The Christian and Society

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“We can’t talk about humanity or our nation if we are not prepared to start practicing righteousness on the individual level of really giving ourselves to other people.”

I am going to be speaking about the Christian’s responsibility in society and the importance of our development of a Christian mind in this regard.

Jesus called us to be the salt of the earth - the salt to preserve society from decay. In Romans 12 Paul calls us not to be conformed to the world in which we live, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. As we think about this question of our responsibility to society as a whole and the place of government and the Christian’s responsibility in it, I want to begin with three quotations which should be a challenge to us as Christians. The first I think is very helpful in describing where we are today. To repeat what an Australian, Manning Clark said:

We are entering an era where a great dullness, so deep that no one can fathom it, is going to descend on us like a cloud. ¹

This is just to remind ourselves and challenge ourselves as we begin to think about the Christian’s responsibility in society as a whole, that Christians above all others have a responsibility not to be caught in that dullness of apathy and self-fulfilment which characterizes our society.

Secondly, a quotation from John Stewart Mill:

No great improvement in the lot of mankind is possible until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought. ²

In other words, he is saying quite simply that we need to be prepared to really think through what our responsibility is, and what our calling is, and what the society is in which we live, and why it needs to change where there aren’t going to be any changes. As Christians, that’s a challenge to us from a non-Christian in an era of apathy and emphasis on the pursuit of pleasure. We have a tremendous responsibility before God to provide that challenge in the modes of thought of our culture - to be a challenge, to be a light and to provide an alternative.

Thirdly, I want to read some quotations from Solzhenitsyn from a speech he gave in 1978 which was extremely critical of the West. Some of you have probably read it before (or some like it), because he gave a whole series of speeches over the last two or three years in which he was very, very critical of the West. It was at that point that people stopped really
listening to what he had to say. Everybody was delighted when he came from Russia and was very critical of Russian society, but when he started criticizing the West, people didn’t like it very much. His criticisms were very, very profound. Just listen very carefully to his criticisms; they are worth reading, because he had some very helpful things to say.

The first was that he criticized our system of legalistic righteousness. He pointed out that, in the West, people are much more concerned for the letter of the law than the spirit of the law, and that’s the way that our whole legal system works. Everybody is pressing the law to its very limit to get his rights and to avoid getting into trouble. Now let’s read what he says here.

“If one is right from a legal point of view, nothing more is required, nobody may mention that one could still not be entirely right, and urge self restraint or a renunciation of these rights, call for sacrifice and selfless risk; this would simply sound absurd. Voluntary self-restraint is almost unheard of: everybody strives toward further expansion to the extreme limit of the legal frames. (An oil company is legally blameless when it buys up an invention of a new type of energy in order to prevent its use. A food product manufacturer is legally blameless when he poisons his produce to make it last longer: after all, people are free to purchase it.)”

That’s his first criticism. The kind of legalistic righteousness we have developed in the West. A dependence upon the letter of the law, rather than its spirit. And secondly, he criticized very powerfully the excessive emphasis on individualistic freedom in the West.

“The defence of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenceless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.”

On the other hand, destructive and irresponsible freedom has been granted boundless space. Society has turned out to have scarce defence against the abyss of human decadence, for example against the misuse of liberty for moral violence against young people, such as motion pictures full of pornography, crime, and horror. This is all considered to be part of freedom and to be counter-balanced, in theory, by the young people’s right not to look and not to accept. Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil.”

That is a very profound statement. And again, here:

“Mere freedom per se does not in the least solve all the problems of human life and even adds a number of new ones.”

And then he comments on an earlier time. He says:

“And yet in early democracies, as in American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted on the ground that man is God’s creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding one thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual be granted boundless freedom with no purpose, simply for the satisfaction of his whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were eroded everywhere in the West; a total emancipation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming ever more materialistic. The West has finally achieved the rights of man, and even to excess, but man’s sense of
responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer. In the past decades, the legalistic selfishness of the Western approach to the world has reached its peak and the world has found itself in a harsh spiritual crisis and a political impasse. All the celebrated technological achievements of progress, including the conquest of outer space, do not redeem the twentieth century’s moral poverty, which no one could have imagined even as late as the nineteenth century.”

I have included these quotations at length because I think what he says is a tremendously profound and quite accurate indictment of our culture and its moral poverty.

Now as Christians we have a responsibility to do something about this - a responsibility before God to the society in which we live. What I want to do now is to look at the Christian’s response, what our calling is, and at some of the issues which we ought to be concerned to fight for in the society. But I don’t think that we can really take anything for granted in terms of where we stand, so I want to start with something very basic, and that is to look at the importance of government; secondly, we will look at the purpose of government, then at some Biblical principles of the Christian, and then at the place of Biblical law.

So first of all, the importance of government. I think a Biblical attitude and understanding of the importance of government is very important, because today all around us everybody talks about peace, and hardly anybody talks about justice. Rather, like Solzhenitsyn said, we all want freedom to have peace, and we are afraid our lives might be disrupted, so we demand peace. But rather, like Jeremiah said in his day, people were crying, “Peace, peace,” when there was no peace, and there is no peace in the world today. Biblically, peace is only a product of justice. While injustice and tyranny reign in societies, peace is impossible. Just as for us on the individual level, peace with God was impossible without the death of Christ bearing the just judgment for our sins, so in any other area of life, peace is impossible without justice. So I want to start by looking at the place and importance of government.

The Place and Importance of Government

In the Old Testament, it is absolutely clear that God appointed human governments within the nation of Israel to be his representatives on earth to maintain justice. In Deuteronomy 1:13-17, Moses commands the people to choose some wise and respected men from each of their tribes to be set over them, and they say, “Yes, this is good.” Hear Moses in verses 15-17:

I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you ... And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it. (NIV)

And there - just a simple statement - judgment belongs to God. God is the one who is judge of all the earth and he has appointed human government (the government, here, of Israel) for the purpose of maintaining justice on the earth.

In Deuteronomy 16:18-20:

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and
twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you. (NIV)

And over in Chapter 17: 18-20 it speaks about a future time when Israel will have a king, and it has the same emphasis there. The king is to have before him a copy of the law of God, which he is to read all the days of his life and apply in the society and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. He is to rule by the law of God in Israel.

So the first point I want to make is simply this: That God instituted human government himself. Human government is not simply an idea which human beings have developed and said, “This will help us.” Obviously, particular governments are chosen by men in all sorts of different circumstances and ways, but the very institution of government is something which is given by God for a specific purpose.

We could look at a later passage in Psalm 82, which says:

God presides in the great assembly. He gives judgment among the gods. (NIV)

This is a passage which causes people all sorts of confusion. Why does the psalmist use the word gods here? The word gods is used for human rulers, and it’s quite clear as we read down the Psalm that that’s who it’s talking about. It’s used for human rulers with this reason - that all human authorities have the purpose of being God’s representatives on Earth to carry out his justice. That is why they are given such a high title in the Psalm. So that is the first thing in the Old Testament - we have a very high view of human government.

But what about when we come to the New Testament? Many people would want to argue that this view changes, that the importance of government, and the place of government, and the Christian’s responsibility where government is concerned, are no longer the same. Many people would point to pacifism and the Sermon on the Mount (like “Don’t resist evil”; “Overcome evil with good”) to support such a view. But if we look at the New Testament, I think it’s quite clear that the same view is continued. In John 10:34, 35, Jesus actually quotes from Psalm 82. Now in the passage Jesus isn’t talking primarily about human government - he is defending himself against the accusation of blasphemy. The Jews say to him, “We’re going to stone you because you, a man, make yourself equal with God,” and Jesus responds by saying, “Does it not say in your law that the Scripture cannot be broken?” In other words, this statement, which he then quotes, is absolutely binding and authoritative, and Jesus regards it as such. He commends such a view. “I said, ‘you are gods,’” is the passage that he quotes. In other words, Jesus has the same view of the importance of human government. He sees human government as being God’s representatives, God’s vice regents on the earth. So Jesus approves of the statement of the Psalm.

When we come to Romans 13, we find Paul with precisely the same attitude towards government and its purpose as the Old Testament has. In this passage in Romans 13, Paul speaks of governments as being God’s ministers:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. (Romans 13:1, NIV)

The authorities which exist have been established by God; consequently, he who rebels against the authorities is rebelling against what God has instituted. Verse 4 says, “he is God’s servant to do you good,” and again, “he is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” So Paul here has precisely the same view as the Old Testament in terms of the importance of government.
Now again, many Christians will appeal to passages in the Sermon on the Mount like “love your enemy,” and “do good to those who hate you,” but we notice that the two ideas about loving your enemies and the place of government and the Christian’s responsibility are not opposed to each other. If we look at Romans 12, Paul virtually quotes there from the Sermon on the Mount,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. (Romans 12:17, NIV)

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay;’ says the Lord. (Romans 12:19, NIV)

Now, you will find many people quoting that passage and saying this means that Paul, just like Jesus, is completely against the Christian ever being involved in any situation of administering justice or the use of force, and that what Paul is saying is that all judgment should be left to God at the end of the age, because it is God’s job to take vengeance on evil. But that is not Paul’s point, and that is why immediately afterwards in Chapter 13 (which is obscured for most people by the chapter division), Paul goes on to say that governments are God’s instruments of wrath to punish the evil-doer. In other words, God has not left it simply to the end of the age for himself to judge, but he has appointed government for this very purpose of judging evil in the present age.

Now there are many situations, of course, in our personal relationships with one another, where we should not resist evil, where we have to return evil with good, where we’re not to take vengeance on the personal level. We should be quite clear that the Old Testament law said precisely the same thing. If we were to read Leviticus 19, for example, that chapter says precisely the same thing - that it’s wrong to bear grudges against your neighbour, it’s wrong to return evil for evil, you must love your enemy, including the alien.

But at the same time, the Law of Moses upholds the principle of justice and the punishment of evil. It does not just uphold it, but God requires it as a necessity. So there are many occasions everyday where we are required to forgive each other, not to return evil for evil, not to take vengeance ourselves against one another. But this argument does not apply when it comes to the responsibility of government to punish the evil-doer, which it is required to do by God. So Paul repeats himself there. “Do not take vengeance, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath.” Then, the ruler is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrong-doer. So again, Paul clearly has the same view of the institution of government as the Old Testament.

The Purpose of Government in Scripture

Now secondly, we want to ask, “What is the purpose of government in Scripture?” What is the purpose of government? We have already seen that:

a) The purpose of government is to rule justly by the law of God and by his wisdom, and there are many statements in Proverbs which talk about that - about the king ruling according to the wisdom of God. So that’s the first thing, the first purpose of government - to rule justly according to the law of God, to maintain justice in the land in obedience to God’s law. Later, I want to look in detail at God’s law in the Old Testament and its place today, to try and give us a program for Christian political action.

b) The purpose of government as appointed by God was to defend the cause of the poor and needy who have no advocate, and there are many, many passages like that which speak of this in the Old Testament. It’s one of the central purposes of human government -
to defend the cause of the poor and needy who have no other advocate in society. Proverbs 31:8, 9 speaks about the duty of the king. He is to

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. (NIV)

That is the theme that is repeated over and over again in the Scripture. There are many passages in the Psalms which speak like that. Psalm 82, for example, says this:

How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (NIV)

I think today, very often, we have forgotten, or governments have forgotten, that that’s one of their fundamental responsibilities - to be the advocate of those who have no other advocate in society. We can all look around and think of those who have no other advocate in society. We can all look around and think of those who are in our own cultures. Who has no advocate? We would have to say that at least some of those who have no advocate are the unborn, the infants who are handicapped and the very old.

c Another fundamental calling of government (and in a way we have mentioned it already) is to punish those who do wrong and, included in that, those who oppress the weak and the needy. Over and over again, the book of Deuteronomy speaks of the necessity of the punishment of the wicked when it’s speaking in the context of selling people into slavery or of murder. Over and over again it says quite simply, “You shall not pity the murderer. You shall rid the land of the blood of the one who has died.” And God says, “If you don’t, I will require justice for the blood of the one who has been killed of the whole land.” In other words, God is simply saying there must be justice and punishment in this age. That is the calling of government.

Often, as Christians we don’t think of that as a good thing (the punishment of those who do wrong), but over and over again in Scripture, kings who punish the wicked are commended by God. Kings who fail to punish the wicked are rebuked by God very severely. Over and over again in the Old Testament, the severest condemnations are given for those in authority who do not rule justly, who do not protect the poor and needy, who do not punish the wicked. God’s character has not changed from the Old Testament to today. He is still concerned for the poor and needy, and he still requires governments to be concerned for them too and to punish wickedness. The whole idea that we are living in a different moment of history where the idea of justice is one that is no longer important is one that cannot possibly be maintained on reading of Scripture. God’s character has not changed. It always remains the same. That is why the Scripture looks forward to the time with great joy when Christ will come back and finally remove all wickedness from the earth and bring righteousness and justice for the first time in fullness.

God requires that some attempt be made in the present. Rather than saying that the Christian should not be involved in such things, our attitude should be very different. The more Christians who really understand what justice is, who are involved in government, the better. The less likely there is to be corruption, the more likely there is to be some justice in the land. I think I should say here, the issue is not one of violence. Christians often speak about the use of punishment on any level as if it was use of violence, and how can I, as a Christian, use violence? But, in the Bible, the use of force, the just use of force to restrain evil, is pleasing to God. He has established government for that very purpose. If we start using the word “violence” with all the implications it has of injustice, we have lost the battle before we begin.
The Christian’s Responsibility in Society

To look at some areas of the Christian’s responsibility in society, I want to start with some very fundamental things.

a. The proclamation of the gospel. If we want to know what we’re doing, what we ought to be doing as Christians, in our desire to change the society in which we live, we have to begin with proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of individuals who will be salt in the society. The fundamental problem that we face always is the human heart, and that can only be basically changed by the power of the gospel.

b. The gospel must not be proclaimed narrowly. We must teach and practice ourselves the authority of Christ, the Lordship of Christ over the whole of our life, so that we encourage ourselves and one another to be lights in the world. So that Christians who are soldiers, businessmen, workers or judges, or jurymen, or politicians or policemen are taught to be righteous in all that they do and in all their relationships. We don’t reduce Christian morality to a very narrow area, but we really see it (our life as Christians) as embracing everything we do. It has to stand under the commandments of God and the practice of righteousness.

c. Obviously related to this, there must be in our own lives the example of righteousness in all our dealings with one another. In every sphere of life, we must love our neighbour as our-self. Starting with ourselves, we are caring for the people around us in need. We are not just concerned with the issues of society as a whole, but we, ourselves, are those who care for the poor and needy, who are prepared to open our homes to them, who are prepared to spend ourselves for others in the same way that Christ did. Our whole life as Christians is like a series of concentric circles. We have to start with ourselves and our own obedience to God, to be sure that our own lives are pure, and then we look out and practice righteousness in terms of caring for other people and giving ourselves to them. We can’t talk about humanity or our nation if we are not prepared to start practicing righteousness on the individual level of really giving ourselves to other people. There’s a tremendous responsibility in every individual Christian and in every church that we offer a light to our society, like a city set on a hill (to use another of Jesus’ images), that we offer an alternative to the kind of self-indulgence that exists around us in our society. But we don’t see that as our calling as believers. We don’t see ourselves in a time of great need where our calling is to give ourselves to serve other people.

d. Prayer for those in authority over us in government. Paul speaks of this in 1 Timothy 2:2. There are several things we can pray for. I will mention just a few.

1. that they may seek and know God’s truth themselves

2. that they may rule justly and wisely in the fear of God and recognize that they are ruling as his vice regents. How many people in government really think of themselves as those whose responsibility it is to apply the commandments of God and to rule under God, and realize they are going to have to answer to him one day for every decision they make in their office of government? That is what the scripture says. So we pray that they may rule justly and wisely and in the fear of God. That, as Christians, therefore (as Paul says), we may be able to live a quiet and peaceful life, instead of being persecuted.

3. that the gospel may be freely preached and that our rulers may not be followers of false ideologies which bring injustice and tyranny against the weak and persecution on the church.
e. We must be prepared to honour and obey governments, and that is rather a difficult idea for us, because we have got accustomed to being completely cynical about governments and the whole office of government, the whole institution of government. We must be prepared to obey and honour governments as God commands us in his word.

f. We must, however, always obey God rather than men, including governments, when there is a disagreement, a conflict, a tension between the two. We must always obey God rather than men.

There are a couple of examples in Acts 4:19 and 5:29, and they are about the preaching of the gospel. But this applies not only to the preaching of the gospel, but also to refusing to do evil which is commanded by the laws of our land. You can think of examples from Scripture: the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1 who refused to kill the children when they were commanded by Pharaoh; Joseph disobeying Potiphar’s wife; Rahab hiding the Israelite spies from her own rulers; or, in our day, in our own generation we can think of Corrie Ten Boom in Holland disobeying the government there and hiding Jews, (rather like Rahab in her house) against the commands of the state. So we must always obey God rather than men.

g. Related to this, we must not think that because we live in a democracy where we have had religious toleration Romans 13 means that all governments are good and must always be obeyed, so that a conservatism quite foreign to the spirit of the gospel is fostered among Christians. We must be very clear at that point. Revelation 13 in the New Testament (also see Romans 13) speaks of a government which is “the beast.” We must recognize that the world is against the truth, and that therefore, the Christian must be prepared to expect the hostility of the state against both the gospel message and the practice of justice, both of which the Christian longs to see prevail.

h. We must be prepared to count the cost of being part of the people of, Christ, who have no abiding city here, and be ready therefore to suffer, both for the sake of the gospel and for the practice of righteousness, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:10, knowing that this may involve suffering for ourselves and also for our families. Again, we live in a society where we all want to protect ourselves, our own rights and our own freedoms, and to create space for ourselves. As Solzhenitsyn said in that very profound article, we are not accustomed to people making any kind of self-sacrifice. But that is what the Christian is called to. There will be many occasions where we may have to count the cost. It’s quite obvious when you look at Christians in a situation like the USSR, where they have to count the cost all the time, both of believing the gospel and practicing righteousness. We must have the same attitude.

i. We must be prepared out of love for our neighbours and out of recognition of the high and honourable calling which it is, to be involved in government ourselves - in the work of civil justice, of law enforcements, et cetera. As I said before, the more Christians there are who are involved, the better. The more likely (we would hope) that there is to be some justice, less bribery and corruption, less partiality, and so on.

j. Some of you will find this a rather difficult point, so I will spend a little bit more time on it. What we uphold as believers is not simply government itself, but the rule of law - not the status quo. In other words, in the end, neither a king nor a president nor a prime minister nor a parliament nor the majority in a democracy at 51 %, is the standard by which we judge what is right and what we honour ultimately. What we honour ultimately is what is right - the rule of law. The law is king rather than the other way round. The Christian has an absolute standard by which to judge government, and that standard is God’s character.
and word, and that means that even those in government must be subject to the law themselves. Just like it says in Deuteronomy, the king wasn’t to consider himself better than the other members of the people of Israel, but he was to do what was right himself. In other words, the law is not made by rulers; rather, the job of rulers is to apply the law. If they break it, they must be subject to the law’s reprisals. You can think of President Nixon for example. It was quite right that he was brought before the courts and removed from being President because of his breaking the law.

This raises the problem: What if a government breaks the law, not just here and there, which all governments do, but becomes a tyranny and uses violence to uphold its position? This raises the possibility of civil disobedience by the Christian, and I recommend to you Dr. Schaeffer’s book, The Christian Manifesto, which goes into this question at length - of Christians’ practicing civil disobedience. It also raises the possibility of revolution.

Contrary to popular opinion, Christians have not always been on the side of the status quo. Rather, there is a very long and respectable tradition of Christians’ upholding the necessity of revolution which goes right back to the Middle Ages and includes figures after the Reformation, for instance Calvin. Calvin held that it was the responsibility of those in the lower offices of government to remove the king if he was a tyrant, because they must bring him before the standard of the law. Or you could think of Cromwell and the Civil War in England, where Parliament resisted the tyranny of Charles I and had to take up arms to do so, to bring him to justice. Or in Holland, the overthrowing of the power of Spain, or the American Revolution (which many Christians were involved in). In the Bible itself, wicked rulers are removed from power by God’s command and by the use of the sword (Jezebel and Athaliah). We should notice here that what is upheld is not a kind of Marxist ideal of revolution, but the replacement of a tyranny which is breaking the law (in other words, which becomes lawless), by a government which upholds the law. It is a very different understanding of revolution from that which the Marxist puts forward. We are measuring something against an objective and absolute standard; the replacement of a tyranny which is lawless by a government which upholds law.

Of course; we have to say that there is no perfection in any government, just as there is no perfection in any other human institution in this world. As I said before, this is all the more reason for Christians to get involved and to try to improve the situation.

I just want to make a couple of qualifications here. I am not saying that the legitimate use of force to restrain evil is the only way to deal with situations of terrible injustice and confusion. I want to give just a couple of examples. I think you could use Uganda and Idi Amin as a very good example of where revolution was the right and only response. It would have been much better if it had happened earlier. If we had lived there, I hope that we would have been prepared to take part in it because, if revolution is delayed (the replacement of a lawless government by a lawful one), then the land becomes so desolated that it takes many, many years for it to recover and for the institutions of law to be set back into place. And that, of course, is what happened in Uganda because the tyranny went on so long.

I want to give a couple of other examples. First of all, in Latin America as in many other parts of the world, there are very unjust dictatorships and the question obviously arises, “Should the Christian join with the Marxist in such a situation in a revolution against tyranny?” My own feeling is that we ought, perhaps, to find a third way and not side in such a situation with either the extreme right or the extreme left. For such a revolution would most likely replace one lawless government with another lawless government.
Now, of course, to find a third way is not an easy solution because it involves the way of the cross and being prepared to be rejected and persecuted by both sides. What must happen in such a situation is that the Christian must be prepared to be the advocate of the oppressed.

The second example, where I would suggest a different kind of solution, would be that of Northern Ireland, where I personally feel that the only solution to the problem lies, not in the use of force, in army occupation, or some government imposed solution to satisfy the Protestant majority, but rather the Protestant majority voluntarily giving up all power to the Catholic minority - the voluntary surrender of their status as British, of their rights and privileges that they may have maintained for themselves for so long. I really suggest that as a serious alternative, and there are Christians in Northern Ireland who are certainly working in that direction. I don’t think there is any other human solution to that situation. So don’t go away just thinking I am advocating a kind of mindless use of force in any and every situation.

Coming back to where we were, we are responsible as Christians to be active in society. We are responsible before God to be the first fruits in the coming Kingdom of God by being involved in the establishment of some justice on the earth.

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2 ibid, p. 20  
4 ibid, p. 19, 21  
5 ibid, p. 49  
6 ibid, p. 49, 51  