

SIN IN HIGH PLACES

Some of you must have seen the interview Ex-Senator Graham Richardson gave on his recent book, or seen his book. The theme was that, as a loyal party member, he was prepared to do whatever it took to advance the cause of his party. He included lying and deception in “whatever it took.”

This is not meant as an attack on any political party. There are probably politicians of all parties who are unscrupulous. Those who know some history know what “real politics” is, and know that this kind of thing is not new. They will be familiar with the name of the unscrupulous statesman at Florence Niccolo Machiavelli, who set out his defence of unscrupulous statecraft in his book, *The Prince*. Some will remember people saying during World War II, “My country right or wrong.” This week a speaker at the National Press Conference criticised governments that carry out covert operations, because they are afraid of opposition from their own people. He said that people should not trust any people in authority.

Christians will want to say at least four things. The first is that no individual can set aside his conscience without incurring God’s just judgment. The second is that it is still true that truth and righteousness serve the best interests of any country. God’s Word says, “*Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people*” (Prv 14:34). The third is the profound truth that in this sinful world God still preserves a degree of peace and security through people in government who are sinful, and Christians normally obey them, for the sake of conscience, as God’s representatives. When Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7, Nero was the emperor! We shouldn’t make the mistake people in the Logos Foundation made of saying that only God-fearing people had a right to govern, or that the Jehovah’s Witnesses make, when they say that all government is of the Devil. The laws of reason govern nations, and Christians have no monopoly on common sense. The fourth is to say that, even when governments follow harmful policies, God makes all things work together for good for the sake of His people.

It is good to reflect that there is a somewhat parallel situation to the third point above in the church. The pastors from whom you hear God’s Word and receive the sacraments are themselves sinful. The Word that they proclaim ought to be God’s Word, and when it is, we must believe it. The Sacraments are not theirs, but Christ’s, and Christ’s words make the sacraments what they are. What is said here does not include teaching false doctrine, which has no rights whatever in the church. In the aftermath of the tenth, the severest, persecution in the early church, schisms occurred in North Africa and Egypt. Donatists in North Africa accused Catholic bishops and deacons of handing over copies of the Scriptures to the pagan authorities during the persecution. They held that ministry by these “betrayers” spread pollution or contagion to all their people. Subsequently, the people they accused were vindicated, and many of the Donatist leaders were shown up as having been criminal and even “betrayers” themselves. However, the principle that such writers as Optatus and Augustine affirmed is still correct, that the Gospel and the Sacraments are effective because they are Christ’s, even if the preachers and those who distribute the Sacraments are unbelievers or wicked. The *Augsburg Confession* says that false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners don’t stop the sacraments from giving God’s great blessings (Article VIII). There are interesting applications. The Lord’s Supper at which a woman presides is still valid, because of Christ’s Words, but we would refuse to receive it from her, because of the disobedience involved (1 Cor 14:33-34).