

## Session 4

### CHURCH AND STATE

**Christians have taken different approaches to the state. This session explores what these look like, and how the way we see God affects the choices we make in relating to those who exercise political power.**

NOTE: The term 'the state' does not equate directly with a country or parliament. Instead it is taken here to mean the political power which forms the basis of civil government over a geographical area - this can also include the means of enforcing that power such as the courts, the civil service and the military.

#### Key Messages

- a) There are different 'models' or ways in which the church has related to the state throughout history
- b) We need to name and learn to live with the tensions that exist between church and state
- c) The pictures we have of God will shape our own attitude to the state

#### Preparation

You will need

- Copies of the two hymns printed on the accompanying Session 4 handout
- Copies of the handout of biographies used in Session 1
- Copies of the roleplay instructions found in the second Session 4 handout
- Bibles
- Flipchart paper and pens

#### WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

God of all, we pray for our country. We remember before you those who have been elected to positions of authority within local and national government, those who are part of the judicial system, those who serve in the armed forces, and those who are part of the civil service or work in local government. May they act with integrity, seeking ways that make for peace with justice for all people. And give to us a deeper understanding of some of the challenges they face in the work they do. Amen.

#### INTRODUCTION (10 mins)

##### ACTIVITY

**Distribute copies of the hymns on the handout - *I vow to thee my country* and *Sing we a song of high revolt***

*The first expresses a very clear loyalty to one's country as well as to God's heavenly kingdom, and raises questions as to whether such commitment is always justifiable. The second hymn could be written by those intent on revolution, and raises questions of how far it is permissible to challenge the state.*

**Discuss the words and meanings of the two hymns.**

**What do they say about Christian attitudes to the state? Would you feel comfortable singing either or both of them in church? Why?**

#### CHURCH AND STATE IN HISTORY (15 mins)

##### ACTIVITY

**Distribute copies of the biographies used in the Session 1 handout.**

***Throughout history Christians have taken different approaches to the state. The biographies used in Session 1 give examples of some of the most famous ones. What issues and problems do these raise? Are they all relevant today? Which do you feel is closest to your own position? Why?***

#### THE WITNESS OF THE BIBLE (20 mins)

What does the bible have to say about our relationship as Christians to the State? Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most significant passages in the story of how the church and state have related. The different ways in which it has been interpreted have been key – and a whole range of views have been offered on the basis of this one passage! You may choose to compare and contrast it with other bible passages as well, such as Luke 4:16-19 (Jesus proclaims his allegiance to a very different kingdom to that being upheld by the state), Luke 23 (Jesus is sentenced to death by the political authorities), 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 (Paul declares the rulers of this world are doomed to destruction).

### **ACTIVITY**

***Read Romans 13:1-7***

***What does this passage say to you about the relationship between Christians and the state? In what ways do you agree with Paul, and in what ways do you disagree?***

In discussion you might like to ensure that the following points are covered:

- **The passage is written in the context of a small and vulnerable community.** Paul is writing to a small Christian community that is very aware of the might of imperial power, and his readers would have been particularly conscious of the way in which, just a few years earlier, Jews had been expelled from Rome. The demand for loyal conduct is about avoiding any new edict that would result in another wave of expulsions, and so Paul gives the initial advice to live peaceably with all (12:28) and now in this passage takes up the question of how relations with the political authorities are to be conducted.
- **God-given power can be rightly or wrongly used.** Paul draws on Jewish tradition in declaring that the authorities receive their power from God. But although Paul doesn't discuss it, it is clear that this God-given power can be rightly or wrongly used. (Reflect on other biblical examples of power being rightly or wrongly used – such as Daniel 5 where Belshazzar is weighed on the scales and found wanting. Or read Proverbs 8:15-16 that implies governing can be done justly or unjustly.)
- **Ultimately our highest allegiance is to God.** Further, although Romans 13 might appear to advocate a quiet acceptance of anything decreed by those in authority, the preceding chapter suggests otherwise. There we read of the renewing of the mind in accordance with the will of God, and of the need to face up honestly to the threat of persecution. Thus, Paul juxtaposed persecution and civil loyalty, ultimate obedience to God and due honour to the authorities. He proposes this to be a particularly powerful witness. It gives a positive role to those who have civic responsibilities whenever they exercise their rule in legitimate ways. But in urging recognition of this, Paul is under no illusion that power can be wrongly used and in the end our highest allegiance is to God.

### **LIVING AS CHRISTIAN CITIZENS (25 mins)**

For most of us living in democratic states, the nature of our engagement with the state is fairly uncontroversial. We may disagree with what a government does, but in a democracy we have the option of campaigning to influence public opinion and of voting for another party. However, there are times when people feel that the state uses its power illegitimately.

### **ACTIVITY**

***Ask the group to identify times when they felt in conflict with what the state was doing, or to talk about possible scenarios when this might occur.***

***Churches and Christians have, of course, disagreed about how they should respond in such situations. It will depend on our politics and our theology!***

***Get the group to consider the range of possible responses below. You could do this by dividing the group into twos or threes and giving each group one of the models described on the handout for Session 4. Ask each group to take on the opinion expressed on their piece of paper – give them a few minutes to discuss as groups, and then ask a representative of each group to roleplay their case, and criticise each others' arguments.***

***Alternatively you could use the handout to guide a general discussion which covers these approaches.***

***Identifying people or situations which illustrate each position.***

***What picture of God underlies the various responses to the state?***

The following are all options for the church as it seeks to respond to the actions of the state:

- Accept the benefits and the comforts of co-operating with the state with gratitude:
- Use our position to help others, but being cautious about getting ourselves into trouble:
- Seek radical change or revolution:
- Take non-violent direct action:
- Walk away and create an alternative model of how life should be lived:
- Stay in co-operation with the state, conscious of the compromises needed, and try to voice effective opposition:

***As the churches in this country try to relate to the state, we tend to take this last option. Are we right to do so? Under what circumstances might we choose an alternative way of relating to the state?***

#### **FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)**

***How does your picture of God shape the way you choose to relate to the state?  
Should the Church and an individual Christian relate to the state in different ways?  
What do you think you have learned from this session?  
What questions has it left you with?***

#### **PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)**

God of all life, give to our churches wisdom, grace and understanding. Where the state acts with truth and justice, may we be quick to offer our support and encouragement. Where there is a willingness to ignore the needs of the most vulnerable and the rights of the oppressed, may we be prepared to take a stand and be the voice of opposition. Amen.

#### **HOMEWORK**

***Find out about how your denomination relates to the State. Most Churches have a public issues office which relates to Government (eg The Joint Public Issues Team where Baptists, Methodists and members of the United Reformed Church work together - see [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk)). Has there been a history of non-violent resistance in your denomination? Or has your Church worked alongside the state for positive change?***