

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 22

Volume 22 • Number 2 • April 1998

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

made in all earnestness, at that point that idolatry exacts its price. But it is here, I think, that the NT's picture of the gospel and the world of political life finds one at least of its contemporary echoes.

I cannot, in short, support from the NT the separation of the gospel and politics which is still so popular, not least in certain shrill branches of contemporary evangelicalism. We cannot abandon politics to those who carry guns, or for that matter to those who carry pocket calculators. When I pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, I cannot simply be thinking of a condition which will begin to exist for the first time after all human beings have either died or been transformed *a la* [1 Corinthians 15:51](#). If I am to be true to the giver of the prayer, and to those in the first Christian generation who prayed it and lived it, I must be envisaging, and working and praying for, a state of affairs in which the world of the 'state', of society and politics, no less than the world of my private 'religious' or 'spiritual' life, is brought under the Lordship of the King.

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The Church and the Nation

Valson Thampu

On August 15th 1997 India celebrated the 50th anniversary of its political freedom and independence from British colonial rule. On that day more than 20,000 Christians met in New Delhi for a service of Thanksgiving and Prayer sponsored by the churches of the capital city. The Church's influence in the development of the nation is far greater than its numerical strength. Christians were active in the framing of the constitution; missions and churches have pioneered in education, medical care and social welfare and their thousands of institutions are noted for high standards, integrity and compassion. The important place of the tribal states in the Union is the fruit of Christian missions. Christian members of parliament meet regularly for prayer. The democratic spirit within the Christian community, which now numbers approximately 30 million is an important factor in the life of the nation which continues to be the largest democracy in the world. In this statement of Christian realism Valson Thampu speaks with commitment to the unfinished agenda of the Church's role in nation building and the primacy of the Church's call to prayer.

Editor

Fifty years ago an ancient civilization was reborn as an infant nation. We succeeded in creating a free India. But we haven't had great success in creating a united people who are free to feel and think as Indians. The agenda to achieve inner freedom remains unfinished. So also does the mandate to 'set the captives free' from their social, economic and cultural prisons.

Development was understood narrowly to mean only improvement in the material conditions of life. The State endeavoured to help people survive; and that was important. It still is. But it was forgotten that the State is required to be also a standard-bearer of

values. The leaders pursued their vision of a secular, socialistic and democratic nation. In retrospect we realize that the people did not understand their rhetoric. And now the rhetoric too has changed, if not vanished!

The foundation for an independent India was laid. We gave ourselves a splendid Constitution. But the people have not been nurtured in the passion for unity or the commitment to justice. Instead, attempts are being made to soil the social fabric of India in the pursuit of power and short-term profit. Massive efforts to balkanise the national psyche are still going on. Our society today abounds in alienation.

Yet we remain, thank God, the largest democracy in the world. But we have a long way to go to build the democratic mental infrastructure. In the telling words of Nani Palkhivala, we are a people 'who gave unto ourselves the Constitution, but not the ability to keep it, who inherited a resplendent heritage but not the wisdom to cherish it, who suffer and endure in patience, without the perception of their potential'.

THE CHURCH IS LEAVEN IN SOCIETY

Though a tiny minority, we have stretched ourselves to the limits to serve the cause of nation-building. We have worked like the 'leaven in the lump', without wanting to draw attention to ourselves. It was right that we did so. But there has been a problem. In as much as we focused exclusively on a few chosen areas, increasingly we lost touch with the totality of the national scene. We did not have the confidence or courage, except on occasions, to discern the general trends in the society as a whole. Even when we became somewhat uneasy about certain developments, we were not sure if we could make any difference. We continued to pursue our vocation, blissfully unaware of the tragic degeneration in our national character. Values and ideals continued to decline and die in public life. We chose to ignore the fact that slowly we were becoming irrelevant to the larger context. By now our alienation from the national mainstream has reached an all-time high. And there is demoralization everywhere.

This is good neither for the Church nor for the nation. The loss for the nation is not just in terms of the decline in the standards of our institutions of service. The loss, more fundamentally, is that the springs of renewal that our society so desperately needs, are all drying up. Our present state of marginalization is not the result of our numerical insignificance. It is the outcome, rather, of a crippling misunderstanding concerning the role of the Church in the given society. It is not in terms of the quantity of services rendered, nor of the prestigious quality they maintain, that the mettle of the Church's relevance is to be assessed.

Our radical calling is to imbue our society with an adequate vision of what constitutes the foundation for human dignity and fulfilment. If we are the 'salt of the earth and the light of the world' we cannot stop short of ministering to the wholeness of the nation as a whole, believing that 'with God everything is possible'. It is in this regard that we have suffered maximum demoralization. We may not break out of this state of disability as long as we continue to be obsessed with quantity and scales of operation. It is time we realized that we shall serve India best only in terms of our own unique strengths and resources, in the light of which we need to re-think our Christian vocation in the present Indian scenario. Being the 'leaven in the lump', we are called to relate to the total context and work towards its continual renewal. The health of the nation, not less than the well-being of individuals and groups, is our goal.

Part of our problem originates in the exclusive focus on sin and salvation at the individual level. While this is an important part of the Christian proclamation and vocation, it is by no means our total mission. The essence of biblical spirituality is the

effort to integrate seemingly exclusive areas of commitment and responsibility. We cannot pursue, for example, the ultimate to the neglect of the intimate. God does not want us to focus on the world to come to the neglect of the world around us. Likewise, we are not to focus on the individual at the expense of the nation.

ACCOUNTABLE TO CAESAR AND TO GOD

As a community guided by the light of the Word ([Ps. 119:105](#)), we have yet to come to terms with the larger implications of our incarnate spirituality. Though in a somewhat enigmatic fashion, Jesus himself pointed to a necessary relationship between the State and the Church, between Caesar and God. We are to give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is his. The underlying truth is that we cannot honour our commitment to either without also remaining faithful to the other. The followers of Jesus cannot afford to be politically naive, indifferent or irresponsible.

Reflecting from within the context of India at the threshold of another century, we need to ask: What is it that we owe to Caesar or to the State? Is it only dutiful payment of taxes? Competence and commitment at work? Do not our dues to Caesar also include our duty to remind him continually that he too owes something to God? That he must render unto God what is God's and that he is entitled to his share only on the basis of his accountability to God? As we quote [Romans 13:1-7](#), we are to affirm not only that Christians must uphold civic authority but also that every form of authority is accountable to God. This is the bottom-line of our prophetic presence in a society fast sinking into corruption and moral anarchy. Surely, India can do a lot better with a little more of accountability in public life!

Biblically, it is self-evident that a definite role is envisaged for the Church in the given society. It is also clear that the totality of that relevance is not adequately claimed or practised by us today. The followers of the Lord Jesus Christ have added duties, while not being exempt from what is routine in their society. We shall here limit ourselves to considering only one of them.

After cleansing the Temple of Jerusalem Jesus affirmed: 'My house shall be known as a house of prayer for all nations' ([Mk. 11:17](#)). This is a seminal statement on the source of the Church's relevance to society. The Church is not merely an army of professional and skilled workers engaged in the pursuit of a materialistic and secular agenda. We betray our biblical heritage if we believe that nations and societies can be built with human and material resources alone. The Book of Proverbs says that where there is no vision the people perish ([29:18](#)). The Psalmist avers that our efforts to build the city will be futile if God has no place within our endeavours ([Ps. 127:1](#)). He has, probably, the story of the Tower of Babel at the back of his mind in this instance ([Gen. 11:1-9](#)).

THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL RESOURCES FOR NATION BUILDING

We tend to under-estimate the importance of spiritual resources simply because we are too deeply influenced by the presuppositions of a materialistic culture. Only that which is tangible, visible and ponderous has any value and the invisible things of the spirit tend to be devalued. But not every resource even in a secular and scientific sense is visible or tangible. What about the force of gravity, for example, without which life would come to a stand-still? The wind, for example, which, like the power of the Spirit, can only be felt and seen in terms of its impact on other objects? The importance of oxygen for life cannot be belittled because we cannot touch or see it. A mindset that discounts the invisible will

end up discarding values and the subtle things of the spirit. The foundation of a building is invisible, but is not unimportant for that reason.

In the midst of the mounting evidence all around us, we cannot resist the truth that the basic contribution we as a faith community can make to the shaping and renewal of the Indian Republic is our fervent intercession before the throne of Grace. The main vocation of the Indian Church is to be 'a house of prayer' for our nation.

Prayer played an important role in our freedom movement. To Gandhiji, prayer was at least as important as the political parleys. The people of India followed his saintly leadership with fervour and zeal. Prayer, thus, constitutes the very foundation of our nationhood. It should remain the source of the health and wholeness of our society. It is in this sphere that the Church and individual Christians can make a decisive contribution. The Great Commission embraces individuals and nations alike. We need to enter fully into this enlarged paradigm of understanding the significance and vocation of the Church to regain the lost grounds of our relevance to the national main-stream.

Prayer, to be sure, should not be seen as an escape route from reality. Prayer is not an alternative to action. Prayer is, in fact, the most relevant resource to cope with and master reality. Prayer needs to be incarnated through corresponding action. True prayer is, in a real sense, the 'word become flesh'. It is only through prayer of this kind that anything of lasting value can be achieved.

It is very gratifying to learn that Christians, crossing all denominational barriers, have come together to pray for the nation and experience our solidarity as a Christ-centred and patriotic people, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of our independence. We need to be encouraged by the truth that the gospel played a significant role in awakening the passion for freedom in the minds of the Indian people. The Christian faith has had a liberating influence wherever it spread. The influence of the Bible on Gandhiji is too obvious to be debated. As I wrote recently in one of our national newspapers: 'It is a matter of pride for Indian Christians that the Father of the nation is indeed the most outstanding example of appropriation of the biblical idea of freedom in modern history.' It is our sacred duty to continue to mediate the power of the gospel into our society and public life as part of our commitment to work towards the health and wholeness of India and her teeming millions.

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A Message of Solidarity from The National Council of Churches India on the Occasion of the Golden Jubilee of India's Independence

The National Council of Churches in India representing over 20 million Christians greets all people of our nation on the eve of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Independence with the following message.

We remember with gratitude and thanksgiving

- the life and sacrifice of the freedom fighters and martyrs of yesteryears.
- the great national leaders, religious leaders and Christian missionaries who gave their life and guided our nation.
- those unsung men and women who laboured and continue to labour for bringing Justice and Peace.
- the Jawans (soldiers) who sacrifice their lives in safeguarding the security of our country in eternal vigilance and the Kisans (farmers) who sustain the life of our nation.
- the salient provisions of our Constitution, the Democratic values on which the life of our nation is founded, and those who are involved in the governance of our country.

WE REPENT

- the negligence of duties related to our communities and our nation.
- the mistakes of the past and seek God's forgiveness to fulfill the mission of Christ in the world which he loved and be a sign of hope for our motherland.

WE COMMIT OURSELVES

- to the development of our nation through elimination of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.
- to fight against corruption in the churches, society and governments.
- to support and express our solidarity to all the efforts of the government in upholding human rights, communal harmony, and the vision of a welfare State.
- to build up communities of Peace and Justice through propagating and practising the message of love and peace.
- to the practice of participatory democracy, secularism and freedom with responsibility.

WE DEDICATE OURSELVES

- to fully participate in nation building so that our country will continue to develop as a land which will be the model of the Kingdom of God. To that end may God help us!

The Lordship of Christ and Political Ideologies