

Honor The Emperor

It was a time of “fiery trials” for disciples as the cruel wrath of Nero was turned toward them. Disciples had suffered persecutions from various sources throughout their approximate 35-year history but this was the first imperial persecution. The church would need encouragement, so Peter wrote, “*To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*” Because this was the area of much of Paul’s work, it has been suggested that this letter possibly could have been written and sent by messengers to comfort them at Paul’s martyrdom.

Encouraging them to proper conduct as they braced themselves for and endured bloody persecutions brought by false accusations of Nero, Peter gave this startling exhortation: “*Honor the emperor*” (1 Peter 2:17).

“What! Honor the emperor! Peter, you must be out of your mind! How could you make such an odious demand of us? His armies continue to occupy Judea and our holy city, Jerusalem. He burdens us with taxes to support his military conquests and persecutions of innocent believers. Our taxes support pagan religions. The populace worships him as a god, confessing ‘Caesar is Lord!’ Peter, you are asking us to violate our own consciences by supporting evil through taxes and submissive conduct. Honor that corrupt, evil man! No way!” Would you have expected some such response?

Misunderstandings causing conflict between religion and civil government were not new. It was needful for the child Jesus to escape the sword of his own earthly king. The Magi had inquired, “*Where is he that is born king of the Jews?*” That got Herod’s attention. He, being a Jew, should have looked for and welcomed the son of David to sit on David’s throne, but he thought only in terms of his own literal throne being threatened. So, he had the infants slaughtered.

The great temptation of Jesus in the wilderness was for him to use his powers to bring all people into awesome subjection and to provide for their physical needs under his reign as an earthly king. Thus he would have avoided the cross, and a temporal kingdom would have supplanted the eternal kingdom, offering no escape from sin and death.

Historically, Israel had been ruled in a combined political-religious system administered by prophets, priest, Levites, and later with kings, but at that time they were subjugated to Rome, a galling situation for Jews. The Jews expected a Messiah who would deliver them from Rome. When they heard John the Baptist proclaim, “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” they interpreted it as, “The restoration of David’s earthly throne is at hand.” They would be freed from Rome! In his time of popularity, the people were ready to crown him as their king

Jesus gave no encouragement to that. He selected no army to defend or empower himself.

All along, Jesus stressed the spiritual nature of his reign. In veiled figures his parables were emphasizing the spiritual character of the kingdom of heaven, yet their earthly expectations were so strong as to survive his death and resurrection. How sad it is that even today many believers expect him to return and reign over an earthly kingdom.

There is reason to believe that Luke wrote to Theophilus, a Roman official, in order to dissociate the Christians from the nationalistic Jews who resisted Rome. So, very early, in telling of John the Baptist's proclaiming of the kingdom of heaven, Luke wrote that, "*Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than is appointed you.'* Soldiers also asked him, '*And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages'*" (Luke 3:12-14). It is evident that John planted no seed of resistance by siding against Rome's tax collectors or by encouraging Roman soldiers to resign or desert the army that occupied and oppressed their land. It is Luke who mentions the Jewish leaders making false accusations before Pilate, "*We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar*" (Luke 23:2).

In an effort to entrap Jesus, Pharisees asked him, "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*" After they had to admit that Caesar's image was on their coinage, he declared, "*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*" (Matt. 22:15-22).

All of this was disappointing and galling to the rulers among the Jews who themselves resisted Rome, so they testified at his trial that Jesus was a revolutionary threat to Rome. Pilate saw their political deceit and would have released Jesus had the Jews not intimated that it would reflect on Pilate's own allegiance to the emperor.

Years pass as the church spreads and the Jews continue to resist Roman rule. Because the early disciples were Jews, the Romans associated them with the revolutionary disturbances caused by the Judean Jews. So persecutions continued to escalate throughout the empire. How should the disciples react to this? The leaders among the believers advocated "political correctness" rather than giving the Romans any reason to think that the church was politically involved. Both Peter and Paul, prominent among the disciples, made sure that their writings could not be interpreted as revolutionary against the political system.

For an example, though we can be confident that they (and Jesus) had deep feelings about slavery, they did not advocate the church becoming a political force to demand freedom of slaves by governmental decree. They paid taxes in support of Rome where slavery was common. They continued to honor the emperor while relying upon the spiritual power of their teaching to influence corrupt societies so that slavery and other injustices would be remedied. History has proved the wisdom of their course of action.

In later years Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. Unable to receive a fair trial in Judea, he appealed to Caesar, and by doing so he expressed respect for Roman justice and the

emperor. It will do no harm to imagine that Theophilus might have been in charge of Paul's defense in the imperial court. He could present Luke's writings as evidence that the disciples were not political subversives or revolutionaries. Then, we can wonder, if the defense read to the court the following words from Paul's epistle to the Roman disciples:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (Romans 13:1-7). The defense could rest its case.

Peter was the other “big name” associated with those called Christians. With the persecutions of the believers throughout the empire, he could not expect to escape the wrath of the emperor. We do not know that he was ever in Rome but, at least, tradition is strong that he was crucified for his faith and leadership. He, like Paul, had written to instruct disciples far and wide that which could be read in his own defense in his trial:

“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 wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext of evil; but live as servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:13-14. Please read the context.).

Though governments differ in various countries today, all believing citizens should be able to gain practical guidance from these Scriptural references. Perverse, evil, and oppressive men may be in power. We may consider them unworthy of respect as men, but we are called upon to honor them because of the office they hold. Disciples should promote peace without becoming subversive to the society and government.

When the church tries to become a political power instead of a spiritual influence, it has lost sight of its mission. Perhaps the worst thing that has happened to Christianity is when the church gained power in the Roman Empire through a state religion. Individuals should work for improvement in society, but when they organize into a political movement, they exceed their bounds. Though effort has been made in recent times in our country to band all believers together for political influence, the most evident result has been the disdain attached generally to the term “the religious right.”

Governments have policies that violate the consciences of sincerest citizens. Maybe it is support of the death penalty, warfare, abortion, assisted suicide, prostitution, special rights granted homosexuals, stem cell use, cloning, or social injustice. Does that give offended persons the right to refuse to pay taxes, to disregard the laws of the land, to dishonor the rulers, or to undermine the government? Apostolic teaching and example would rule against that.

Our influence must be through example and teaching. It is not likely, for example, that the “pro-life” movement will ever eradicate abortion by legislation. But they can boldly teach sexual morality, parental responsibility, sacredness of life, and sanctity of marriage while providing counseling, adoption services, and other supportive services. As these spiritual concepts and precepts are taught and practiced sincerely, they should have more positive effect than enforced legislation.

In many countries past and present, the citizen had little voice and was prohibited from criticizing the government. The teaching of Peter and Paul would have special application for them. In our democratic republic we are blessed with freedom of speech to criticize the government and its officials. We can become politically active, promoting ideas, communicating with our representatives, and voting to retain or dismiss them. This is a great blessing for us individually. But the church as an organized group must not be lured into political activity because campaigns tend to become dirty and demeaning, it divides sentiment toward religion along party lines, and seeks to make religion legislative.

(Cecil Hook; January 1, 2002) []