

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒THE CHRISTIAN IN A POLITICAL WORLD⇐

Many books have been written about the involvement of Christians as individuals or the involvement of churches in political and social issues. It is not the intention here to repeat the many arguments on one side or the other. The intention is to consider the matter in the light of the understanding of the covenants which we have reached.

The Old Covenant was a covenant for a nation. It therefore dealt with all aspects of social and political life, as we have seen. The New Covenant is a covenant for individuals of any nation who choose to accept it. There is therefore nothing in the core of the New Covenant calling us to social or political action. It calls us to accept forgiveness for sin. However, there is an expectation that the result of a new relationship with God will lead us to love, respect and help those about us. It is this expectation which leads people to social action which may be described as “political”.

To take a very simple example, consider any place and time where there is no education or medical services. It could be in England of little more than a century ago. A Christian teacher opens a school in his home village. Before long the local aristocracy or industrial barons become alarmed at the prospect of a more thoughtful peasantry or workforce. They seek to have the school closed. What started as loving social action has become a “political” issue. Or again a doctor in the last century decides to dedicate half of his time treating the poor in the local slums, free of charge. He soon discerns their greatest need to be a fresh water supply. He takes their case to the local water board. His action has now become “political”.

Suppose that instead of the individual teacher or doctor of the examples above, there are groups of people acting together. The “threat” to vested interests may well be seen as greater, and the opposition the more fierce. If the people are identified as Christians, the whole Christian body may be targeted as enemies of the State. Of course in other political circumstances their action may be praised, but it is when conflict arises that the issue of Christian involvement in politics becomes most intense.

But not all involvement of Christians in “politics” arises from loving social action. Some of it arises from the same lust for power as is found in many other human beings or groups of people. And because of human frailty, it is easy for loving social motivation to become tarnished by lesser motivation. It is important for Christians to realise that in social and political affairs they are generally seen by the state and other citizens as having the same rights, or lack of rights, as any other citizens. They will be judged by their behaviour as citizens. Of course this may not always be true. On many occasions in history, Christians have been treated as enemies of the state, as for example in the former Soviet Union. On other occasions ecclesiastical leaders have obtained monstrous privileges, such as using the power of the state to enforce church attendance or burn “heretics”.

It is this power, or influential position, of some church leaders that I want to dwell on for a while. Whether through membership of the House of Lords, or as people whose opinions are often sought by the media, these leaders are seen to be expressing a “Christian” viewpoint by virtue of being church leaders. But, as we have seen, there is no Christian viewpoint on the majority of political issues. Christ did not, for example, preach “one man (to include women!), one vote” in Judea; nor did Paul preach it in the Roman Empire. No! They preached repentance, turning to God, forgiveness, the sacrifice of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. When church leaders express political views, they should make it clear that they are expressing their own views as citizens and make it equally clear what Christianity really is about. The result of the failure to make this clear is that when their views are naive, ignorant, ill-informed or misplaced, as sadly is common, it is

Christianity which is brought into disrepute and laughed at, not the individual church leader.

Church leaders were trained to be teachers of religion. They have no more knowledge of the economic, social, international or other political field than any other citizen unless they have particular training or experience. Sadly too, the road to seniority, and consequently a higher media profile, does not appear to be based on effectiveness in preaching the gospel message but on matters it is difficult to identify.

Yet there is an important area in which some Christians may have a significant contribution to make to political awareness. This is through prophecy. The New Testament shows, particularly in the Book of Revelation, an awareness of both the religious and political future of the world. This awareness follows on from the prophets of the Old Testament and it is therefore to be anticipated that there will be prophets in the church, as discussed in the earlier chapters on the Gifts of the Spirit, with a prophetic vision of the future. Whether this prophetic vision should be shared within the church alone, or outside, would be for the individual prophet to decide. What is sad is that Christians are largely unaware of this possibility, and generally discuss political issues at the same level as anyone else, that is without reference to the long-term purposes of God.

There is a second point too. The Bible covers many centuries of history and varying cultures. Even without the possibilities in the modern world for obtaining an understanding of international affairs, such as libraries, books, radio, television and so on, there is enough in the Bible to provoke thought outside the narrow confines of one's own culture and its prevailing understanding of political affairs. To take a simple example, the West has no understanding of tribalism and how to deal with it. This becomes apparent in its total failure to understand or cope with the problems of the disintegrated Yugoslavia. Prevailing Western idealism is too naive to provide insight or a solution. The East has a much better understanding, but no voice. And the Yugoslav mentality is closer to the East than it is to Western idealism. Perhaps we could look to an Easterner such as Moses for some insights into the solution! I leave that exercise to the reader to research. Sadly, church spokesmen are too infected with current Western thought to express alternative views.

It is often said in church circles that the English legal system is based on the Jewish system, that is on the law of the Old Testament. This is somewhat difficult to substantiate. The common penalty for more serious crime in England is prison. The Old Testament law does not include prison as a punishment for anything. Theft is dealt with by restoration and compensation in the Old Covenant. This is a new concept in English law, and only rarely applied. As for hanging people for theft, as was done a few centuries ago in England, this is far from the Old Covenant legal system. Simply listing areas of crime with penalties under the Old Covenant and penalties in English law would show just how little there is in common.