

Christian Participation: a Biblical View

Dr J. Gordon McConville

Lecturer in Hebrew and Old Testament, Trinity College, Bristol

In a day when Christian leaders rush to pronounce upon matters of public concern (and even attain an unaccustomed celebrity for doing so); when 'Christian CND' lines up against the voices of 'public' Christians in government (witness the former chairman of the Conservative Party); when Christians themselves disagree not only upon specific issues but upon their right - qua the Church - to pronounce upon them, there is good reason to ask (with a degree of detachment from any particular issue) whether it is possible to construct a biblical theology of Christian participation.

In many quarters, including evangelical ones, the pendulum has swung markedly in the direction of participation. Yet there is still a significant non-participationist (pacifist) lobby, and indeed even among participationists dialogue can be fraught because of the feeling on the part of the politically committed that others are not committed enough, and the suspicion that they have merely expressed one or another of the available political options, baptising it in the name of the Trinity. In all this the use of the Bible tends to be haphazard. In what follows I wish simply to offer an outline for what I take to be a proper procedure in developing a biblical theology of participation.

The question is a hermeneutical one of some complexity. It not only involves asking what this text or that means, but more fundamentally, where do you start? The non-participationist will tend to start with the sayings of Jesus. The command to 'love your enemies' (Matt.5:44) thus becomes the hermeneutical key to the problem, and the foundation of a theology in which Christians belong primarily to a supra-national society which relativizes all other loyalties, and issues specifically in the refusal to take part in war. Those who feel that such an attitude pays insufficient attention to biblical context and therefore want to begin with the Old Testament still face the problem of how to use the texts they find there, and indeed of deciding which to look at first.

In what follows I want to suggest that the Old Testament is indeed the place to begin, and offer first some general considerations which support this. (1) To begin with the Old Testament is to follow the Bible's own logical order; in principle one always begins here in constructing a biblical theology of anything. (2) The distinction between Old Testament and New Testament does not correspond to a distinction between 'world/matter' and 'spirit'. This notion derives partly from a non-biblical (Greek) concept of what is implied by 'spirit', and partly from an evolutionary view of biblical theology, according to which the Old Testament is seen as (to a greater or lesser degree) crass and the New Testament sublime. (3) The Old Testament (in contrast to the last idea) focuses upon the 'world', because that is the theatre of God's dealings with mankind. Its concern with

Gordon McConville writes on the Christian and his involvement in society at large.



things political derives from God's intention to redeem the whole world. Clearly this is a concern which does not cease with the New Testament. We shall see (a) that there are implications for politics/government in the Old Testament beyond what is relevant to the contribution of ancient Israel (and therefore that such implications are not rendered invalid in New Testament theology by the simple contrast between Israel and Church), and (b) that New Testament texts which bear upon political matters (e.g. Romans 13, and some of Jesus' statements) are informed by patterns of thought established by the Old Testament, and cannot be understood apart from them.

A Mandate to Govern

We come now to document relevant Old Testament material. (This is the main concern of the next paragraphs, though there will be incidental comment on what the material implies about politics. More particular attention will be paid to such implications in the following section, where we shall look at the figures of Joseph, Jeremiah, Daniel and Mordecai). We look first at Genesis because it is the logical as well as the actual beginning. Gen.1:28 has the command: 'fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea' etc.. Man, as God's image, (which partly implies 'viceregent'; Egypt's king was also described as the 'image of God') is to rule God's earth and bring it into subjection. The idea itself needs no introduction these days. I simply stress that it has a necessary relevance to the task of human social organization. Gen.1:28 may well be rightly used as a mandate for cultural activity of all kinds (unaffected by the inbreaking of the New Testament age) but I suggest that, more fundamentally, it bears relevance for government. In Genesis 1 the organization of God's world is given to man, who becomes fully man as he performs this task. From now on, in the story of Israel's election and beyond, the issue is not *whether* government but how. This is not to suggest that this issue is present in the Old Testament to the exclusion of all others, but simply that it is almost always present.

After the great disobedience of Gen.3 (which nevertheless

does not obliterate the divine image in man, cf. Gen.5:1;9:6) the biblical revelation is a story of restoration. We come now to the stages of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, which are so much a part of that. The inevitably political dimension of the story begins to be evident even with Abraham, who, as a chieftain of some significance, becomes involved in a war affecting the political configuration of Palestine on behalf of his nephew Lot, while all the time keeping aloof from the temptation of contemporary city-life (Genesis 14). The tension between the need for the people of God to be involved in, yet distinct from, the human systems of the world appears.

All hope for the future must be, to some extent, hope for restoration of things as they ought to be, and prophecy has a good deal in it of hope for a world properly managed

The next important step is the exodus, with its disengagement by the people of Israel from the tyranny of Empire, not, however, as a rejection of all political systems, but (as well as being the decisive moment in Israel's salvation-history) into a new kind of system, one which by its nature stood over against the self-serving character of the imperial state, and proclaimed human brotherhood under God. Moses, as lawgiver and archetypal prophet, stands in contrast to Pharaoh, brings statehood into the arena of obedience to God and makes it serve the good of all. With Moses we continue to see the inevitability of a political aspect to human life, together with definite indications as to the shape it should take. (This is not to espouse the naïve view that the ideal political system is one which apes the Israelite one and attempts to regulate modern society by Old Testament law. It is rather to say that the laws of Israel are based on principles which modern lawgivers might still take as their ideal. Deut.15, with its radical application of the idea of brotherhood, is powerfully suggestive for political philosophy. Its suggestions have not altogether been missed by western democracies, of course, though there is much more than pale democracy here).

The most celebrated political category in the Old Testament is, of course, the monarchy. 1 Sam.8-12 make it clear that this was fundamentally a false trail in Israel's pilgrimage. The request for a king is a rejection of God (1 Sam.8:7), and Israel comes to see, too late, that she has thus, in measure, become re-enslaved to that from which she was liberated in the beginning of her existence as a nation (1 Sam.12:19). Nevertheless, God takes the error into his scheme of things, and subjects kingship to the principle to brotherhood (cf. the law of Deut.17:14-17). The accession of David (ultimately) is obviously much more than just an accommodation by God to man's sinfulness, since it becomes the vehicle for so much prophecy of hope for ultimate salvation. For our purposes, however, we simply note that not even Israel's disobedience could rescind the mandate to govern and be governed. The covenant made with Saul is a 'renewal' of the covenant that already exists, 1 Sam 11:14. God's kingship (which

undergirds all his covenant-making with man) overflows – here as with Adam, Abraham and Moses – into earthly rule, even if this particular form of earthly rule seems to offer a challenge to it. Finally, this very tension issues in prophetic theology where, for example, the 'government' is upon the shoulder of the coming Davidic king (Isaiah 9:6). In Old Testament prophecy, the coming age is still in terms of Israel and/or Judah, and often of Davidic kingship also. Now clearly the ultimate implication of Old Testament prophecies, whether in terms of God's kingship *tout simple* or his kingship as mediated by David, is in terms of an age entirely beyond the present order of things. (This we are taught by a whole biblical theology: it does not necessarily emerge from any one prophetic text taken in itself). However, this side of the parousia, one implication of much Old Testament prophecy is (not Millennium with HQ at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, but) simply that its terms are so much those of the world and its government. All hope for the future must be, to some extent, hope for restoration of things as they ought to be, and prophecy has a good deal in it of hope for a world properly managed (especially justice and protection for the poor).

Government of the Nations

Our remarks so far have been based on the belief that Old Testament material relating to the constitution of Israel puts into effect within Israel the mandate of Gen.1:28 to govern, and further, has an implicit relevance for contemporary thinking about the nature of government. There is, however, a good deal of material which relates more generally to the duties of nations and of individuals within them. The Old Testament story makes it clear that God's interest goes well beyond Israel. Genesis again provides the basic evidence with its command to 'fill the earth', Gen.1:28, the genealogies, Gen.5, 10 (cf. 1 Chr.1) and the promise to Ishmael, Gen.16:10. The same assumption – that God's word comes to all the nations and that they are obliged to respond – underlies the command to Elisha to anoint Hazael king of Syria (1 Kings 19:15), Jonah's mission to Nineveh, and paradoxically, what are called the 'oracles against the nations'. In Amos 1, 2, for example, Judah and Israel are simply enumerated in a list of nations which have incurred God's wrath. Similarly, Jeremiah 27:8 subjects all nations to the same rigour as Judah, namely submission to Babylon. Ezekiel 28 is directed specifically against the king of Tyre, thus pointing up well what is implied in all these passages, namely that those who bear responsibility in the nations are responsible to God, and indeed that they stand or fall with *how* they bear that responsibility. This is why Assyria, in Isaiah 10, can be God's scourge of Israel, yet at the same time blameworthy because her actions do not represent an intention to obey God. The fact that all these cases are instances of the nations' failure to obey God does not invalidate the point that they are nevertheless called to obey. (The same thing is true in any case of Israel and Judah.) The nations are not punished simply because they are there, but because they have mishandled a God-given authority. There is throughout the implicit possibility that they might obey; the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:34-37) is a little hint of this. The upshot of all this is that rulers are

held to account for how they rule, and indeed that in ruling they are fulfilling the biblical mandate (Gen.1:28) to do so.

Old Testament Politicians: Joseph, Jeremiah, Daniel, Mordecai

We have seen that the nations of the world, though they were not 'elect' as Israel was, were deemed to exercise in their ruling a God-given role and authority. We can now go a step further and observe what seems to be required of, or at least permissible for, the 'saint' of Israel when his political context is no longer an Israelite nation (co-extensive with the 'people of God'). Such were Joseph, Daniel and Mordecai (and indeed Ezra and Nehemiah, who were officials of Empire despite exercising their functions most conspicuously among their compatriots in their homeland - but cf. Neh.1). All of these rose to eminence in states which not only were not Israel, but in their turn oppressed Israel. (This is as true of Persia as of her imperial predecessors, despite the 'servanthood' of Cyrus, Isaiah 45, Ezra 1:1-4. Cf. Ezra 4:6-24. Jeremiah is included in the list above because of his letter to the exiles, Jer. 29, in which he encourages them to seek the welfare of the city of Babylon, where they now dwell. He is thus in line with the others named). In the accounts of these men's activities the context is highly political. The duty of the ruler to rule is everywhere assumed (though neither Genesis nor Daniel nor Esther is a political treatise as such). But more importantly, the individuals in question become involved, quite as a matter of course, in national affairs. Now of course in all these cases there is a deep divided loyalty, which either remains latent and potential (as with Ezra, cf. Neh.9:32-37) or comes to the surface in a moral dilemma. Nevertheless, what is significant is that their withdrawal from public life (where that occurs, i.e. the imprisonment of Joseph and the attempted liquidation of Daniel) is not on the grounds of the wickedness of the nation as such, but is only precipitated when their loyalty to God is specifically and personally challenged. (Neither Joseph nor Daniel 'resigns'; each simply refuses to compromise in his loyalty to God and takes the consequences.) Our conclusion from the stories of Joseph, Daniel, Mordecai and others is not simply a pragmatic one, along the lines that they made the best of a bad job, or that things would have been so much worse without them. It is, I think, that the activity of governing remains intrinsically 'good' (to borrow the terminology of Genesis 1) even where actual governments are evil. There is no question of our heroes discriminating among political systems, as between those which are more and less worthy to become involved in. Rather their good and godly qualities raise them willy-nilly to their positions of eminence. This itself testifies eloquently to the essential compatibility (recognized even by the ungodly) of godly wisdom with the activity of governing. Our texts go to some lengths to make these points. There is as often as not a stark contrast between the character of the government which the Israelite saints serve and their own characters. Daniel serves in a situation of brazen idolatry (until he is asked himself to become idolatrous); and Mordecai occupies the position of Prime Minister in Persia while a decree of genocide remains in force against his own people!

Relevance Beyond the Old Testament

We concluded above that the Old Testament saint operated fully within pagan government, and indeed that in doing so he manifested the created 'goodness' of that activity. We also observed that his commitment to both God and state potentially, and often actually, landed him in a dilemma, in which his loyalty to God finally showed the relativity of that which he bore to the state. I want to suggest that this provides a paradigm for the Christian's relationship with government.

God's kingship is expressed at every point in the biblical revelation, at creation, throughout Israel's history and in the New Testament

Now, non-participationists will object here that the transition from the statements and assumptions of the Old Testament cannot simply be carried over to Christian living, which looks first to the New Testament. The church, they argue is a supra-national body of believers, such as the 'saint's' political loyalty can never be the same again. I contend, however, that the New Testament does not actually change the relationship between believer and state much if at all. We can see reasons for this (a) in principle, then (b) by reference to certain New Testament texts.

(a) There are certain continuities between the Old and New Testaments. Two concern us. First, and briefly, the idea of God's kingdom is an overarching concept uniting the testaments. God's kingship is expressed at every point in the biblical revelation, at creation, throughout Israel's history and in the New Testament. Jesus' teaching about the kingdom (or kingship, Greek *basileia*) of God as something radically new does nothing to alter the fact that all authority-phenomena are derivatives of that kingship. (Witness his riposte to Pilate: 'you would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above', John 19:11). There is no reason for us to think that this will not remain so until the end of the age. The kingship of God always corresponds to earthly manifestations. (We shall come in a moment to Romans 13).

The second continuity that concerns us is that of the exile. Our learning of biblical theology and history can leave us with the impression that the exile equates with the events of 587 BC and the following 70 years. It strikes us as the culmination of years of Israel's disobedience, whose effects nevertheless were soon effaced by the remarkable act of God which issued in the Jews' restoration to their land. It is, however, much more than that. There is a sense in which the events of 587 BC are never undone. The restoration of 539 BC is complete neither in extent (since many Jews did not return, witness Esther) nor in kind (since Judah did not again become politically independent within the Old Testament period). Indeed 587 BC can be regarded as a decisive turning-point on the broadest canvas of biblical history, for thenceforth the people of God are always 'in

exile'. The idea of exile remains important in modern Diaspora-Jewish theology, and indeed in popular Christian spirituality. (Think of the song 'This world is not my home, I'm only passing through'). In spite of this most Christians today express a loyalty of some sort to their state. In the West this rarely produces a serious moral dilemma, and indeed the very possibility of such a dilemma is often submerged by the nationalistic theology evident in some countries. Nevertheless the possibility is theoretically very real. Eastern Christians need no reminding of it. Yet there too the reality is that Christians work with the same two loyalties as we in the West. East or West, we are in 'exile' in the sense that the people of God to which we belong is not co-extensive with the state within which we live. We are to this extent in comparable positions to Joseph and Daniel, Esther and Mordecai, Ezra and Nehemiah. The implication is that full participation in government is an open possibility. In principle this extends to Easterners also, should they be permitted, since their position more closely approaches those of the Old Testament figures we have discussed than does our position in the West. If we are shocked by the loyalty of our Eastern brethren to their own countries, it is perhaps a reflection more of our nationalistic Christianity (which barely recognizes our 'exilic' condition) than of our acumen in biblical interpretation. The East is a constant reminder to us that our freedom to participate at every level of our society could at any time be withdrawn, and we ourselves plunged into the most terrible dilemma. Yet Daniel *et al* give us a basis on which to make the most of the freedom that we do have, because that which we are free to participate in is fundamentally of God.

(b) We come now to some relevant New Testament texts. Obviously the few remarks that follow cannot claim to do justice to the question of the New Testament's attitude to the state. My concern, however, is not to give an exhaustive exegesis of all the relevant texts, but rather to bring us to them (and especially Romans 13), *at the appropriate point in the discussion*, that is, after we have seen, as we have, what the New Testament writers, by their background in Judaism, might be supposed to have assumed about the possibilities of participation in government. This seems to me to be the most serious deficiency in any argument about participation which takes its starting-point anywhere in the New Testament. Naturally, the specific background of the New Testament texts must have its proper place in exegesis of them. But this is only to say that exegesis of any text must take into account, as far as possible, all the influences which lie behind and have occasioned it.

Having made the point about specific background, we must go on to say that some of the New Testament texts are quite enigmatic. Jesus' 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' (Mark 12:17) is a case in point, because Jesus does not actually say what does belong to Caesar. The statement is rather an implicit challenge to his interlocutors to think again about what belongs to Caesar, in a situation in which some may have come to a too ready accommodation with his demands. What it does not do is drive a wedge in principle between religion and the state. With Romans 13 also we must give some consideration to what it does not say. It

might be argued that Romans 13 does not sanction participation, because it nowhere envisages it. It is concerned rather with response to an aggressive government and counsels, at most, obedience to the ruling authority, on the grounds that all authority is from God. It is undeniable that this is the ground of obedience which is urged here. Yet Paul hardly claims to give here a definitive theology of government and participation. To the argument that participation is not envisaged in Romans 13 it is sufficient to answer that participation was not in fact a possibility. Participation is not an issue for a community for which the possibility of pogrom is a more urgent consideration. Yet the Christians under Rome were, in principle, in the same position as Joseph, Daniel, Mordecai and others were. They were people of God in 'exile'. Under favourable conditions they could, again in principle, have participated fully in the running of the State, and even risen to eminence in it. The early church's decision to take a different view, influenced by her actual political weakness, is no guarantee that she had a rounded theological understanding of this - or even that she had the mind of Paul on it. The decisive background of Romans 13 (and indeed of 1 Peter 2:13-17) is those biblical accounts which, far more than the New Testament passages do, picture the real character of the situation, and dilemma, of the believer under pagan (or just non-Christian) government.

Reformed Theological Journal 1986 Issue

Subjects discussed include

Paul: Kingdom Theologian
Jeremiah's Prophecy of the New Covenant
The Ministerial Faithfulness of Samuel Rutherford
Calvinism Versus Humanism in America
The Challenge of Mission

Helpful Book Reviews

The Reformed Theological Journal

- * stands in the Calvinistic tradition
- * seeks to make a distinctive contribution to Reformed thought
- * published annually by the faculty of the Reformed Theological College - the seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland

Price £2.50 plus postage
(UK £0.25, overseas £0.65)

Order now. Send your subscription to:

Reformed Theological Journal,
Cameron House, 98 Lisburn Road,
Belfast, Northern Ireland BT9 6AG

Existing subscriptions continue unless cancelled