

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>

A table of contents for *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_caribbean-journal-theology_01.php

SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE INVOLVED IN JAMAICAN POLITICS?

by

*N. Samuel Murrell
and Erica Campbell*

The leadership role which the Reverend Herro Blair played in the newly formed third party in Jamaica, the National Democratic Movement, brought a series of old questions back into public debate as Jamaicans prepared for the 1997 general elections. While the controversy over the separation of church and state—which has dominated public discourse in the United States for the last three decades—has never been a serious Caribbean problem, the present political climate is causing Jamaican Christians to raise new questions about their role in the political process. How Christians should regard the state, what kind of allegiance they should have to government or a political party in Jamaica, whether politics is necessarily evil or a necessary evil in Jamaican society, and what the role of the Church should be in Jamaican society are old questions that are always topical and scarcely void of controversy; they mirror the varied perceptions people have of politics and what they regard as the proper role of the Church in the political process.

In this essay, we argue that politics is not necessarily evil and, in fact, is good; government is intended to ensure fairness in society, protect citizens, encourage good and punish evil—not just impose taxes on the poor and facilitate the rich. As a consequence, the relationship between the church and the state should be one of ethical collaboration. Active Christian participation in the political process to promote “the good” can be considered a duty to one’s God and country. Like earlier Jamaican Christian political activists (Sam Sharpe, George William Gordon, Paul Bogle, Alexander Bedward and Marcus Garvey), Christians should view their involvement in the political struggle as a God-given duty to society. As the 1981 House of Delegates to the North Carolina Council of Churches affirms, “Vigorous involvement in political causes and political

*N. Samuel Murrell
(Ph.D., Drew University)
teaches African-
American, Caribbean and
African Religions at the
University of North
Carolina, Wilmington,
and is a visiting lecturer
at the Caribbean
Graduate School of
Theology.*

*Erica Campbell (M.Div.,
Caribbean Graduate
School of Theology) is a
lecturer at the Jamaica
Theological Seminary in
Theology and Modern
Languages.*

activities are a vital aspect of Christian witness in the modern world" (House of Delegates 1).

Jamaica's Political-Religious Tradition

Some Christians who adopt an ascetic notion of Christianity see their relationship to political systems as one of withdrawal; they stay a conspicuous, if not comfortable, distance from the political process. In other sectors of the Jamaican society, Christians are expected to make an impact on the political system, but only from a distance. Others, who embrace what H. Richard Niebuhr calls a Christ-against-culture attitude, regard the church's role in society as one of critique; a watchdog which, more often than not, utters only prophetic condemnation of the existing political systems. Still others believe the church should transform culture but must not get too deeply involved in politics. For example, some Christians have credited the church with playing a crucial role in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and leading the fight for civil rights and desegregation in the United States, but they claim it must not corrupt itself in the present political culture of Jamaica. The Church is regarded primarily as the messenger of individual spiritual salvation with a secondary, though not unimportant role as the moral conscience of the nation. Christians are expected to speak out on issues such as crime, dishonesty, injustice, bigotry and corruption but they must not get too political.

This, however, is not the most enduring political religious tradition of Jamaica. Since the early 1830s, Baptist missionaries (e.g. William Knibb) and Afro-Jamaican religious leaders and lay preachers (Sam Sharpe and Paul Bogle) played a vital role in Jamaica's political struggle for liberation, equality, independence and social change. Jamaican Christians were so heavily involved in the Sam Sharpe Christmas rebellion of 1831—which was originally planned as a peaceful nonviolent direct action against slavery—that it is dubbed "the Baptist War." Christians led a yuletide rebellion against oppression which forced the British Government to hasten emancipation by several years. Christians were again at the forefront of the struggle against oppression in the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865; a political action precipitated by the total absence of justice for Blacks, the landlessness of the poor masses willing to engage in agriculture, and embarrassingly poor wages given to workers in St. Thomas-in-the-East (the eastern parish of Jamaica).

Baptist, Nativist Baptist and other Afro-Jamaican religious traditions which flourished in the post-emancipation era gave leadership to

prophetic political activity through the fiery and brave Baptist preacher Paul Bogle and the very articulate and courageous Assemblyman George William Gordon—who shifted his allegiance from the high church (Church of England) to Native Baptist (Heuman 5). Bogle, Gordon (who was in Kingston and did not take part in the rebellion) and about 400 others, mostly innocent Native Baptist Christians, paid the ultimate price for their prophetic progressive political thought and action in the Jamaica of Governor Edward Eyre—a bloodthirsty, heartless, brute beast who was appointed Lt. Governor of Jamaica on the basis of his two year stint as office assistant (a glorified messenger boy) in the office of the Governor of Trinidad and Tobago, the colour of his skin and the fact that he was British. On the eve of the rebellion, Eyre was acting Governor while Sir Charles Darling was on leave in Britain.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the Christian leader Alexander Bedward was dubbed strange and crazy for his unfamiliar prophetic and apocalyptic voice in defense of the oppressed. Jamaican Christians were members of the first Teachers Union formed in 1895. They were also members of the “Club movement” which followed the teachers’ example of organized labour during the first two decades of the 1900s, a movement which led to the rise of unionism and the legalizing of organized labour in Jamaica in 1919 (Phillips 110). Marcus Garvey and other Christians in the UNIA formed and influenced the formation of political parties in Jamaica. Other Christians have led constituencies, supervised general elections, acted as trusted advisors to politicians, made peace between warring political factions, especially in the battle zones of Kingston’s inner city, and held offices in local government.

Many pulpits have been used as a political platform for the spread of Jamaican nationalism (so well epitomized in Norman Washington Manley), Afro-Jamaicanism, patriotism, justice and peace. For this reason, the church is regarded as an active participant in and a force to reckon with in Jamaican social and political life. Professor Nettleford noted in 1978 that since Independence, the clergy in the “established churches” have also attempted to make Eurocentric Christian orthodoxy and liturgy culturally, socially and politically relevant to society. While some preachers resisted “the revolutionary rhetoric of socialism and change” of the 1970s,

many of the young clergy from a variety of denominations are to be found actively on the side of what would be called progressive politics, supporting social change and consciously seeking ways and means of projecting God with a human face (Nettleford 1978, 21).

Politicians themselves have often recognized the love affair between the Jamaican Church and the state.

Political leaders have repeatedly declared Jamaica to be a "Christian country." Political creeds are given Christian sources of origin or inspiration when they are to be promulgated and "sold" to the general mass of people (Nettleford 1978, 19).

As Nettleford observes,

The Chairman of the Jamaica Council of Churches could in 1989 make public claim for the church to run future general elections in collaboration with the bipartisan national Electoral Commission (1989, 6).

Christians and Jamaican Politics of the 1990s

In spite of recent skepticism about Christian participation in Jamaican politics, the country has a strong democratic tradition in which both Christians and non-Christians are active. Since the late 1940s Jamaicans have exercised their franchise and voted in the Westminster system of government in which two parties vie for the leadership of the country. The 1997 general elections witnessed a three party contest with the incumbent Peoples' National Party, their usual rival since the 1940s, the Jamaica Labour Party, and the National Democratic Movement all wooing the Jamaican voter. It may seem on the surface that the democratic system is ideal and, by virtue of its competitive nature, would produce candidates of high quality. These, in turn, would make the system strong, vibrant and fair to all Jamaicans. But increasingly, people are viewing Jamaican politics in a very negative light.

In the past two years, there has been much talk in the media about the uncommitted and alienated voters who have become disenchanted by the greed and corruption they see in the government. Many party supporters are now disgusted at the politicians and what they regard as the glaring inadequacies and moral degradation of the Jamaican political culture, its inability to alleviate the severe hardship among the masses of the people (the new sufferers), or to solve the crime problem which has reached epidemic proportion throughout the country. Other voters are alienated by what Jamaicans call "ginalism" and "politricks" (a form of political dishonesty and outright dirty party politics) and "patron-clientelism."

Politics in Jamaica is very intense and in some cases very violent. Paradoxically, this violence has its roots in the political divisions of the 1940s—at a time when Jamaican nationalism was showcasing some of

its most articulate leaders and issuing a clarion call for unity of purpose. As Peter Phillips noted,

After 1940 . . . the Bustamante-led Bustamante Industrial Trade Union, broke ranks with the Trades Union Council to provide a mass base for Bustamante's Labour Party, which functioned in opposition to the Peoples' National Party led by Norman Manley which had emerged as the bearer of the nationalist demand for self-government (Phillips 110).

This split was later followed by the expelling of the communist element from the Peoples' National Party, which then broke ranks with the Trades Union Council and set up "its own affiliate union, the National Workers Union." Although these "breakups" in unionism seem quite tame and not related to the political violence in modern Jamaica, Phillips intimates that

The division of the labour movement, along contending lines of party affiliation contributed to the growing violence and "tribalism" associated with interunion rivalry . . . (Phillips 111).

From the late 1940s on, the spirit of rivalry and animosity gradually became part and parcel of Jamaican electioneering and party politics.

Today, party allegiances are very entrenched and often passed on from generation to generation; one crosses party lines at great risk. In the interest of good family relations, some of our Jamaican friends were forced to forego the excitement of exercising their franchise for the first time in the 1980 elections because their parents dared them to "remain under their roof" while voting for a party other than the one Mom and Dad supported. This commitment to partisan politics is so strong that it destroys relationships when it gives way to very heated arguments that often erupt in violent confrontation among neighbours and in families of opposing political allegiances. The 1980 general elections provide more than ample evidence of the extent to which party loyalties can yield deadly results; over 800 people died in political violence throughout Jamaica. The statistics seem more characteristic of a civil war than a "democratic" election. Carl Stone says:

This great intensity of feelings, emotional loyalties and aggressive and combative sentiments of support . . . has to be understood as a response to the need for power on the part of the majority classes . . . The bottom 40% of income earners make up 95% of the . . . hard-core membership . . . Because the poor and socially

disadvantaged are in the majority, it is their cultural style and emotional and social needs that shape the style of the political party's internal life. For them, the party is their road to power and social opportunity and is therefore deserving of total commitment and great sacrifices in defending its interests (1985, 5).

Although the poor underclass constitutes the majority of the membership of the political parties, they are not the movers and shakers in the decision-making machinery of a given party. The middle class professional leadership actually makes final decisions at the party level. One wonders, therefore, why loyalty to a particular political party is considered so important in the quest for empowerment and social and economic opportunity in Jamaica. Unfortunately, "patron-clientelism" is really

the dominant feature of the organization of mass support for competitive political parties in the Third World. The core of this system is the exchange of economic and social favors to a poor and socially fragmented population in return for party support (Stone 1980, 91-92).

These favours are given out of scarce and limited resources, access to which is best gained from the seat of political power, the government.

Ensuring that one's political party wins the general and, to a lesser extent, the local elections, is often regarded as a matter of life and death. This explains the violence and even the formation of garrison constituencies which, through force and subtle coercive means, are formed to ensure a party that the votes in that constituency are secure. The link between clientelism and garrison constituencies is most entrenched in the ghettos where the poor, dispossessed and disempowered are found in large numbers. In that environment, might is right. The gun is the coveted means of settling even the most trivial dispute. Gangsters, thugs, drug dealers and political hoodlums who control the streets and decide who lives and who dies, make a mockery of law and order of civilized society and political ethics. This is politics at its worst; it makes the uglier side of Jamaican life the source of rules by which the political game is played out in the streets and at the ballot box.

The politicians' role in the creation of garrisons through clientelism, and the violence and "bogus" voting that their supporters engage in, lead people to believe that the political system is not only corrupt, bankrupt, and beyond repair, but bad for one's health. "People will murder you if you are not careful while campaigning in some constituencies" said a

woman. This reality definitely influences one's respect for politicians and determines the level at which Christians can be politically active in Jamaica without losing their integrity and their lives. If the country's resources are being used to benefit the party faithful, or more precisely, to keep them subjugated and committed to the party, then the respect which is supposedly due the political leaders is unwarranted. Understandably, many people feel they have a just cause to withhold honour from those to whom honour is not due and, like talk show host Wilmot Perkins, develop a cynicism about the country's possibilities for progress and an utter mistrust of politicians. The question is, however, what is the best solution to the problem and how far will cynicism go without sparking a bloody revolution similar to the one in Grenada?

Some Jamaicans, including a few Christians, are of the opinion that politics has become so corrupt in Jamaica that only a revolution can bring about radical change to the system; they believe it is needed to break the cycle of violence, patron-clientelism and poverty. But Jamaicans who are frustrated with the political system would only add insult to injury by contemplating a violent revolution as a solution to the country's problems. The recent history of Grenada can serve as a warning. Many Grenadians, including the clergy, who were disgusted at the political corruption in the Grenada United Labour Party, welcomed the violent overthrow of the corrupt Gairy government in 1979. Thousands of Maurice Bishop supporters, many of them Christians, celebrated in the streets throughout the island at the news that the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) had ousted the recalcitrant Prime Minister Eric Matthew Gairy and his cabinet from office. Finally, we thought, Grenada is back on the road to responsible government in a civil society.

But the mayhem that followed in the wake of the counter-revolutionary disaster of 1983 and its aftermath, taught us that "he who lives by the sword, perishes by the sword." A large number of civilians, many of them Christians, were executed by Bernard Coard's military henchmen while others jumped to their death off the cliff at Fort George. Two university educated Christian friends of Samuel Murrell, one a chemist and the other a biologist, who helped to make the explosives that blew up Gairy's barracks in St. Georges in 1979 were themselves later treated brutally by their own PRG hoodlums. One was executed in the Fort George "slaughter" by Bernard Coard's Militia on October 19, on the eve of the American invasion, and the other was kept in a miserable confinement without trial for many years—poorly fed and severely tortured. When Murrell visited him in his cell in the PRG's maximum security prison in January 1981 (allowed in only in his

capacity as clergy) he had lost the use of several fingers and his face was barely recognizable; although his spirits were very high. It is a miracle that he survived to complete his MD in New York where he now practises medicine.

In the Grenada of Bernard Coard and his wife (1979-1983), there was no place for sharp critical and independent minds or freedom of expression. Religion, which Karl Marx regarded as the opiate of the people (dope or ganja), was tolerated as a means to a political end. The political system which the PRG brought into being was tightly controlled by radical Leninist Marxist bureaucrats who sought to manipulate the moderates in the party (Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, Unison Whiteman, Kendrick Radix, Jacqueline Creft, George Louison and others) and eliminate all opposition and voices of dissent. The fact that these moderates in the PRG were all friends and acquaintances of Samuel Murrell when he worked at the Bank of Nova Scotia in St. Georges made their death even more tragic and painful to him.

This is a problem that Jamaica does not need, and we are confident will not experience; as bad as things may seem, politics in Jamaica is not as depraved and the future is not as bleak as it was in Gairy's Grenada. Jamaicans cherish their freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion. Prime Minister Patterson of Jamaica has no known Mongoose Gang or henchmen slaughtering people who oppose his party; he does not stash Jamaican tax dollars away in a personal Swiss bank account; he has not taken over the prosperous hotels in Jamaica as Gairy did; and his cabinet spends its time seeking solutions to Jamaica's vexing problems rather than counting unidentified flying objects (a Gairy fixation). Jamaica also leads Grenada and many other eastern Caribbean countries in industrial development, education, health care, sports and science and technology. Indeed, there is much hope, both in the private and public sectors, for Jamaica to overcome its restructuring problems as a precursor to economic stability and the eradication of poverty and violent crime in the nation.

Becoming a part of a violent opposition to constituted authority is one thing, but once political authority is undermined the maintenance of law and order becomes much more difficult than it is under a corrupt political system. Because of the way in which society is structured locally and internationally, government is not as expendable as some critics think. Government is there to ensure national security, peace among neighbors, just dealings between patrons and proprietors and employers and employees, the defense of the vulnerable and the health and well-being of all citizens. One need not paint all politicians with the same brush, the brush of corruption. Political leaders who engage in

wrongdoing and criminal acts do so not because they are politicians, per se (although the system offers temptations that go with the wielding of political power), but because individual politicians make bad choices, show poor judgment and have selfish ambitions.

If this is the case, Christians can fix the broken system by opposing unethical and unjust government policies and particular instances of the abuse of power. They can vote politicians out of office and support a government which has the will and national integrity to distance itself from crime, corruption and abuse of power. In Jamaica's political climate, this challenge has become a herculean and very risky task for the individual Christian; life can be snuffed out in party politics before one knows he or she had a problem or an enemy. The unified voice of the church, where that unity is possible, is a more powerful and effective means of condemning injustice and abuse of power and preserving the moral authority and integrity of the institution of government than the work of a "lone ranger." In this context, the church will be engaged in political involvement in two ways, moral support of good policies and programmes and prophetic critique of bad ones.

For the church to exist in a highly political culture like Jamaica and just operate at the level of civil obedience and submission to authority is a grave abdication of duty. Quite apart from the economic and political disaster which this fosters, Christians would give the impression that they are condoning the ills of society and showing indifference to the cry of the poor and oppressed masses. The Church must not only continue to speak out when it perceives a threat to its own existence and operations but wherever and whenever government shows signs of neglecting its duty, abusing its power and overstepping its authority. Nettleford comments that

at times of revolutionary change of the sort that Independence brings, the State assumes primacy in the conduct of national affairs claiming to be the 'ultimate authority' over the Church and conscience in the conduct of private life, having grounded its legitimacy in the sovereignty of 'the people' (1989, 6).

But Jamaicans, in fact, have "held on to the autonomy of their religious beliefs and ranked the church high in the pantheon of accredited authorities." Consequently, "throughout Independence the role of the Church has remained pivotal and no government is likely to win out in any combat with that constituency" (Nettleford 1989, 6).

The church should make use of this position and challenge classicism, racism and sexism as strongly as it does garrison politics, and policies

that do not encourage and support families and communities. It needs to address the country's penchant for imports rather than developing its ability to be self-sufficient. Christians should resist the divestment of key areas of Jamaica's economy to foreign entrepreneurs, which further aggravates the pain and suffering of the poor. The church should criticize the non-intervention of the government in the exploitative employer-employee relationship in the work place. But Christian prophets must not allow a particular ideological leaning to prejudice their critique of an issue of grave concern to the nation. Moral and biblical principles should be a guiding rod for Christian political activity. God's concern for the poor must play a central role in determining our attitude toward government policies and their implementation. This is by no means an easy task and must be done with integrity and accurate knowledge; for governments make decisions based on a variety of considerations which must be carefully analyzed. This is why dialogue between church and state is important and research for the acquisition of accurate information on an issue must be done before "prophetic utterances" are made from the pulpit. The Christian who gets involved in political affairs at this level must be an informed citizen and an educator who helps others understand the difficulties involved in governing a developing country with limited resources but expensive taste buds.

Bevis Byfield says there is a feeling that, "by and large, societies as they are now organized, have, in the main, contributed little to the transformation of the lives of the people who live within those societies. What we need is a reordering of the structuring of those societies so that emancipation and redemption of people can be realized." Byfield uses four terms to describe a "Trickle down" theory of economics, which assumes that if the rich get richer, then the poor will get richer as a result. He says it is:

- 1) Paternalistic - the rich make decisions about what is good for the poor.
- 2) Manipulative - the poor have to conform to the wishes of the rich.
- 3) Inadequate - it comes out of a system fraught with injustice.
- 4) Oppressive - it leads to unholy alliances between financiers in rich nations and tiny oligarchies in the poor nations, both of which have an interest in keeping the poor from challenging the system which keeps them poor (Byfield 4, 9).

This may be a fine analysis of the situation but in order to tackle the problems, one may have to become involved in decision-making at the highest level of government, and this means active political and/or economic involvement. The need to do what one ought to and can do to change the system is ever present. Christians should seek to move the

society from what is to what ought to be. But how can this be accomplished? Political and economic life is very complex and the problems are deep rooted and endemic. It takes persons of courage, knowledge, insight and strength of character to make a real difference in the fight to effect social, economic and political change in the country. It is much easier to identify the country's problems than to be actively involved in solving them. Christians and non-Christians alike who recognize Jamaica's political crisis and know what the solution is, need to be proactive in society rather than reactive.

The question of the extent to which the church should be involved in political activities, of course, cannot be conclusively settled in this short paper. There are so many dangers and unanswered questions surrounding this issue that the church is damned if it is politically active and it is doubly damned if it is not. While the role of the church in society as a champion of social justice, peacemaking and moral values is absolutely essential, partisan politics can stifle the church's message and destroy its credibility. As Nettleford notes, the church's message might be undermined and "emasculated temporarily" if it promotes one rising populist branch of politics over an established order, though never ignored. The church's prophetic voice must always be heard in a society where "government continues to be seen as dispenser of largesse in the form of jobs, contracts, as well as social services outside [sic] and in times of crisis" (Nettleford 1989, 6); and when political leaders step outside the bounds of their constituted authority.

In her response to Bishop Neville DeSouza's "Christian Action for Social Change" (in *Social Change: Christian and Social Science Perspectives*), Maxine Henry Wilson chided the Bishop for limiting the role of the Church to social change that does not include political action. This she sees as "a failure or reluctance to meet the entire challenge." She argues quite strongly that:

Social change is one facet of a network of activities or of actions. Fundamental to any hope of or strategy for social change, must be an assessment of the power structures in the society and the concomitant designing of methods and approaches to deal with these structures. Any failure to come to terms with power and power relations in the society is quixotic and can only lead to some questioning of the real commitment to change. It has been stated that the church must take its place . . . on the side of the poor. But history and reality shows us that the poor has no economic and/or political control . . . it is impossible to correct social maladies in any lasting and profound way without redressing existing economic and political relations (Wilson 33-34).

Christian Scripture and Political Action: Rom 13:1-7

No discussion on the Christian's relationship to the state could be complete without an examination of biblical teachings which form the source of Christian thought and action; the controversy over Christian involvement in Jamaican politics is not without biblical warrant and theological reflections. In fact, since the fourth century, people have viewed Romans 13:1-7 as the official biblical teaching on the Christian's duty to the state. According to ethicist John Howard Yoder, since the post-Constantine era this text has served as a sort of capsule constitution to guide the Christian statesman and stateswoman (193). Consequently, the pericope has stirred up enormous controversy in the history of biblical interpretation.

In modern times, Nazis, fascists, dictators and other political ideologues have used the biblical text to their advantage. Some Americans have cited Romans 13 in support of government and the draft into the U.S. military. Fundamentalists Christians have quoted this text to pronounce anathema on those who refused to cooperate with America's questionable military aggression against foreign nations like Viet Nam and Grenada, and also to denounce the international anti-Apartheid movement. Some extremist interpretations led ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr to argue that the text allows an unqualified endorsement of government and a vehicle for too uncritical a devotion to political systems, ideologies and leaders (1941). But Romans 13:1-7 supports neither revolution nor legitimation of government. The text does not address directly the question of the Christian's active participation in a political movement or political life and offers inadequate principles for the Christian's relationship to the state in general.

Many scholars even question whether the pericope was originally a part of Paul's letter to the Romans since it is self-contained and seems to interrupt the context of what precedes and follows the text (Murrell 13, 21). Some argue that nowhere else does Paul discuss the state or the Christian's relation to it. The text also seems to assume the indefinite continuance of the present order which, according to Romans 13:11, is at the point of disappearing (Murrell 13, 21; Bruce 99). Those objections can, of course, be answered with several observations. The Roman Christians' situation may have required that this topic be addressed. Paul's epistles show a keen interest in dealing with specific local problems. Nowhere in the passage is it stated that human government is going to continue indefinitely. Paul's recognition in 13:11 that the perfect kingdom is yet to come points to the fact that human government

falls short of God's ideal. Far from contradicting Paul, the thoughts expressed in Romans 13:1-7 simply make Christians aware that they must do their part to make the present order as good as it can be. Finally, the Apostle's style has never been one to commend him to literary critics. "Smooth transitions are not so characteristic of Paul's style that there is any need for surprise at an abrupt change of subject" (Bruce 99).

British theologian F. F. Bruce, who agrees that the pericope is self-contained, does not believe that the flow of Paul's argument is interrupted. He notes that the paragraph which precedes Romans 13:1-7 encourages Christians to have a good attitude to non-Christians, even those who try to hurt them. The pericope contains the injunction: "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all persons" (Romans 12:18); this may include "living peaceably with the representatives of the State" (Bruce 101). J. Moiser also sees a connection between the preceding verses and Romans 13:1-7:

Taking together these two pericopes . . . can be justified, not primarily on lexical grounds . . . but on grounds of content: blessing persecutors (12:14), refraining from revenge (12:19) and subjecting oneself to authority (13:1) clearly form a unity . . . A possible solution to addressing difficulties which come out of the confused writing, is to interpret the text as a juxtaposition of two separate, but related ideas. Christians need to renounce thoughts of revenge both against each other (12:15-20) and against the state (12:21 - 13:7). In this way, 12:14 functions as a superscript to the section 12:15-13:7 (576).

Paul wrote this letter to deal with political and theological problems in the Roman church. By mid first century, early Christians in Palestine were meeting in small cells on the fringes of the synagogues. In time, a conflict developed between the Christians and the Jews in Rome, a conflict so great that the Roman authorities had to intervene. To preserve the Pax Romana, Claudius gave an edict to expel the key figures in the dispute. No distinction was made between Jews and Christians; both fell under the Jewish rubric. Eventually, those who were expelled from the city returned to Rome in new settings. Despite the passing of time, some animosity towards the State existed among those who had witnessed the expulsion (Crafton 323; Moiser 577). Consequently, Paul wrote establishing a theological basis for his appeal for unity within the church and offered practical advice on Christian conduct in society. Of special concern to him is the need for the church

to maintain good relations with the state so that the gospel is not hindered in any way. As Jeffery Crafton puts it,

Paul creates a rhetorical vision in which he and the Roman Christians are actors in a larger divine purpose . . . Paul's intention is to involve the readers in his world, as much as possible, through theological argument, through emotional and ethical appeal and through demonstration of the ways in which he and the Romans are already participants in this world (319-320).

Unlike the "Palestinian Zealots who recognized no king but God and would pay taxes to no one but God, Paul may have wanted to dissuade Jewish Christians in the capital from taking part in revolutionary movements" (Morris 458). In this context he urges Christians to submit to civil authority and render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that belong to God. In the interest of the future survival of the church, Paul argues that governmental authorities are "derived from God" (appointed by God) and that the person in authority is the "servant of God" to promote the good in society and punish the evil (13:1-4); it is not the person in the office, per se, but the office itself that has God's approval. While God may recognize the need for government in Germany, Uganda and Iraq, for example, Hitler, Amin and Houssein were not sent by God.

Applying Scripture to Jamaica's Political Situation

However one interprets the notion that God ordained government, Paul's use of the term "submission" poses a serious problem to many Jamaican Christians, especially those who have to endure injustice, manipulation and exploitation from unscrupulous persons in positions of power. Many wonder how God could require submission to those who, by their behaviour and conduct, are not in line with God's right and just will. Of course, one can argue that in Romans 13:1-7 Paul is presenting his version of an ideal state which does not exist in actual reality. But Paul was addressing a real situation in Rome and his readers knew that their state was less than ideal. He tells them that God ordained the principle of governing and that Christians were to submit to governmental law since it promotes good and punishes evil, "for there is no authority except that which God has established." One should respect governmental authority out of conscience as well as out of fear of punishment. Paul is suggesting that Christians should not act on the basis of what is comfortable and safe but according to what promotes the gospel. We should not render evil for evil and certainly not "fight fire with fire." Passive resistance, moral and spiritual infiltration, and

obedience to Christ and legal authority are the essence of Paul's teaching in Romans.

This line of argument, of course, seems to put Jamaican Christians in a position of do-nothing pacifism. It implies a passive, conformist disposition even in the midst of blatant, reckless and "deviant behaviour" on the part of government. Submission, however, is not synonymous with blind allegiance. The idea that the state is ordained by God and it is God's servant shows that absolute authority lies, not with government, but in God Himself; absolute power in human hands corrupt absolutely. To Christians, absolute submission to government rather than the divine is idolatrous. It goes against the clear call in Romans 12 for nonconformity to the world's philosophy and conformity to God's expectations and ideal. Submission to human leadership is therefore conditional rather than absolute; governments are to be obeyed only when they promote the good and do not arrogate to themselves absolute authority over people's lives under God.

Caesar is to be respected to the extent to which it protects the poor and vulnerable against abuses by the rich and powerful, renders justice to all citizens of the state irrespective of pigmentation, class or creed and maintains the public trust (Murrell 19).

Therefore, what should Jamaican Christians do if their government ceases to promote the good but becomes recalcitrant in encouraging garrison politics that furthers oppression and exploitation of the poor? This is a matter for individual conscience as well as corporate ecclesiastical polity. By virtue of one's relationship to God, the Christian whose heart and ears are open to the cries of the oppressed has the moral obligation to speak out against acts of injustice and exploitation in the wider society. As theologian Leon Morris says, "The Christian is to recognize that order is important in any state. But if the state exceeds its lawful function, if it plainly directs subjects to actions that are wrong, then that is another matter" (462). Although Morris cites Jesus as saying "render to Caesar only the things that are Caesar's, for we are to render to God what is God's" (Mark 12:7), he does not say how a Christian should respond to an immoral government (462).

Bruce, however, said emphatically, "The state not only may, but must be resisted when it demands the allegiance due to God alone" (101). Christians may use the political process to oust corrupt politicians from office and withdraw their support from bloodthirsty dictators. However, bloody revolution (as in Grenada) and tribalism (as in Rwanda) should be avoided at all cost and the Christian should not take up arms (as in the American frontier and Northern Ireland), except, perhaps, in special

situations of self-defense. The Christian should adopt a stance of peaceful and passive resistance where possible but certainly not passive acceptance. In their struggle against bigotry, oppression and terror, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and many others have demonstrated that nonviolent direct action can be more powerful and effective in forcing progressive social and political change than the barrel of a gun used in Grenada, Cuba, Northern Ireland, and Nazi Germany.

From Romans 13:1-7 one can deduce that political involvement at the level of civic duty is implied and advocacy for justice is understood. But what about a Christian actually walking in the corridors of power and becoming a governmental authority? Does Paul or biblical teaching support that idea? There seems to be no prohibition in this case. Paul certainly speaks to the Christian citizen but he gives no instructions to the Christian politician. The apostle does not prohibit a Christian functioning as a political leader, and it does seem quite in order for Christians to make direct input into the progress and development of the nation. Since government was established by God and its officials are His servants to do good (Rom. 13:4) politics in and of itself, though it has a peculiar character in Jamaica, is not evil. God intends that governments act justly and behave in a way that will be beneficial to the governed. How much more equipped is the Christian to act as the servant of God in the capacity of ward of the State! Leading a nation with justice and equality for all is, perhaps, the highest form of service one could render to God and country.

Martin Luther, the sixteenth century reformer, often taught his young parish trainees (ministers in training) to allow whatever Scriptures do not prohibit or condemn and uphold what Scriptures demand. Judeo-Christian Scriptures present no obstacle to Christians entering politics; and where there are no prohibitions, determining how one should contribute to the political process is an individual choice. This can be done in many ways: by simply being a good citizen, supporting fair governmental programs, playing a prophetic role in society—praising the good and condemning the unjust and unscrupulous policies and practices of political leaders—or by fulfilling a political ambition of actually becoming a politician; or sharing in the leadership of a party as Reverend Herro Blair does in the NDM.

In Jamaica's democratic society, citizens uphold the ideal, though not quite a reality, that politics is a process which allows them to determine how they could live together in peace and harmony. Jamaicans believe also that political decisions which affect people's lives should be moral, as much as that is possible. Christians, by virtue of their presence and

participation in the political process, can encourage moral rectitude, justice, peace, equality and reconciliation among people and between peoples and their God. Jamaican Christians could therefore learn much from the important planks in the statement adopted by the House of Delegates of the North Carolina Council of Churches in 1981:

1. While Christians should participate in politics with zeal, they should carefully avoid prideful self-righteousness and dogmatic certitude.
2. Concern for those whom Jesus called “the least of these” must be a dominant factor for Christians in determining political judgments and action.
3. A strong interest in genuine equality and a wide sharing of material and social goods should inform Christian thinking and acting in the political sphere.
4. Government can and does serve many good purposes; it is the agency through which the whole society can act to promote the general welfare and serve the common good.
5. Christians should support public policies which strengthen families especially those with children (House of Delegates 1-5).

Conclusion

Many qualified Jamaicans who could make a positive contribution to the nation’s political future shy away from doing so because of political violence and malfeasance. But the politician does not have an exclusive hold on corruption; it is a societal problem. Even the church, and especially the clergy, is occasionally rocked by scandal of national proportion. If, however, the indifference to politics continues, Christians will exclude themselves from many spheres of endeavours with serious consequences. In order for the political system to work fairly and justly for all Jamaicans, decent, moral, and courageous people will have to enter politics.

This discussion about the Christian’s involvement in politics is likely to continue for a long time with no clear solution. What is evident, however, is the fact that there are many levels at which Christians relate to and can get involved in government. The two best known are attitude to authority, dealt with directly in Romans 13:1-7, and speaking out on the issues of the day or standing up for justice and the proper use of authority. Entering politics must remain a live option for the Christian,

based on the high view of the state presented in Paul's letter to the Romans as well as the need for moral leadership in Caribbean politics.

WORKS CITED

- Bruce, F. F. 1990. *A mind for what matters*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Byfield, Bevis. 1987. Theology from below. In *Social change: Christian and social science perspectives*, ed. Figueroa and Judith Soares. Kingston: University of the West Indies.
- Crafton, Jeffery A. 1990. Paul's rhetorical vision and the purpose of Romans: Toward a new understanding. In *Nouvum Testamentum* 33(4): 317-339.
- Heuman, Gad. 1996. A tale of two Jamaican rebellions. *Jamaican Historical Review*. 19:5.
- House of Delegates of the North Carolina Council of Churches. 1996. A statement on Christians, churches, and politics. Adopted April 19.
- Moiser, J. 1990. Rethinking Romans 12-15. *New Testament Studies* 36(4): 571-582.
- Morris, Leon. 1988. *The epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Murrell, N. Samuel. 1987. Wrestling with the Bible in the Caribbean basin: A case study on Grenada in light of Romans 13:1-7. *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies*. 8(1): 99.
- Nettleford, Rex, ed. 1989. *Jamaica in independence: Essays on the early years*. Kingston: Heinemann.
- Nettleford, Rex. 1978. *Caribbean cultural identity: The case of Jamaica*. Kingston: Institute of Jamaica.
- Stone, Carl. 1985. *Class, state, and democracy in Jamaica*. Kingston: Blackett.
- _____. 1980. *Democracy and clientelism in Jamaica*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- Phillips, Peter. 1988. Race, class, nationalism: A perspective on twentieth century social movements in Jamaica. *Social and Economic Studies*. 37:3.
- Wilson, Maxine Henry. 1987. Comments on DeSouza. In *Social change: Christian and social science perspectives*, ed. Figueroa and Judith Soares. Kingston: University of the West Indies.
- Yoder, John Howard. 1994. *The politics of Jesus*. 2nd. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.