

## The Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of Men

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Current events prompt thinking about the morality of war, the justification for preemptory military strikes, and how religious faith of political leaders should impact government decisions. I do not propose to answer specific questions about the propriety of attacking Iraq and, if so, under what conditions. Rather, I want to consider as a Christian the relationship between God's kingdom and kingdoms of men.

The distinction between God's kingdom and all human governments is explicit in Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. Nebuchadnezzar headed the super power of his day, but Daniel said his kingdom was but one of a series that would fall. Finally, God would set up an eternal kingdom, without successor, and "it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (2:44-45). God's intent was not to give the king inside knowledge about the future but to lead him to a humbler estimate of his place in the scheme of things and to remind him his kingdom, though powerful and magnificent, was finite and, like all human endeavors, stood under God's judgment. He, like us, needed to know the difference between the kingdom of God and kingdoms of men.

This is elementary, but it is continually forgotten by those who should know better. History is strewn with examples of nations that have co-opted the church for their own purposes. Evil dictators like Hitler try it with state-controlled churches. They know religion cannot be totally extinguished from human hearts, so they subvert religion for their own purposes. Even well-intentioned political leaders invoke God and use religion for national self-interest. Prayerful expressions like "God save the Queen" and "God bless America" are converted into propaganda slogans, particularly in time of war, blurring the distinction between God's kingdom and the state.

It's not surprising government leaders equate their policies with God's kingdom. But why do Christians forget the distinction? Why are members of the most conservative evangelical churches most nationalistic and militaristic and most impressed by national power and prestige? Do they think this somehow furthers God's kingdom? His kingdom is not dependent on government to enforce Christian morality, provide for prayer or keep Sunday a day for worship. We all prefer living under good government with leaders of high moral and ethical standards. Such rulers and governments can do of much good. But to equate human kingdoms with God's or to suppose the triumph of God's kingdom is dependent upon the work of human governments is wrong.

We also need to know the difference between God's purposes and human plans. Individuals and nations are sometimes aligned with God's purposes, wittingly or unwittingly, for God uses nations for his own purposes. He called Assyria the "rod of my anger" although "this is not what he has in mind" (Isaiah 10:5,7). The Assyrian king had neither the faintest idea nor the faintest interest in carrying out the purposes of God. Ignorance of God's purposes in history is one reason God's designs and human plans are often at odds. Another reason is that governments act in "the national interest," while God acts in the interests of the entire world. Nations seek to

protect their citizens, but in doing this they often undervalue lives of innocent people elsewhere. Tragically, even Christians succumb to the temptation of thinking a life in one's own country is more valuable than one in an "enemy" nation.

Abraham Lincoln, president of the United States during the terrible bloodshed of the American Civil War, recognized "the Almighty has his own purposes." In a private meditation he wrote, "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God cannot be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party – and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are the best adaptation to effect his purpose." Lincoln did not suppose that because God has his own purposes he was absolved from his presidential duties, for near the close of the war, in his Second Inaugural Address, he said, "With firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in..." But he had the humility to recognize he might be mistaken and the faith to acknowledge God's purposes will prevail.

National leaders need similar humility while making the best decisions they know how. Those of us who criticize decisions of those in power also need to recognize we may be wrong and at cross purposes with God. Such humility will help us look honestly at the possibility we, and not merely our opponents, need to repent. Lincoln, when proclaiming a national fast during the war, called upon the people to "recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation" and to "pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved."

In all this, we need to recognize that God reigns, no matter what happens on earth. I am amazed how insecure many feel today. They fear terror attacks and fear they will be victims. Perhaps they will, for violence and death are very much a part of the world in which we live and there are no guarantees against suffering. But this does not mean we must live in fear, for faith in God raises us to a higher level.

Those who believe scripture know the final outcome is certain, that Christ has vanquished death, that all wrongs will be made right, that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and that God will be "all in all." We are part of a "kingdom that cannot be shaken," ruled by the "King of kings and Lord of Lords." God tells us as he did Isaiah in another time of crisis, "Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary..." (Isaiah 8:12-14). This does not mean nothing bad will happen to us, but it means we don't have to be terrified, even by death, for God will bring us through it all. He is our sanctuary.

Habakkuk came to this kind of faith when he pondered the calamities God said would befall his people. Though, as he said, "my heart pounded, and my lips quivered at the sound," he also said, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights" (Habakkuk

3:16-19). This is not blind faith, for it rests on the reality of who God is rather than our own understanding and on God's promise that those who are righteous will live by faith (2:4).

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