

April – June 2025

The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE BOOK OF JONAH

Part 8

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray Thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.”

(Jonah 3:10-4:3)

The latter part of this little book supplies the answer to Jonah’s earlier strange behaviour; why he had been so opposed to God’s will at the first, for him to go to Nineveh. As was seen in the introductory article, Jonah was a prophet who had been raised up of God to minister in Israel. According to 2 Kings 14:25 he was an inhabitant of Gath-hepher, a town in Zebulun which was in the province of Galilee. Jonah was a patriotic Jew – His nationality and ancestry held an inordinate place in his life. In this he was not alone, for this trait was typical of the Jews, and continues to be. They are a proud people who have ever and always considered themselves superior to any other race – indeed all other nations were regarded as outside the pale of Divine favour, and ‘Gentile dogs’.

Before going further, it is necessary to recall from the Scriptures exactly who the Jews were and from whence they originated. What was the purpose of their separation from other nations in the Old Testament era, and where do they figure in New Testament times? The distinction between Israel and the Gentiles traces its origin back to God’s call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1. Abraham was commanded to separate himself from home and kindred, and go unto a country which the Lord would show him. There, God would make him a great nation, and he would be made a blessing to all other nations through his seed – the promised

Deliverer. This distinction between the children of Abraham and the Gentile people came into greater prominence when the Israelites were brought out of Egypt and constituted a nation; having received from God His Moral Law in writing, plus the various other rules and regulations contained in the Ceremonial and Judicial Laws that formed the basis and constitution for them as a nation.

This was unique. God had not dealt in this way with any other nation. To them was committed the sacrificial offerings, the priesthood and so on, but all this was to foreshadow One who was to come – the Great High Priest and His vicarious work; His one offering for sin for ever. It was to give to the believing Israelite the firm assurance of the forgiveness of sin and everlasting salvation. Whilst these sacred ordinances and rites were definitely committed to Israel, they formed in those days an obvious wall of partition between that nation and the Gentile nations; but that wall would one day be removed, at the death of Christ (cf Ephesians 2:14). Their national constitution, and being entrusted with these sacred ordinances, were of temporary duration, and would in the fulness of time, forever pass away – giving place to that reality which they were only designed to portray. Alas, Israel, in the main, never appreciated this. They thought that spiritual blessing and Divine favour were exclusive to them alone, for all time. However, the fact that God had used Israel for this purpose never meant that His saving grace was restricted to that single nation – quite the opposite. The very first promise of a Saviour away back in Eden (cf Genesis 3:15) can never be viewed in any other light than embracing all people. Noah foretold that both Ham and Japheth – the two sources from which Gentile nations issued after the Flood – would participate in the salvation to come through the line of Shem (via Abraham). The blessings given to the patriarchs embraced all families of the earth in their spiritual implications. It is clearly stated to Abraham: “*in thee shall **all families of the earth** be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3). These words are repeated in Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14. Israel was briefly to be a spring of living water, which waters would flow out to all other nations; a witness to the Gentile world that they might learn of God and His sanctifying grace.

Yet how few Gentiles appear to have been thus blessed during the Old Testament era. Rahab is one example, and Ruth another – a Canaanite and a Moabite. Naaman was a Syrian. Then there were other unnamed proselytes who forsook their Gentile way of life and bound themselves to the Jewish laws and were admitted into its privileges: *“And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you”* (Exodus 12:48-49).

Some strangers from outside of Jewry evidently did come into the fold, but generally speaking, it was rare. The Jews constantly forgot, indeed seemed never to realise, that it was a vital part of their mission to be a light unto the Gentiles. They were content and satisfied with possessing the truth for themselves, giving little, if any, thought for others. This produced pride and arrogance within them. They became bigoted nationalists and opinionated separatists; as such they tended to repel the surrounding nations rather than attract them. Is there not a solemn lesson for us all in this? How easy it is for Christians to become so taken up with their own blessedness that they become indifferent to others. When this is so, a form of spiritual pride takes hold, making them inwardly like the Pharisee who said: *“God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are”* (Luke 18:11); a ‘holier than thou’ air is detectable, which repels the non-Christian. Such a life and attitude as this does not honour God, or promote His purposes of grace.

This matter of the Jews, their constitution, the reason for their existence, and their failure to fulfil it through arrogance and un-spirituality puts Jonah 4:1 into context. Jonah had imbibed the spirit of his people and his age. He had resentfully gone to the great Gentile capital city, and preached with fervour, ‘yet forty days and Ninevah shall be overthrown’ – a message well suited to his prejudiced disposition. That was the preaching that God had bidden him, and he discharged the

duty with zeal, motivated in great measure by a sense of Jewish superiority. He marched through the streets, thinking within himself: “you Gentiles with all your sin and idolatry are an abomination unto my God; now He is going to judge you; you only have forty days left, and all will be over for you; you strangers and foreigners have no hope; God has made no covenant with you; we are the chosen people!” However, long before the allotted time had expired, the Ninevites were all in a spirit of repentance from the least to the greatest. From the king downwards, they were all in sackcloth.

It is easy to imagine the proud Jewish prophet inwardly mocking the Ninevites’ self-abasement. “What do they think they are doing? What do they hope to accomplish? My God will take no notice of this; He has no time for pagan Gentiles. He is the God of Israel, not of Assyria. I have pronounced their doom, and that sentence will be executed!” Then comes the great shock. No, Jonah. These Ninevites have repented at your preaching, and the sentence is revoked. “What?!” – he inwardly argues – “have I come these hundreds of miles, to deliver this message of total overthrow, for nought? For three days I have marched the streets and done my duty, and it has been a waste of time; in fact, I have been made a fool of; it was always my worst fear that this outcome might occur”.

The Lord’s purposes in grace much displeased Jonah, indeed he was “*very angry*”. The original Hebrew is more forceful than might appear in the English translation. It could be rendered, ‘it was a great evil to Jonah, a fierce wrath burned within him’. What an attitude for a prophet of God! Might it not be expected that Jonah would be extremely happy at the outcome? He had preached a message of judgment which had resulted in a vast city being brought to their knees in repentance before God. This had caused Divine wrath to be turned aside. No – instead of the messenger rejoicing over the sparing of the people, and magnifying the grace and mercy of God, he becomes very angry. What a sad state of heart this man was in! Lying at the root of it was spiritual pride and

partisanship. A most sobering application is contained in this; a relevant lesson for the present day. For there exist individual Christians, and in fact whole denominational sections within the professing church, who are inwardly persuaded that they alone have it right, and the rest are only worthy to be judged. Under a guise of piety, there oozes an objectionable spirit of sectarianism. What is more, if any spiritual outcome occurs, which is not exactly according to their preconceived way of thinking, it is immediately dismissed as anathema – which if one dared to question or discuss, their anger is quickly aroused – modern Jonahs.

“And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray Thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil” (v.2). ‘Jonah prayed unto the Lord’. It is important to remember that this book is an autobiography – Jonah is writing about himself. He has already told us that he was very angry. Now he goes on to report that he prayed. This is very strange, for true prayer demands a calm and contrite spirit. What he is describing here, is that in his anger, his heart burning with fierce wrath, he turned to God. He directed his words towards the Lord who had sent him to Nineveh, and expostulates with the Most High. He calls into question the whole matter of his mission to the Assyrian capital, to preach as he did. This certainly is not true praying, and can only be regarded as ‘prayer’ in the sense that this man directed his words towards God. But he was finding fault. He was justifying himself and taking issue with God for sending him to preach such a message. He sought to legitimise his unrighteous anger. Look at the next phrase of the verse: *“I pray Thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?”* Mere use of the expression ‘I pray Thee’, does not make this a proper prayer – Jonah continues by complaining of the providences of God.

From the nature of his words, it seems he had an inkling that, in the event of a devastating message of destruction being carried to the Ninevites,

they might repent, and the Lord might forgive them. To his mind, this made him look a fool; and unlike the Apostle Paul, Jonah was not prepared to be counted a fool for Christ's sake (cf 1 Corinthians 4:10). In his reproaches against the Almighty, Jonah goes back to the beginning, seeking to justify his original act of rebellion and disobedience: "this is why I took a ship to Tarshish," he says, "to avoid this worst possible outcome of mercy being shown to Gentiles." He continues his irreverent conversation with the heavens: "*I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil.*" "What a disgrace that I, an ordained prophet amongst the sons of Abraham, should go to these idolatrous Assyrians with a clear-cut message of judgment, and then after all, these godless pagans are forgiven!" It was all too much for his bigoted Jewish sensibilities.

"Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (v.3). Here we see to what extremes men will go when the flesh comes to the fore, and is given free rein. It is written: "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord*" (Isaiah 55:8). But here is a case of man reversing the order, and Jonah prioritising his opinion above the opinion of God. Such is the presumption and arrogance of man, when possessed of a zeal not according to knowledge (cf Romans 10:2); misguided Christians who, when faced with the truth, will not relinquish their preconceived notions. This was Jonah's big trouble. Now, when matters were not working out as he imagined they should, he effectively says: "I can't stand this – I would be better off taken out of it, even by death". Is it possible for a believer to sink to such a low level as this? The answer is – yes. This is one of the reasons for the Book of Jonah's inclusion in the Holy Scriptures. It is written for our learning. Jonah is an example of where an intransigent adherence to error, can lead even a child of God. Let us then ensure that our own beliefs and convictions are based four-square upon the Word and will of God, and this alone.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

“WE ARE THE PEOPLE”

Many are apt to over-value and over-rate their own abilities, as if they had engrossed all knowledge, and had the monopoly of wisdom in their own breasts; as if all must borrow or buy of their store, and light their candle at their torch. Wisdom is no man’s peculiar – and a great opinion of our own wisdom savours of great folly ... It is the emptiness of knowledge, not a fulness of it, which makes so great a sound. They who expect that all should bow to their judgments, and acquiesce in what they resolve; they who would be esteemed to speak nothing but principles and postulata which must be swallowed without chewing, by an implicit [acceptance]; they who require assent, rather than persuade it, may justly fall under the weight, and feel the smart of this scornful objugation: “*No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you*” (Job 12:2). The Apostle is expressive: “*if any man think* (that is, proudly conceits) *that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know*” (1 Corinthians 8:2). What then, doth he know, who thinks that he knoweth all things, and that all men must know from him? Observe, all kind of scorn is not always uncomely. We may, without breach of charity, or strain of holiness, check pride with derision, and speak them below men, who speak themselves above men, or act what is unworthy of men.

Joseph Caryl (1602 – 1673)

Seeing the “*fullness of the Gentiles*” (Romans 11:25) covertly entering in, and that which is said in Deuteronomy being fulfilled, “*they have moved Me to jealousy with that which is not God ... I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation*” (Deuteronomy 32:21), [Jonah] despairs of the salvation of Israel, and wracked with great grief, erupts in a voice that sets forth the causes of his sorrow, in a manner saying: “I, of all the prophets, have been chosen to announce the salvation of another people – and thus the ruin of my own”.

Jerome (ca. 345 – 420)

MAN BY NATURE AND GRACE

The first thing which arrests our attention is the avowed opposition to the will of God which Jonah again displays. He had shown a similar spirit at a former time; and, to subdue his opposition to the Holy One, he had passed through a discipline, the most remarkable which ever happened to man. By that discipline he was tamed and subdued; and we have found him like a man of God indeed, pouring out his heart in contrition before Him whom he had offended. When we listened to the prophet's mournful words, and heard him so like a humbled and subdued sinner, crying from the depths, we might have supposed that from that hour onward, to the day when the grave should close upon him, Jonah would have walked humbly with his God: he might well be ashamed and confounded, and not able to open his mouth any more. But far from that, he appears again before us, challenging the sovereign God. He, in effect, declares that he does not believe that the Judge of all the earth has done right. He denies by his conduct that God may do according to His pleasure in heaven and on earth. He more than insinuates that the will of the creature is to be preferred to the will of the Supreme. It is that creature in rebellion again. It is correction all forgotten and self-will as resolute as before. It is nature once more paramount in the heart and grace eclipsed or put away...

We have seen that many attempts have been made to account for this conduct on the part of Jonah. Religious animosity is one solution; Jonah's zeal for the truth of God is another; his regard for his own reputation is a third; his wish to see an example of vengeance on the heathen, that the Jews might be roused thereby, is a fourth. But without deciding between these, we observe – what will find a response in the soul of all who know their own heart – that there is enough by nature in us all, to make us walk in the footsteps of Jonah, strange and inexplicable as his case appears. Let preventing grace be withheld, let man be left to the guidance of his own wayward will, and there is not one among us

who would not act in spirit just as Jonah did. We confess in words that ‘God does all things well’, and we would shrink from formally declaring that ‘The Judge of all the earth will not do right’, yet do not the murmurs, the restlessness, the repining of thousands, proclaim that they speak and act as if Jehovah did wrong? He is doing now, just as He did at Nineveh – every event is under His control; and sooner or later the Universe will see that He did all things well. But, meanwhile, we repeat the conduct of Jonah from day to day, and many who wonder at his waywardness, or cannot explain it, nay, are reluctant even to believe it, act in the same spirit of murmuring and repining, because Jehovah is supreme, and man but a creature. The simple meaning of every murmur that escapes our lips, is this – ‘Jehovah will not let me have my will’; and that is, in spirit, the very sin of which Jonah was guilty.

W. K. Tweedie (1803 – 1863)

A petulant man is out of sympathy with the mercy of God, as experienced in his own history. Had not Jonah, only a little while ago, been in the same position as the Ninevites are now? Yea, had not the punishment of disobedience overtaken him? Had he not been cast into the sea, and confined within the precincts of a great fish? Then, the sailors with whom he voyaged, did not manifest a petulant spirit, not even when they discovered him to be the secret of their peril, but rowed hard to bring him to land. And, not only had man shewn him sympathy in his danger, but also God. For, while in the belly of the fish, his life was preserved, and ultimately, in a miraculous way, delivered from its sentence of imprisonment. Surely then, here was a discipline that ought to have prepared Jonah for the exigencies of the present moment. A remembrance of his own history ought to have inspired him with sympathy towards the repentance of Nineveh. But no! He is animated by a petulant spirit, which renders him insensible to the instruction of his past life.

J. S. Exell (1849 – 1910)

LONG SHADOWS

4. Nationalism (continued)

Previous articles under this heading have considered some of the ways in which the errors of Jewish Nationalism have adversely affected Biblical doctrine, and the true Church of God. One of these ways is ‘Zionism’ and its adoption and promotion by Christian denominations. Another is the myriad claims of succession or biological descent from Israel, by or for other nations, sects and religious groups. However, the third way in which this aspect of Judaism has blighted Christianity, is perhaps the most widespread and damaging of all, namely, the ‘nationalisation’ of the New Testament church, after the fashion of Old Testament Jewry. Stated in this way, the principle may seem obscure; but its effects are more plainly seen in two practical examples, of which the first demands a fuller consideration:

1.) THE RELATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The Old Testament Age

In ancient times, God was pleased to make His truth known by means of ‘object lessons’, in the form of signs and wonders, and miracles of judgment or deliverance; by means of altars, sacrifices, priests, rites and rituals, tabernacles and temples – all of which were ‘**figures** for the time then present’ (cf Hebrews 9:11, 24). These material things required a physical location, and living people to implement and enact them, to which end, God raised up a nation – Israel – from an obscure Chaldean man, via a very circuitous route. This would be the stage and setting upon which these Divine illustrations could be given. The Hebrews were made the custodians and trustees of these ‘visual aids’, and would in fact be utilised as a demonstration themselves many times, on a national scale – whether in their origins and preservation, their victories and defeats, their rise and fall – “*Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come*” (1 Corinthians 10:11). The tragedy is that so few

members of ‘natural’ Israel ever learned the lessons that they were instrumental in teaching, or perceived the spiritual significance of the physical rituals in which they engaged – instead becoming infused with a spirit of national pride, spiritual presumption, and xenophobic prejudice. To their collective mind, they were **the** people, God was **their** God, His favour was guaranteed, and all other nations of the world were ‘beyond the pale’ (cf Isaiah 65:5, Jeremiah 8:8, Romans 2:17-20, Acts 10:28).

For the period of history that Israel was instrumental in preserving and portraying Divine Truth (about 1500 years), it required a place and means to do so. This necessitated a territory, a system of governance, and a means for its defence. These the Lord provided to them – the moral, judicial and ceremonial Law, the land of Canaan, rule by judges “*about the space of four hundred and fifty years*” (Acts 13:20, cf 1 Kings 6:1), and by monarchs for a similar duration, until the Exile. Thereafter, they enjoyed a measure of autonomy under the administration of successive occupying powers, for five centuries more. A connection thus existed between the religious practices of the Jews, the land in which they lived, and its rulers.

However, even during the Old Testament era, the Lord laid clear lines or demarcation between the religious and secular. Of the twelve Judges providentially raised up by God – whilst nine different tribes were represented – none was drawn from the tribe of Levi, to whom the priesthood uniquely belonged. In the time of the monarchy, excepting Saul (a Benjaminite), the Davidic dynasty was entirely from the tribe of Judah. (Only in the cases of Moses and Samuel is a member of the Levitical order seen to have a measure of secular authority – though never wielding both, simultaneously). This distinction is stressed in the Hebrew epistle: “*For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood*” (Hebrews 7:14), and given dramatic emphasis in the cases of Saul and Uzziah – kings who briefly dared to invade the role of priest. Saul, desiring to improve military

morale and national unity by observance of religious ritual, offered sacrifices himself, earning this solemn rebuke: *“What hast thou done? ... Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which He commanded thee: ... now thy kingdom shall not continue”* (1 Samuel 13:11, 13, 14). Likewise, Uzziah’s *“heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense ... and they ... said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God”* (2 Chronicles 26:16, 18), and he was struck down at once with leprosy, languishing in solitary confinement on that account until his death.

The Lord also gave unmistakable evidence that His spiritual purposes in grace extended far beyond the territorial confines of one nation; whether in the promises to Abraham (cf Genesis 12:3, 28:14); prophecies at the mouth of David (cf Psalm 2:8, 96:1-13), Hosea (cf Hosea 2:23), Isaiah (cf Isaiah 11:10, 42:1-6, 65:1), and Zechariah (cf Zechariah 2:11, 14:9); or in numerous living examples. For those who were made the recipients of Divine mercy and favour included Mesopotamians (cf Acts 7:2), Canaanites (cf Hebrews 11:31), Hittites (cf 2 Samuel 11:6), Syrians (cf 2 Kings 5), Sidonians (cf 1 Kings 17), Moabites (cf Ruth 4:10-22), Shebans (cf 1 Kings 10:1-9) and Ninevites (cf Jonah 3:10 and preceding articles).

The New Testament Age

By the time of the Lord Jesus’ incarnation and public ministry, the spiritual dimension of Judea’s existence had been entirely eclipsed by nationalistic and political concerns. If the prophecies were considered at all, they were interpreted only in terms of a militaristic Messiah, bringing salvation from occupying powers, and restoring an earthly monarchy. Even as He declared the Truth, refuting and confounding their misapprehensions, there were those who determined to *“come and*

take Him by force, to make Him a king" (John 6:15); whilst the continual direction of their conversations and questions revealed the national obsession (cf Luke 13:1, 20:20-26). Ultimately, the Lord Jesus was brought to trial, where, in an act of gross duplicity and hypocrisy, the Jews sought to tarnish Him with that same spirit of bellicose patriotism that they themselves were constantly fomenting (cf Luke 23:2). It would have served Pontius Pilate's purpose very well, had he been able to find any evidence of it in the person of Christ. But though Pilate was a master of subverting 'due process' to his own ends, and though under tremendous public pressure, not the least element of nationalism could he detect in the Saviour. "*Then Pilate ... called Jesus, and said unto Him, Art thou the King of the Jews? Jesus answered him ... 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*", obliging the governor to reluctantly declare: "*I find in Him no fault at all*" (John 18:33, 36, 38) – resorting instead to a complete miscarriage of justice. Thus the mighty work of Calvary was performed, and the Lord gloriously returned from the dead, for forty days more "*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:3). Despite which, there were still those asking "*wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6), even as He ascended to a throne infinitely greater than any that the earth could proffer (cf Hebrews 1:3).

And so the New Testament church had its commencement – which prompts the question: what nationality is Christianity? Or, to what country does the church belong? Two answers might rightly be given. "**None**" – the church has **no** nationality, or country of origin. Its Saviour and Lord cannot be located in any nation (cf John 6:62), since He is 'from above', and by extension, so are the church's members (cf John 17:14-16). In practical terms, from the very outset it was despised and rejected of all lands with which it came into contact – whether Judea, Samaria (cf Acts 8:1, 11:9), Asia Minor (cf Acts 13:50, 2 Timothy 3:11), Macedonia (cf Acts 16:19-24), Thessaly (cf Acts 17:5-8), Achaia (cf Acts 18:12-16),

or Rome (cf 2 Timothy 4:16-18). Under these circumstances of universal persecution, maintenance of any former national identity was futile for the early Christians, so among their number there was soon, “*neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free*” – but only congregations for whom, “*Christ is all, and in all*” (Colossians 3:11). Again, it could accurately be stated that the church is **all** nationalities. Suppose an interested enquirer had journeyed to Jerusalem immediately after the Lord’s institution of the New Testament Church, and determined to resolve the question of its national allegiance and ethnic origin, by listening to the language principally spoken among its members. What would he have heard? A multinational audience, “*all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?*” (Acts 2:7-12). Whatever else was meant by the miraculous events of Pentecost, this much was clear: the true church transcends all national boundaries, and the gospel message is unto all. The Great Commission encompasses “***all nations*** ... *even unto the end of the world*” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Roman Age

It has been stated with some accuracy, that among the Emperors of Rome, it was not Nero or Domitian, but rather Constantine that did the greatest damage and harm to the New Testament church. For whilst those former Caesars were inveterate persecutors of Christians, being responsible respectively (as it is believed) for the martyrdom of Paul, and the exile of John, with incalculable atrocities besides, it was under Constantine that Christianity was officially mandated as the statutory

religion of the Roman Empire. Amongst the early ‘church fathers’, there were those who hailed the dramatic reversal in policy, and formal recognition, as a wonderful deliverance. They did not perceive the real danger, or foresee how quickly the church would be “*corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ*” (2 Corinthians 11:3). The sudden promotion of the church into an organ of the state required huge changes, and reorganisation along the lines of other functions of secular government – the creation of titles, offices, clergy, hierarchy, geographical regions, sources of income, systems for admittance and registration, an approved form of doctrine that could be rigorously enforced, punishments for non-conformance. And thus by degrees there came into being papacy and priestcraft, creeds and councils, infant sprinkling and inquisition – indeed that whole litany of errors that comprises and defines ‘Roman Catholicism’.

Space would fail to tell of the process of events by which the Roman ‘church’ outgrew and outlasted the empire that had originally brought it into being; and how, before long, it was priests who authorised and legitimised emperors, rather than the other way around; and Popes who were commanding the armed forces of supposedly ‘Christian’ nations, and directing them to the recapture of Jerusalem in various Crusades. Who was there left, in the depths of those Dark Ages, who could even remember ‘from whence the church had fallen’, and would ‘repent, and do the first works’?

The Reformation Age

In the mercies and providence of God, after some twelve centuries of darkness, a little light began to dawn. Not, it must be noted, at the instigation of any man, or group of men. Of much greater significance to the ‘Reformation’ than any of the much-vaunted names with which it is commonly associated, was the invention of the humble printing press – and with it, the ever-wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures, first in Latin, and then in vernacular languages. Once the Bible could be read freely, the baseless and fabricated nature of Rome’s practices was plain

to see, and many of them began to fall. Many – but alas – not all, and in particular, the amalgamation of church and state, from which Romanism had originally arisen, proved too difficult for the Reformers to shake off. Between the likes of Luther, Melancthon, Calvin and Zwingli, a spectrum of differing views is found. Some, having seen the papists fall from favour, were happy to become the recipients of political patronage in their place, and quickly adopted an Erastian viewpoint (the notion of state supremacy over the church). Others, having wrested the levers of power from the grip of the Romanists, were unwilling to relinquish them again, and were soon wielding political influence in much the same way themselves. Still others adopted a position of compromise, or co-operation between the church and the state – so long as it was the church to which they belonged. But none, excepting a few Anabaptists, advocated for a full separation between church and state, as it had been at the beginning; for none it seemed, were prepared truly to live as ‘strangers and pilgrims’ in their own homelands (cf Hebrews 11:13).

The Modern Age

The Reformation in England proceeded with scarcely any alteration in structure from what had gone before, inasmuch that Henry VIII quickly adopted the title of ‘Head of the Church of England’, and assumed for himself and his heirs, those powers formerly vested in the Pope. Thus the entanglement of church and state continued unabated. Even during the brief interregnum and Commonwealth period, although the doctrine of the church was changed, and the disposition of the secular authorities, the relationship between them was, if anything, closer than ever. And so it continued, with an ‘established’ church giving allegiance to the monarch, and its bishops afforded seats in the halls of government. In times of international conflict and armed hostilities, the church has provided a theological pretext, and ‘Just War’ argument for the state. In times of invasion and colonisation, the state has offered the church the opportunity of expansion and ‘mission’, to veil its own territorial ambitions. And from within the evangelical denominations, no voice of protest is raised; no denouncement of this unholy union; no

protestations about the pernicious influence of a humanistic, secular state upon the church, or the dire effect of nominal, defective Christianity upon the state. None are making a thorough application of the Apostle's exhortation: "*come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you*" (2 Corinthians 6:17).

Still to the present day, the majority of Christians seem to be under the false impression, that it is their responsibility to politically influence the state; and that it is the state's responsibility to support and defend the church. There is no Biblical basis for either assumption in the New Testament. No such interaction was ever envisaged, taught, or practised by Christ or His disciples. To 'speak truth to power' even at risk of life or liberty, has good precedent (1 King 17:1, Matthew 14:1-4); to do so on the expectation of patronage or support is folly in the extreme. And what do those Christians expect to achieve, who would have the government impose Biblical principles by force of law, or threat of prosecution? This is not the Great Commission. This is not how souls are saved. This is not how the cause of Truth will be prospered. The Lord's people are not commanded to lobby politicians, but to preach the gospel; not to march in protests, but to be living epistles, known and read of men. The Scriptures teach that "*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority*" – not that they will favour our cause, support our claims, or suppress our enemies, but only to the end, "*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty*" (1 Timothy 2:1-2). So wrote Paul in the midst of persecutions and imprisonments.

At every turn in this long history of admixture and collusion – whether in the Roman era, the Reformation, or more recent times – it might be argued: 'but was it not so in the Old Testament?' 'Did not the Jews combine together the religious and secular?' 'Did not priests anoint kings, and kings furnish temples?' 'Was not the moral law enforced by judicial authority?' Indeed, these things were so; and the reasons for it have already been described. Those arrangements were merely 'figures

for a time', and 'rudiments of the world' (cf Hebrews 9:9, Colossians 2:20); 'but when that which is perfect came in, then that which was in part was done away' (cf 1 Corinthians 13:10). Who would ever wish, or dare, to drag the New Testament church, in all its holy perfection, back into that deficient, primordial system of eastern monarchs and judges and swords? *"Now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?"* (Galatians 4:9). Now that the Kingdom of Heaven has been manifested, in its spiritual, universal, globe-transcending glory, it can never be reduced again to the level of carnal powers, or earthly nations.

2.) CHRISTIAN PATRIOTISM

It was one of the worst characteristics of the Jewish people of old, that, having been used temporarily by God as a means of propagating His truth, they were not moved thereby to thankfulness, humility, obedience or circumspection, but only to patriotic pride and nationalistic fervour. It is to be feared that, in this detail also, many Christians continue to emulate the ancient Hebrews. This seems especially so in the 'Western' world – where a person's profession of Christianity is often coupled with a nationalistic spirit, and Old Testament language appropriated to their own countries of residence.

It is disturbing to hear believers praying publicly for "our dear land", or "our beloved country", and realise that they mean nothing more than the United Kingdom, or some other earthly nation. In respect of the former, one wonders what country they are living in, or in what period of history. Can they really be speaking of post-industrial, post-Christian, 'post-truth' England, with its institutionalised iniquity and mandated immorality – where sin in all its most horrible forms is paraded daily on the streets, celebrated by the media, 'and the people love to have it so'? Imagine if First Century Christians had maintained a patriotic attachment to **their** countries of residence – the Christ-hating malice of Judea, the idolatry and sophistry of ancient Greece, the brutality and heathenism of

Rome – would the inspired Epistles have commended them in these things? Overt persecution quickly revealed the true situation, and eradicated any vestige of national loyalties from their minds. Or what if modern-day believers of other nationalities were to show such affection for **their** lands and leaders – in Iran, or China, or Russia, or Saudi Arabia for example? How would the wider Christian constituency react to such a mentality? But those who live in Western Europe, or America, have no greater justification or excuse: *“what then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved ... that [we] are all under sin; as it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (Romans 3:9-12).

The Scriptures are clear, concerning **all** the countries of the earth – whatever their histories or constitutions might claim to the contrary – *“the **whole world** lieth in wickedness”* (1 John 5:19). The Divine perspective of God is this: *“Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, He taketh up the isles as a very little thing ... All nations before Him are as nothing; and **they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity**”* (Isaiah 40:15, 17). It behoves Christians in every place to adopt the same attitude, and, *“**love not the world, neither the things that are in the world ... For all that is in the world ... is not of the Father, but is of the world**”* (1 John 2:15-16). If the church will not learn these lessons in times of relative peace, why should God not teach it by the sharper method of persecutions and oppression, to make the distinctions more evident?

There is no better testimony to true and saving faith, than to ‘sojourn in one’s country of residence, as in a strange country’: *“For they that say such things declare plainly that ... they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city”* (Hebrews 11:9, 14, 16).

R. J. Steward

EDITORIAL

To the Lord's people, instruction is given: "*If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. **Set your affection on things above**, not on things on the earth*" (Colossians 3:1-2). In light of the foregoing article, it seemed apposite to stir up the saints to a 'heavenly patriotism', since, "*our conversation [which word means – 'citizenship'] is in **heaven**; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 3:20). Whatever features might tend to make an earthly country desirable, these are all immeasurably exceeded in the Christians' true homeland.

Its Landscape: "*a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month*" (Revelation 22:1-2).

Its Government: "*Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever*" (Isaiah 9:7); "*He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with His truth*" (Psalm 96:13)

Its Economy: "*an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:4); "*a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*" (Luke 12:33-34).

Its Capital: "*We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in*" (Isaiah 26:1-2); "*the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*" (Revelation 21:1-2).

Its Accommodation: *“In my Father’s house are many mansions”* (John 14:2); *“we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”* (2 Corinthians 5:1).

Its Populace: *“the general assembly and church of the firstborn ... just men made perfect”* (Hebrews 12:23) *“And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it ... they which are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life”* (Revelation 21:24).

Its King: *“the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it”* (Revelation 22:3); *“the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light...”* (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

This little ‘gleaming afar of eternal glories’ should stir up the true believer’s heart, with that *“desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better”* (Philippians 1:23); being *“confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 5:2); to testify with the ancient poet, concerning heaven:

“To thee, O dear, dear country, mine eyes their vigils keep;
For very love beholding thy happy name, they weep:
The mention of thy glory is unction to the breast,
And medicine in sickness, and love, and life, and rest.
O sweet and blessed country, the home of God’s elect!
O sweet and blessed country, that eager hearts expect!
Jesus, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest;
Who art, with God the Father, and Spirit, ever blest.”

ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION

7th & 8th June 2025 D.V.

Saturday 3.00 pm & 5.30 pm Tea served 4.30 pm
Lord’s Day 11.00 am & 6.30 pm

Preacher: Mr G. Chewter, Bedford

a cordial invitation is extended to all