***An Ethical Analysis of The Prince by Machiavelli***

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Niccolo Machiavelli, the great Renaissance philosopher of Florence, penned a persuasive treatise on how a ruler should govern his city-state.  His book *The Prince* has become a foundational stone for political philosophy.  It has been studied by philosophers, historians, professors, and students since its completion.  *The Prince*’s political ethics, however, contradict several key Christian ethics on church-state relations, the duties of a ruler, and the duties of the people.

The Bible and *The Prince* differ regarding church-state relations.  God’s original plan for government consisted of a theocracy with God as the ruling head and a prophet or a divinely appointed leader as His spokesmen to the people.  Moses, Joshua, and the judges of Israel are perfect examples of a theocracy.  However, due to the sins of the people and their unwillingness to follow, God gave the nation of Israel a king to rule them and a high priest to meet their spiritual needs.  Church and state were closely tied in the Old Testament.  In the New Testament era, church and state were separate because the Romans had conquered Israel and put in place a pagan ruler.  During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church increased the ties of the church to the state through papal influence over kings.  The Biblical mandate for church-state relations is a divinely appointed ruler who leads the people, makes judgments based on the Bible, and prays ceaselessly for God’s help and wisdom.  The heart of the king should be close to the heart of God who is the final judge of all the nations.

The religious nature of the king was a farce in *The Prince*.  Church and state were completely separate, but the prince appeared to be religious in order to keep the commoners happy.  Machiavelli did not believe that a prince should have an ardent faith.  The prince of a state should appear to be merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright, but in reality, did not have to possess any religious moral character.  His appearance of religion should satisfy his citizens who are members of the Catholic faith.  In Machiavelli’s opinion, religion served to keep peace amongst the lower classes, and it was used as a tool to provoke good will by the people towards their ruler.  Religion was really of no consequence, because the state was all in all.

The responsibility of the ruler towards his people is another conflicting area between the Bible and Machiavelli.  According to the Bible, the state does not exist for itself but for the people.  God ordained rulers to administer, legislate, and oversee obedience of the law (see I Samuel 8:20).  The state protects the people from foreign enemies, yet also respects property rights (see I Samuel 8:20; Exodus 20:15).  As part of national protection, a divine ruler offers peace to the good citizens, but offers cause for fear to the evildoers in the nation (see Romans 13:3-4).  God’s perfect plan for His divine ruler involves a man who displays the highest virtues and the greatest moral integrity.

Machiavelli claimed that the prince does not have any true moral obligations to his people.  He believed that moral corruption could produce security and stability for the state.  Therefore, a ruler committed a moral wrong if the situation called for it.  Public and private morality were separate entities in *The Prince*.Machiavelli also declared that it was better for the prince to have vices than to possess virtues, because a virtuous prince supposedly spoiled the people with his goodness.  Although it was better for a ruler to be feared than loved, Machiavelli exhorted that the ruler should avoid hatred by his people.  He concluded by saying that since vicious rulers are not loved, the prince should endeavor to show greatness, courage, and fortitude.  Ultimately, Machiavelli’s advice is steeped in selfishness; everything the prince did was for his own good and not for the good of the people.

The responsibility of the people toward the state is one point upon which the Bible and Machiavelli agree.  God declared that people are to submit themselves to the laws of the state, because He ordained government (see I Peter 2:13; Romans 13:1-2).  God also stated that people should respect and honor those in political office (see Romans 13:7).  The primary function of the people is payment of taxes, and this belief was supported by Jesus Christ when he was here on earth.  The Bible also suggests praying for political leaders and petitioning for change if a wrong has been committed by the government.  Overall, the Biblical responsibilities of the people involved a humble, submissive servitude to a divinely appointed leader.

Machiavelli devoted little in his writing to the duties of the people under the state.  He believed that peasants provided only two basic functions.  First, peasants paid taxes so the prince could take care of the state and carry out his duties.  Money was necessary for war, for livelihood, and protection.  Second, peasants served in military service.  Above all, they were to be submissive and loyal to the state.

The ethical values of Machiavelli are completely adverse to Christian political ethics.  His ideal prince was a selfish, pragmatic leader who did whatever suited him best.  Machiavelli’s pattern for leadership does not fit the specific outline that God gave in the Bible.  Although *The Prince* should not be used for literal advice on the governing of a state, it remains a beautiful piece of Renaissance literature.