

II: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS (1)

THE term "politics" is regarded by many people as a "dirty" word. It is often used in a disparaging or contemptuous sense. A politician is regarded as one who is without principle, a time-server, "all things to all men", one who trims his views according to the company he is in. This conception of a politician is illustrated by the candidate for parliament who summed up an election speech by saying, "Those are my principles, ladies and gentlemen. If you don't like them — well, I can change them." Artemus Ward, the American writer of the last century, makes a character say in one of his books: "My pollertics, like my religion, bein of a exceedin accommodatin character", while Sheridan in the eighteenth century, says in his play *The Critic*, "Conscience has no more to do with gallantry than it has with politics!"

Guidance in the Bible

All this sounds rather cynical, but it is typical of the view that a great number have of politics and politicians and even of government. Yet government is necessary for the orderly conducting of society, and is the best means we have of ensuring such order. And strange though it may sound, the Bible has much to say for the guidance of God's people, Jews and Gentiles, in the Old Testament and the New, in our attitude and responses to governments and politics. It must be the teaching of the Bible that guides Christians in their everyday relationships in the world we live in.

The classic and most important passage is, of course, Roman 13:1-7. We should read it often, especially in modern versions or translations; but even in the A.V. its language and meaning are crystal clear. There can be no "ifs and buts" about obeying what it says, no side-stepping of our responsibilities. The writer, Paul, had had far more experiences with governors, rulers and other authorities and "powers" than most of us will ever have. Yet he commands us (and, let us remember, under the inspiration of God) to "be subject"; this authority, being from God, is not to be resisted; and tells us that rulers are appointed for the good of men and only the evil need fear them. Those who do right have no need for fear. It is upon the wrongdoer that laws exercise judgement, and this judgement is from God. The man of God

is to obey not only for fear of God but "for the sake of conscience". Finally we are taught to pay our taxes and other dues for the well-being of the country and its people.

Such commands come stranger still when we consider the governments existing in Paul's time, and with which he had so often come into contact, and would even more after writing these words. It was the Roman Empire, the greatest political and military power that the world of that time had known, to which Paul was urging subjection and obedience. We often think of its rule as being one of tyranny and oppression, especially towards those who did not follow its idolatrous religions and mystery-cults, and its emperor-worship. Yet by its strict laws and administration of justice it was a guarantee of the rights of individuals and the defender of the weak and oppressed against the lawlessness and savagery of those who opposed the control of the Empire.

In Col. 1:15-16 Paul states the tremendous truth that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him, and in all things hold together." In our present world it is difficult to remember this glorious fact: many would say that "it takes some believing." It certainly does; but, like Abraham who believed in the face of all seeming facts that God was working His purpose out, the Christian must believe and accept this truth, though many things seem against it, to deny and frustrate it. God is a God of order and love and peace; His ways and works for men, and His purposes, are for our good; and He has set, ordained for our good "thrones, dominions, principalities and powers". Without these ordinances of God the whole world of men would be in chaos. As with everything men handle these divine institutions have been mishandled and corrupted for men's selfish ends, for power and authority over others; and violence and cruelty have been and still are too often the instruments of governments. But in the first place God instituted government, and it remains God's means of ensuring and preserving order and justice in the world.

Application to Christians

The Christian is not to oppose this institution. He is not to be an anarchist or a nihilist (one who believes in the destruction of all political and social systems for the betterment of mankind). In the New Testament we are taught to pray for governments and rulers: "...I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Our responsibilities to governments are set before us in such passages as 1 Peter 2:13-17: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether...to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to shame the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Love the brotherhood; fear God; honour the emperor"; and again in Titus 3:1 Christians are exhorted by Paul "to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient...ready for any honest work".

In the light of the teaching of God's word quoted in the above passages of scripture it would be difficult to justify the participation by Christians in protest marches and other demonstrations, in opposition movements, agitations for reform in political matters, lobbying of M.P.'s and so on, which are so common today. It is true that many matters annoy and anger, injustices which need to be righted, "Truth for ever on the scaffold, Wrong for ever on the throne", as James Russell Lowell wrote. We burn in anger and are frustrated at such things, and we yearn to rectify them. But we recall how the Lord Jesus Christ dealt with the deepest wrongs and injustices and the harshest treatment. In Him Isaiah's prophecy (42:1-4) was

fulfilled: "...I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations: he will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth..." (For the fulfilment read Matt. 12:17-21).

In his contacts with powers and authorities Paul, understandingly, failed to attain the standard of his Master. He claimed his rights as a Roman citizen, justifiably so. But his anger got the better of him when (Acts 23:2-5) it burst out in indignation against Ananias the High Priest.

Some Questions

Does what we have written mean that Christians always are to support or at least fail to rebuke or oppose those things which governments wrongfully legalise or do? Are the politicians infallibly right? Are we to let evils pass without raising our voice against them? Did not Christ Himself denounce the hypocrisy and evil of the rulers of His day? Did not James, the Lord's brother, inveigh against the oppressors of the downtrodden in his time? And did not Peter, whom we have quoted as exhorting us to be subject to every human institution, kings and those in high authority also fearlessly declare to those high authorities that it is wrong to listen to or obey men rather than God (Acts 4:28)? Must Christians fawn upon the "powers that be" although conscience, informed by God's word, revolts against many things? When is a Christian justified in the sight of God in refusing to do that which, though lawful, is contrary to God's law, "the law of Christ?"