

KINGDOM OF GOD AND SOCIETY: an evangelical perspective

by Geoffrey Allen

(The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the church movement of which he is a member)

Throughout most of the history of Christianity, believers have felt, and often disagreed about, a tension between the "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" claims of the Gospel on the lives, energies and resources of Christians and the Church. In this paper we shall seek to explore this tension and make some proposals as to how to approach its resolution, from the perspective and in the light of the values and priorities of evangelical Christianity.

1. New Testament priorities

As evangelicals, we hold the Bible to be normative as the supreme authority in matters of both doctrine and life. Therefore the first question we must ask is: "What is the teaching of the New Testament, and how does it define priorities, regarding the role of Christians in influencing society?"

Even a superficial reading of the New Testament shows very clearly that for both its protagonists and its authors, the "other-worldly" perspective prevails. Both Jesus and the apostles dedicated their energies to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God *"in word and deed"*¹ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Their priority was to bring men and women to turn to God in repentance and to put their faith in Christ; to enter into a salvation that was not just a doctrinal or credal confession but a powerful transformation of lifestyle, values and priorities; and to become effective, functioning, reproducing members of God's people, the Church. The Church was seen as a people whose destiny was in eternity, much more than in this world. Little thought appears to have given to any projects for the transformation of society, the more so as they were motivated by a powerful sense of eschatological urgency. As the apostle Paul expresses it, *"we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"*.²

Both Jesus and his disciples made a clear distinction – it might be better to say "contrast" – between "the Kingdom" and "the world".³ "The world" is seen as a system hostile to God and to his Messiah⁴, and the call of the Gospel is to *"save yourselves from this corrupt generation"*.⁵ Those who enter the Kingdom in its present reality, thus coming together to form the Church, are called to remain *"in the world"* while not belonging to it, as witnesses to the light in the midst of oppressive darkness.⁶

This clear witness of New Testament priorities thus allows us to draw a first immediate, unfashionable conclusion: that we too ought to adopt the same scale of priorities. God calls his people primarily to *"fix our eyes... on what is unseen [and] eternal"*, to *"set our hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God"*⁷ rather than on what is present, visible and temporary. The latter obviously include such undoubted benefits as physical health and healing, economic prosperity, social justice, and peace both within societies and between nations.

2. The eschatological dimension

A second preliminary conclusion is that we must guard against any blurring of the boundary between "the world" and "the Church", such as has characterised most of the history of Christianity (including Protestantism) from the time of Constantine on. Such a temptation has

¹ Luke 24:19, Rom 15:18.

² 2 Cor 4:18.

³ See for example Mt 13:38; Jn 17:11,14-15; 1 Jn 2:15-17.

⁴ E.g. 1 Jn 5:19, 1 Cor. 2:21. See the excellent study by Watchman Nee, *Love not the World* (London, Victory Press 1968).

⁵ Acts 2:40.

⁶ Jn 17:15-18, Phil 2:15-16.

⁷ Col 3:2.

often clothed itself in excellent and persuasive motives such as the beneficent influence of Christianity on society. However, in the longer term, the result has nearly always been that the "salt" has ended up by "*losing its saltiness*"⁸, merging into the "world" around it to the point of becoming barely distinguishable from it.

It is true that the Scripture foresees a time when "*the kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*".⁹ But how we expect this to come about is decisive in determining our attitude to attempts to change things for the better in the present age. Those who subscribe to a postmillennial eschatology expect the world to be redeemed and brought into obedience to Christ through the labours of the Church, without any decisive supernatural intervention on God's part.

However, such an eschatology is now rare among evangelicals, most of whom subscribe either to a premillennial interpretation (of one variety or another) – prevalent among Pentecostals and charismatics as well as Brethren and Baptists – or an amillennial one (common among "historic evangelicals" such as Presbyterians and Anglicans, as well as Roman Catholics). Those who subscribe to these schools of eschatological thought are generally pessimistic about the possibility of any radical and permanent transformation of society through the influence of the Gospel, which must await the coming of Christ to "*rule all the nations with an iron sceptre*".¹⁰

What, then, is the biblical warrant for Christian efforts to make this present world a better place? Essentially it comes down to the practical implications of the second great commandment: "*Love your neighbour as yourself*", and the apostolic exhortation: "*As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers*".¹¹ The degree of "opportunity" we have will vary with many different factors, including our life circumstances and the particular gift and calling each Christian receives from God. Some are undoubtedly called to devote themselves particularly to social projects, political campaigning or the pursuit and exercise of political power in the interests of the Kingdom whose first characteristic is "*righteousness*".¹² Such righteousness is not – as a Christianity influenced by Enlightenment individualism often erroneously assumes – merely personal piety and uprightness, but also embraces the pursuit of social justice, as is shown by the constant exhortations of all the Old Testament prophets.¹³

3. The social consequences of the Kingdom

There is no question that the power of the Gospel does, and indeed must, transform the behaviour and lifestyle of those who believe. "*Faith without works is dead*".¹⁴ Consequently Christians' social relationships must and will be transformed. Tertullian famously reported the opponents of Christianity as remarking, "Look how they love one another... and how they are ready to die for each other!".¹⁵ The calling of Christ is for his disciples to be "*the salt of the earth*" and "*the light of the world*".¹⁶ The Church, as the visible, present expression of the Kingdom, is called to be an "alternative society" living by different norms from those generally practised by their neighbours; the first church at Jerusalem, as described in the early chapters of the Acts, is an outstanding example of this. Not only in its internal relationships, but also in its manner of treating outsiders the Church is to demonstrate the indwelling Spirit of Christ and the reality of his kingdom.

Thus for example Jesus teaches his disciples a radically new style of leadership: "*Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever*

⁸ Cf. Mt 5:13.

⁹ Rev 11:15.

¹⁰ Rev 12:5, see also 2:27 and 19:15.

¹¹ Mt 22:39 and parall.; Gal 6:10.

¹² Rm 14:17.

¹³ The book of Amos is a particularly trenchant example, but a large part of all the prophetic writings is devoted to exhortations to exercise justice and compassion towards the poor, widows, orphans and foreign immigrants.

¹⁴ Jas 2:26; cf. Mt 5:16.

¹⁵ *Apologeticum* 39,7.

¹⁶ Mt 5:13,14.

wants to be first must be slave of all".¹⁷ While this teaching applies in the first instance to the exercise of authority within the Christian community, it seems clear that the attitude taught must also apply to leadership exercised by Christians in secular positions of authority, whether in the family, business, law enforcement or positions of political power.

4. The case of slavery

Apart from marriage and the family, the area of human relationships which the New Testament addresses most frequently is that of relations between masters and slaves. This is not surprising, since slavery was universal in the ancient world (as indeed it has been for most of history until modern times), and the first-generation Church included many slaves and many slave-owners.

What many modern readers find surprising, however, is that nowhere do the New Testament writers propose the abolition of slavery, or that Christians should campaign for its abolition. (This would in any case have been a quite unrealistic objective, given the small numbers and limited or non-existent influence of Christians at that time. Of course no negative judgement is implied towards those who did successfully campaign for its abolition, mainly in the name of Christianity, many centuries later.) Nor indeed do they anywhere suggest that Christian slave-owners ought to free their slaves as a matter of course.

What the New Testament does teach in a number of passages, on the other hand, is a radical transformation of the relationship between masters and slaves. Christian slaves are exhorted to work hard even when unsupervised, as though serving Christ the Master of all¹⁸, to respect their owners even when they are harsh and unjust, and even to accept undeserved punishment without complaint.¹⁹ But the instructions for slave-owners are perhaps still more radical. They are told to remember that they too are slaves of Christ and that they will have to give account to him as Master and Owner of both themselves and their slaves, who makes no distinction between slaves and their owners. It is also stated that in God's eyes there is no difference between slaves and free men, but in Christ all have equal status before Him and equal standing in the Church.²⁰ At the Lord's table slaves and their owners participated on an equal footing.

The most vivid illustration of the kind of transformation produced by this awareness is found in Paul's often neglected but delightful little letter to Philemon. Here the apostle, from his prison (probably in Rome), writes to an old friend, apparently one of the leaders of the church at Colossae. The letter is to be delivered by Onesimus (the name means "Useful", and gives occasion for a little joking word-play, v.11). According to most interpreters Onesimus was a runaway slave of Philemon's, who in making his getaway had apparently provided for his journey by robbing his master²¹. But after making his way to Rome, as did many others in his position, in order to seek anonymity in the crowds, he had come into contact with Christians, been converted and had been making himself "useful" to the imprisoned apostle.

Under Roman law there was no limit to the severity of the punishment a master could inflict on his slaves. Runaways were frequently branded with red-hot irons, apart from the probable beating and confinement.²² But Paul, who is not above resorting to a little moral blackmail (vv.17,21), asks his friend to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord", and concludes, "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me"²³. There is indeed a strong hint that Paul is asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom and send him back to Rome. But in any case, for a slave-owner to be asked to welcome back a runaway slave as "a dear brother", indeed as though he were the great apostle himself, is truly radical. And this does not appear to have been anything exceptional in the early Church.

¹⁷ Mk 10:42-44; cf 1 Pt 5:2-3.

¹⁸ Eph 6:6-7, Col 3:22-23.

¹⁹ 1 Pt 2:18-21.

²⁰ Eph 6:9, Col 4:1, Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13.

²¹ Phm 18-19.

²² Archaeologists have dug up branding irons made to burn into the victim's skin texts such as, "If you find me, arrest me and return me to my master ...".

²³ Phm 16-17.

We can see, then, that for the first-generation Christians the *content* of their conduct and their relationships was much more important than any efforts devoted to changing their outward *form*. It is well known that in the USA, after slavery was formally abolished in the 1860s, discrimination, oppression and exploitation continued in other forms. This is in no way to decry the heroic and noble efforts of the abolitionists. There is no contradiction between changing the laws and institutions governing people's lives, and changing the ways in which people behave towards one another within the framework of those laws and institutions. The two approaches are complementary, not alternative. But, when it is necessary to choose where to invest one's time and energies, there is no doubt that the New Testament preference is for the latter.

5. The social influence of Christianity in history

As already mentioned, for most of the "Christian era" the Church became so identified with the structures and institutions of society as to "lose its saltiness" and its ability to transform them, at least in the radical ways envisaged by its founders. Indeed it became so much identified with "the establishment" as to be frequently seen as representing and defending the interests of the powerful and privileged against those of the poor and oppressed.

The radical internationalist and anti-militarist stance of the early Church, too, all but disappeared. Much of the hostility towards Christians on the part of the Roman Empire had been due to their refusal to acknowledge its claim to their supreme loyalty and their unwillingness to take up arms in its defence. They considered themselves as members of a trans-national Kingdom and under obligation to love all men, which was not unnaturally interpreted as incompatible with killing them.²⁴ But after the "Constantinian compromise" this position rapidly disappeared as the Church came increasingly to identify the objectives of the "Christian" Roman Empire as its own, finding theoretical justification first for the "just war" (Ambrose, Augustine) and later for the "Crusade", a war of aggression and sometimes extermination against dissidents, "heretics" and "infidels" (it should not be forgotten that the Crusade were waged not only for the conquest of the "Holy Land", but also to exterminate the "heretics" in the south of France and other parts of Europe).

Until after the Reformation and the later gradual extension of religious freedom, the "fringe" or dissident Christians who rejected compromise with the political establishment were generally too taken up with mere survival and with the simple proclamation of the Gospel to have much leisure to devote to questions of how to relate to and influence secular society. Moreover, the mainstream Reformation did not question the association between Church and State: the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* was the price paid for protection by rulers from the Inquisition. Thus the boundary between "Church" and "world" continued to be blurred, even in much of the nascent evangelical movement, which flourished as much within (Puritans, Pietists, Methodists, etc.) as outside (Independents, Baptists and Anabaptists, Brethren, Pentecostals...) the "established" Protestant denominations.

It is really only with the growth of secularism, starting from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and continuing to the present day, that the question of the Church's relationship to secular society has presented itself once again within a more biblical framework. The 21st century thus offers us a historic opportunity to rethink and redefine this relationship.

6. Some challenging areas

In concluding this study, let me suggest some areas in which 21st-century Christians need to take more seriously the challenge of the radical message of the Kingdom in its social implications, while continuing to give top priority to the Kingdom "within", the transforming and liberating power of the Word and the Spirit of Christ.

Naturally the degree and nature of such involvement will vary widely from one believer to another. Some may be called to be actively engaged in one or another area, while others are likely to be involved only marginally.

²⁴ It is interesting, and perhaps significant, to note that a similar rejection of military violence was adopted by various radical Christian renewal movements throughout history, such as the Quakers, most of the black Pentecostal movement in the USA, and the (Welsh) Apostolic Church.

A. The challenge of poverty. As we have seen, the Old Testament prophets were tireless in denouncing oppression and injustice towards the poor and the socially powerless. *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*²⁵

Today we live under a system in which the whole economic balance between First and Third Worlds is skewed in favour of the former. The causes are varied and complex, but include the disruption and destruction of wars; corruption, maladministration and kleptocracy; but also the accumulated inheritance of colonial oppression, exploitation, the slave trade, and so on. The West still prospers on the capital accumulated through such means in past centuries, and continues to use its economic power, arms exports, and other means to preserve and extend its advantage. If today we wonder how past generations of Christians could have accepted slavery as a normal part of life, perhaps future generations will wonder how we could have tolerated and profited from such gross economic injustice.

Possibly one of the most challenging passages in the New Testament in this field is that in which Paul outlines his vision for mutual economic help between believers in different countries: *"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality..."*²⁶ What would this kind of "equality" look like today between believers in, say, Canada and Rwanda? or Sweden and India?

Personally I believe we need to take a great deal more seriously the call addressed by such thinkers as Ronald J. Sider²⁷ to Christians in wealthy Western nations to consciously "downsize", adopting a simpler and more economical lifestyle in order to free up resources for those in need, both believers and non-believers (as well as giving practical witness, in a society given over to the worship of Mammon, to the truth that "man does not live by bread alone"). The "Fairtrade" movement, too – started by Christians such as those responsible for "TEAR Fund" out of concern for the victims of economic injustice – deserves the support and involvement of more believers. At the same time, churches in the Third World need to foster projects for economic development and self-reliance within their spheres of influence, enabling Christians to take a lead and set an example of hard work, honesty and sound business practice.

B. Injustice and oppression. The Scripture exhorts us to *"remember those in prison as though you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are ill-treated..."*²⁸ In the first instance the reference is to Christians persecuted for their faith; and this is at least as relevant today as when it was first written. But should we not also concern ourselves for other victims of persecution, violence and unjust imprisonment? There is a great deal of testimony in the Bible that God certainly does so.

C. Ethical investment. Most Christians do not even ask themselves what is done with their bank savings, private pension fund, or other investments. Yet if our money is being used to finance the international arms trade, the production and sale of tobacco products, or other questionable economic activities, ought we not to be concerned?

D. Care for God's world. Unfortunately pagans and New Agers have often been more active in environmental causes than most Christians. Yet God entrusted the earth to mankind's stewardship, *"to work it and take care of it"*²⁹ (an expression which unfortunately has sometimes been interpreted by Christians as though it meant "...to exploit and plunder it!"). Christians should be in the forefront of responsible efforts to conserve and protect the earth, its resources and all the living creatures that inhabit it, which God created and originally pronounced *"very good"*. Indeed, Christians who believe in the special creation of the different kinds of living things have far more reason to be concerned for their protection than materialistic evolutionists, who believe that the extinction of species and their

²⁵ Is 58:6-7.

²⁶ 2 Cor 8:13-14.

²⁷ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, InterVarsity Press 1977.

²⁸ Heb 13:3.

²⁹ Gen 2:15.

replacement by others newly evolved is part of the natural order of things. If God created the different kinds and then rested from his creative work, once lost they can never be replaced!

There are undoubtedly many other areas that we could mention. But it is my hope that those mentioned here may provoke productive reflection and debate, and perhaps a fuller understanding of the role and responsibilities of the sons of the eternal Kingdom in a fallen world, as we "*look forward to the day of God and speed its coming*".³⁰ Your kingdom come, Lord, and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

³⁰ 2 Pt 3:12.