

POLITICS AND RELIGION by Stephen Perks

Politics and religion are inseparable. This fact alone accounts for the persecution of the early Church by the Roman State. Francis Legge stated the facts clearly when he wrote: “The officials of the Roman Empire in time of persecution sought to force the Christians to sacrifice, not to any of the heathen gods, but to the Genius of the Emperor and the Fortune of the city of Rome; and at all times the Christians’ refusal was looked upon not as a religious but as a political offence.” At the trial of Christ the chief priests of the Jews said to the officials of the Roman Empire: “We have no king but Caesar” (Jn 19:15). The early Christians, when faced with the same question, replied: “We have another King. His name is Jesus Christ.” The Romans understood what this meant: either Jesus would bow the knee to Caesar or Caesar would have to bow the knee to Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 19:12). The Church faces this same question again today, and in a way that she has not had to face it since the days of the Roman emperors. Who is Lord: Christ or Caesar? Christ or the modern secular State? There was, and is, no third option, no “third way.” This was, and still is, a *political* issue. Jesus Christ was victorious in his struggle with the Roman State. He will be victorious in his struggle with the modern secular State. The only question that remains is this: on whose side will *you* stand? Whom are *you* for? Whom will *you* obey? The Lord Jesus Christ or the modern idolatrous secular State?

Christianity is not a private devotional cult, a worship hobby, that could find a quiet place in the greater context of ancient Roman idolatry. Christianity is not comparable with the mystery cults that were popular in ancient Rome. For the early Church, merely adding Christ to the Roman pantheon—a tactic that was tried, unsuccessfully, by at least two emperors—would have been a denial of his lordship and sovereignty and would have successfully neutralised Christianity as a threat to the Roman State. But Christianity is more than a devotional cult. It is a religion that structures the whole of man’s life. Both the early Church and the Roman State understood this. Modern Christians on the whole have signally failed to understand this. And it is this failure that accounts for the decline of Christianity in the West today.

Christ does not merely demand that we refrain from burning the incense to Caesar; he demands that Caesar burn the incense to him and acknowledge his lordship and sovereignty over Rome and the empire. To burn the incense to Caesar was to acknowledge that Caesar was the political overlord. For Christians, to refuse to burn the incense meant that Jesus Christ is the political overlord, the King of kings to whom all kings must bow, Caesar included. There is no area of religious neutrality anywhere in the created order. Politics is not a religiously neutral enterprise, it is an intensely religious enterprise. Burning the incense was a religious act of political submission. Refusing to burn the incense was not a religious crime in the narrow sense (a devotional offence); it was, rather, a religious act of political rebellion against Rome.

The Church in the twenty-first century must recognise this truth and begin living in terms of it, as did the early Church, by challenging the political idolatry that is destroying the Western world today. Only when the Church awakens from the deadening slumber that has overtaken her and proclaims once more the lordship and sovereignty of Jesus Christ over the whole of life, including the political realm, will the world be delivered from its slavery and bondage to sin as manifested today in the politics of rebellion against God; and only then will the world experience real freedom, the glorious liberty that the gospel of God brings to all nations that submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The law and gospel of God is a public truth, a light not only for man’s personal devotions but also for the government of the nations. It must inform all that we think, say and do, as individuals *and* as nations. Only when submission to the Lord Jesus Christ becomes a reality in the life of the *nations* of the earth can it be said that the Great Commission is being fulfilled, since the Great Commission is not a command to disciple *individuals* from among the nations, but a command to disciple the very nations themselves.