

Hartford Bible Students

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What Does the Bible Say About Church and Government?

Jesus stated emphatically to his disciples that his Kingdom was not of this world. (John 18:36) Since that time, Jesus' faithful followers have been waiting patiently for this Kingdom and its rightful head — remaining separate from the politics of the world. This important teaching, however, seems to have been forgotten.

Babylon: A Prophetic Picture

Babylon is first noted in the Old Testament as a great and powerful city in the days of the Hebrew prophets. These prophets warned God's people of the consequence of living carelessly and forgetting their covenant to serve God alone. Because they did not listen to the prophets and fell into the ways of the world, God allowed Israel to be taken captive by ancient Babylon

Babylon appears again in the Book of Revelation, this time in symbol as an oppressive force which would quickly arise upon the early church and persecute the disciples of Christ. (Revelation 17:2-6) As Israel of old is a symbolic picture of spiritual Israel during the Gospel era, so ancient Babylon is a picture of a powerful system which would take Christians captive. As the Israelites compromised with their captors by mixing their true religion with pagan practices, so too, many spiritual Israelites became careless, mixing true Christianity with the false practices of Babylon the Great. Thus, Babylon has become a symbol of confusion — a mixture of truth and error — a mixture of Christianity with the world. In the picture, the treasures, which had been given to natural Israel as a sacred trust, were taken captive to Babylon of old: "And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD... all these he [Nebuchadnezzar] brought to Babylon." (2 Chronicles 36:18) The treasures of the Lord were those sacred items used in the Temple. (Exodus 25:22) Similarly, the beautiful truths — treasures — entrusted to the early followers of Christ would soon become adulterated with the practices and governments of this world and of an assortment of pagan religions. The Apostle Paul referred to this careless condition which would arise in the early church and would lead the disciples of Christ captive to a worldly spirit. The second coming of Christ "...shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of

sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself... so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God..." (See 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8) Has this prophecy been fulfilled? Was there a time when the church was dominated by one who exalted himself in the temple — the church? Was there ever a great falling away where the church mingled with the world and caused spiritual Israel to compromise its truth and purity? The answer is yes.

Rise of the Holy Roman Empire

The great alliance of church and state is an indisputable fact of history. Roman persecution of the early church over the first three centuries weakened the resolve of many Christians, and when Constantine converted to Christianity, ambitious church leaders saw this as an opportunity to gain favor and partnership with their former persecutors. After heavy persecutions upon Christians in the first few centuries, perceived providence seemed to open a door of relief. Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313) and Christians were brought into favor with the Emperor. The great Roman Empire first courted an alliance with Christians to keep the Empire stable, but soon after, with the encouragement of corrupt bishops, compelled adherence to the church. After only three centuries of waiting for the return of Christ, many church leaders, eager for power, were willing to accept this union of church and state. A marriage began between church and state. By A.D. 800 the church was not only fully married to the Roman Empire, but actually lording over it. Revelation calls this Babylonish mixture harlotry. (Revelation 2:2-6; 17:5) The once pure church, betrothed to Christ, her heavenly bridegroom, began to reign without him, setting up her own kingdom and marrying the kingdoms of this world. How quickly the admonition of James to the church was lost: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this... to keep himself unspotted from the world." James 1:27

The Hunted Became the Hunter

Within a few hundred years after Christ's death, everything was changed. Instead of suffering, came honor; instead of humility, came pride; instead of truth, came error; and instead of being persecuted, the church became the persecutor of all who did not adhere to her

dictates. Soon she began to invent new doctrines to justify her course, declaring that the promised millennial reign of Christ had come, and that he was represented by her popes, who reigned over the kings of the earth as Christ's vicegerents. Her claims were successful in deceiving the whole world. She made all nations drunk with her erroneous doctrines — teaching that eternal torment awaited all who resisted her demands.

Revelation 14:8; 17:2

The kingdoms of Europe claimed to be Christian kingdoms — Christendom — and announced that their kings reigned “by the grace of God” through appointment of the church. This claim has been a gross libel upon the true Kingdom of Christ, for Jesus said of his disciples they “are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” And Paul exhorted the church, saying, “Be not conformed to this world.” John 17:16; Romans 12:2

Serious injury has come to the children of God as a result of the church nominal (in name only) and her illicit affair with the world. The followers of Christ have been led to an improper intimacy with earthly kingdoms, to the neglect of the Gospel concerning the true Kingdom and the hopes centered in it. Truly, the best and the worst of earth's nations are but “kingdoms of this world” whose lease of power from God has expired so that they may give place to their ordained successor — the Kingdom of Messiah.

Our Citizenship in Heaven

Jesus did not say that his Kingdom should be set up before he returns. (Acts 15:14-17) The prophecies of Revelation state that when Christ would return at the end of the Age, the seventh trumpet would sound, and then the kingdoms of this world would become Christ's. (Revelation 11:15) Therefore, the Apostle Paul reminds Christians: “Let every person be in subjection to the

governing authorities...” and pray for those “that are in authority; that we might lead a quiet and peaceable life...” Roman 13:1 NAS; 1 Timothy 2:1, 2

Jesus was not a political reformer. In harmony with Jesus' statement, “My Kingdom is not of this world,” the Apostle Paul confirmed this, saying, “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...” (Philippians 3:20 NAS) Jesus taught his disciples that the new wine of God's Kingdom could never be poured into the old wineskins of the current society and government. (Luke 5:37, 38) Those corrupted systems will never be reformed. Soon, Christ will sweep these away to make room for his righteous “Kingdom to come” when all the families of the earth will be blessed by his righteous rule. Genesis 22:18; Matthew 6:10

Originally, all Christians held to this view. They knew their part and lot was not to try to remake the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God. They knew they were not to enter the world's politics, nor to enter its wars. They knew their allegiance was to Christ and his coming Kingdom. They gave heed to the admonition of the Apostle Peter who encouraged them to live as aliens and strangers in this world. (1 Peter 2:10, 11) Until Jesus returned, they were to wait as espoused virgins. They believed that Jesus would return and receive his faithful followers as his beloved bride. Although the present systems of earth will be torn down, there will be a new heavens, free from corruption, from which Christ and the true church will reign, and a new, cleansed earth prepared for the billions of resurrected mankind. Then will come the proclamation, “the spirit [Christ] and the bride [his church] say, Come... and let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” Faithful Christians still cling to and wait for this beautiful prospect. Revelation 21:1-5; 22:17; See also Daniel 2:44.

Send to: Hartford Bible Students

P.O. Box 493 * Manchester, CT 06045

E-Mail: bibletruthkeys@gmail.com

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