



Principles, Preaching and Problems

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"I came not to send peace"

Trevor Maher

*"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword
... he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:34,38).*

IN THESE troubled times, when different religions unite to condemn terrorism and preach tolerance of other faiths, what principles should guide the true disciples of the Lord Jesus? What attitude should they portray in their lives, both individually and collectively?

The awful events of 11 September have brought about a form of unity between contrasting and differing faiths, faiths which have in most cases doctrines totally contrary to each other. Clergymen of the established churches are seen linking arms with Muslim clerics and Jewish rabbis. Protestants and Roman Catholics join together in services of remembrance and issue joint declarations condemning terrorism.

The prime minister, Tony Blair, declares, "We are all the children of Abraham", and the Queen in her Christmas Day message talked about the sense of belonging to a group or community which has in common the same desire for a fair and ordered society.

In particular, the Queen stressed that this sense of belonging is what helps to overcome differences, misunderstandings, prejudices, ignorance and fear. She then stated, "We all have something to learn from one another whatever our faith, be it Christian or Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh". There is, then, a great drive to make people more tolerant of different faiths and to accept that differences do not matter; rather, we should seek out what we have in common.

Strangers and pilgrims

There is therefore an inherent danger for the disciples of Christ that the separateness of their calling will become blurred in the wave of tolerance and acceptance, even patriotism, that binds people together in such circumstances. It is more difficult to stand apart in times like this than if

the nation was at war in a conventional sense, because of the emotions and sympathy that 11 September evokes. Hebrews 11 clearly sets out the mind that the faithful disciple must possess. We must look "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God", recognise that we are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth", and "desire a better country, that is, an heavenly" (vv. 10,13,16).

As such, disciples will not seek to learn from any of the faiths around that are steeped in error, no matter how sincere their intentions, nor seek out common ground with those whose objectives and understanding as to the purpose of God are so greatly at variance with their own. They will have in mind the warning of the Apostle Paul, that light and dark have nothing in common, nor does a believer with an unbeliever, Christ with Belial, or the true God with false ones (2 Cor. 6:14-18). This is a principle established with Israel when they were in the wilderness prior to entering the land, and the apostle quotes from that time, showing that the principle is a prerequisite for those who would be sons and daughters of the living God.

Rehoboam and Jeroboam

The narrative in Kings and Chronicles concerning the succession to Solomon highlights for us how God views tolerance and compromise in regard to false religious beliefs and worship. What seemed to be just a power struggle between a lawful but weak and foolish king and an able rebel was in reality the outworking of God's judgement on the idolatry Solomon had allowed to become established. His many foreign wives had caused the introduction of false gods and worship, and without God's intervention Jerusalem would no doubt have been given totally over to them.

Solomon's failure had bred a national spirit of tolerance to other faiths. The division of the nation was vital to preserve an element of the true faith and worship and to make individuals assess their own position and commitment. The rending of the kingdom in two would sharpen the perceptions of those who might otherwise have succumbed to the tolerance and apathy regarding other faiths. This separation was God-inspired to preserve the faith. To most people it would appear as a power struggle between Rehoboam and Jeroboam, a political activity; but the wise and the faithful would realise what was at stake. Jeroboam's early action in casting off the Levites and making the religion of the northern kingdom more tolerant and open showed that God was right.¹

Helping the ungodly

We are, or should be, moved by the suffering and grief that is inflicted on men, women and children by their fellow men or by what are seen as natural disasters. However, if giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, shelter to the homeless, medical aid to the sick and diseased, causes us to be silent about the hope of the true gospel, embarrassed by our doctrines, or, even worse, encourages us to water down our teachings so that we do not stand out as very different from other faiths, then we have a real problem as individuals and as a community. There can be no justification for compromising the "great and precious promises" that have been handed down to us.

Indeed, the fact that we have such a dichotomy between our beliefs and false faiths, and yet are still prepared to respond to the needs of our fellow mankind, should cause others to reflect. Of course it may be that they will not want our contribution if they are aware of our teachings. Some among us might find that unacceptable, and that is why they seek to play down our distinctive differences.

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah joined himself to Ahab king of Israel in a military activity he soon found that the basis for making decisions between them was very different. Ahab had people who told him what he wanted to hear, prophets who had corrupted the true faith. Jehoshaphat wanted to find out what Yahweh the true God had to say. As the record shows, the military action was a disaster humanly speaking, although the will of God was accomplished. On returning home Jehoshaphat was greeted by

Jehu the seer with the words, "Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD?" (2 Chron. 19:2). As a result of his actions God was angry with him. He had become involved in something that caused him to oppose the purpose of God.

We must always be careful that we are not drawn into something that can be contrary to the will of God or cause us to compromise our faith or the position of the household. The aspect of God's judgements being poured out on this present world is one rarely spoken of, either amongst ourselves or to those outside our community, probably because we are afraid of likely reactions. Yet the prophetic scriptures, particularly the book of Revelation, reveal that the angels of God under the direction of the Lord Jesus have been ensuring that, during all the centuries that have elapsed since Rome overthrew Jerusalem, God's judgements have come on those who do not believe on Him and on those that have corrupted His Word and turned it into a lie.

There is more than one kind of judgement. God judges "them that are without", and, as the context in Corinthians shows, this is continuous; judgement of the world never ceases (1 Cor. 5:13). Under the law of sin and death, and aggravating their condition by their sins, men and women in general are open to God's judgements, "the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast, and the pestilence" (Ezek. 14:21), such as came on Jerusalem in the time of Ezekiel, which brings them unto everlasting death. Such judgements will be multiplied at the time of the end with the appearing of the Lord, as Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10.

A sword, not peace

Jesus took a very straightforward attitude to the problem of military excesses and disasters that killed the innocent. It is recorded in Luke 13:1-5 that Jesus told his listeners that such was the world they lived in, and the important thing was for individuals to repent prior to such events overtaking them. The end of those who had not repented was that they perished. There is in these words of Jesus a sense of urgency, of a need for action on the part of the individual before it is too late. He follows these words with a parable

1. See 1 Kings 11:11-13; 2 Chronicles 11:3,4,13-16; 13:6-12; 15:12-19. A careful reading of these verses shows how the true faith was kept alive.

concerning a fig tree that is under threat of removal because it is not doing what it exists to do—bear fruit. It represented Israel, and the forthcoming judgements on Jerusalem and the Jews were such that they caused Christ to weep. But they still came.

We too weep for the world we live in: so many lives slipping away into everlasting death through old age, sickness, disease, starvation and poverty; oppressive and cruel governments, through hate and vain ambition; false religious beliefs—the list is endless. But one thing above all else takes people into that helpless condition: ignorance. Jesus knew that it was essential that people be made to face up to the truth about him, his teaching and God's purpose with the earth.

There can be no peace (the word means unity) between different faiths because there is only one true faith. When the angels sang at the birth of Christ, "and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14), they were not referring to harmony and peace between men and women on the earth. Rather they were confirming that there

would be unity between God and man through Christ, and it was God's good will that was being extended to man.

So it is that in this present dispensation Christ is not preaching peace but challenging us to have the courage to stand apart from others, to seek only unity with God. When those who believe in a triune god seek unity with those who see Christ as just one of many prophets, or who as a people reject Christ as their Messiah, it is bound to end in failure. There can be no unity for the believer in such a gathering. The true faith will divide families and cause us to search our conscience to see where our real loyalty and love lies. This will not prevent us as individuals or as a community extending help to those in need, but it should ensure that we do not allow such activities to draw us into a unity with the world.

Christ prayed for his disciples: "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word is truth" (Jno. 17:15-17).



Encounter

*Reprinted items from earlier issues, chosen by
the Publishing Editor*

The Law given through Moses*

10. Witchcraft

Islip Collyer

ONE MORE matter of capital punishment under the Law calls for attention. The well-known command, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Ex. 22:18), has been attacked as harsh and unjust. It may readily be admitted that the attempt to apply this law in comparatively recent times has certainly been unjust. The grossest of superstition has often prevailed, and the old law has been quoted to justify a senseless cruelty.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the savagery in this matter was an evil of primitive ignorance, and that it has only given way before the advance of modern learning. The truth is that in the earlier centuries of the Christian era

there was not nearly so much of this superstition as that which developed later. Probably the worst period was between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The savage persecution of old and friendless women, on the assumption that they were witches, increased in Europe even while the men who wielded power were greatly increasing in worldly knowledge and wisdom. In England the decline of this abomination, as with the gradual decrease of many other cruelties, coincided with the translation of the Bible into English and the consequent delivery of apostolic teaching to the multitude. The Authorised Ver-

* First published October 1947.