

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 6

*One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"*

*Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.'<sup>8</sup> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'*

*So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"*  
(Luke 14:14-24, NRSV)

Way back in part 4 of this series (2 months ago), I mentioned how in the year 313, the situation for Christians in the world changed. Christians had been a mostly underground group up to this time, often unnoticed, sometimes directly attacked by those in power. But the new Roman Emperor Constantine not only issued an edict that protected Christians in the Roman Empire, he went on in 325 to invite the Bishops to come together to resolve some of the disputes among Christians. An early form of the Nicene Creed was then adopted (it was completed in 381). But now that the Christian church was protected, and its leaders had prestige in their communities, it became almost assumed that those who didn't agree with the majority were either forced to change their views or face exile or execution.

In the year 380, the Roman Emperor Theodosius issued an edict that now made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. So now the church went from being persecuted, to being tolerated, to now able to persecute any who disagreed with it. So back to my earlier question: **Was Jesus' model of voluntary servitude and self-denial simply meant for (A) an ancient day and a slave society, or is it meant for (B) all Christian living, whether slave or free?** The majority of Christians at that time would likely have answered A.

I think one of the clearest examples of this is in a letter written by Saint Augustine in the year 416. Augustine is now a Bishop, which by this time makes him among the most powerful people in his community. He commented on the passage in John 6:66-67, when many of His disciples left Jesus:

**...at that time the Church was only beginning to burst into life from the recently planted seed, and that there was not yet fulfilled in her the prophecy: 'All kings shall fall down before Him; yea, all nations shall serve Him' (Psalm 72:11); and it is in proportion to the more enlarged accomplishment of this prophecy that the Church wields greater power, so that she may not only invite, but even compel men to embrace what is good."**

(St Augustine, Letter #173, Letter to Donatus, year 416)

He then goes on to offer his interpretation of the Luke 14 passage above; that when the slave goes out to invite in the poor and other outcasts, this represents the earlier church, but then when the slave is

ordered to “compel” people to come to the banquet, this represents the church of Augustine’s time, and he understood “compel” to mean that people are actually forced to attend (though the people of Jesus’ time would not have understood it that way):

**Mark, now, how it was said in regard to those who came first, “bring them in”; it was not said, “compel them to come in,”—by which was signified the incipient condition of the Church, when it was only growing towards the position in which it would have strength to compel men to come in. Accordingly, because it was right that when the Church had been strengthened, both in power and in extent, men should be compelled to come in to the feast of everlasting salvation, it was afterwards added in the parable, “The servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the Lord said unto the servants, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in.”**

(St Augustine, Letter #173, Letter to Donatus, year 416)

Augustine was born in the year 354, converted to Christianity in 386, became a priest in 391, and then Bishop in 395 and remained that until his death in 430. The world he lived in was a predominantly Christian world, where Christians had the power to enforce Christian “laws,” such as forced baptisms, and punish persons who broke them. So it is not surprising that Augustine and others would have assumed this was the way Christianity was meant to progress. At the time, the common belief was that the time of the book of Revelation had passed, and now they were living in the time of the millennium (Revelation 20:4-6).

It might not surprise you that I find this view problematic, considering what I have written in parts 4 and 5. If it had been Jesus’ intention to create a Christianity that wielded the power of nations, He could have come into the world as royalty, or at least worked His way into a position of power. But He goes through life as a nobody in the political scene, remembered only because of poor, illiterate people who kept His witness alive. In Mark 10:42-43, He says that His disciples are NOT to be like the Gentiles who exercise power over others. In Matthew 4:8-10 and Luke 4:5-8 He rejects the offer of Satan to give Him the kingdoms of the world. There are instances in the Bible where one can make the case that an old tradition has run its course and needs to be replaced, but there is no inkling of that in this case (a side note: in Islam this happens: within the Qur’an there is a transition from a powerless community to one of power and conquest – but not in our Bible).

So it is my judgment (until I am shown otherwise) that this change from a servant community to a community of power happened without Biblical support, and this view of Christianity has dominated ever since...

But with some exceptions. The monastic movement (men becoming monks, women becoming nuns and living in separate communities) arose almost immediately as the church became powerful. Years later, as Protestant thinkers began challenging some of the traditions of the church, there were some who challenged the marriage of Church and State. In the next article (maybe the last in this series... maybe) I will focus on these.

Yours in Christ,

