

Book Review of *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*, Vernard Eller, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987



Vernard Eller

Vernard Eller is a Church of the Brethren (U.S.) theologian, author of a score of books, and never dull! He writes in a lively, offhanded manner that is not remotely “stuffy”.

He has written a book entitled: *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*, which for him is a kind of capstone to what he has been wrestling with for many years in some of his other writings.

He says he finally knows a name for what he has been for years through studying the Bible: a Christian anarchist, and he argues that *anarchy* is the only consistent biblical political option for God's people.

The book is dedicated to Jacques Ellul, who wrote a piece several years ago, which recently appeared in English translation in *Jesus and Marx*, entitled “Anarchism and Christianity”. In it, Ellul, an internationally respected French sociologist and lay theologian, says: “... the only Christian political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: total refusal of its existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take.” But for Ellul, this does not mean non- engagement in the sociopolitical realities of our society. Rather, he says, “...as Christians we must participate in the political world and the world of action, but in order to deny them, to oppose them by our conscious, well-founded refusal.” (both quotes from Ellul, *Jesus and Marx*, Eerdmans, 1988, pp. 172 & 173)

Eller comments that “...Ellul demonstrates decisively that a particular version of ‘anarchism’... is the sociopolitical stance of the entire Bible in general and the New Testament in particular...” (p.5)

Eller anglicizes the Greek term *arche* into *arky*, then defines it biblically thus:

(that which is determined to *govern* human actions and events) is a good synonym - as long as we are clear that political arkys are far from being the only ‘governments’ around....

‘Anarchy’ (‘unarkyness’), it follows, is simply the state of being unimpressed with, disinterested in, skeptical of, nonchalant toward, and uninfluenced by the highfalutin claims of any and all arkys. And ‘Christian Anarchy’ - the special topic of this book - is a Christianly motivated ‘unarkyness’. Precisely because Jesus is THE ARKY, the Prime of Creation, the Principal of All Good, the Prince of Peace and Everything Else, Christians dare never grant a human arky the primacy it claims for itself. Precisely because *God* is the Lord of History we dare never grant that it is in the outcome of the human arky contest that the determination of history lies. (pp. 1 & 2)

He distinguishes this sharply from secular anarchy, which ever revolves around the autonomous Self. He says: “For Christian anarchists, then, the goal of anarchy is ‘theonomy’ - the rule, the ordering, the arky of *God*.” (p. 3) This means, bluntly, that no power, no government, no “arky” is ever legitimate - only God's rule. For “Human beings

just aren't morally capable of controlling arky power and making it work to beneficial ends. *Power corrupts.....*" (p. 21)

He traces this kind of "anarchy" from the early church period until the era of Constantine in the fourth century, at which point, as he put it, church leadership simply switched the headings, declaring all pagans to be Christians in one fell swoop of mass infant baptisms. As a result,

The church became the Biggest Arky of All, graciously taking unto itself every evil the empire had ever represented. It sacrificed all understanding and appreciation of its God-given anarchy in its zeal to make the world good and do good for it. It lost the beautiful anarchy of its house-churches of human beings to build cathedrals of politicians... It lost the anarchical refusal of military service to mount armies bearing the banner of the cross and in this sign conquering. It lost its anarchical Jesus whose kingdom was not of this world to paint for itself an icon that needed a label before you could tell whether it was a picture of Christ or the Emperor (a sad, sad confusion). It lost its "holiness" in bestowing that title upon the empire instead. The trading of anarchy for Christian arky was the deflowering of the church. (p. 23)

He continues with a quick overview of church history, indicating that "Within the foregoing history of Christendom, there are two churches, two Christian groupings in particular, that stand out as different. They are the New Testament church and the Anabaptists of the Protestant Reformation." (p. 32)

A little later he summarizes the five distinctives of these groups: "The New Testament church and the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century display five characteristics in common and in contrast to all forms of arky faith.":

- a. Neither gives a hint of wanting to *legitimize* any of the powers that be. Those all exist by God's *sufferance*; none can boast his *blessing*.
- b. Neither shows any inclination to fight the arkys (even those perceived as most wicked) nor to compete with them (whether physically or verbally). There is no felt need to be knocking heads with them or trying to get power over them. It is not in any such contest that the future of the race is being decided.
- c. Neither shows any interest in making something of itself in the eyes of the world - getting its power consolidated, finding the organizational structures that will make it more effective and influential. Both are content to be quite weak, and, shall we say, anarchistic.
- d. Neither makes any big claims (or even small promises) about what it intends to do in the way of governing, saving, correcting, or even improving a lost and wrong world. Neither makes the sounds of a candidate for office.
- e. Most of all, both show complete confidence that God can and will accomplish whatever he has in mind for his world, with or without their help. At his pleasure, God can use either arkys or anarchys, arkyists or anarchists. But he needs neither and, most definitely, licenses none. (p. 42)

Turning to biblical history, he sees a progression towards an anarchical ideal: "Clearly, the course of God's way with Israel - beginning with the prophets - was *away* from temple

arky and *toward* the anarchic reality of the synagogue. In its turn, Christianity started out as a completely anarchic ekklesia and then drifted into churchly arkydom.” (p. 52)

Key to his “Christian Anarchy” is his denial of the traditional interpretation of Romans 13:1 - 7 - an interpretation dominant not surprisingly only since the era of Constantine, the time of the Great Reversal of Christian Anarchy. He disallows that this text in anyway indicates that the state, provided it acts “justly”, is to be highly authoritative in our lives. He says it is neither a “god” nor a “satan” - rather a mixture of good and evil as are we. It therefore is neither to be legitimated or condemned by the Left or the Right.

Rather, reading the text anarchically, he says that Paul delegitimizes the political world as a whole, entirely bypassing affirming legitimacy of any government, tyrannical or democratic, Left or Right.

He supports this with several assertions: *First*, the ‘governing authorities’ are given as a specific example of the enemy, whom we are to love according to Romans 12, the immediate context of Romans 13. *Second*, the Roman Empire elsewhere in Paul’s writings is part of the “principalities and powers” against which, as for instance in the Eph. 6 text, we are fighting, albeit, and incidentally, never with “worldly weapons” (II Cor. 10:4). It’s hard to imagine that Paul would think differently of Rome in this passage! Likewise, Paul was steeped in the Old Testament, which had a long tradition of opposing pagan governments. *Third*, Paul himself had been badly treated under Rome, and was writing to a church, primarily of Jewish converts, broken up by an edict of Emperor Claudius a few years earlier which had dispelled all Jews from Rome. Paul also knew full well Rome’s role in the unlawful crucifixion of Jesus. *Fourth*, the call to be “subject” to the authorities is not a legitimating of the authorities, rather a neutral counsel of “not-doing” - resistance, anger, assault, power play, or anything short of loving the enemy - the state of Rome. This is entirely in keeping with Jesus’ counsel of non-retaliation to cheek-slapping, etc.¹ *Fifth*, the institution of “worldly government” in ancient Israel, according to I Sam. 8 was a *rejection* of God! - even though God accepted Israel’s bad choice, and worked through it. But he clearly never approved it. Eller says:

Paul knows that worldly government is an illegitimate usurpation of God’s power - knows it as well as God and Samuel did. However, what his well-justified-in-hating-Rome readers need also to know is that God *accepted* his own rejection as accomplished fact and thus proceeded to accept (yet hardly “legitimate”) worldly government as a “given”, a human necessity through which he just might be able to prevent some damage and perhaps even gain a bit of good. (p. 200)

Sixth, the governing authorities are called “servants of God” in the same way the bloodthirsty Assyrian hordes in Isaiah were (13:3 - 5 & 10:5 - 7, 12 - 13). And the pagan

¹ Another possible translation of the Greek word for “meddler” is “revolutionary”. In the Greek, the word “even” does not appear. Certainly the word “revolutionary” fits the context better! Is it not likely the very bias of the translators, influenced by a pro-state interpretation, which made them choose against thinking that early Christians could ever have been viewed as revolutionaries? I know of no English language translation which uses the word “revolutionary”.

Persian Emperor Cyrus is even called God's "messiah" or "christ", and "shepherd" (Is. Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 4, 13). If God can say such brutal and pagan hordes are "God's boys", then he could also use the Roman "no-gods", the governing authorities, in the same way. *Seventh*, the Romans used a completely pagan system of justice, entirely retributive and punitive in its goal, totally unlike the merciful justice of God. Nonetheless, just as the justice of the pagan Assyrians was likewise brutal and entirely opposite to God's justice, still God works through the pagan justice system of a godless Roman, or any other, state. So don't resist the state, Paul says, partly because it will punish you if you do; partly because of conscience since God works through even their wrong kind of punitive justice to do "good". *Eighth*, the only thing owed anyone, including the enemy state, is *love*. And *finally*, in his words: "Nevertheless, though the arkys all be under judgment (as all of us individuals are, too), God will *use* as servant whatever arky he chooses (when he chooses and how he chooses). He will also *punish* these servants the same way - even while *loving* each and every human individual involved the whole time. That's Christian Anarchy." (p. 204)

To summarize then: "Eller's thesis is that Christian Anarchy is actually a major theme in church history. He locates a strong Old Testament background but identifies Jesus as the true founder of the tradition. Paul carried on the idea, but when the church became institutionalized as the official religion of the Roman empire, the concept was all but lost. It resurfaced in the Anabaptism of the Reformation's radical wing." (back cover) Though it can be found here and there throughout church history as well. There are also many modern-day examples.

"Christian Anarchy is the faith in God's primacy as sovereign Lord and orderer of history which is given such weight that all the big claims of self-confident human scheming and power-play become sheer distraction." (back cover) It is the ultimate rejection of any secular/religious division of the world. There is only one Lord, and hence only one legitimate Power, King, Ruler, Prime Minister or President: all and everyone else is relative and decidedly under judgment after that. "Jesus is Lord" is the cry *only* of the Christian Anarchist.