

The Cross Confronts The World System - Religious and Political - January 1988

'More wars result from religious bigotry or political intrigue than anything else.' So says the typical secular humanist.

Bring religion and politics into the conversation at work, in the pub or at home and people start getting hot under the collar. 'Don't let's spoil things by getting into religion/politics' is the usual remark.

Opting out

It's also true that, however much the politician tries to distance himself from religion or the clergyman from politics, the two constantly find themselves embroiled in issues together. This has happened in recent debates in Britain concerning inner cities, immigration law, the Abortion Bill, the government's national campaign on AIDS, military defence, homosexuality and Britain's refusal to implement sanctions against South Africa. Some Christians retreat from any issue that is likely to get them involved in politics. They wrongly apply the scripture about good soldiers of Jesus Christ not entangling themselves with the affairs of this world (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

Not only does their interpretation keep them disentangled, but it blinds them to the sight of poverty, deafens them to the cries of the hurting and prevents them speaking out on the great moral issues of our time.

Confrontation

Real commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ will at some time or other put you and me into conflict with either religion or politics.

The New Testament shows that the life and ministry of Jesus was characterised by ecclesiastical and political controversy. The book of Acts portrays the infant church in continuous difficulty with the leaders of the day.

It's time we Christians woke up to the fact that to preach and demonstrate the message of God's kingdom in this age will at times involve conflict with ecclesiastical and political interests. Why? Isaiah says that the foundations of God's throne are justice and righteousness (see Isaiah 9:7). The message of justice and righteousness in our time provides the solid ground beneath our feet for establishing the kingdom of God.

Justice will challenge injustice everywhere, demanding change within political policies that threaten human dignity by racism, devalue human life by abortion and sentence the disadvantaged to a never-ending life in the poverty trap.

Righteousness will continually confront institutionalised Christianity with the responsibility of being clear in its example and uncompromising in its message.

'Get rid of Jesus'

Jesus didn't die broken-hearted because the ordinary people of his day had failed to respond to his message. He didn't die a disillusioned or despondent preacher rejected by his congregation. In human terms, he was cut short in the prime of life, murdered at the height of his ministerial popularity.

The decision was taken by people who felt threatened by him, people who read the signs of their time well. They realised that he would never fade away through lack of followers. The whole world would soon be listening. And if the world believed what he said, the implications for clergyman and politician alike were horrific — both would fall.

Religious opposition

The cross was the point to which all history had been heading. It was at the cross that the full message of the kingdom of God met head-on the unleashed power of the kingdom of darkness.

Behind the decision to crucify Jesus was the self-protecting power of institutionalised religion, epitomised in Caiaphas, the high priest (see Matthew 26:57-68). His commitment to protecting the religious establishment and his concern for theological tradition both demanded that he charge Jesus with blasphemy.

He may have given the appearance of deep concern for the temple and for God, but at heart he was a religious politician out to maintain his power-base. A master of the emotional and intellectual manipulation of people, he knew how to use a reluctant Pilate to protect his religious self-interests.

Institutionalised religion in every generation has proved itself a dark world of intrigue controlled by shrewd, unscrupulous professionals who manipulate their more naïve fellow ministers into positions of silence. Like the believing priests of Jesus' day, they found themselves unwittingly used as support for powerful opposition to true righteousness, biblical obedience and kingdom justice. There is no room for religious professionalism in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Its simplicity exposes all empty religious traditions.

Christ's gospel of compassion and the miraculous laid bare the cold emptiness of Judaism. Because of this, Caiaphas had to move quickly.

Political opposition

Pilate had held office for ten years as governor of Judea (Luke 3:1). He had no wish to see the political landscape disturbed. Devoid of principle and without commitment of faith to any religion, Pilate was anxious to keep religious issues to a minimum. In the true tradition of the professional politician, he sought to steer clear of religious debate or ecclesiastical controversy. He was representative of a world power that by this time had become so weakened through corrupt living that money, status and military might were his main considerations.

To Pilate, the Jews — with their religious debates and demands — were a troublesome people. His contempt for them came to the surface at the trial of Jesus, culminating in his flippant dismissal of responsibility for Jesus' death by his symbolic act of washing his hands of the whole affair. His failure to enact justice for the only one who could truly be called just revealed a sin-stained heart that no external washing could ever cleanse.

Power at the cross

The attitude shown by Caiaphas and Pilate is with us today. Some people's sense of values is so distorted and compromised that they cannot tolerate Jesus Christ.

The cross was the final effort of the religious and political systems to extinguish for ever the light that was shining in their darkness. Yet Christians rejoice that God allowed such manoeuvring to further his own divine purpose.

Shortly after standing before Caiaphas and the other religious leaders who had arrested them, Peter and John joined the believers in praying, 'Sovereign Lord, . . . Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (Acts 4:24, 27-28).

Little did the scheming leaders realise it when they crucified Jesus, but the moment of God's greatest weakness proved to have more impact than their moment of greatest power. Their cunning intrigues were no match for the wisdom of God.

End of darkness

What started with 120 people embracing the cross in the joy of his resurrection now encircles the globe with millions of born-again, Spirit-filled, Christ-centred people.

The cross proved once for all that neither the religious nor the political world has room for the message of

Christ. The resurrection showed something else: Christ is greater than the religious and political worlds combined —and, through those who embrace the cross, he confronts both in every generation.

Those who are denied basic human freedom and dignity through racism, communism, fascism or capitalism can find hope in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of this world's darkness is coming to its end, while we who know Christ can rejoice that we are 'receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28).