

# **POLITICAL CHRISTIANITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

By Robin Phillips

It is commonly assumed that prior to Constantine in the fourth century, Christians had as little to do with politics as possible.

This is far from true.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century itself, Christianity and politics were inextricably combined. In order to appreciate the significance of this, we need some background information about the religious and political climate of ancient Rome.

## **MYSTERY CULTS**

In ancient Rome during the 1<sup>st</sup> century, there was an array of different mystery cults. These mystery cults were brought to Rome from all over the empire, many from the East. These cults functioned as personal devotional hobbies, offering their votaries privileged access to various divinities. They gave worshipers a subjective sense of belonging since one could have a personal relationship with a god or demigod. The mystery cults did not affect someone's life in the public world, but were directed towards one's interior spirituality. With an esoteric flair, they offered spiritual excitement, without making demands on public life.

## **IMPERIAL RELIGION**

Now the religion of Rome, on the other hand, was just the opposite of this. It was a political religion that dictated the whole of one's life in the public world. It structured how people were expected to live as good citizens of the Roman state.

Many of the Roman emperors claimed to be sons of a god, and some even went so far as to claim divinity. Emperor worship thus became a feature of the Roman religion. However, even in the provinces where the Julio-Claudian emperors were not actually heralded as divine, we may still speak of the Roman state as being 'religious' in the sense that it sought to structure all public life, thought and allegiance. In an uncanny resemblance with Nazism, the Roman state offered a vision of the good life; the Roman state offered peace; the Roman state brought together previously warring pluralities; the Roman state offered a sense of eschatological progress; the Roman state provided a framework of meaning to answer the question 'how should we live?'

If you lived in the way good Roman citizens were expected to live – that is, if all your public life acknowledged Rome as the supreme power – then the state couldn't care less if you engaged in various mystery cults. As Stephen Perks points out, contrasting the mystery cults with the religion of Rome:

Religion...structures life. It structures the life of the individual and of society. This is precisely what a cult does not do. A cult is a personal worship hobby. It does not structure one's life nor does it structure society.

The Eastern cults that were popular in ancient Rome, such as the cults of Mithras and Isis, did not structure the life of their adherents, at least not if they were good Roman citizens. What structured the lives of the Romans was the religion of Rome which was a political religion. (From lecture 'Christianity as a Cult', published by the Kuyper Foundation)

There is evidence that some of the families of the Roman emperors worshipped at various mystery cults. They could do that because the mystery cults were not in competition with the religion of Rome.

To sum up, the mystery cults were directed towards the private, the personal, the devotional, the internal spirituality of an individual, while the religion of Rome was directed towards the public, the external, the corporate and political society as a whole. The one did not affect the other.

## **THE CHRISTIAN CHALLENGE**

Understanding this distinction is crucial if we are to appreciate the impact early Christianity had in the first century.

Christianity offered a direct challenge to the *political* religion of Rome. Christianity was not one more among thousands of mystery cults.

The Roman state would certainly never have persecuted Christians if the worship of Jesus was simply one more private cult to choose from. On the contrary, Christians were seen as subversive precisely because their religion was in competition with the political religion of Rome. Christianity offered a vision for how society as a whole should look, as well as showing how individuals within that society should behave. The gospel had as much to say about politics – how nations should be governed – as it did about our own personal lives. As Stephen Perks points out,

As long as Roman citizens practiced the religion of Rome, they were free to practice whatever cult they wished, the cult of Jesus Christ included. It was the early Church's refusal to limit the Christian faith to the status of a cult that brought Christians in conflict with Rome. The practice of Christianity as a religion and not a cult brought the church into direct conflict with the religion of Rome. This was a clash of religions not cults. (Ibid)

Francis Legge makes the same point in his book *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*:

The Officials of the Roman Empire in time of persecution sought to force the Christians to sacrifice, not to any of the heathen gods, but to the Genius of the Emperor and the Fortune of the city of Rome; and at all times the Christians' refusal was looked upon...as a political offence. (Kessinger Publishing, 2003)

This dispels the common myth, which we find time and time again, that Christianity was apolitical prior to Constantine in the fourth century. Even if all we had was the New Testament, without the massive corpus of other historical evidence, we would still know that Christianity challenged Rome as a competing *political system*. Let's look at some of the New Testament evidence.

## **JESUS IS LORD**

The very proclamation 'Jesus is Lord' (Acts 2:36; 10:36; Rom 8:39; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1:9; 8:5-6; Phil. 2:10-11; 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:20) was seen as a direct challenge to the political religion of Rome. (See N. T. Wright's book *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, SPCK 2005 and his essay '[Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire](#)') The underlying subtext was 'Jesus is Lord, therefore, Caesar is not.' This did not mean that Christians denied that Caesar had genuine authority. They acknowledged Caesar's authority, but even this acknowledgement contained an implicit challenge. As our Saviour put it, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' (Mark 12:17) We know from Psalm 24 that *all* the earth belongs to the Lord. This means that Caesar only has the authority God chooses to give him. As Jesus said to Pilate, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it has been given you from above." (Jn. 19:11)

God's authority over all things was the basis of Paul's argument to the Romans for why they needed to submit to civil authorities. Paul said, 'Yes, Caesar has authority, but only because it has been given to him by the higher authority of God,' to paraphrase Romans 13:1-2. Paul's teaching that Caesar's authority was derivative rather than ultimate would have been perceived as nothing less than fighting talk, a direct challenge to imperial pretensions. Because Caesar's authority was given to Him by the higher authority of Jesus Christ, Paul could claim in Romans 13:3-4 that rulers were responsible before God to do good and to be a terror to evil works. Christianity thus held even the emperor accountable to a higher standard.

In light of this backdrop, it is not surprising to find Roman emperors later making such a point of trying to force Christians to say, 'Caesar is Lord.' They rightly recognised that Christianity was a challenge to the emperor's pretentious claims and the ideology on which the state was based. Christianity challenged the state, not by advocating anarchy and civil disobedience, but by showing that our citizenship rests first and foremost with a higher empire (Eph. 2:19-20; Heb. 11:15-16). This higher empire is ruled by a King who demands that even Caesar bow the knee and repent (Acts 17:30).

If the gospel had been merely the good news that there is a way to go to heaven when you die, or if Christianity had been promoted as merely a method for having a personal relationship with God, it would have been lost amidst an array of numerous other mystery cults and private devotional hobbies. The religion of Christ was subversive precisely because it proclaimed that Jesus reigns on the earth now. Jesus' Kingdom claimed to be the final say, not merely on private devotional matters, but on public, social and political affairs.

## **THE POLITICAL RELIGION OF JESUS**

Christianity was a political religion right from the very start, even before Paul. We find this emphasis in Christ's own words. In Matthew 28, Jesus claimed total authority over everything and he used this as the basis for commanding disciples to convert, not just individuals, but entire nations.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' (Mt. 28:18-19)

If all authority has been given to Jesus on heaven and on earth, then this includes everywhere. There is nowhere on the earth or in heaven that does not come under Jesus' demand for complete allegiance (Col. 1:15-18).

If the early Christians had not challenged every area of life and society with the doctrine of Christ, then they would have been giving the implicit message that there are some areas where Christ has not been exalted Lord. They would have been implying that there are some places in the world and culture that Christ did not die to redeem.

It is customary to hear, in retort, that Jesus said His kingdom is not of this world. A careful look at the original Greek reveals that Jesus did not actually say that. The RSV translates John 18:36 closest to the original: 'My kingdom is not *from* this world.' Christ's kingdom is certainly *of* and *for* this world, but it does not arise out of or (from) this earth. It comes from heaven to the earth. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, 'thy kingdom come on earth...as it is in heaven' (Mat. 6:10). The phrase 'kingdom of heaven' in the gospels has this same underpinning, referring to the rule of heaven (that is, of God), being brought to bear in the present space-time world. This draws on the theological backdrop of passages like Daniel 7: 26-27 and is the same crowning vision we find in Rev. 11:15, where we are told that "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ..."

## **THE CHURCH'S VOCATION**

If you look out in the world today, it is sometimes hard to see much evidence of Jesus' authority. But that is where the church comes in. In the present period - between the inauguration and consummation of Christ's kingdom - the church has the vocation of bringing His authority to bear on every area of society.

This means that piece by piece, institution by institution, nation by nation, person by person, all things need to now be reconciled to Christ. That is the mission of all Christians, who are called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19) in the task of bringing all things back into subjection to the Lord (2 Cor. 10:5). Like the Psalmist, we are to "say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns'" (Ps. 96:10). Naturally, this includes all the institutions, organisations and cultures that make up those nations. We are to bring the Lordship of Christ to bear on all the arts, the sciences, the economies, the music, the philosophy, the educational systems, and of course the political systems of this world.

In these and every other area, we are to proclaim that Jesus reigns by showing the implications of that reign in practice. Our message to the powers of this world is that their time is up - Jesus is King of Kings now and his reign has started.

## **THE GOSPEL CHALLENGE**

The very term 'the gospel' would have also functioned as a political challenge to the religion of Rome. Throughout the Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, *euangelion* ('gospel' or 'glad tidings') was regularly used to refer to the birth, announcement, accession or victory of a great emperor. There is an inscription in Priene on the Asia Minor coast from 9 BC which refers to the birthday of Augustus. The inscription talks about this day as '*the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him...*' In this context, glad tidings were associated with the creation of a new world, an era of peace and justice made possible by the new emperor. Thus, the inscription refers to Augustus as '*a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...*'

The striking thing is that this is the exact kind of language that early Christians used to talk, not about the emperor, but about another leader: namely Jesus. The 'gospel of Jesus Christ' also announces the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through Him (Lk. 2:10-11). It also announces a Saviour who comes to make wars to cease, to create order everywhere and to bring peace (Isa. 9:6-7; Lk. 1:79). From the Roman perspective, Christianity must have seemed like the great parody of the Roman state, while the early Christians would have seen Rome as the great parody for which Christ's kingdom was the reality. Both Christianity and Caesar believed they alone held the answer for bringing justice, order and peace to the world (Zech. 6:13; Jn. 14: 27), both offered a sense of community (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:9), both had brought unity out of previously warring pluralities (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Rev. 5:9) and both were intent on achieving worldwide dominion (Isa. 9:7; Col. 1:19-20; Rev. 11:15).

Although Christianity and the Roman state may have had similar goals, they went about achieving those goals in radically different ways (Jn. 18:36). No wonder the early Christians were persecuted. The glad tidings of Jesus was bad news for Caesar because it proclaimed there was another way to bring peace and justice to the world that was superior to Caesar's way. It proclaimed that God had called out a people whose vocation was to work for peace and justice on Jesus' terms instead of Caesar's terms.

We have explored Christianity's challenge to Caesar, but we might equally have explored the way the gospel confronted first century paganism. If Paul's gospel had been merely an approximation for a personal, individualistic experience that has little or no bearing on public life (one more mystery cult), then the makers of idols in Ephesus would never have found him to be a threat to their livelihood (Acts 19).

Similarly, if we preach the gospel in all its original power, the makers of idols today will find us a threat to their livelihoods. In our world, no less than the first century, the power of the gospel depends on it functioning as a subversive challenge to the false

gods that abound (1 Cor. 8:5-6). The New Testament writers could make this challenge boldly because they had confidence that Jesus had already won the victory (Col. 1:19-20; Heb. 1:1-4). Christ's resurrection and ascension are the guarantee of the success and worldwide dominion of His kingdom (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Eph. 4:8-10). What is left is simply the implementation of that victory.

Christians today should learn from the example of Paul and the early church. We need to reject formulations of the faith that make no demand on the political sphere. We need to ask the Lord to put the nerve back into the gospel – the gospel that troubled Herod when he heard of Jesus' birth; the gospel that made the idolaters at Ephesus riot; the gospel that made Caesar quake in his boots.