

Response to “Church & Society: New Testament and Early Christian Considerations”

By Dina Gonzalez-Piña

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My task this afternoon is to provide a response to Leith Anderson’s presentation.

Introduction:

When studying the New Testament and Early Christian Considerations, it critical to include the Old Testament lens. The Old Testament provides an overarching perspective for the Christian in the early church. For example, Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and other prophets denounce the injustices being committed by the governments of their time. Their proclamations and actions should be linked to the interpretation of the early church in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God sides with the widows, the orphans and the foreigners. In the New Testament, Jesus establishes the church and calls it to step into the kingdom of God here on earth.

Gracias, Ed and Tim for the invitation to respond. As a third generation evangelical Christian I understand Leith’s perspective and views. However it was during my undergraduate studies at Fresno Pacific College (then) that my understanding of the gospel deepened. Through my encounter with Scripture, Anabaptist theology and my interactions with the marginalized the gospel has become holistic: It now is both the Holy Spirit (inviting people to encounter Jesus) and the work for peace and justice (interested in living out his will on earth).

Points of affirmation:

1. The Bible is the rule for faith and practice amongst Christians of evangelical and Anabaptist traditions. We are citizens of heaven and are to live by the revolutionary ethics of the Sermon on the Mount and the essence of the gospel of Christ. What did this revolutionary radicalism look like within the church in Acts?
2. Early Christians demonstrated an enormous faith and actions in God. These Christians were compelled to risk death for their faith and values as martyrs. For example, Flavius Clement, Flavia Domitilla, Maximilian and Clement of Rome (Driver, 1988; Zorrilla, 2009).

Points of expansion:

First, let us revisit some of the statements in Romans 13:1-7.

Paul states, "...for there is no authority except which that God has established....for he is God's servant to do you good."

The understanding that has been shared with us previously is that Paul has a positive perspective regarding government authority. However, in his book *The Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder suggests this is only one of the ways for understanding the institution of government by God. Yoder states,

The institution of government by God is to claim that whatever government exists, it is by virtue of an act of institution, that is a specific providential action of God, that it came into being. Therefore this government exists by revelation. The events whereby it came to rule are themselves providential. [For example], if Germany finds itself under the control of Adolf Hitler, this very fact demonstrates that his government is 'of God' (p. 199).

Examples: Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, President Rios Mont, a professing Christian who massacred the indigenous community in the thousands.

Yoder (1994) suggests a second option that is not focused on a particular government but rather develops the perspective which views the concept of government as proper government. This implies that when government lives up to a certain minimum set of standards then it can claim the sanction of divine institution. However, when government does not function accordingly it loses its authority. When this happens, Yoder states, "It becomes the duty of the preacher to teach that this has become an unjust government" (pp. 199-200).

Second, let us revisit the story of Cornelius in Acts 10. The understanding that has been shared with us earlier is that Cornelius "could become an uncircumcised Gentile Roman and still be a Christian." The conclusion also presented is that Cornelius, a centurion, remained an officer in the Roman army.

However, Scripture does not clearly indicate that Cornelius remained an officer in the Roman army. It has been suggested we arrive at this conclusion without being provided clear exegesis. Why could it not be the opposite? Cornelius had become a Christian and discovered the peace of Christ (Pax Christi), not the peace of Rome. The perspective of the early Christians being committed to peace is further elaborated

upon by Driver (1988). Let us consider Matthew 26:52: "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword, will die by the sword."

Challenges:

What was the role of the Christian in the early church? Scripture does not offer a clear, concise definition for the church. However, the Bible does sketch out the characteristics through a shared imagery of God's people. Juan Driver warns us about the dangers of perspectives which lead toward individualism and institutionalism. When these perspectives are exaggerated, one is at risk of losing sight of the dimensions of kinship as a part of God's family. What is the role of the Christian? Were the Christians in the early church neutral in their perspective of government? Were the Christians in the early church partial toward the authority of government or the oppressed? How did the Christians in the early church proclaim the good news to the oppressed and the disenfranchised? What was the message of the good news? How did the Christians in the early church address the issue of privilege reconcile it with the gospel of peace and justice -- shalom?

Jesus clearly declares, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30, Luke 11:23).

Conclusion:

1. Paul calls us to submission, not to obedience, in Romans 13. Submission is to accept the temporary authority of governments even though they are unjust like in the case of the Roman Empire. However, we confess that there is one Lord and recognize that we must obey God before other man (Yoder, 1994).
2. Through God's redemptive power, the church has been called to be a witness proclaiming its heavenly citizenship (Martinez, 1993). Every earthly system of government is broken and imperfect. However, we are able to participate and serve in government. Yet we are not to be attached to any type of government system (Gonzalez, 2001).
3. The marginalized communities may be more apt to easily recognize the brokenness within any type of government system, because oftentimes they are the ones that have been forgotten. On the other hand, Christians who possess power may not recognize the brokenness of the government system because it is not in their interest (Gonzalez, 2001).

Dina Gonzalez-Piña is assistant dean of multicultural ministries at Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, Calif.

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