



Whitefield BRIEFING

November 1996 (Vol.1 No.6)

Thinking Christianly About Politics

Andrew J Goddard

A politician, a surgeon, an electrical engineer and an anaesthetist once entered into a discussion about which of them represented the oldest profession. The surgeon staked his claim by citing Gen 2:21: God "took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh". The anaesthetist just laughed because every surgeon needs an anaesthetist and, sure enough, that same verse begins "the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep". Clearly, his was the oldest profession. The electrical engineer couldn't believe his ears! No-one could beat him, because everyone knows that when God faced chaos and darkness his first creative act was to say, "Let there be light". The other two couldn't match this and so agreed he must have won. "Oh no, he hasn't", said the politician with a smile, "Who do you think created the chaos?"

For many, particularly young people, in contemporary Britain and the wider west-ern world that is what politics is all about: the creation of chaos. They are increas-ingly disenchanted with the political process and disbelieving of politicians' prom-ises. And yet, amidst this scepticism and frustration, there remains a deep-seated faith in the power of the state and the ability of legislation and political engage-ment to resolve our social, economic and moral problems. In times of trouble it is to politicians that many instinctively turn. They do so in criticism but also in the hope of action and solutions. Politicians, of course, actively encour-age this attitude in their 'religious' propaganda: "It is the dangerous, quasi-demonic enemy who threatens to bring chaos, so you need to keep trusting us"; "The prince of lies is out to deceive you again, only we can give new life to Britain". In such a political environment, how are we to think Christianly about politics?

We need first to recognise that such thinking probably doesn't come naturally. Despite the fact that our news media is filled with politics, in my experience most sermons and Bible studies make little or no reference to the subject. Christian thinking about money or sex or an issue of political controversy (eg immigration, the arms trade, social security, or abor-tion) is thankfully becoming more wide-spread. Unfortunately, Christian thinking about politics (more narrowly defined as the task and character of political authority and political power, and the processes by which these are gained) is still relatively rare. We can begin to piece together a Christian mindset on politics by approaching the subject from three differ-ent but closely inter-related perspectives: theological, biblical/exegetical and Christ shaped.

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

When attempting to think Christianly on any subject it is helpful to set it within the broader context of our theology. Then we can see what implications our biblically-based view of God and his world may have in this particular area. We often find this method followed in debates between Christians of opposing political par-ties, but an appeal is then usually made to only one or two doctrines. So, for example, when publicity was recently given to Tony

Blair's Christian faith, William Powell MP was re-reported as responding that, "If you accept the doctrine of original sin, it seems to me impossible to be anything other than a Conservative".¹ To which, of course, it is possible to reply, "If you accept Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God and the doctrine of resurrection from the dead, it seems impossible to be anything other than a revolutionary".²

As these conflicting conclusions from different theological premises indicate, there is a danger in drawing any implications for political allegiance from just one sub-section of Christian theology. Although what follows must be highly selective, we will try to set politics in a wider theological context by taking the narrative structure of Creation-Fall-Redemption as central to any biblically-based theology and asking what conclusions can then be drawn for thinking Christianly about politics.

Creation/Fall

Beginning with the origin of political authority and its relation to the Christian doctrines of creation and fall, we must turn to the opening chapters of Genesis. On this question we find a long-standing and fundamental divergence within Christian thinking between followers of Augustine (including most of the magisterial Reformers) and followers of Thomas Aquinas (such as most mainstream Roman Catholic thought).

Augustine (354-430) cites God's command in Gen.1:26 and asserts that God "did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man, but man over the beasts".³ His position is therefore clear: Politics is not part of God's good created order; it is instituted by God but only as his response to human sin.⁴ In contrast, Aquinas (1225-74) in his *Summa Theologica* clearly answers that "even in the state of innocence, some men would have exercised control over others".⁵ Although he says this control could not entail servitude, this view of political authority as part of the pre-Fall creation still marks a radical

break with Augustine and seems to owe more to Aristotle than to Scripture.

These two contradictory views on whether or not political authority is founded in the created order must not hide the fact that politics now is inextricably bound up with coercive rule and the power of enforcement. These means of political action must be characterised as an element of the fallen world and can only be legitimated by the need for political authority to respond to and limit sin in society (cf Gen.9:6; Rom.13:4).

Redemption

The New Testament's terminology for redemption is predominantly political: "the Kingdom of God", "Jesus is Lord". We must therefore ask what this entails, especially once we realise that this kingdom is established, and Jesus becomes Lord not by political means but by eschewing political power and instead suffering at the hands of human political authorities (1 Cor.2:8).

First, this clearly shows that, in contrast to the religious aspirations of many first-century Jews and the secular hope of many in the contemporary world, redemption is not achievable through politics. God did not redeem Israel and the world through a mighty political ruler on the model of the Davidic monarchy. Instead, he chose humility, powerlessness and execution as his path.

Second, although politics has a role, this is always secondary and limited to the fallen world's preservation. The political task is neither ultimate nor redemptive. Just as coercive political rule had no place in creation, so in the new creation all human rule over humans will be destroyed, and God himself will be all in all (1 Cor.15:24).

Third, any politics which effectively claims a redemptive role and demands religious devotion (which is quite possible even in a secular liberal democracy) thereby opposes God's redemptive work in Christ and, at its extreme, could be said to represent the biblical Antichrist.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Most Christians, if asked for three texts in

the Bible on politics, would think of Romans 13 and "Render to Caesar..." in the Gospels. Then they would struggle for a third example, perhaps coming up with "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). This shows the narrow way in which our churches and post-Christian society have shaped us to think instinctively of the Bible and politics. Not surprisingly, these passages are usually (mis-) interpreted as advocating uncritical acceptance of established political authority. The many highly critical texts such as Judges 9, 1 Samuel 8 and Revelation 13 are forgotten, ignored or explained away.⁶

In fact, Scripture gives us a very realistic account of the political world. There are a few stories which show how political power can be used for good (eg Joseph in Gen 41-50), stories which vividly illustrate its dangers (eg Daniel) and stories which demonstrate how the presence of a faithful member of God's people can limit the evil planned by political authorities (eg Esther).

These narratives all relate to Gentile political systems. In Israel itself, the historical books of the Old Testament are unsparing in their criticism of Israel's political rulers - even King David. Their personal, familial, political, military, diplomatic and religious failings are constantly recounted as if to hammer home God's original warning to Israel when they sought an established form of human political rule (1 Sam.8).

The Old Testament does not see God as primarily at work in Israel's internal political conflicts. The word of God is very rarely spoken from Within Israel's political life. Instead, the royal court is usually seen as the natural environment of the false prophet while God's word comes from outside the political world through God's true prophet. When it comes, that word often addresses the world of politics as must God's word today, but it only very occasionally takes the form of political advice or solutions.

CHRIST AND POLITICS

Finally, what of Jesus and politics? From

the time of his birth the significance of Christ's coming for human politics is emphasised by the Gospels: Gentile wise men hail him king of the Jews, and so King Herod seeks to kill him (Mt.); Mary is told that his kingdom will have no end and sings that he will bring down rulers from their thrones (Lk.).

Jesus' ministry opens with a temptation to secure political authority and power for himself by worshipping Satan, while in the course of his ministry people seem eager to view him as having a political role which he refuses (eg Jn 6:15). Meanwhile, John the Baptist is executed for criticism of Herod Antipas, but Jesus implicitly repeats John's challenge (Mk.10:1-12) and is less than complimentary about the ruler (Lk.13:32).

The Gospels' picture is therefore one with little comfort for those holding political responsibility. Yet Jesus is not presented as a political opponent seeking to wrest political control from those currently holding power. Indeed, for most of his public ministry he remains detached both geographically (in Galilee not Jerusalem) and ideologically from the centre of Israel's political life. When he arrives in Jerusalem, however, he does so in such a way as to claim to be, in some sense, Israel's true king. He is clearly seen as a potential challenger to established authority, hence the question about paying taxes to Caesar and his enigmatic response in which he skillfully avoids being identified with any of the standard political options (Mt.22:15-22).

Ultimately, the political establishments of Israel and Rome can tolerate his presence no longer. In his trial before Pilate he explicitly claims to be a king, but, in contrast to all political kingdoms of this fallen world, the servants of this king do not rely on coercive power (Jn 18:36). Poor Pilate is incapable of comprehending such a claim. It is political, and yet it explodes all established political categories. Unable to hear the truth, Pilate is swayed by a combination of political expediency and the mob's blasphemous declaration of devotion to Caesar.

He has Jesus executed -as "King of the Jews".

Jesus' political stance, very roughly sketched here, should continue to disturb and perhaps confuse our political thinking today just as it did for Pilate. In an astonishing confession, Charles Moore, editor of the Daily Telegraph, reveals how deeply Christ contradicts all his natural thinking about politics. His confession offers a stark challenge to all of us, whichever newspaper moulds our political thinking: "One can't help fearing that if the Telegraph had been around in AD 33 it would have condemned Jesus for being seditious ... As the Telegraph tends to be on the side of constituted authorities, it would probably have taken Pilate's view, I fear... That's what most bourgeois persons would do".⁷

CONCLUSION

Political authority, if it recognises itself to be a response to man's fallen nature with a limited non-redemptive task, can serve to contain the threat of chaos and the power of sin. It cannot, however, eliminate these. Once those seeking and holding political power try to use that power to achieve more than politics' ordained and limited end of restraining sin through upholding justice in society and serving the common good, political life soon becomes a new idol. Like all idols it feeds off people's devotion, but instead of meeting their real needs, simply creates more chaos. Christians, who know the true place of political authority in God's purposes, are devoted to serving the crucified Christ as Lord and are praying for the coming of God's own kingdom, must therefore encourage those engaged in political life to acknowledge its limited role and significance. They must warn any society when they discern its political life falling prey to the real dangers of idolatry leading to chaos.

REFERENCES

1. *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 April 1996, p.1.
2. It is not a coincidence that, at the time of Jesus, the Sadducees who denied resurrection were political conservatives and defenders of the status quo, whereas the Pharisees who believed in resurrection from the dead were often political radicals or even revolutionaries (see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992, ch. 7 on these different Jewish parties).
3. *City of God*, Bk 19, Ch 15.
4. For a full discussion see R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, CUP, 1970, Appendix B. He sums up Augustine's view in the following words:- "the institutions of government, coercion and punishment are brought into human society by sin. They are God's just punishment for man's transgression, and they are also his providential disposition for coping with its consequences..." (p.205).
5. *Summa Theologica I/I*, Q96, Art 4.
6. Probably the best antidote to this limited and distorted perception of Scripture's teaching about politics is the work of the French Protestant thinker Jacques Ellul (1912-94). In addition to the two books listed below, his major discussions of the Bible and politics are found in *False Presence of the Kingdom* (Seabury, 1972); *The Ethics of Freedom* (Mowbrays, 1976); *The Subversion of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1986) and *Anarchy and Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1991).
7. Interview in *Third Way*, Vol.19 No.2, March 1996, p.18.

FURTHER READING

Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to read the Bible politically* (SPCK, 1989) Jonathan Chaplin, *Politics and the Parties* (IVP,1992)
Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (Vintage Books, 1967)
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The Revd Dr Andrew Goddard is Curate of St Mary's, Cogges, Witney, Oxon. His DPhil thesis was on The Life & Thought of Jacques Ellul with special reference to his writings on law, violence, the state, and politics. He was a grantee of the Whitefield Institute for 3 years while studying for his doctorate at Christ Church, Oxford