

CONFUSING THE ROLES OF CHURCH AND STATE IN THE NAME OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The *Chronicle* on Friday 9 January reported that Dr Norman Habel made a presentation on social justice to the three-yearly conference of Lutheran secondary teachers at Concordia College. For some time he has been saying that the Holy Spirit was active in Australia before the coming of the white man. This is nothing but sanctioning a religion without Christ, for the Holy Spirit's work is to testify to Jesus. Or Habel has published a book called *Rainbow Spirit Theology*. In other countries, including New Guinea, theologians have been promoting not only native cultural values, but also native spiritual values. The Christian faith has the power to transform culture, and no one should advocate that neutral elements in native culture should be removed, so that everything conforms to Western culture. However, spiritual values are different. What does not proclaim Christ can only come from the spirit below. Here the principle should be: "Bum what you have worshipped! Worship what you have burned!"

The *Chronicle* reported, "He said people had to be prepared to offend people in power to ensure everyone was given a free chance in social justice." A sober reply ought to be that it is not the church's role to make this world a better place by taking on an activist role in social justice. The Church proclaims the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. In a paperback in 1984 Or Habel caricatured those who hold such a view as "heaven-hunters", people who were interested only in eternal life, and do not care at all about what happens on this earth. We maintain, on the contrary, that observing the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is God's way of caring for both this world and the next. God has placed the government in authority to administer justice, reward good, and punish evil. On the basis of God's law the church should tell all who will hear that God will punish those who are unjust and do not repent. However, it is not the role of the church to offend people in power except where God's commandments are being grossly neglected, as in abortion and euthanasia. It is not the church's role to use organised force, or even offend people. When the church does speak over against people in power in a legitimate way it should be limited to times when the Law is used as a curb; and then what the church says to governments almost invariably comes across in the negative: "Do not do that, or God will punish you!" In other words, it is the right of God to take such vengeance, not the role of the church. Normally the church deals with those who are within, when it comes to rebuking sin, including unjust treatment of others. Promoting positive political measures to make this world a better place is the task of politicians and citizens. Politics deals with what is possible to enforce, usually rests on human reason and common sense, and often involves a compromise with what is less than ideal.

When Christians render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's they must remember the New Testament command to honour those in authority, and submit to them as what God has ordained, for conscience' sake. When a Christian defies a state law, he may only do so in the name his higher duty to obey God's commandments. The Christian has the duty, certainly, to stand up for the weak and defenceless, and will gladly help and support those who have been wronged. However, for Christians to offend people in power in the name of social justice assumes that only Christians have a right to say what reason and common sense require, which is absurd. It assumes that the church has the right to take punitive action, which it does not.

What ultimately suffers when people promote a social Gospel is the Gospel itself. Years ago Dr Habel delivered a lecture called "The Passionate Christian." In it he promoted the false antithesis that the Gospel is not a set of truths, but a story in which people meet God. He attacked the notion that the Christianity deals with a set of doctrines. For him, to be passionate about the story through which people meet God is more important than any formulation of doctrines, including the inerrancy of Scripture. Against that, how else can anyone present the Gospel story without the doctrine of atonement from sin through Jesus Christ? Such false antitheses sound very compelling when a charismatic speaker like Norman Habel presents them. Students eat out of his hand, because he seems to be presenting something new and exciting. But is it truthful and correct?

In other places over the years Dr Habel is shown that he holds a distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, on which the idea of myths in the Bible is based. He holds the JEPD source hypothesis of Mosaic books. He has long advocated that the LCA should involve itself in "pink" political causes. His idea of social justice is similar to what was called "liberation theology" for third-world countries. He supports open communion, and holds that aspects of non-Christian faiths, such as Aboriginal dreaming, can contribute significantly to our understanding of Christianity. Many of these views were expressed in an article in the *Lutheran Theological Journal* in December 1988.

It is sad when people who want to promote "the story of what God has done" adopt Gospel reductionism,

and in the name of the Gospel make selective use of Scripture. Dr Habel also makes the “Gospel principle” the basis for setting aside the Lord’s command that the public ministry should not be open to women.

People who err in the area of the third use of the Law should not be allowed to speak about the topic of social justice in the name of the Lutheran Church. The sad truth is that when the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, and the specific aspect of this distinction, the right relationship of the Church and the State, are obscured, it is really the Gospel that suffers.