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The believer and obedience to the State

The Believer



and obedience to the State

A sermon preached by Rev. Ivan Foster at the 1998 Kilskeery Annual Conference September 18th -20th.

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men, Acts 5:29.

Our conference messages have been very timely. The subjects were chosen in the springtime of this year, but providentially they have been very much suited to a people who are witnessing the establishment of a government here in Northern Ireland that is built upon lies and deception and which must be viewed as a threat to Christian values and liberties. *When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn*, Proverbs 29:2. The British Government is determined to place in power, here in Northern Ireland, those who have come to their position within the political scene by murder and terror. Such actions can result only in grief

and mourning for the righteous. The word *mourn* in Proverbs 29:2 is the same word as *sigh* in Exodus 2:23. That tells us just what awaits those who come under the rule of the wicked. *And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage*.

We have had it demonstrated in our conference that the spirit of apostasy has pervaded the nations. Governments and peoples are stirring and increasing in their rebellion against God. We see Psalm 2 coming to pass before our eyes. *Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against*

his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us, Psalm 2:1-3. The changes in legislation that make legal what God has declared unlawful, such as sodomy and abortion, and make illegal what God requires of men, such as the forthright denouncing of sodomy and the proper disciplining of children, are evidence of antichristianity stirring in the parliaments of Europe. Believers will wish to have no part in any such rebellion, so consequently they will be brought into confrontation with any government that is under the influence of this spirit of apostasy. It was in just such circumstances that the apostles found themselves, in the portion of Holy Writ before us. In obedience to Christ, they had begun to preach the gospel, much to the annoyance of the rulers who had crucified the Saviour. Those same rulers were now determined to silence the apostles and stop their spreading of the gospel message. Notice that:

I. THE APOSTLES ACKNOWLEDGED THE RIGHT OF THE AUTHORITIES TO ARREST THEM AND INTERROGATE THEM

1. They did not resist arrest. They could have done so, for it is clear that there was



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sizeable support for them amongst the people, verse 26. Multitudes had been converted since the day of Pentecost, 2:41,47; 4:4; 5:14. The apostles made no effort to stir their supporters to oppose their arrest. Christians should not refuse to answer when charges are laid against them. Paul, in Acts 25:11, shows us the respect that we should have for magistrates for the sake of their God-ordained office, even when the holders of the office are evil men.

Like so many confrontations, this one began gradually. In chapter 4, we see the beginnings of the rulers' annoyance with the message of the gospel, verses 1-2. It was then also that the apostles declared their obligation to obey God, irrespective of man's laws. *But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard*, Acts 4:19-20. As the opposition to their witness increased, so too does their boldness in declaring their duty to obey God first. In our text is a very succinct and bold proclamation of this most important truth.

2. They spoke respectfully to those in authority. *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel*, Acts 4:8. Here is respect for the ruler. Notice these respectful words were uttered by a man full of the Holy Ghost. Even though these men were guilty of a great crime, the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, nevertheless the apostles, for the sake of their office, spoke respectfully to them.

Notice also that:

II. CIVIL AUTHORITY MAY COMMAND THAT WHICH IS CONTRARY TO GOD'S WILL

That is what the case is here. The interests of those in government were the direct opposite of the interests of God.

1. How wicked are those rulers to whom the gospel is an embarrassment! *Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us*, verse 28. The gospel message condemned these men and their policies. That is why they sought to silence the apostles. Here is the basis of all persecution.

How long will preachers be allowed to condemn the murderous atrocities of the IRA and implicate Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness in that murder campaign, when once these men have become ensconced in power? Not long, I am sure.

2. How wicked are those men who would silence God's truth, in order to continue in sin. Such was the aim of these men. They saw the power of God accompanying the apostles but remained stubborn in their Christ-rejection.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it, Acts 4:13-14.

It is a sin most common. Many withdraw from under the gospel in order to continue in their sin untroubled and undisturbed. The spirit that moved and motivated the evil rulers in



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the days of the apostles is more common than most people believe. It is found amongst sinners in every gospel-preaching church.

3. When civil authority opposes the gospel then dark times are ahead . Such a confrontation has not been known in any great measure in Great Britain since the end of the 17th century. Here in Ulster, there has always been the strong opposition of Roman Catholicism, which has broken forth into bloody rebellion and massacre on a number of occasions such as in 1798 and the early part of this century and, of course, over the last thirty years. Nevertheless, we have enjoyed a great measure of peace and tranquillity. But the signs are that such blessings are drawing to a close and a dark night will engulf the United Kingdom.

Notice also that:

III. TO THE BELIEVER GOD'S WORD IS THE SUPREME AUTHORITY

The Sanhedrin was the highest court in Israel yet the apostles were ready to defy it in order to carry out God's command.

1. The free and full declaration of the gospel has the highest authority. It had the seal of the One Who had been exalted with God's right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour. It was by His command that the gospel is preached and none, neither king nor pope, can rescind that command.

We ought to note that no one can enjoy the saving power of the Lord Jesus who has not submitted to His Princely authority. Today, many would call themselves "Christians" who live in defiance of Christ's law. That cannot be. It is as a Prince and Saviour that Christ grants repentance. *Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins* , Acts 5:31. He must be obeyed if you are to be saved.

2. Providential deliverances have emphasised this authority . Verses 19-20. When the rulers imprisoned the apostles, the Lord released them. Heaven over-ruled earth's lower court. That same divine intervention took place later, as recorded in Acts 12:7-10. Indeed, history records many occasions when the direct intervention of God frustrated the decrees of His enemies. The Saviour's return to this earth in power and glory will be the final demonstration of His authority over rebellious men.

3. The title given the gospel underscores its authority. The gospel is called the words of life. Christ is the LIFE and the gospel is His Word. The proclamation of these words has the approval of heaven and must continue, irrespective of the oppositions of men.

IV. IT IS AN HONOUR AND JOY TO STAND AGAINST RULERS FOR CHRIST

1. We are His witnesses. This is our solemn duty from which no man has the right to turn us. *And we are his witnesses of these things* , Acts 5:32. Into the hands of God's people God has entrusted the story of the Saviour's birth, life, death and resurrection and it must be told no matter what. The word for witness (*martus*) is the word from which we get our word martyr. Because witnessing for Christ has ever been a task linked to suffering it



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has taken on that meaning. To stand amidst the hottest fire is an honour from which no Christian should shrink.

2. It is to such obedient believers that the Holy Ghost is given . Obedience always brings a fresh enduement of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The times of persecution for the church of Christ have also been the times of overflowing grace amongst the persecuted. The holy defiance of the disciples recorded in Acts 4:23-30 is followed by a fresh outpouring of the Holy Ghost. That too was the experience of our own church in the late 60s and early 70s. May the Lord grant us such a spirit of obedience again!

3. Joy is the fruit of such obedience. *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name* , verse 41. They joyfully continued in defiance of men and obedience of God. A people endued with such a spirit is irrepressible! *The joy of the LORD is your strength*, Nehemiah 8:10. He whom the Lord makes happy, He also makes strong. *The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him* , Psalm 28:7. It is no coincidence that in this day of weakness there is also a dearth of real Holy Ghost joy. Oh for the experience of Paul and Silas in the midst of their afflictions! *And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them* , Acts 16:25.

May the Lord again be pleased to pour upon His people the Spirit of grace and supplication and power, that we might be saved from rejecting the honour of standing for the Saviour and creeping away in shame!