

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Called to be holy: Separation of Church and State

On 30 April 2013, I received the current *Truth for Today* programme schedule and saw that I'd been allocated today's subject. The very same day, I read in my local newspaper some interesting facts about happenings on the 30th April throughout history. The paper's 'On this day' column gave that date for when London bus routes were first numbered in 1905 and when Adolf Hitler shot himself in 1945. But it was the first item listed which caught my eye. Evidently the 30 April 311 AD was when the Christian religion was legally recognised in the Roman Empire. That brought to an end 'The Great Persecution of Christians'. Galerius and Constantine jointly issued an edict of toleration, which granted Christians the right to practise their religion. Soon after, Constantine was dramatically converted prior to the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. He claimed to have seen a cross of light, with the words 'by this win' above it in the sky, when he looked up to the sun. All his troops were ordered to adorn their shields with this Christian symbol and they won the battle, after which he claimed emperorship of the Western part of the Roman Empire. The accession of Constantine was a turning point for early Christianity because he assumed the role of 'patron for the Christian faith'. But it was the Emperor Theodosius I who established the state church of the Roman Empire with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. That's when he made Nicene Christianity the sole authorised religion under papacy. Its legacy carries on, directly or indirectly, throughout modern day Christendom.

But we need to change track at this point and ask ourselves the questions, 'What, if any, is the scriptural perspective of these events in the early church history?' and 'How did the Lord assess these early days of His church's history?' Revelation 2:1-3:22 prophetically show the successive phases of church history, especially of it here in the western world, where Christianity has been so dominant. The Lord's letter to the church at Ephesus in 2:1-7 describes the post apostolic period of Christianity, when the church immediately fell from its prime estate, which the Lord so desired. This is captured in His own most moving words: "*You have abandoned the love you had [for me] at first*" (Revelation 2:4, English Standard Version). The letter to the church in Smyrna follows in Revelation 2:8-11. It describes the persecutions of the church by the Roman Empire, starting with Nero in AD 64, and ending with the accession of Constantine in 312. The Lord's special message to Christians of that era was: "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Revelation 2:10).

This brings us to the letter to the church in Pergamum (or Pergamos), Revelation 2:12-17. Prophetically, it denotes the establishment of the church under the patronage of the secular Roman government from Constantine onwards. That is, it describes the joining together of church and state. But the word Pergamos means 'spurious marriage' and is used by the Lord Himself as a synonym for this unholy alliance. A pertinent expression, "*You dwell where Satan's throne is*", which is repeated as "*where Satan dwells*", occurs in Revelation 2:13. It tells us in no uncertain terms exactly what the spiritual barometer of this church indicated. More importantly, we're informed as to what the Lord thinks for any union between church and state. The Lord is not exaggerating here. The Roman Empire governed the known 4th Century world. Rome dominated and defined the world system, about which the Apostle John wrote: "*We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*" (1 John 5:19). However, even although this was true, the Lord was able to commend the church: "*You hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith*" (Revelation 2:13). This is a comment on the creeds, derived by the first four general councils of Christian churches, which defined the faith, when there was so much controversy about the Person of Christ.

How then does a true believer in Christ hold fast to the faith and be holy in situations where these Pergamos circumstances still prevail? It's by becoming an overcomer or a conqueror. We must listen to what the Lord says to Pergamos: "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it*" (Revelation 2:17). An overcomer in Pergamos conditions is a believer who recognises that he or she must be spiritually separate from the spurious idea of a formal link-up between church and state. This doesn't mean that an overcomer is isolated and without Christian fellowship. Not at all! Listen to how Paul instructs those who are spiritually exercised: "*Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master ... ready for every good work. So ... pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*" (2 Timothy 2:21-22).

Nowadays, an overcomer succeeds in being holy and separate from what is false despite the prevailing conditions in Christendom. There's special help from the Lord to such conquerors - He provides "*the hidden manna*" (Revelation 2:17). "*The hidden manna*" is symbolism for the beautiful life of Christ, who lived perfectly before His God and Father as He walked through the dark world of sin. He's "*the true bread from heaven*" (John 6:32). He gives eternal life and spiritual sustenance to anyone who responds to His voice through the Spirit and becomes an overcomer! The Lord also promises a special overcomer's reward - the engraved white stone, His personal appreciation of faithfulness to Him. It's really Him as the Master saying, "*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*" (Matthew 25:21).

The false part of Christendom becomes more obvious in the letter to the church in Laodicea, where it's so nauseous to the Lord that He symbolically spues it out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16). This permanent separation of true from false will occur at the Rapture, Christ's coming for His true church, when He takes her to be with Him in heaven. The false church, which started in the Pergamos period of church history when there was that initial union of church and state, continues to exist on earth during the Tribulation period after the Rapture. It's described as "*Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and mother of earth's abominations*" in Revelation 17:5. Revelation 17 and 18 clearly indicate the state, or world power, to which it's joined to be both anti-Christ and anti-God. That state is symbolically "*a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names and it had seven heads and ten horns*" (Revelation 17:3). Where do we find these symbols on display today? The new Brussels headquarters of the Council of Europe contains a bronze statue of a woman riding a beast, the so-called 'Europa bull', just as in Revelation 17:3. Also, the rival parliamentary building (the one with the Tower of Babel) in Strasbourg, features a mural of a naked woman riding a beast.

From this prophetic review of church history, it's obvious that the professing church hasn't remained true to its original heavenly calling. (And we know this to be true from what we see in Christendom.) Therefore we must go back to biblical Christianity to find out about the necessary and true separation of church from state. Very soon after the church was formed on the day of Pentecost, the hostility of the state towards the church was laid bare. Peter and John healed the lame man in the Beautiful Gate of the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-10). As they preached in Jesus the resurrection of the dead, they were arrested by the Jewish authorities (Acts 3:11-4:4). The next day they were called before the Jewish state council, who charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:5-21). Peter and John told the Sanhedrin that they would continue to do whatever was right in the sight of God (Acts 4:19). On a later occasion, "*Peter and the apostles answered [the same council], 'We must obey God rather than men'*" (Acts 5:29). Thus the church continued separate from, and in directly opposed by, the Jewish state rule.

The Lord had warned His disciples: "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin*" (John 15:18-22). Notice that He speaks about the world's hatred rather than that of the Jewish state. The early church recognised this fact in their prayer meeting following Peter and John's release in Acts 4. "*And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" - for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel'*" (Acts 4:24-27).

Hence, when the early disciples took the Gospel beyond the narrow bounds of Judea and Samaria, the opposition to, and hatred of, the church didn't cease. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles the separation between church and state remained clear and distinct. The Apostle Paul experienced this on several occasions, even though he was a Roman citizen!

- He was driven out of the region around Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:48-52);
- He had to flee from Iconium (Acts 14:4-6);
- He was stoned and left for dead in Lystra (Acts 14:19-21);
- The churches he established on his first missionary journey were left in no doubt: "*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22);
- He was again in trouble with the authorities and he was thrown into prison in Philippi, when he took the Gospel into Europe (Acts 16:19-24);
- In Thessalonica, Silas and he were accused of "*turning the world upside down*", of acting against the decrees of Caesar by saying that there was another king, Jesus (Acts 17:5-9);
- In Corinth, Paul wasn't allowed any Roman citizen rights before Gallio and was driven from the tribunal (Acts 18:12-17);

- After three years of church-planting and establishing Christianity proper in the region of Asia around Ephesus, a riot broke out in the city. Paul had to make a quick exit to save his life (Acts 19);
- Then he only managed three months in Greece before the Jews plotted against him (Acts 20:3);
- Sometime later, he only was free for a few days in Jerusalem before he was arrested whilst in the temple precincts (Acts 21:27-23:11);
- Thereafter he remained a prisoner of various kings and of Roman state officials, even though no real charges could be made against him (Acts 24-28);
- Finally, he was martyred for his faith by Emperor Nero. Just a short time before, he'd written to Timothy indicating that this would happen: *"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing"* (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about this issue of separation of church from state. In Philippians 3:19-20, he contrasts professing Christians, who have their *"minds set on earthly things"*, with true believers and their real heavenly citizenship. The Amplified Bible helpfully expands Philippians 3:20: *"But we are citizens of the state (commonwealth, homeland) which is in heaven, and from it also we earnestly and patiently await [the coming of] the Lord Jesus Christ (the Messiah) as Saviour."* But accompanying this exalted status of heavenly citizenship are demands for proper heavenly behaviour. Paul exhorted the Philippians in Philippians 1:27 *"Be sure as [heavenly] citizens so to conduct yourselves [that] your manner of life [will be] worthy of the ... Gospel ... that you are standing firm in united spirit and purpose, striving side by side and contending with a single mind for the faith of the ... Gospel."*

Although our citizenship is in heaven, we're not to be completely unconcerned about the activities of the country we live in. However we must keep in mind that Paul and these early believers weren't revolutionaries but missionaries. We must also bear in mind that the Lord Jesus Himself said to His Father in John 17:14-17 that those who follow Him would be in the world but not of the world.

As we see the injustices that exist in our world we may wish to do something about them. In Great Britain today, our government is changing laws which have been based on God's standards outlined in Scripture. Sin is encouraged and righteousness is discriminated against - so what should we do? If we want to make a lasting difference we need not be involved in politics. But we must be involved in preaching the Gospel and in praying for the state government. We must not be aggressive or hostile towards the state. Remember the example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He did not defend Himself before Pilate, who asked Jesus what He had done to have caused the Jews to demand His death. *"Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world'"* (John 18:36, English Standard Version).

Prayer is the only weapon to be used (see Ephesians 6:14-18). Prayer for rulers and governments is the essential feature of behaviour which is becoming to heavenly citizens. Paul enjoined the Philippian church to be united in their witness as a church and prayer is an integral part of church life. Paul emphasises this in 1 Timothy 2:1-8, where he tells his 'son in the faith' that prayer is to be the first priority of the activities of a local church. He explains that prayer is to be made specifically for kings and all who are in high positions, which includes governments. This is to the end that believers can then enjoy peace and quiet lives. Such prayer brings pleasure to God our Saviour. *"[He] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time"* (1 Timothy 2:4-6). In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul goes on to point out that the church of the living God is a pillar, or witness, and a buttress, or support, of the truth. A local church can only be truly effective in promoting the truth if it has a genuine desire for people to be saved through hearing the Gospel. A holy distinction between it and the state is also necessary to achieve these objectives. As a MP was recently reported to have said, 'Christianity is about absolute truth, politics is all about compromise!'

Finally, there are other helpful New Testament passages which deal with the individual believer's attitude and behaviour towards the state. In Romans 12:2, Paul describes the negative aspect, then the positive, of our sanctification. Negatively, we mustn't allow the world to squeeze us into its mould. Positively, we must strive to do the will of God by an on-going process of transformation - the renewal of our minds, which comes about through prayer and study of the Scriptures. In Romans 13:1-7 he goes on to the practical aspects of God's will in respect to the state. For conscience sake, a believer should be subject to the governing authorities on the understanding that they've been ordained by God Himself. This means we must pay our taxes, including council taxes and indirect taxes, such as VAT. We must also give proper respect and honour to those who rule over us.

Peter is very direct with his exhortations: *"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people*

who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour [those ruling in government]" (1 Peter 2:13-17). Peter says to behave in this godly way is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, who left us His example to follow (1 Peter 2:21). In 1 Peter 2:11, Peter urges us to be true sojourners and exiles or pilgrims, just like those worthies of faith in Hebrews 11 - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who "acknowledged they were strangers and exiles on the earth ... they desire[d] a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:13, 16). And Moses, who "considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:26).

The call of the Lord Jesus to be in the world but not of it still challenges us today. I pray that the Scriptures we've considered today will help us in better understanding of our position. Our separation to Christ needs to be seen not only in our civil life but also in our church life.

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