

16: God and Co-operation in Evangelism

Church and State

The old and thorny problem of the relationship of church and state arises frequently in the pursuit of evangelism. In foreign missions it has a way of becoming especially acute for the obvious reason that the missionary has to reckon with two governments, his own and that of the people among which he labours, and for the equally obvious reason that in many instances the latter government has not been influenced by Christian traditions.

What follows is not an attempt to say anything like the last word on this intricate problem. It is a brief statement of some theological principles bearing on the matter.

The position, occasionally taken, that the church because of its spiritual character must refuse to have dealings with the civil government is wholly untenable. It represents Anabaptism at its worst. The spiritual and the natural cannot thus be divorced. Both are divine creations, and the one God has revealed Himself in both. The natural serves as a necessary background for the spiritual. For instance, God first made the covenant of nature with Noah and in it guaranteed the continuity of the human race (Gen. 8:21, 22); subsequently God established with Abraham the covenant of grace, in which He guaranteed the continuity of the church (Gen. 17:7). The latter presupposed the former and even demanded it. And the state as well as the church is divinely instituted. 'Let every soul be subject unto the high powers. For there is no power but of God:

the powers that be are ordained of God' (Rom. 13:1).

Both preachers and politicians have been known to make the blunt statement that they believe in the 'absolute' separation of church and state. Such language is irresponsible. Those using it never made a serious attempt to think this matter through, for it is self-evident that no two areas of human life are completely independent of each other. When the state confronts a moral issue, as it often does, it becomes the church's duty to enlighten the state from the Word of God. If the state enacts a law which demands of its citizens violation of the moral law of God, who will deny that the church is in duty bound to protest? The state surely has something to say about the property rights of a church. And few, if indeed any, will care to deny that it is a God-assigned duty of the state to protect the church in the exercise of religious liberty.

Clearly, the proper relation of church and state is not a simple problem for every angle of which there is an easy solution. Yet, certain conclusions as to the bearing of this problem on evangelism would seem to be unassailable.

Let not the state engage in evangelism. It is a task assigned unmistakably by God to the church. The proper function of the state is quite another; namely, the punishment of evil-doers and the praise of those that do good (Rom. 13:3, 4); in short, the maintenance of justice in human relations. Here the principle of so-called sphere sovereignty applies. Strictly speaking, God alone has sovereignty. But the sovereign God has assigned authority—a relative sovereignty, if that be not a contradiction in terms—to the church and to the state in each of two areas of human life. As the church may not impinge on the sovereignty of the state, so the state may not impinge on the sovereignty of the church. When King Saul, before joining

battle with the Philistines, usurped the priestly function of bringing sacrifice to God, God rejected him as king over Israel (I Sam. 13: 1-14). When King Uzziah presumed to burn incense in the temple, which was a prerogative of the priests as representatives of the church of the old dispensation, God smote him with leprosy (II Chron. 26: 16-21). And when Charlemagne, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, forced entire nations at the point of the sword to receive Christian baptism, he went far beyond the limits which God has ordained for the civil government.

Let not the church ask the state for permission to preach the Word of God. To do so would constitute an ignominious surrender by the church of its God-given sovereignty, an outrageous substitution of the state for Christ as head of the church, an unpardonable recognition of state totalitarianism. Attention must here be called to as prevalent and pestilent a heresy as exists today. It is that men possess by the grace of the state such basic liberties as that of speech, that of assembly, that of the press, that of religion and worship. Such is not at all the case. These are *God-given* liberties and therefore *inalienable*. It was God also who bestowed upon the church the right as well as the duty to proclaim the gospel to the utmost bounds of the earth. Having received that right from the King of kings, the church may not supplicate the civil magistrate for it.

Let not the church permit itself to be degraded so as to become a tool of the state. All too often that has occurred in the past, notably in the post-Reformation period. By way of reaction from Rome, which taught the supremacy of the church over the state, the churches of the Reformation, by and large, went to the opposite extreme of Erastianism, which regarded the church as a phase of the state and therefore placed the church under state domination.

That accounts for the established or state churches of many European lands. It was not until the nineteenth century that free churches began to flourish, and to the present day they have by no means supplanted all established churches. Serious damage to the cause of Christian missions resulted. The fortunes of missions came to be bound up with the manoeuvring of European states in foreign politics. Briefly, foreign missions became to a considerable extent political. As striking and sad an example as any is afforded by the so-called Boxer uprising in the year 1900 in China. Due to the intervention of other governments in the internal affairs of that nation a wave of intense hatred against foreigners swept over the northern Chinese provinces, and numerous missionaries were slain.

It is a duty of the state to protect its citizens, the church included, in the exercise of religious liberty. On that proposition there is almost complete unanimity in present-day Protestantism. In its original form *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, being a product of the Reformation period, was marred by a strong Erastian note in its teaching of the relation of church and state to each other. In 1788, due in part, no doubt, to the influence of that great American Baptist, Roger Williams, American Presbyterians removed that error from this doctrinal standard. No longer did they assign to the civil magistrate the duty 'to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed'. Nor did they continue to say: 'For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatso-

ever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God'. Yet, significantly they insisted: 'As nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger' (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXIII, 3).

That this position is Scriptural permits of no doubt. It is implicit in the assertion concerning the magistrate, 'He is the minister of God to thee for good' (Rom. 13:4). Clearly to the point is the use made by Paul as missionary of his Roman citizenship. By virtue of that citizenship he could carry the gospel freely to all parts of the empire, and on at least three occasions when he suffered violence and injustice he insisted on that right. When the magistrates of Philippi ordered him and Silas released from prison, Paul protested vigorously: 'They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? Nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out' (Acts 16:37). When the Roman garrison at Jerusalem had taken Paul into protective custody and the chief captain gave orders that he should be examined by scourging, Paul said to the centurion standing by: 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?' On being informed that his prisoner was a Roman, the chief captain was afraid and forthwith put a stop to Paul's examination (Acts 22:24-29). And when Porcius Festus, procurator of Judea, wishing to please Paul's Jewish persecutors, suggested that he be tried at Jerusalem rather than at Caesarea, the apostle rejected that injudicious proposal and made use of

his privilege as a Roman citizen to appeal to the emperor (Acts 25:11). In the providence of the all-wise God that appeal resulted in the triumphant entry of the gospel into the capital city of the world.

Paul's writings contain a passage which bears most directly on the point at issue. It is I Timothy 2:1-4. The apostle exhorts that 'first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men: for kings and for all that are in authority'. He asserts that such prayers by Christians will be conducive to their leading 'a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty'. But he does not stop there. He goes on to say that God is pleased with the intercession of His people for their rulers and their consequent peaceable living, because these contribute to the accomplishment of God's desire, 'who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth'. In fine, one teaching of this passage is that, if the civil magistrates govern as they should, that will enhance the spread of the gospel.

The fact having been established that it is a God-assigned function of the state to protect the church and its members in the pursuit of evangelism, some concrete conclusions are in order.

According to international law each nation is its own judge as to who may enter its domain and who is to be excluded. Therefore, although a church of Christ may never petition an earthly government for permission as such to preach the gospel, it is perfectly proper for a church to request a foreign government to admit a specific missionary, and it is just as proper for a church to enlist the aid of the homeland government in this procedure.

The missionary in a foreign land must show due respect for the rulers of that land, even if they are pagans. Likely

Paul wrote both his epistle to the Romans and his first letter to Timothy during the reign of infamous Nero. The divine command, 'Fear God. Honour the king' (I Peter 2:17) holds for evangelists as well as for others. And, wherever he may labour, in every legitimate way the evangelist must cultivate the good will of the civil magistrate.

It may not be wise in every instance for a foreign missionary to rely on protection by his own government. Some years ago an American missionary in China caused injury accidentally to a Chinese child. He was placed under arrest. According to 'extra-territorial rights' then in force, he might have insisted on being tried by an American court. Instead, he chose trial in a Chinese court and by so doing created much good will.

Well may the evangelist co-operate with civil authorities in the suppression of such social evils as slavery, prostitution, and the illegal sale of narcotics. However, when doing so he must distinguish between the function of the state and that of the church. The state combats such evils with 'the sword' (Rom. 13:4); the church combats them with 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Eph. 6:17).

Christianity and Other Religions

A view widely prevalent today is that Christianity is but one of the many religions of the world, in a class with all the others, although perhaps at the head of the class. From that premise the conclusion is drawn that the task of the Christian missionary is not to induce the adherents of another religion to replace it with Christianity, but rather to collaborate with men of other religions in a search for