

The Christian's testimony includes both telling men how to be saved and telling statesmen how to be just, says the author. The second is less urgent, but not to be neglected.

The Things That Are Caesar's

by John Howard Yoder

In an earlier article we began to investigate whether, and if so why, Christians whose nonresistance prevents their serving the state in certain capacities still may be called to speak to the bearers of political authority about how they fulfill their responsibilities. (C.L., July, p. 4.)

But to say that we have good reason to speak deals with only a part of the problem. Knowing what we should say is still more difficult. It is partly because of this that many Christians, deeply concerned about suffering and injustice, have concluded that they must be silent, because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

When, for instance, Mennonite spokesmen speak against conscription, and thereby indirectly in favor of a professional army, and of greater reliance on new weapons, how can we be sure this is the advice the government needs? Many Christians voted for Prohibition—or called for governmental suppression of obscene literature through the Post Office Department. Can we be sure that forcing the vices of alcoholism and pornography to “go underground” did not in fact make them more harmful and harder to control? These are examples which illustrate the fear of saying the wrong thing, even when the Christian position seems quite clear.

Our basic message to men is the call to repentance and faith. The nature of the new life in Christ, by which men are judged, to which they are called to turn, and in which by the power of the Spirit they may walk is made known to us in Christ. This is so clear that even those who reject the message He brought generally agree about what it meant. But what we need to tell the state cannot be this clear, for the state, insofar as it bears the sword, exists only “outside the perfection of Christ.” It is present because of sin and its agents are men who have decided, at least for the present, *not* to act in the nonresistant, self-giving way we call discipleship.

If all we say to him is that he should follow Christ, the agent of the state may well understand the evangelistic appeal, but will not see in any way how this applies to his work. If he understands anything, it will be that his office as agent of the state should no longer exist, which is not, on the basis of the Bible, what we want to say.

It is therefore quite understandable that many Christians have seen this as one place where a double standard must be used. This position has been, in many different forms, the conviction of traditional Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and dispensational fundamentalism. It is also shared by numerous modern Mennonites of fundamentalist sympathies. It is understood that God has two distinct wills—one for the Christian in the church, the other for the unbeliever in society at large, especially in the state. God actively and effectively desires that the state should use violence and that the Christian should not. God's will here is not only permissive, as is the case for the fall of man, which, without its having been His intention for men, God has turned to His glory. God so *desires* that the state should bear the sword that Christians who suggest that it might do so a little less belligerently are working against God's will. He so *desires* the death of a murderer that for a governor to pardon a man, or Christians to ask him to do so, means making the state be unfaithful to its divine mandate.

This “double-standard” position has had many advocates throughout church history and is advocated today by brethren whose testimony deserves a wide hearing. This article is not the place to deal with the issue in detail, beyond our expression of desire to see such discussion continue. The fact that the present article attempts to explain a position which the writer feels is more consistent with the New Testament and with Anabaptist-Mennonite attitudes is intended not to close, but to open such

discussion. Historically, while recognizing that governments do, in God's redemptive providence, operate on a level lower than that of discipleship, Mennonites have not told the state that its duty is to be *more* severe in the administration of justice, which is what a conscientious application of the “double standard” theory in our society would call for.

To You for Good

One of the generally accepted ideas of modern religious liberalism has been its high respect for human personality. The “dignity of man” has been made the basic religious value, and on this foundation it has been possible to argue in favor of democracy, the Bill of Rights, trial by jury, and social welfare measures. Now this assumption that man is basically good is theologically erroneous, if nothing is said of the effects of the fall of man on his nature and his status before God. Yet for Christians there is a sense in which it is true that “human dignity” is a basic moral value. Man, every man, even the morally unworthy man, does have a real value before God, and therefore for the Christian, not by his own merits, but by virtue of Christ. The sentences beginning, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren . . .” were not careless Oriental exaggeration in Jesus' mouth. Because of Christ, my neighbor's welfare is my concern.

Not the only way, nor the principal way, but one way to express this concern is to remind the agents of the state of their obligation to act “for good” (Rom. 13:4), that is within the limits of respect for human welfare and for the personal dignity even of the unworthy. Police should be reminded that even a criminal must be treated decently, humanly. Prison authorities and local governments responsible for the adequacy of prison facilities need to be forcefully reminded that their prisoners are



Things of Caesar: The Arch of Titus in honor of the conquest of Jerusalem and dedicated by Emperor Domitian in A.D. 81. In some ways the modern nation state is more selfish than Rome.

human beings. Jail facilities which do not make possible separating hardened criminals from first-offense juvenile delinquents are an offense against human dignity which no Christian should want to see in his county.

This concern for human welfare may express itself in numerous ways, including what we say about the economic order, so called "welfare agencies," schools, taxes, overseas aid, and the connections of the police with the underworld. Yet one of the clearest and most direct points at which it arises is the assumption by the state that it has the right, or even the duty, to kill certain social offenders. Capital punishment is increasingly being seen to be not only unchristian but socially unjustified, useless in the repression of crime, and a source of inequality and wasted effort in the work of the courts. Christians should not have left to the pragmatically motivated criminologist, or the humanistic religious leader, the initiative in witnessing to the executioner or to the judge that the life he takes is not his to take.

The Old Testament authorized the death penalty, though less broadly than did the

pagan moral codes of Moses' time. The Old Testament also authorized divorce, polygamy, genocide, and the stoning of un-submissive children. Since Christ died the death which all men (whether murderers or not) had earned by their sin, the sacrifice for the sin of murder (Gen. 9:6) has been fulfilled "once for all," just as clearly as the later Levitical sacrificial ritual. The prophetic message that God does not desire the death of the sinner (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11) is not only "spiritual" in its meaning.

We shall not expect that if a state government ceases to put criminals to death the world will be basically changed or all problems of the treatment of criminals solved, any more than such ideal results were achieved by the Christian witness against slavery a century ago. To testify against one evil or in favor of one humane and just act by the state need not involve any utopian illusions about the world's betterment. Our reason is not that we expect to save society; it is that the man whose welfare—bodily, mental, or otherwise—is at stake is "one of the least of these my brethren."

Every Knee Shall Bow

Going beyond this general concern for human welfare, we may look at several other principles or guiding lines to govern our testimony to the state. One of these grows out of the realization that one of the most basic ways of understanding sin is to see it as pride. The state is not only an institution which protects society against some of the effects of sin, it is also one of the most obvious ways in which human pride expresses itself. This may be expressed in the simple desire of one man to dominate his brothers, which is one of the traits of all human government. Matt. 20:25. It may go so far as open idolatry, when a state or an individual ruler actually claims for himself absolute religious significance. Rev. 13. In these extreme situations, the Christian path is called "the patience and the faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10), i.e., the witness of nonresistant suffering, if need be to the point of death.

There is, however, no reason to assume that the Christian testimony against a state which defies itself should be limited to these extreme situations. A government which does not persecute Christians and does not ask to be openly worshiped in some ritualistic way is just as subject to