

Not From Hence

“Jesus answered; my kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now is my kingdom not from hence.”
John 18:36

Standing before the procurator of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth affirmed that he was a King. He was only minutes away from torture and execution, and yet there was no panic, no terror, and no confusion in the man who stood accused. This, Pilate could not understand. Over what was he King? Where was his army? The prisoner said his kingdom was not of this world; what did this mean? Who really was this man?

Happily, we who know the Lord Jesus also know the answers to Pilate’s questions. We know the Kingdom of Christ is not a different Kingdom in the sense that the Parthian Empire was different from the Roman Empire. We know the Kingdom of Christ is of a different order altogether. It is heavenly, not earthly; it is the kingdom of God, not a kingdom of man. It is not from hence.

The words of verse 36 surely speak to the subject of Christians and war. The Lord explains why his followers do not fight. He does this by connecting fighting in war with a demonstration of one’s allegiance. If one fights as a soldier, it is because they have given their allegiance to the one for whom they fight. This is the fundamental reason why the servants of Christ cannot fight or engage in warfare. Doing so would involve pledging one’s allegiance to another power. Jesus said his servants would fight **if** his kingdom were of this world.

One would think the clarity of Christ’s words to Pilate should remove any confusion an honest seeker might have on the question of Christians going to war. Unfortunately, that has not been so. The teaching of non-resistance is one of those doctrines that has not been commonly upheld by the broader community of professing Christians since the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine.

History records tragic instances of men going to battle, armed and prepared to destroy the enemy, thinking they do God a service. (John 16:2) Bloody examples of this include the horrible Crusades from the 11th through 13th centuries, the French Wars of Religion during the 16th century, and the particularly devastating Thirty Years War in the 17th century. While the resurgence of Muslim violence in the 21st century has been universally condemned by Christians, it seems most professing Christians continue to see no contradiction in the followers of the Lamb of God taking up the weapons of carnal warfare to attack, fight, and kill while in uniform.

As the Anabaptists, our kinsman according to the spirit, we see these things as being utterly incompatible with the Kingdom of Christ. Actually, we find in the words of verse 36 the reason for separation of church and state: They are two distinct entities, representing two very different kingdoms, and are therefore incapable of being united. As with the teaching of non-resistance, the related teaching on the nature of the church and state fell out of favor with the majority of professing Christians with the creation of the ‘Christian’ Empire under Constantine.

This teaching faced the 16th century Protestants as they strove to reform the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. The late Mennonite Scholar, Harold S. Bender, wrote this assessment in his essay, The Anabaptist Vision, in reference to Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli:

“Both reformers decided that it was better to include the masses within the fold of the church than to form a fellowship of true Christians only.”

Church historian Chester E. Tulga is quoted in the booklet, The Anabaptists: Neither Catholics nor Protestants, as writing the following:

“All of the leading Reformers, who so heroically freed the church from the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope, fastened a State Church upon the people wherever they went.... This was true of Luther, who fastened a State Church upon Germany; Zwingli....in Switzerland; John Knox....in Scotland; Henry VII....in England; [and John Calvin in Geneva, whose consistory was nothing more than a bold-faced inquisition]. They all became persecutors like Rome before them!”

It was tragic to miss the point of what Jesus said to Pilate. This was certainly not the only time Jesus had spoken on this topic. At the beginning of his ministry, he announced the Kingdom was at hand. To Nicodemus he explained the only way to enter this Kingdom is to be born again.

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3

“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” John 3:5

The Apostles after him understood this well. Citizenship in this kingdom supersedes our citizenship on earth, inasmuch that in Christ our earthly citizenship is of no real consequence:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. “ Ephesians 2:19

“Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bound nor free, but Christ is all, and in all.” Colossians 3:11

In these and many more verses, we see that the identity of the brotherhood, the true church, must remain clearly separated from the world and its governments. Regardless of where we were born or where we live, in an absolute sense our citizenship is first and foremost in the Kingdom of Christ. Earthly distinctions do not carry over into the Kingdom. In the view of our King, in his kingdom there is neither Chinese nor Japanese, neither Indian nor Pakistani, neither Serbian nor Hungarian, neither American nor Iranian. Nationalism is foreign to Christ’s Kingdom.

In summary, the words “not from hence”, did not merely speak to geography. They have a deeper meaning that involves much more than not participating in war. The Kingdom of Christ involves ethics and laws that are different from what we find here among the societies and governments of this world. In studying the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, we learn some of these are Love, Truth, Purity, Service, Humility, and Faithfulness.

It is true these virtues are also promoted and encouraged by many people today. Nevertheless, it is also true that there is a marked difference between what we find here in this world, and what we find in Christ. The difference is in the teachings surrounding these principles, and between what is taught as ideal and what is actually lived out in real life.

Down through the ages keeping these virtues of Christ, including the principles of non-resistance and separation of church and state, has cost the true church much. The world has not understood what it means that we belong to another kingdom any better than Pilate did. As a result, there have been suspicions, misunderstandings, accusations, and even persecutions directed against those who would not conform.

This really hasn’t changed in the 21st century. An interesting example of this suspicion is found in present day Germany, in a case where some, out of religious conviction, want to home school their children. That government forbids, by law, parents from choosing to school their children at home. In a related ruling, the German Federal Constitutional Court stated it is in the public’s interest to counteract the development of “parallel societies.”

Regardless of the cost, the follower of Jesus cannot put aside any of the teachings of the Lord. How can such an integral point of Christ’s teaching, love towards enemies, be relegated to secondary importance? How can adherence to this be optional? The ramifications are tragic.

Come what may, we must hold high all of the truths taught by our Lord and His Apostles, even those that have been neglected. They are part and parcel of what it means to be a follower of the Lamb of God.

This article appeared in the “Truth for our Time” column in the “Christian Friendship Messenger”, and is prepared by the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) Communications Committee. Comments or Questions can be directed to: ACCNcommunications@gmail.com