

The Papal and Hierarchical System - Part 3

by Joseph John Gurney

The sermon warns against the dangers of the alliance of church and state and the consequences of the church's corruption and reliance on temporal power.

Scripture: Psalm 72:11, Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 5:5, John 18:36, Romans 14:17, 2 Corinthians 10:4, Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 1:13, 1 Timothy 2:5, Revelation 13:7

Topics: "Church Authority", "Spiritual Kingdom"

Description

Joseph John Gurney preaches about the usurpation of temporal power by the professing Church of Christ, highlighting the historical evidence of the church's assumption of authority over kings and nations, leading to persecution and bloody cruelties. He contrasts the early days of Christianity, where the army of the Lamb fought without carnal weapons, with the later alliance between the church and the state, resulting in the abuse of temporal power for ecclesiastical purposes. Gurney warns against the dangers of persecution and the enforcement of religious uniformity through the sword of the magistrate, emphasizing the true nature of Christ's kingdom as heavenly, spiritual, and independent of human authority.

Transcript

ON THE USURPATION OF TEMPORAL POWER

BY THE PROFESSING CHURCH OF CHRIST.

IN the preceding account of antichrist, abundant evidence is afforded that the main feature of this unholy power, is the assumption, under spiritual pretences, of temporal authority, followed by an actual mastery over the kings and nations of the world, and by the practice of bloody cruelties, in the persecution of the children of God. This scriptural picture of that which was foreknown of the Lord, and foretold by his inspired servants in the apostolic age, has at once filled and stained the page of history during a long course of ages.

Never was portrait more frightful, and at the same time more accurate, than that which the pen of prophecy was impelled to draw of that "spiritual wickedness in high places" which has p55 since developed its "working," to the astonishment of every reflecting observer, and to the distress and degradation of mankind. During the first three centuries of the Christian era, the religion of Jesus found its way into the world, without the compulsory influence of any temporal power.

Neither the sword of the warrior, nor that of the magistrate, was unsheathed for its promotion and support. On the contrary, the kingdoms of this world and more especially the iron power of the Romans were ranged on the opposite side, and fought against the army of the Lamb. That army used no carnal weapons in its defence; the armour which every soldier in it wore, is detailed by an apostle -- the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.

Truth was the banner of the followers of our blessed Lord; that banner was inscribed with the motto of "Love to God and Man," and it was upheld by multitudes of the meek of the earth, who like their divine Master, were victorious only through suffering. It was in the good fight of faith alone that they displayed their fortitude and valour on the earth; and when earth was theirs no longer, they joined, one by one, the glorified multitude whom John beheld in his visions, clothed in white robes, and with palms of victory in their hands those who had "come out of great tribulation, and had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Undoubtedly there were numerous corruptions, which, even in those early ages, had crept into the life and character of professing Christians; yet the description now given was justly applicable to very many; and thus in despite of all the raging of the heathen, and all the buffetings of Satan, true religion sped its course, and at last, to an astonishing extent, pervaded the civilized world. But now a vast change awaited the destinies of the church. Early in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine adopted her as his own.

The state formed an alliance with her, and undertook, by the intervention of secular authority and human power, to defend her interests, and to promote her cause. True indeed it is, that some of the emperors who followed, adopted a different course; but on the whole, the world smiled upon her. The professing people of God gradually fell into the arms of the civil magistrate, and learned to place their dependence on the arm of flesh. As time flowed onward, corruptions increased, and under the gradually deepening shadows of a long and dark night of apostacy, the assumption of temporal power on the part of the nominal church of Christ, became more and more daring.

No longer was the hierarchy satisfied with the support and protection of the civil magistrate; but kings and princes must now fall under its dominion. The ten horns of the beast, i. e., probably, the European states and kingdoms, into which the Roman empire was divided, bowed under the rod of the false prophet; or in other words, of the second beast who had the visage of a lamb but the voice of a dragon. Rome spiritual, not only obtained possession unlike the Levites of old of a territory of her own; but with the resistless power of a magician, humbled the proudest monarchs at her feet, employed them as slaves to hold her stirrups, and pretended to have authority to dispose of their dominions at her pleasure -- to set up kings, and to bring them down as being herself in the place of God, the Queen of all kings; the Lady of all the lords of this terrestrial globe.

In the mean time the true church fled into the wilderness, and was nourished with heavenly manna, in the holes and caves of the earth. Few in number and scattered in place, the faithful followers of the crucified Jesus, themselves crucified to the world, and the world to them, worshipped God in privacy and retirement. But from age to age they were the children of tribulation, and the rage of their enemies pursued them into their most covert retreats. Finally, after the truth had broken forth and openly manifested itself in the Reformation, the flames of a most barbarous persecution were lighted on every side and the blood of the poor innocents was poured forth in vast abundance into the lap of antichrist.

Here was the work, and here the triumph of Satan, who was a liar and murderer from the beginning. Kings and queens, with their subordinate officers, kindled those flames, and kept them burning for the destruction of the righteous, under the resistless commands of their mother and supreme ruler, Rome spiritual. By ruthless assassination, by cruel warfare, by various p59 kinds of torture, by the sword and the fires of the magistrate, myriads of sincere believers in Jesus, fell victims to the professing church of Christ, in possession of temporal power.

That power has since become comparatively weak and broken; but were it fully restored, is there not too much reason to believe that the same iniquities would be re-enacted, under the same pretence of holiness and truth? That there is to be observed a most extraordinary revulsion, in the present day, towards the papal system, is notorious. Many are they, in various countries, and in different classes of society, who have actually given in their adherence to Rome spiritual; and many more are they, in our own land, and even in America, who while they profess to have no connexion with her, have openly adopted most of her tenets and principles, and seem more than half disposed to find a resting-place in her bosom.

Let her once more become the dominant church in Great Britain and Ireland let the sword of the magistrate be once more fairly under her command and who shall say that the blood of those who bear a consistent testimony against her superstition and idolatry, will not flow as freely and p60 copiously as in days of old? The same principles, in possession of the same power, may in all probability be productive of the same effects. While I am one of those who on this and other grounds, consider the progress of popery to be highly alarming, I am by no means disposed to underrate the personal piety of many members of the papal communion.

The Roman Catholic Church holds many of the essential doctrines of the Christian religion, and holds them with a firm hand; and independently of the evangelical character of Jansenism, (which can hardly be classed with the papal system,) there can be no doubt that there is much of devotional feeling, and some true Christian faith and holiness, to be found within her borders. Great and numerous as are her superstitions, and prevalent as is the infidelity to which they have led, the truth as it is in Jesus, has not been without its influence on the heart of a Fenelon, and on the hearts of many other members of that church, who have truly loved the Lord who bought them.

Again, when I speak of that church in her character of mistress of the beast of ten horns, which wounds and slays the followers of Christ, I do not forget, and have no wish to p61 conceal, that so far as this is the peculiar characteristic of antichrist, it is far from being confined to the Romish hierarchy. The church, in possession of temporal power, and abusing it by acts of persecution, has presented itself to the attention of mankind, and has claimed its portion of the bloody page of history, under many forms besides that of the papacy.

The papists themselves have suffered and died under the hands of their religious opposers in power. King Henry VIII, and Queen Elizabeth found their victims under the notion of heresy, as well as Mary. Under the sway of Kings Charles I. and II., the nonconformists suffered deeply from those, against some of whose doctrines and practices they bore a righteous testimony. And when they were themselves in power under Cromwell, they had little mercy on others who dared to differ from their own system.

In New England, they led the unoffending Quakers to the gallows, who thus expiated their crime of preaching the gospel to the poor in a manner contrary to the notions of the ruling church. There are indeed few Christian sects which have suffered so much from the fury of religious persecution as p62 the Friends.

During the reign of King Charles II. more especially, when all assembling for public worship, except in the established church, was forbidden by law, the Quakers alone, of all the Christian denominations persevered in holding their meetings; at the same time, when carried into courts of justice, they refused to take the oath of allegiance, in obedience to the command of Christ, "Swear not at all;" and they also refused to pay tithes to the clergy, in remembrance of another of our Lord's precepts, "Freely ye have received, freely give."

In consequence of their faithfulness in all these respects, and especially because of the holding of their meetings for divine worship, they were cast in great numbers, into filthy dungeons, and were there mixed up with the vilest felons. In the mean time their houses were ransacked, and their goods spoiled; and many of them died in prison, in consequence of long confinement, and other harsh treatment. But their patience did not fail them, and often did those noisome prisons resound with the praises of that Saviour, on whose behalf they were content to suffer.

It is the shame of Protestantism, that even in p63 the present day, religious liberty is sacrificed to the unrighteous attempt to enforce uniformity of worship, in accordance with that view of Christianity which happens to be dominant in any particular country. Within the last few years, while the Lutherans were persecuted in Prussia, under the sanction of the reformed church of that country, (a persecution, which under the present benevolent monarch, has happily ceased,) the Lutherans themselves, in Hanover, Hamburgh, and the kingdom of Denmark, being the established religionists, have been actively engaged in persecuting others.

The ideal notion of perfection in the things of religion in these states, is uniformity; the actual effects produced are bonds, confiscation, and imprisonment, on the one hand, and on the other, a prevailing religious lifelessness, with infidelity at the bottom. Every one knows that this, to a great extent, is a just description of the countries which range, on the plan of uniformity, under the papal banner for example, Italy and Spain. The great hope of France, in matters of religion, is the late dissolution of the alliance of the state with a single form of Christianity.

Yet popery is rampant in that country; and it is impossible to p64 say how soon the degree of religious liberty which now prevails may be smothered, under the influence of a bigoted priesthood, backed by the missionary zeal of a host of Jesuits. From the remarks which have now been made, the reader will perceive that my views of antichrist are far from being restricted to the Romish church. Wherever any portion of the professing church of Christ enters into alliance with the state, and avails itself of the sword of the magistrate, in order to enforce uniformity in religion and worship, and to persecute and punish all who resist the decree, there, in my opinion, antichrist is enthroned and operative.

In the several churches which have pursued this course, there may be upheld much of sound doctrine; and it is freely allowed, that they contain many members who are true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ; but as far as they wield the sword of the magistrate in the work of persecution, so far they embody the antichrist of Scripture, the man of sin, the false prophet, who rules over the beast of ten horns being himself the head of the beast; even of that beast which unites the natures of the leopard, the bear, and the lion, and wounds and p65 slays the children of God.

Yet unquestionably this character, in a very especial and pre-eminent manner, has marked the annals of the Romish hierarchy. With the strange anomaly which we have now been considering -- the professing church of God in possession of temporal power, and abusing it for the affliction and destruction of the true

followers of Christ we must now contrast the scriptural account of the kingdom or reign of God, of heaven, or of Christ by which several expressions, only one kingdom is intended.

Many and various are the passages of Scripture which relate to this kingdom -- in the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles, the Revelation. They are too numerous to quote; but from a general view of them, the reader will scarcely fail to draw the following deductions: 1. The kingdom of God is set up in this world, and perfected in the world to come, by divine power, independently of all human authority. The little stone which is destined to fill the whole earth, is cut out of the mountain "without hands." 2.

This kingdom is of a nature wholly different p66 from that of the kingdoms of the world. "It cometh not by observation." It is "within us." It is in its nature heavenly, spiritual, exercised over the hearts of men, unseen in its action, but manifested in its fruits. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." 3. It is not to be either defended or promoted by carnal weapons, or the arm of flesh. "Our weapons," said one of the great ones in this kingdom a very prince in the Israel of God "are not carnal, but spiritual, and mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds," <fec.

"My kingdom is not of this world," said the Saviour himself to Pilate, "else would my servants fight." 4. The subjects of this kingdom -- the soldiers of its standing army -- are the meek and humble followers of the Lamb; all of every name, class, profession, or country Jew or Greek, male or female, Scythian, barbarian, bond or free who are brought to repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ all who are delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the dear Son of God. p67 5.

Of this kingdom, Jesus, the risen and glorified Saviour is, in the divine economy, the appointed Head, the Lord of Glory, the King of kings, who is seated on the heavenly antitype of David's throne, there to rule and reign over the universal church, to all eternity. Now Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Absolute Sovereign as he is of his own church, and of the universe for the church's sake, he requires not the interference of human monarchs, in the support and maintenance of his kingdom: and the one grand means by which he secures these objects, is the influence of the Holy Ghost.

While the Scriptures contain a clear account of the principles on which his reign is founded, and of the laws by which his people are governed, he deals immediately with the hearts and affections of men -- he humbles their pride, obliterates their sins in his own blood, leads them in paths of righteousness, sanctifies them in body, soul, and spirit, and spreads over them his own banner which is Love. Such being the true character of the kingdom of Christ, (commenced and carried forward on earth and perfected in heaven), it is evident that nothing can be more foreign from its nature, or more opposed p68 to its principles, than the assumption of temporal power, for ecclesiastical purposes, much more the abuse of that power in a work which is peculiarly marked in Scripture as the work of Satan, (Rev. ii. 13) i. e. persecution.

To defend the cause of Christ against even its enemies, by the sword, is forbidden to the Christian; to lay waste that cause by the persecution of his faithful followers, is not only unlawful, but diabolical. It is to be hoped that the more reflecting and moderate of all classes of professing Christians are prepared to unite in these sentiments; but this is a subject, on which it is impossible to take up our rest at any half-way house. The most important principles are involved in the discussion, and these principles must be fully fathomed, and their legitimate results fairly developed.

If in any country, certain political privileges are restricted to any one denomination of Christians; if Christians of other names and sects are excluded from these privileges by the law of the land; and, again,

if persons of one form of faith, conscientiously adopted, or received by education, are constrained to make pecuniary sacrifices, in order to support p69 another form of the same faith, from which they dissent it must be allowed that these are so many new types of a compulsory, and therefore, of a persecuting system in matters of religion; and are in point of radical principle, as much at variance with the true nature and character of the kingdom of Christ, as the sword or the fire of the magistrate, the gibbet or scaffold of the executioner.

It is the interference of the authority of man with the prerogative of the Great Head of the church. It is the cramping of the liberty of the Spirit, and of the inalienable rights of conscience. As long as the peaceable duties of the subject and citizen are performed, and every practice avoided which is at variance with the law of the land, in temporal matters, or opposed to the welfare of the body politic, so long it is evident that Christians of every name ought to be in possession of equal political rights, and ought to be permitted to pursue their own religious course without molestation or interference.

It is easy to perceive that the unjust provisions to which we have now alluded, are the natural consequence of the alliance of Church and state. When one particular form of Christianity is adopted p70 by the state as its own when a marriage takes place between them, and each becomes pledged to support the other it inevitably follows that Christians of other denominations are placed under disadvantageous and degrading circumstances. And in whatsoever degree such circumstances are alleviated, these nonconformists are still in some measure treated as "strangers and foreigners," and not as "fellowcitizens with the saints and of the household of God'."

So also it is unquestionable that the higher grades of persecution, have arisen out of the same alliance between church and state. The state adopts the church, under some particular form as its own; and the church, on her part, lays claim to all the powers of the state, for the support of her cause, and for the punishment and destruction of her opposers. To this alliance must be ascribed all the horrors of the inquisition, all the blood which flowed in the massacre of St. Bartholomew; all the martyr-fires which were lighted by Queen Mary of England; all the sufferings of the Quakers in the 17th Century; all the bonds and vexations which are at this very time endured by dissentients in many parts of Protestant Europe; and until p71 the system of marrying the church to the state is renounced, there can be no security against the recurrence of those direful scenes which peculiarly distinguish the character of antichrist, and verify the portrait drawn, in the Holy Scriptures, of the "man of sin."

Were the views which have now been advanced, generally adopted among professing Christians, the great head of the Church might surely be trusted for conducting the affairs of his own kingdom -- a kingdom not of this world in such a way as would best promote the welfare of his subjects, and his own glory. He would put it into the hearts of his followers (as has already been the case) to unite in the general dissemination of those Holy Scriptures, which contain the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are all bound to believe, and of the moral principles which ought to regulate our actions.

In the mean time, the gentle but constraining influences of his Spirit would be moving, according to his own good pleasure, on the hearts of men convincing them of sin, humbling them in the very dust, breaking them down into repentance towards God, and inspiring them with a living faith p72 towards the Saviour of men. Thus would he enlarge the boundaries of his righteous government, while those who already belong to it would be built up in Him, and gradually prepared for a translation to the inheritance of the saints in glory.

In carrying on this work, he would doubtless employ, as he ever has done, the instrumentality of men. He would raise up his servants for the purpose, according to his own wisdom; he would anoint them with the oil of his kingdom; and thus would not only call them into His service, but qualify them for their work. He would also secure in due season, for the protection of his people, and for the furtherance of his cause, the friendly countenance of the powerful of the earth. Kings would become, not by exclusive laws, but by influence and example, the nursing fathers of the church, and Queens her nursing mothers.

Yet all men would see and understand that the work is the Lord's. All the glory would be unquestionably due, and not only due, but rendered to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God blessed for evermore.

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