

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)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Church and State.

AN EXAMINATION OF DR. KARL BARTH'S TREATISE "CHRISTENGEMEINDE UND BURGERGEMEINDE."

THE relation of Church and State has never been a purely academic subject. The imprisonment of Thomas Helwys for his religious convictions, which Baptists remember with just pride, was an example of that tension which has existed since the days of the primitive Church between the secular world and the spiritual community within it. During the present century this tension has become particularly acute on the Continent where the rise of totalitarian governments has caused the Church to pass again through the fires of persecution. It is as a reminder of this grim ordeal and not merely as a piece of scholastic research that we must read Dr. Barth's new treatise, and the issues raised in its pages have already been settled at the cost of suffering and even death in many a community over which the shadow of the Swastika has fallen. His central theme was originally given as a series of lectures in a number of German cities since the war, and is now published in pamphlet form for the general reader.

We are reminded at the outset that Church and State are not just terms, but communities of living people (hence the double use of the word "Gemeinde" in the title.) The Church is the community of those who have been brought together in any given place through a knowledge of Christ, and whose duty is to confess Him. As members of a spiritual body whose Head is Christ, they share a common life which is manifested inwardly by a common hope faith and love, and outwardly by the public confession of Him. The State, on the other hand, is the community of those who have been brought together in any given place for the purposes of mutual protection (i.e., the protection of the rights of the individual against his neighbours, and of the whole community against the rest of the world.) The function of the State is to legislate, to govern, and to administer justice.

Church and State are related, existing together in a world which still awaits its final deliverance; and the State is a mixture of believers and unbelievers without any clear conception of its relationship to God, spiritually blind and unconscious. Therefore, all its tasks and objectives are relative and limited, since it

The Baptist Quarterly

has no certain vision of the truth. It possesses physical force which can be used for its protection. Yet this is itself a sign of its essential weakness, a reminder of the precarious position in which the safety of the State always stands. Always having to be on guard against potential foes, the State knows nothing of that œcumenical spirit which binds different communities of Christians together in the bond of peace.

Despite these obvious limitations on the part of the State, the Church cannot entirely separate herself from it. The problems of the world affect her life, the spiritual death which rules over the secular society sometimes penetrates into the Church, and there are Christian communities where neither faith nor hope nor love is alive. Moreover, the differences between the Churches of different lands are still so pronounced and racial influence so strong, that the œcumenical movement is still only a movement. The Church need not look down on the world too much!

Yet it is the Church, and she alone, which really understands the purpose of the State, for she alone knows the righteousness of God which the State must express in a limited and imperfect form. She alone knows the pride of man which would lead to chaos and confusion if it were unchecked, and she knows that God has ordained the secular State to prevent the breaking in of this chaos, to restrain the power of the evil doer, and to reward the good (Roman xiii, 3; I Peter ii, 14). This time, in which the State performs this function and through its constitutional forms expresses imperfectly the righteousness of God, is a time of grace (i.e., it is granted by His grace and for the purpose of allowing men to avail themselves of that grace). Being thus ordained the State, no less than the Church has a definite place within God's will and purpose, and its very existence is a sign that sinful men are still remembered and protected by Him. It is a source of benefit to an unholy world, maintaining within it a provisional and relative standard of holiness. And although it cannot be regarded as having any part in Christ's Kingdom, yet it belongs to those powers which are subject to Him as the risen Lord (Matt. xxviii, 18) and which cannot separate us from Him. (Rom. viii, 37ff). From such an institution as this the Church cannot cut herself off in indifference, for this would mean resisting the ordinance of God and incurring His condemnation (Rom. xiii, 2.)

The vocation of the Church is to exist as an inner core within the State, proclaiming the reign of Christ and the hope of the coming of God's Kingdom. The State has no such message to proclaim, it cannot even pray, but must be prayed for by the Church; it knows neither the source nor the destiny of human existence and the most it can do is to discharge its immediate

duty faithfully, always hovering between optimism and pessimism, hoping for the best and yet expecting the worst. It is to the service of this needy society that Christians are called, they must work and pray for the world, making themselves responsible before God for their unbelieving fellows, and submitting themselves to secular authority (Romans xiii, i. a) not in blind and unquestioning slavery, but because the wider circle of the world like the inner circle of the Church is centred in Christ, and because they have a responsibility to Him in this wider circle (Romans xiii, 5.)

The Church cannot prescribe rules for an ideal State; there is only one Body of Christ which must always remain distinct from the world. No form of government, however enlightened, can take the place of the Church or do her work. Therefore, while it is the responsibility of Christians to work for better social conditions, they must never equate any political system with the Kingdom of God. There is a limit to the goodness of all human systems, and the hope of Christians is not for an earthly Utopia, but for "a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

When Christians take positive action in the life of the State, they will not be guided by natural law, which is the standard of judgement of heathen states, the commonly accepted idea of what is right and wrong. To make this the standard of judgement for the Christian would be to make the Church indistinguishable from the State, which can do no other than follow this natural law which leads only too often to disaster. Nor will the Church act in the political sphere for her own profit and the increase of her own influence. The Church is in the world not to enlist the world's support for her own ends, but to serve.

The Church may expect certain facilities from the State, for part of the State's divine significance is that it should provide opportunities for the proclamation and hearing of the Word. When such facilities are granted, whether in the provision for religious education and broadcasts, the protection of Sunday as a day of worship, financial assistance, or in any other way, the Church must accept them gratefully as gifts in which she recognizes God's providential purpose. And if such opportunities are denied, she must ask herself whether she is not at fault in not having made her witness strong and faithful enough to warrant her being regarded as an important factor in the life of society.

The word "witness" sums up the divinely ordained function of the Church; she is in the world to witness, to remind men of God's Kingdom. The aim of this witness is to bring continually before the State the facts of its relationship to God and its place

in His sovereign dispensation. For the Church knows that the law of the State is in its limited way an analogy of the Kingdom of God, and since the State in its spiritual blindness knows nothing of this, the Church must take the initiative in pointing it out. The Church will therefore act in the political sphere by giving her weight to any decision which will make clear the the sovereignty of Christ over the whole and direct the policy of men towards, rather than away from, the Kingdom of God. Her political activity is to witness, to arouse the State from its neutrality and ignorance and point it to God. Dr. Barth now proceeds to show how this line of action will express itself in specific issues.

Since the Church believes that God has revealed Himself in the person of a Man, she will defend the rights of man against all forms of exploitation and will uphold the State as the guardian of those rights. Since God became man, man must be the measure of all things.

The Church proclaims that the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost; she will therefore be the champion of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. She will proclaim the need for social justice throughout every part of the community, and she will judge all forms of government by the measure in which this justice is found in them.

The Church is the community of those who have been called into the liberty of God's children; she will therefore, demand liberty for all in politics, home life, in art, science, and belief. She will not in every circumstance oppose a partial limiting of this liberty, but she will always oppose anything that savours of totalitarianism.

The Church is the community of those who live a common life. She will therefore strive for equality among all men, and will regard as an arbitrary convention the limitation of political freedom amongst certain races and classes, especially among women. But this equality will not be a dull uniformity, for just as the Church knows in her own life a variety of gifts bestowed by the Spirit, so she will recognize that there are different vocations within the secular society. And she will oppose the unifying of these varied functions in one controlling hand, whether it be that of a despot or of "das Volk."

Testifying to the true light that has come in Christ, and living by that light, the Church will be the declared enemy of all secrecy in politics and diplomacy. What is secret is wrong, what is open is right.

The Church is founded and nourished on the Free Word of God which she proclaims. She will therefore ascribe a great importance to free speech of all kinds, believing that through the

right word spoken at the right time decisive results can be achieved. She will therefore oppose all forms of censorship and control of public opinion.

The motive of Christ's followers is not rule, but service. The Church will therefore regard any rule which is not a means of service as an abnormality. There is a difference between "potestas" (which serves justice) and "potentia" (which controls justice and overcomes it.) The results of "potentia" are seen in the downfall of Bismarck and Hitler: "they that take the sword shall perish by the sword."

The Church is essentially oecumenical and concerned therefore, with the welfare of her entire communion. She will bring this same spirit into the political sphere and will present to the secular State a picture of super-national peace and co-operation which must be copied in the world of international affairs if the world is to be saved from collapse.

The Church knows of God's wrath and judgement, that it lasts but a moment, whilst His grace is for all eternity. From this it follows that she will sometimes regard as necessary violent solutions to political problems (e.g., revolution), but only when they cannot possibly be avoided. The Church cannot tolerate peace at any price, but since the Gospel demands a perfection like that of our Heavenly Father, she will pursue and encourage a policy of peace to the very limits of human possibility.

All the above examples, though not exhaustive, show that there is an analogy between the Kingdom of God proclaimed by the Church and the everyday issues of the life of the civil community. In emphasizing this analogy, the Church is committed to a policy of prophetic witness. And from what has been said, it will be clear that whilst no human system of government can ever claim to represent the Kingdom of God on earth, yet Christianity has a stronger affinity with democracy than with any other system.

Finally, Dr. Barth raises a practical question. Is it advisable that a special Christian political party be formed in any given place to carry into effect the outlined plan of prophetic witness? Such parties have already existed in Holland, Switzerland and Germany, and have not been generally successful. Any such party would have to enter the political arena on an equal footing with other political parties, might well be forced into coalition and compromise with non-Christians, and would be dependent for its influence on the obtaining of numerical majorities and the use of propaganda. And if the formation of such a party involved the alliance of Protestants with Catholics, it would also mean interpreting the Kingdom of God as the highest form of natural law and adopting a moralistic and humanistic philosophy. These con-

siderations are enough to rule out the desirability of any Christian political party.

In addition, such a party is not only undesirable, but also unnecessary, so long as the Church faithfully discharges her divine task, which is to declare the Gospel of God's grace. This Gospel, which deals with the King and His Kingdom now hidden but soon to be revealed, is prophetic and political and will remain so as long as the Church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If she will only speak impressively and authoritatively on social questions (and not only on those which affect her immediately, such as gambling and the use of Sunday), if she will only stand as an inner core of righteousness within the State, if she will only illustrate her preaching by her own life, the Church will do all that any party could ever achieve, and far more.

Those who read Dr. Barth's treatise will not only find it stimulating reading, but will find that much of his argument expresses the position held by Free Churchmen in England today. His opening definition of the Church as a community of people brought together in any given place through a knowledge of Christ and for the purpose of confessing Him, would find acceptance amongst Baptists and a great many others who share our doctrine of the gathered Church. Those who do not think in the terms of vivid contrast which form a characteristic of Barthian theology as a whole, will perhaps think his description of the State and its spiritual blindness a trifle overdone. But the central truth of this thesis is beyond question; the Church is in the world and yet not of the world, and those whom the Holy Spirit has called into fellowship with Christ and with one another form a distinct community in which His will is known and the life of His Kingdom is anticipated.

Concerning the vocation of the Church in the world, Dr. Barth enunciates two great truths, both of which will receive our assent as belonging to the Biblical conception of the Church as we have generally understood it. Firstly, the Church is charged with a priestly office in the world. The spiritual blindness of the State requires that intercession should be made on its behalf, and it is only the Church which can intercede since she alone is conscious of her relationship to God. The Church then, as Barth points out, has to make herself responsible before God for the rest of the world and has to pray to Him for those who know not how to pray for themselves. And although he does not commit himself to any doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as we are familiar with it, yet there is at the root of all Barth says the same truth which underlies this doctrine viz., that to intercede before God for all sorts and conditions of men is the privilege and duty of every member of the believing community. Our

view of the Church is not of a spiritual body in which some are called to be priests, but in which all are priests because they are believers, thus making the whole body priestly.

And secondly, the Church's vocation is prophetic, she must not only represent men before God, but also present God to men. The prophetic ministry of the Church will sometimes bring her into conflict with the State, and in her stand for those God-given truths which she has received she will need both courage and grace. But this ministry cannot be shirked if the Church is to discharge her responsibility to God and man, as the record of our forefathers in the faith should continually remind us. Dr. Barth makes it clear for us, in case we were in any doubt, that prophetic witness is not only a duty of the Church and of the believers who are its members, but an integral part of her life in this time of grace, in which God is still granting men the opportunity to repent and believe the Gospel she proclaims.

IRWIN J. BARNES.

William Robinson, *What Churches of Christ Stand For*. (The Berean Press, 1/-).

A new and revised edition of a valuable manual by the Principal of Overdale College, Birmingham.