad ([Genesis 11:9](#)). This scattering process is referred to in majestic terms in Deuteronomy, where language reminiscent of [Acts 17](#) is used: 'When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God' ([32:8](#)). Yet in the very next chapter with the call of Abraham the seeds of a new unity are sown. Grace is always at work after judgement. There is to be 'a great nation' ([12:2](#)) and a land for them ([12:7](#)).

(3) *Israel develops against a background of nations*. As the nations rise and fall during Old Testament history they are, as has often been remarked, usually of much interest only to the inspired writers in so far as they impinge upon the history of salvation. They are there to warn and chastise Israel, for they are the agents of the Lord in correcting his erring people. He can deliver Israel—as he did supremely when they 'stood still and saw the salvation of the Lord' ([Exodus 14:13](#)) at their escape from Egypt. He can permit Israel to be overthrown and taken into exile. He can also use heathen nations to protect and bless Israel—he disposes of kings, emperors and conquerors as he sees fit. The Cyrus passage in [Isaiah 44:24–45:7](#) is followed by the picture of the potter and the clay ([45:9–13](#))—the most lofty assertions of God's sovereignty over all nations near and far.

(4) *The nations themselves* are sometimes seen by the prophets as under the judgement of God for inhuman behaviour—pride, corruption and violence—against which even their own consciences ought to have registered protest. This righteous judgement is seen in brief and elementary form in [Amos 1–2](#), but is later extended by the major prophets to include Egypt ([Isaiah 19](#), [Jeremiah 46](#), [Ezekiel 29–32](#)), Ethiopia ([Isaiah 18](#)), Babylon ([Isaiah 13–14](#), [21](#); [Jeremiah 50–51](#)), Philistia ([Isaiah 14](#); [Jeremiah 47](#); [Ezekiel 25](#)), Tyre ([Ezekiel 26](#)) and Sidon ([Ezekiel 28](#)). It is made clear in this way that nations without the light of special revelation are nevertheless held to be distinct social entities with communal responsibilities, above all a deep moral accountability to the Judge of all the earth. In one remarkable case a Hebrew prophet preached p. 89 repentance in the capital of a pagan kingdom and God's blessing on his labours resulted in judgement being withheld. The preaching of Jonah is a vivid testimony to the moral solidarity and responsibility of the Gentile nations in Old Testament thinking.

(5) *National diversity and distinctiveness is given*. There is no indication in the Old or New Testament that the diversity of nations will be or ought to be replaced by any unified international order in which nationhood is absorbed. As Barth writes 'Christian ethics cannot espouse an abstract internationalism and cosmopolitanism' (K.D. III 4 ch. 12 par. 54.3). The suggestion is rather that, far from merging their identity in a common humanity, each can enjoy and share the particular blessings which it has received while remaining itself. (This is not dissimilar from the blessings of the sons of Jacob in [Genesis 49](#) and [Deuteronomy 33](#)). There is a positive and fruitful aspect to human diversity between nations, just as there is between individuals. I cannot forbear to quote Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize lecture here: 'The disappearance of nations would impoverish us no less than if all people were made alike, with one character, one face. Nations are the wealth of mankind, they are its generalized personalities; the smallest of them has its own particular colours, and embodies a particular facet of God's design' (*One Word of Truth*,

1971, pp. 15–16). It is remarkable that at the consummation of all things, our Lord Jesus Christ sees ‘all nations’ arraigned before the glorious throne of judgement and separation ([Matthew 25:32](#)). And beyond that the vision of John is not that of a city of identical inhabitants, but rather a richly variegated community lit by the Lamb and the glory of God—‘by its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations’ ([Revelation 21:24, 26](#)). The ultimate destiny of the faults and weaknesses of each nation is perhaps hinted at in the final chapter, where the leaves of the Tree of Life are seen to be ‘for the healing of the nations’ ([Revelation 22:2](#)).

(6) *World rule is not desirable*. The last four centuries have witnessed the emergence of the nation-state, in which cultural distinctions are supported by political power and territorial limits. But is the nation-state any more than a more precise and clearly delimited realization of what we have always called a nation? Is it now a menace to human development? Some assert that it is. There is much talk today of an international order, of the need for p. 90 world government in order to ensure world peace, of the folly and dangers of nationalism and of the need to acknowledge the fact of an interdependent world community. In the light of the picture which Scripture paints it would seem that any aspiration to abolish the constituent elements of nationhood must be treated with caution. This is not simply because power corrupts, and with today’s methods of persuasion and the control of world communications, total global servitude is by no means impossible. Nor do we treat this idea with reserve because the proletarian internationalism of Marxism is the strongest contender for the theory, the favoured winner of the race to assume leadership in practice *and* the most powerful force for tyranny known in human history. It is rather that Scripture knows of only one divinely approved international community—that founded at Pentecost when the curse of Babel was for one brief moment inoperative, so that ‘frontier Israelites’—fringe members of the Jewish faith but from other nations and cultures—should hear the Gospel. Cultural distinctions were not abolished—each man heard *his own* language ([Acts 2:6](#)). The barrier of language differences was not eliminated—it was miraculously *overcome* by gifts given to the apostles. We still—post-Pentecost—live in a world of cultural and linguistic differences, though Christian experience in the Church gives a foretaste of the glorious liberty of the sons of God beyond this age, where communication will be totally unhindered. The abolition of nationhood has an element of arrogance in its attempt to remove given features of human existence which have a rightful place in the created order—only sin must be opposed and eradicated. Linguistic differentiation may be, in one aspect, judgement—but it is not sin. National identity—like any particular social structure—can be the seat or the occasion of sin. But its existence cannot be said to constitute transgression of the divine law. Indeed, [Revelation 13](#) suggests that if and when world government does emerge, it is likely to be the most ghastly force for inhumanity and persecution that history has seen, and that idolatry and total control of trade and economic life will give this Satanic power the ability to wreak hitherto undreamed—of havoc upon the Church of Christ ([Revelation 13:7–8, 16–17](#)). The Roman Empire may well be one fulfilment of this vision. But we have yet to see its total embodiment.

(7) *The dangers of nationalism*. There is, then, an acceptance of national identity and diversity in Scripture. But there are warnings p. 91 to be sounded. The nations, Barth points out, do not appear in the crucial foundation chapters, [Genesis 1–9](#). The narrative conceals their existence, though they may have been there. Barth is unwilling for this reason to grant nationhood the status of ‘an order of creation’. He concludes: ‘we cannot deduce a true command of God the Creator, or a distinctive obedience owed to it, from the mere fact that there are nations and that man lives in them ... (K.D. IV 4 ch. 12 par. 54.3). In the same discussion he points out how the reverence for nationhood as a determinate

over-arching principle of social life ethics led from the apparently innocent and enriching aesthetic platform of Herder and the Romantics to the racial theories of National Socialism—to nationalism as an absolute principle, and therefore demonic. Nationalism is no more the key to the understanding of history or society than is social class. Each can turn into rebellion against God and become the tool of every kind of violence and inhumanity. People, blood and race must never be seen as distinct creations or sacred ordinances. Barth warns against the temptation to ‘obliterate the distinction between creation and providence, between the divine command and the divine disposing’. Only the command constitutes a clear duty and an overriding obligation. This leads me to my fourth and final section.

IV. PROVIDENCE, PRAYER AND THE NATIONS

Every Protestant Confession asserts the sovereign control of God in providence over every event in time, in accordance with the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, of our Lord himself (e.g. [Matthew 10:29](#)) and of the New Testament epistles (e.g. [Ephesians 1:11](#)). The Christian is meant to live with confidence in the hand of God, who sustains and governs all things, rather than as a prey to the message of meaninglessness so prevalent today, or to any version of the juggernaut evolutionary theory. God sustains and God rules.

Sustaining is more than maintaining—it is rather an active grip which holds everything together ([Colossians 1:17](#)), an energizing upholding ([Hebrews 1:3](#)) without which all things would disintegrate into unimagined chaos and darkness. And to sustain the universe is also to guarantee the continuance of ‘a moving unfolding unlocking process, revealing continually a gallery of diversity’ (Berkouwer, p. 92 *The Providence of God*, 1952, p.67). Thus we are led to process with a purpose—God’s purpose—and hence to the other aspect of providence—God’s active rule or government. Nations exist by and under his providential sustaining power (as our earlier discussion made clear)—but they also emerge, develop and fall according to his sovereign purpose.

Neither in the case of individuals nor in the case of nations does providence rule out responsibility. Men and communities are held accountable for their rebellion against the law written in their own hearts, idolatry, violence and other forms of wickedness. Evil is woven into the divine plan and can mysteriously be turned to good, as supremely in the death of Jesus, boldly announced by the apostles as bringing both deadly guilt and a glorious salvation ([Acts 2:23](#); [3:15](#); [4:28](#)).

But what may we know of this government of the nations? Here we face the problem posed by the particularity of divine revelation. All events are deeds of God in the providential sense. But his servants the prophets and apostles give the accredited and inspired explanation of the mind of God—his divine purposes in the happenings which they announce beforehand, comment on as they happen or explain *post eventum*. This sure word is now silent in our own day. Only the great symbolic certainties of the book of Revelation span the Gospel age.

Moved by the Holy Spirit ([II Peter 1:21](#)), Old Testament leaders and seers were enabled with finality to reveal the divine purpose in the rise and fall of nations. The coming of Jesus was in the fulness of time, with the nations prepared in many ways for the Gospel. The decree from Caesar Augustus and the powers and jurisdiction of Pilate and Herod were all used at the focal point of divine redemption. But since then there is no infallible interpreter of the finger of God in history. ‘It is often forgotten that we have not been given a norm for explaining the facts of history, and that in the absence of a norm only an untrustworthy plausibility remains’ (Berkouwer *op. cit.*, p. 171). Certainly prosperity and success are not always a mark of God’s blessing and approval, nor is

disaster a mark of his wrath or judgement. The Psalmist and Job wrestled with that problem at a personal level. The resolution of that perplexity is only glimpsed in the Cross.

On the national level, though there is now no nation which has inherited Israel's favoured position, the same moral principles as were revealed in her history may be used in spelling out national [p. 93](#) obligations. We can with confidence affirm certain obligations—the challenges to humanity and justice, to obedience to the divine law and to responsibility. We can announce the warnings of Scripture, and assert the ruin eventually brought about by transgression. Thankfulness for blessings and deliverances, just and compassionate use of power and resources, persistent self-examination in disaster or breakdown—these are universal duties. We shall not be able to interpret the finger of God in every event. Only as the great end-event approaches will there be seen certain recognizable signs among the nations—increasing tumult, war and famine, earthquakes and persecution, false prophets and cold hearts—and the universal preaching of the Gospel ([Matthew 24:3–14](#)) to all nations. Thereafter the mystery of iniquity will be revealed before the final day ([II Thessalonians 2:1–12](#)). This is no timetable, but again—as is the general doctrine of providence itself—a general view of history to be received by faith and used as a stimulus to faithful testimony and perseverance.

Christian prayer is therefore not that we should *know* what God is doing or will do with any nation or nations. It is rather an asking for the eye of faith to discern *my* duty—or the Church's duty—in whatever nation we find ourselves. Nations favoured with centuries of literacy and a Bible in the language of the people, a long history of Gospel preaching, a series of revivals, etc. will surely bear greater responsibilities in view of the privileges they have enjoyed. Some individuals may be called to positions of power at crucial junctures, like Daniel and Joseph, even in pagan nations. All Christians can and should pray for their rulers, as [I Timothy 2:1–2](#) reminds us to do so forcefully. And in those prayers we may often find ourselves wrestling, not with flesh and blood, but with darker and more mysterious forces—spiritual beings associated with particular nations, as the book of Daniel hints ([10:13, 20–21](#)). If the duty of prayer for the nation (prayer which cannot be lacking in penitent identification for our complicity and that of our churches in our communal disobedience) were more widely known and preached, the providential hand of God might well change the direction of this nation, as indeed of any other nation for which earnest prayer was made, for God is no respecter of persons. Providence is a fact that we accept—but only in faith and by faith. Prayer we may not exclude—for rulers and communities. The answers to our prayers we may not always discern. But they *are* answered, and that his hidden hand is upon the destiny of nations—of that we may be sure.

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Which Way to Utopia: With Marx or Jesus?