

The Powers That Be

The Sermon at St Barnabas' Church

Sunday, January 22nd: 2023

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“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: for the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they shall receive to themselves damnation.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have the praise of the same.”

[Romans 13:1-3]

OF all the well-known portions of Paul's epistles, this one has sometimes been misunderstood. Some have taken it out of context, and have imagined, against its plain words, that if a Government were to enact laws totally contrary to God's Word, they are to be obeyed without question. A moment's reflection about Paul's words that *“For rulers are not a terror to good works”* surely disposes of that obvious misinterpretation; moreover, he adds in verse four: *“For he [those who exercise political power] is the minister of God to thee for good...”*

This, in turn, reflects Proverbs 8:14 & 15 about the very foundation of human government: *“By me, kings reign and princes decree justice.”*

King David

If further evidence were needed as to God's requirements for the true exercise of earthly power, go no further than 2 Samuel 23:2-3, spoken by King David under the power of the Holy Spirit: -

"The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God."¹

The first question, then, about Romans 13:1-3 is this -

(1) "To whom did Paul

Given the title of the Epistle, it obviously referred primarily to the Romans. Paul himself was a Roman citizen, and he never failed to avail himself of its privileges whenever the occasion arose. Thus - at

(1) PHILIPPI

He made sure that the magistrates came down to the prison in person to release him and Silas, who was also a Roman citizen, after they had ordered them to be beaten and to be put in the stocks. [Acts 16:22-40]

(2) CLAUDIUS

He responded similarly when he was taken into custody by Claudius Lysias in Jerusalem. [Acts 22:24-28]

(3) FESTUS

When Festus later wanted to hand him over to the Jewish authorities to be tried, he made his appeal to the ultimate power — namely, Caesar. [Acts 25:11 &12]

But not everyone was a Roman citizen, so the next question is: -

(2) “Why Did Paul Lay Such Importance on Obedience to Rome?”

Rome was the dominant, occupying power. For this reason, its presence was resented by orthodox Jewry. Yet Paul must have seen that Roman rule provided significant, God-given benefits for the proclamation of the Gospel: -

- ☀ *There was the obvious advantage of the Roman roads that created a sophisticated means of communication.*
- ☀ *There was widespread peace, due to the presence of Roman soldiers.*

These were real, material advantages; but there was a further issue.

Multi-Religious

The Roman Empire was a far more multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic realm than that in present-day Britain. And yet, despite all this, there was no pressure whatsoever exerted upon Paul, or upon the other apostles, at the time of the epistle to the Romans, to desist from preaching Christ, and Christ alone: -

△ *There were no accusations of “hate-crimes” against those who declared that Jesus Christ alone was the one, true Saviour.*

△ *Indeed, there was no doctrinal charge at all that the orthodox Jews could bring against Christians before the Roman authorities .*

Maybe the clearest illustration of the complete freedom in this regard comes from Acts 18 when Paul was at Corinth.

Gallio: the Pro-Consul of Archaia

[Acts 18:1-17]

Paul had travelled to Corinth from Athens where he met up with Aquilla and Priscilla, and was later joined by Silas and Timothy.

He felt constrained to make the Gospel known and met with much opposition; though he also had success, namely, with Justus, whose house was by the synagogue and Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue.

Paul is Accused

After having laboured for eighteen months, a new Roman pro-Consul was appointed, called Gallio. Paul's opponents seized their chance and brought him to the judgment seat.

Their accusations were: -

“This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law.”

Yet they received short shrift from Gallio, who said:

“If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason that I would bear with you. But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it; for I will be of no judge of such matters.” And he drave them from the judgment seat. [Acts 18: 15 & 16]

Surely this incident alone explains why Paul was so insistent that the powers that be should be respected and obeyed. Was there not widespread freedom to proclaim the Gospel, such as we may now but dream about?

Ask yourself: -

△ Were those early Christians required in their schools of learning actively to promote multi-religious beliefs, or those

of atheism?

- △ Were there subtle, and not so subtle, pressures not to proclaim the Biblical norm for marriage, such as is happening today?*
- △ Were there proposals, akin to those being heard today, that would effectively prohibit the proper preaching of the Gospel of true conversion?*
- △ Was there a concerted move to turn upside down the whole created order of male and female, and to expunge such words from our language?*

The answer, of course, is “No.” No wonder, then, that Paul commended complete conformity to the contemporary powers that be! The existing order allowed him and others much religious freedom.

A Timely Reminder

As for the present day, it is high time to make widely known that, by God's grace, practical assistance to the cause of Gospel truth is still in place. The reason is that, providentially, back in 1688, the powers-that-be enacted what ought to be a most effective safeguard against any incursion of religious liberty in our land.

Coronation Oath Act

They wrote into law, by way of the Coronation Oath Act 1688, that the Monarch is to be regarded as the ultimate safeguard of the sort of political structure that Paul envisaged in Romans 13:1-3. The law of the land states that each Monarch, including the present one, is required solemnly to swear that he will, to the utmost of his power, maintain the Laws of God and the True Profession of the Gospel. This is a very practical expansion and explanation of what is meant by his

title of "The Defender of the Faith".

And whilst we are talking about the King, it is very relevant to Romans 13:1-3 to conclude with two other elements of the traditional coronation service for British Monarchs, over and above the coronation oath.

ORB & SCEPTRE

You have, no doubt, seen pictures of Monarchs holding the orb and sceptre. When the orb is presented to His Majesty, it will be said:

"And when you see the Orb thus set under the cross, remember that the whole world is subject to the Power and Empire of Christ our Redeemer."

The Most Valuable Thing

Later in the ceremony, the King is presented with a Bible in these words: -

"Our gracious King; we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing which this world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God."

All this and more is entirely in conformity with Romans 13:1, where Paul wrote:

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: for the powers that be are ordained of God."

Therefore, on this, the Word of God and the constitution of the land are at one. O how wise were those people, who inserted these words in the Coronation Oath Act – that that to the utmost of his power, the Monarch will maintain the Laws of God and the True Profession of the Gospel! Given that Parliament has insisted that the King should take

such an oath, it can be assumed that Parliament wishes this state of affairs to prevail. This, in turn, implies an undertaking by Parliament never to pass any legislation that breaches the spirit and intention of the King's oath.

Finally, pray most earnestly for the powers-that-be that the spirit and intention of the Coronation Oath Act will be a positive force for much good, and that it will have a noticeable and lasting effect upon our land; for, as Proverbs 14:34 says: "righteousness exalteth a nation"