

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 4

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."
(Mark 10:42-45, NRSV)

I mentioned in the last part that during the Old Testament times when Israel was under foreign rule, the focus was less on the actions of their captors and more on their own behavior. In the New Testament, this pattern continues.

During the time of the New Testament, the nation of Israel could hardly be called a nation. They were occupied by the Romans, they had to do whatever Romans told them to do, and paid taxes to their Roman overlords. Even after the resurrection, as the gospel was spread to Asia, and Greece, and even to Rome, they were still under Roman rule. The only places where Jews had any kind of power or authority was within their own villages and households, and only as long as they didn't attract attention from the Romans. Most of the conquered peoples in the Roman empire seemed to accept their lot, especially since Rome generally gave former countries a lot of latitude to govern their own affairs. But Jews had a unique stubbornness that made them particularly troublesome for the Romans. Many objected to Herod and his sons as their rulers, since they were not Jewish. Also, widespread was the belief in a Messiah who would bring them freedom. In the year 6, a would-be Messiah named Judas the Galilean led a revolt that failed, and as a result, Rome decided to govern Jerusalem directly. So then there were a series of Roman governors of Jerusalem, including Pontius Pilate from the years 26-37.

This was the world in which Jesus stepped into. The common people dreamed of an independent nation of Israel, just like in the days of King David. However, there were also Jews who flourished during this time, usually by collaborating with their Roman superiors. Tax collectors and Priest might have wished for full independence, but most were likely satisfied with their position of influence and power, at least over the poorer people of the land.

With this history in mind, I began to understand some of Jesus' words differently:

"But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

(Matthew 5:39-41, also Luke 6:29, NRSV)

When I first remembered hearing this passage, I thought it sounded like rather cowardly advice; but in its context I see that it is practical and sensible advice. No one who got into a fight with a Roman, or even their Jewish slave master, could expect to win. And having weapons didn't help either, because eventually you would be greatly outnumbered:

Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."
(Matthew 26:52, NRSV)

So this is the way I began to look at Jesus' ministry, practical living for His time. But is that all there is to it? Here arises one of the most important questions of history: Was Jesus' model of voluntary servitude and self-denial simply meant for an ancient day and a slave society, or is it meant for all Christian living, whether slave or free? The way we have answered that question over the centuries has led to splits within the Christian church, and indirectly to the founding of the United States.

The New Testament writers were committed to Jesus' model of ministry and suffering:

As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps.

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth." When He was abused, He did not return abuse; when He suffered, He did not threaten; but He entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly.

(1 Peter 2:16-23, NRSV)

Through the first 250 years of Christianity, the people called Christians had no political power; they were interested only in living lives of service to others, and never placing any demands on other people.

But then in 313, the situation changed. The Roman Emperor himself became a Christian and issued an edict that no longer were Christians to be persecuted for their faith. Up to that time, the Christian community had Bishops and other leaders who directed them, but they did not have the power to make people do anything; they were free to leave the community if they chose, and especially in times of persecution, many made that choice. But now Bishops and other church leaders had the respect of the government and a whole new level of influence. So now Christians had the ability to force people to behave in certain ways; they had power. So now the question loomed large: 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?

Alas! I get to the big question just as I am running out of room to write... I will need another series of articles to unpack this, but let me offer this brief, oversimplified, synopsis of how history has answered this question:

The Catholic Church (beginning in the 300s) and the Orthodox Church: A

The Monastic movements (monks and nuns): B

The Protestants: Luther, Reformed, and English: A

The Anabaptists: Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites, Amish: B

The founding of the United States: a combination of A & B

Politicized United States and American Christianity today: A

The future of Christianity: ??

Yours in Christ,

