

Should Christians take part in Politics?

—H. P. Barker

"Yes, of course; and the better Christians they are, the better politicians they will be."

Such is the answer frequently given to the question which stands at the head of this paper. Certain it is that many Christians do take part in politics. They do so with a desire to advance the cause of righteousness, and to promote the wellbeing of their fellow men.

For the servant of Christ, however, the question of questions should surely be: What will please my Master? His pleasure must be our guide, not only as to *what* we do, but *how* we do it. Has He any will in the matter? Does His Word throw any light there on? This is what I invite the reader to consider.

What is a Christian?

First, however, a prior point must be raised. What is a Christian? Now a Christian is more than a mere believer in Christianity. The term is used in a general way to distinguish such from a Jew or a Pagan. In this sense of the word many an unconverted professor of religion is a Christian.

What, then, is a true, a real Christian? Was Abraham a Christian, or Moses, or David? That they were true saints of God — the excellent of the earth there can be no doubt. But were they *Christians*?

Many believe that these Old Testament worthies are to be considered as Christians, but it is not so. For a *Christian* is one who is blessed beyond anything ever heard of in bygone days. He can speak of the Saviour as having died for him, and as having risen again. Through that risen Christ he is justified from all things. Further, the Holy Spirit *dwells* in him, and unites him to Christ in heaven. In common with all his fellow-believers, he is called with a heavenly calling, blessed with all spiritual blessings, and set in the place of a son, with regard to God. Moreover, the Christian is viewed as having died with Christ, and as having been raised with Him. His position is thus one of *identification with Christ*. Until the day comes for all this to be manifested, the Christian is to walk in the light of it, and to be a stranger and a pilgrim here.

For speaking thus the Holy Scriptures are my authority, and the statements that I make can be verified by any one who will take the trouble to search for himself.

Are you sure, reader, that you are a "Christian"? Are you justified from all things, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Are you a member of Christ's body, united to Him as your Head in heaven? Are you one of those whom God speaks of as His sons?

Weighty questions these, but, wonderful though it may appear, the Christian can answer each of them with a hearty and decided "Yes."

Israel and the Church

In pursuit of our main inquiry, let us note it well that God, in the development of His ways with men, has been pleased to choose *two* peoples for His own pleasure.

The first of these is Israel. Loved with an everlasting love, and chosen from the foundation of the world, this nation was called of God to occupy a unique place on the earth for the blessing of all other nations. Grievous, however, was its failure, and after centuries of sin and rebellion, Israel's wickedness culminated in the crucifixion of the promised Messiah. Consequent upon that fearful act, God has suspended the relationship between Himself and the guilty nation. Not that the suspension is final. Many a glowing prophecy tells of a day when God shall turn their hearts to Christ, when He will resume direct relations with them, and they shall be the channel of blessing to all the nations of the earth.

Meanwhile God has brought to light the purpose which He had formed long before the world began. A company should be gathered out from Gentiles as well as Jews to belong in a peculiar way to Christ, to be co-heirs with Him, and to be united

to Him by the closest and most intimate ties. This ("the mystery" hidden through the course of ages past) is now revealed, and the revelation of this "mystery" is one of the great outstanding features of Christianity that mark it off from all that has gone before, or will follow after (Eph. 3).

An everyday illustration may make this matter clear. An express train is due to pass a certain station in five minutes: but the stopping train stands by the platform. What is to be done? Only one thing. The stopping train must be shunted unto a side track while the express runs through.

In like manner, Israel has been shunted, as it were, so that the Church (composed of all Christians, from Pentecost onwards) might occupy the rails. When the Church has gone through the course of her earthly sojourn, and reached her destination in glory, then Israel will be brought out upon the main line, and once more be the subject of God's blessing, in a national and corporate way.

These two — Israel and the Church — are often spoken of as "the earthly people" and "the heavenly people." These terms are right and scriptural, for Israel was called with an earthly calling, and promised earthly blessing, while the Church's calling is heavenly. She is set in heavenly relationships and blessed in heavenly places. This will be more clear if we refer to some passages of Scripture which set forth the two great charters of blessing, the one for the Jew, the other for the Christian.

Two Great Charters of Blessing

Look first at Deuteronomy 28. Read carefully the first few verses, and note the character of the promised blessings.

"All these blessings shall come on thee." What blessings verses 3 to 13 tell us: "Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store." And so on.

Is it not easy to see that the blessings which were promised to Israel, conditional upon their obedience, were blessings connected with *prosperity on earth*?

Now turn to Ephesians 1:3. How different the blessings here described! "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ."

Who are the "us" of this verse? Christians! *Our* blessings are spiritual and heavenly, in contrast to the temporal and earthly blessings promised to the obedient and godly Israelite.

Christians are not promised earthly prosperity. On the contrary, the most godly Christians have often been the poorest. Take Paul, for instance. He says of himself: "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place" (1 Cor. 4:11). Could anything be more unlike being blessed in the basket and the store than this?

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the Christian's citizenship is a heavenly one. Philippians 3:20 distinctly says so. The word translated "conversation" there has more the meaning of "citizenship," and is closely connected with our word "politics." "*Our* citizenship," we read, "is in heaven."

Again, Christians are said to be "heavenly" in 1 Corinthians 15:48. That is, we belong to the company that is distinctly heavenly.

A Christian may say, "I wish I were more heavenly," and the desire is right if *conduct and ways* are in question. Would to God that we were all more heavenly. But our many shortcomings should not be allowed to weaken this great truth, that as to relationships, blessings, prospects, position, we, Christians, *are* by the purpose and call of God, *a heavenly people*. Unlike Israel, we belong to heaven, our citizenship is there.

The Rejection of Christ.

When the Lord Jesus was on earth He found men engaged in building up a great world-system. Religion had its place therein, but there was no room in the structure for Christ. He would not fit in anywhere. He was "the Stone which the builders rejected" (Mt. 21:42).

Men are still building, and we see the great edifice of the world-system all around. What a wonderful system it is! There is room for almost anything in it. But mark it well, the gates of this great system are bolted and barred against *Christ*. The world-builders of former days refused Him a place, and Stephen charged them with being His betrayers and murderers (Acts 7:52).

For the loyal heart this tremendous fact will colour everything. Never should we forget that we are sojourning in a scene where our Lord has been refused and put to shame. Have we sufficiently taken this into account? Does not this one terrible fact turn the world into "the valley of the shadow of death" for us Christians? How can we share in its hopes and ambitions when He whom we love has been thrust out?

Moreover, the world has owned His great enemy, Satan, as its prince and its god. Politically, Satan is the world's prince (Jn. 14:30). Religiously, he is the world's god (2 Cor. 4:4).

Can we not, therefore, understand that the present age is an *evil* one? It is so called in Galatians 1:4. It is the age of Satan's rule. The Christian, however, is not of this world. Read the emphatic words in John 17:16 that assure us of this. Nor is the Christian set in the world to improve it. His business is to witness for the One who has been cast out, and "who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (or age).

Let the fact of Christ's rejection have weight with you, dear fellow-Christian, and ask yourself, Is it loyalty or treachery to be anything but a *stranger* in the world which has refused Him a place?

Lifetime of Christ on Earth

We have, I think, gone a long way towards answering our question, Should Christians take part in politics? We have considered facts and principles that must surely show that only one answer is possible.

But there are other things to which I now invite the reader's attention. First, let us see what we can learn from the lifetime of Christ on earth.

It was an era of great political agitation. Judea had been annexed to the Empire of Rome, and a Roman governor represented the hated pagan power in Jerusalem. National feeling ran high. Pharisaism was watching its opportunity to put itself at the head of an endeavour to throw off the galling yoke. Under the circumstances would it not be expected that the Lord Jesus should express His views to the political situation, and lend the weight of His influence either to the national party whose aims were patriotic and religious, or to the Roman party, represented by the Herodians? On one occasion members of these two opposing parties attempted to obtain an expression of political opinion from the Lord by a cleverly-framed question. "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" Would He advise them to patiently endure the Gentile yoke, or to strenuously oppose it?

What an opportunity for a politician! Representative men of both leading parties in the State waiting eagerly to hear His answer! What would the great Teacher advise? Would He side with the government, or counsel a movement on the lines of "passive resistance," or what?

It was soon seen that the Lord Jesus had nothing to say to the politics of the day. His mission amongst men was to urge the claims of *God* upon the conscience and soul. So, pointing to the coin used for the payment of the imperial tax, He asked, "Whose is this image and superscription?"

"Caesar's," was the reply.

Then said He, "Render, therefore, to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are God's."

Probably this answer was received with murmurings by the Pharisaic party. "What a lack of patriotism!" they may have exclaimed. "Why did He not urge the people to fight for freedom, and to resist tyranny?" But it is impossible to recall the incident without seeing that the Lord Jesus deliberately refused to take any part in politics. Rather than do so, He would let people esteem Him unpatriotic.

On a previous occasion the opportunity had arisen for Him to place Himself at the head of an enthusiastic multitude bent on asserting the independence of Galilee, the northern province of Palestine. His power to feed five thousand men with a mere handful of bread and fish had so impressed the multitude, that with one accord they decided that He would be their leader and their king. They were even prepared to compel Him by force to accept the position (Jn. 6:15); but it was not for

that that He had come to earth. He would not take part in the movement that was afoot. He withdrew into the solitude of a neighbouring mountain. He was no politician. To serve God and to save men was His object.

On another occasion the question of arbitration was brought up. A quarrel had arisen, and the Lord Jesus was asked to act as arbitrator. What would *you* have done under such circumstances? Would you have argued, "Here is an opportunity for promoting peace and righteousness, and for doing good amongst men"? Would you have consented to arbitrate? Notice that *your Master refused*. "Man!" He said, "who made Me a judge or a divider over you?" (Lk. 12:14). Other, and higher business than that was His.

One may ask, "Do you then think arbitration wrong?" No. To arbitrate is better than to quarrel. Let the world settle its strifes by arbitration, rather than by war, by all means. The point is, that the Lord Jesus left that sort of thing to others. He did not condemn arbitration, but He took no part in it. It belonged to a sphere of things which was outside the "Father's business." And the path that the Master trod is surely the path for the disciple.

The Early days of Christianity

In the early days of Christianity slavery was an established institution, and many were its cruelties and horrors. It might be thought that the servants of Christ would certainly start a campaign for its abolition; but the Epistle to Philemon shows that the Christians of those bright, early days did not lift up a finger to alter the state of things. Onesimus, a runaway slave, had been converted through Paul's preaching at Rome. Instead of using the occasion to denounce the evils of slavery, the Apostle deliberately sends the runaway back with a courteous message and a loving request that the Christian master would receive the returned runaway as a brother in Christ.

No Christian could be indifferent to the cruelties inflicted upon the unfortunate slaves, either in ancient or modern times. And the horrors of the slave trade, who shall tell? Nor is this diabolical commerce a matter of the past. Here and there, on the West Coast of Africa, and elsewhere, the hideous traffic still exists. But the Christian's resource is God Himself. Not agitation, or by joining in a political propaganda; not by getting up petitions to Parliament, or by assembling mass meetings; but by going into God's presence with the burden of the world's woe upon his heart, and then coming out of that presence to carry the tidings of *Christ* to men.

In this way the Christian will rightly seek to serve his Master. At least, so we gather from the pages of the New Testament.

From the late 1800's till the End

In these days when Socialism, Radicalism, and Democracy are watchwords upon so many lips, it should not be forgotten that Christians are exhorted to "honour the King." Who was on the throne when such counsel was given by the Apostle Peter? (1 Pet. 2:17). Not a gracious sovereign like Queen Victoria, not a peace-loving monarch like King Edward VII; Nero, one of the worst tyrants the world has ever seen, the murderer of his mother and his wife, the embodiment of every vice and cruelty, was the wearer of the imperial crown. But Christians were not to join in any movement for the dethroning of the emperor, or the substitution of a better form of government. They were to go on in quiet obedience, suffering for righteousness' sake, if called upon to do so, and withal holding the king in honour because of his high office (1 Pet. 2:13-17). Those in power are there by the ordinance of God (Rom. 13:1), and the Christian's duty is not resistance, but subjection.

I am well aware that many very estimable Christians will dissent from my thesis. They hold that it is not inconsistent for them to take part in the politics of the day. They maintain that Christians should do their utmost to give a moral complexion to public life, and to introduce wholesome influences into the political arena.

Those who argue thus might learn a lesson from the case of Lot. He was a righteous man (2 Pet. 2:7). But he made a great mistake. Becoming a resident in the wicked city of Sodom, he accepted a position of authority there. He "sat in the gate of Sodom." That is, I suppose, he became one of the city magistrates. Probably his desire was to see justice take the place of injustice, to sweeten the putrid atmosphere of Sodom's civic life; but the endeavour ended in awful failure. His testimony was nullified, his voice of warning fell on deaf ears, and the destruction of the city left him a penniless fugitive, to end his days miserably in a mountain cave. How serious the lesson to be read in this narrative!

"But," says someone, "is it not right to try to get the best men elected as members of Parliament? Will not better laws be passed, and the country be better governed, by good men than by bad?"

Well, it may be thought so, but the contrary is often the case. It is significant that when the time came for God to choose a governor for the world, He chose a violent, tyrannical man, Nebuchadnezzar. This man was set up as the first great Gentile head of the nations, when Israel, by disobedience, had forfeited the favour of God. Instead of being left under the rule of the kings of David's line, God gave His wilful people into the hand of the Gentiles, and appointed Nebuchadnezzar (the "head of gold") to govern them. God is behind the scenes, and can carry out His will through the most wicked of men, as well as through the best. Let Christians, then, occupy themselves with the business of *their* Master, and leave the world to attend to the business of *its* master.

Days to come

It is abundantly clear to any student of the Scriptures that Satan has the control of the great world-system. It is not even yet fully developed, but future developments are foretold on the prophetic page. The nations of Europe have a leading place in the wonderful system organized by the devil.

They will ultimately take the form of ten kingdoms, which will form a close confederation, and be ruled over by a great popular emperor, called in Scripture, "the Beast." The Jews, returned to their land of Palestine (though still in unbelief), will receive as their king a lawless, wicked, unscrupulous man, known as "the Antichrist." The Beast and the Antichrist will form a league, and then fearful things will come to pass. A whole volume might be written upon the terrible things that will happen in those last days; awful will be the sufferings and unspeakable the judgments poured out then upon the "dwellers on earth." Let the reader turn to the pages of Daniel and Revelation for further details. *This* is the climax to which the politics of the day are moving on.

But if Satan is working out this great system which he dominates, God, too, has a great system in view, a system of which *Christ* is the blessed centre. I do not now refer to heaven, or to the eternal state, but to what will be set up during the period generally known as the "Millennium," or the thousand years of blessing and glory.

From Daniel 2 we learn that the great world-system will be shattered, as by "a stone cut out without hands." The stone will become a great mountain and fill the whole earth. This surely portrays that which will take the place of the world-system upon its destruction. The God of heaven shall set up a kingdom. Many a prophecy shows that Jerusalem shall be the metropolis of that wonderful kingdom, and restored rule of righteousness shall be established to the ends of the earth. Then shall men beat their swords into ploughshares, and shall learn war no more.

But *the Christian* has his portion in a sphere higher and more glorious still. The world to come has its heavenly, as well as its earthly side; and in that heavenly part, the kingdom of the Father, where as sons we shall be eternally at home, will be our portion. All the glories of Christ in connection with the blessing of men on earth will be for us to adoringly contemplate, but we ourselves shall be with Him, dwelling in the Father's love, and knowing as we are known.

Wonderful to relate, that scene of love and life is ours to enjoy even now. We are not actually there, but in the Spirit of God we have the power of entering in and tasting the joys of that realm of bliss. He unfolds its glories to our hearts, and gives us to contemplate Him who is the centre of it all, the beloved Son of the Father.

Christian reader, what do you know of all this? I am sure that if you knew the joy of that blessed *home* life, you would be dwelling, by the Spirit of God, in a sphere where earthly pursuits have no place. And you would seek to spend the time of your sojourning here, not in joining in that which belongs to the world-system, but in doing the will of God, and serving the interests of the One who is rejected here, but exalted *there!*

Christian Liberty (1)

—Notes (somewhat revised) of an address by A.W.

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (Gal. 5:1).

"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16).

Most readers will, I suppose, be acquainted with the circumstances which led to the writing of the letter to the Galatian assemblies. The historical account of it is recorded in Acts 15. That chapter, I would suggest, should always be read before

studying this Epistle. It tells us that certain ones came down from Judea and taught the trusting saints in Galatia that, unless they were circumcised after the manner of Moses, they could not be saved.

Paul, in speaking of the same class, styles them "false brethren unawares brought in, who came... to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" (Gal. 2:4). They moved in and out among the Galatian assemblies, clothing themselves with all the authority attached to the city of Jerusalem where the apostles lived. They talked to them, as we may suppose, somewhat like this: "Ah! you have had Paul down here preaching his gospel, and you have received it. But we would have you know and remember that even Paul has some things yet to learn. There are those who were in Christ long before Paul, his seniors in the apostolic office. We have come straight from them, and tell you in their name that unless you submit to Moses and keep the law you will never get to heaven."

Thus with good words and fair speeches they gained the ear of these unsuspecting saints and sought to impose upon them the yoke of the law. The Galatians having begun in the Spirit, were now to be made perfect by the flesh (Gal. 3:3). For such teaching the natural heart of man offers a congenial soil. It is so easy to be legal and to fall away from grace. Therefore the Spirit of God led the Apostle Paul to write this epistle to recover those who had fallen into that snare and to guard others who were exposed to the same danger.

Coming now to the two passages introducing this article, it will be clear to everybody that before we can stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ makes us free, we must ourselves be in it. How can we stand fast in liberty if we do not enjoy it? Or how shall a man rejoice in freedom if he be yet a slave? We therefore ask, What is the liberty in which we have to stand fast? It may be described as consisting of three great privileges. First, that we who believe are completely justified by the grace of God on the principle of faith, and not by works of law (Gal. 2:16). Second, that the great gift of the Holy Spirit has been bestowed on us not by works of law, but by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). Third, that we are sons of God, and no longer regarded as children under age or as servants holding a subordinate place in God's household (Gal. 4:1-7). These three constitute the liberty wherewith Christ makes free and in which we must stand fast.

There are no measures in justification. The oldest saint on earth and the youngest believer in Christ are equally justified. They stand, both of them, on precisely the same platform. In this there can be no advance. And our justification, our clearance from all charge of guilt, is due to the grace of God — His free, unmerited favour. On this ground the greatest sinner on earth may be justified, and the best of men can be justified on no other (Gal. 2:21). Meritoriously, it is by the blood of Christ that we are justified (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 5:9), and on the principle of faith (Gal. 2:16).

It is of the greatest moment that young Christians, and old ones too, should be clear and decided upon this first point. No human merit — not a shred of it — enters into your justification before God. You owe this great blessing to His undeserved favour. And it is God himself who has justified you, and He who knows all your sins is the One who has cleared you from every one of them (Rom. 8:33). What confidence this gives, what liberty and boldness before Him and before the foe. No doubt the blood of Jesus is, as we have said, the meritorious cause. Apart from that, how could God justify us and maintain His character as the Holy and the Just? And it is in believing the glad tidings that we are justified from all things, as Acts 13:39 so plainly and forcibly declares.

Secondly, the Apostle does not question the fact of these Galatian believers having received the promise of the Spirit; he only would learn of them whether this great gift had come to them by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). Was it the result of their own labour, their scrupulous observance of "days, and months, and times, and years," or was it a gracious and gratuitous gift following their belief of the gospel? The latter undoubtedly!

Of course we carefully distinguish between being born of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit being given as God's gift. To be born of the Spirit is one thing, the Spirit's indwelling is another. Sometimes the question is asked, When do we receive the Spirit? The answer is found in Acts 10:44. It is when the glad tidings of forgiveness for sins through Christ's name is heard with the hearing of faith that the Holy Spirit is immediately given. It was thus with Cornelius. He had already been born again, for it is said of him that he was "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway" (Acts 10:2). Such a testimony could not be borne to anyone dead in sins. But, though born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, he needed to hear that gospel which should bring to him salvation, and in believing it, he was "sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13).

As with him, so with us. Let us remember then that not only have we been born again, forgiven, justified from all things, but our body is also the temple of the Holy Spirit. Now this great gift is not bestowed one day to be withdrawn the next. We may, alas, grieve the Spirit, but we can never grieve Him away. We are sealed unto, or in view of, the day of redemption — the day for which we hope and wait (Eph.4:30). "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29).

Thirdly, we believers are not in the place or condition of children under age, supervised by tutors and governors, nor are we merely servants holding an inferior position; we have received the adoption of sons. Such is our avowed standing and relationship. God owns us as His sons. Therefore it is written, "because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6). These three then are the constituent parts of that liberty wherewith Christ makes free and in which we must stand fast.

To be cont'd

Micah (5)

—R. Been Sr.

Chapter 3

With this chapter the second part of Micah begins; it continues until and including verse 8 of chapter 4. The main subject in this portion can be summarized as follows: Description of the terrible condition of the people and particularly of their leaders. This is followed by the Lord's plans regarding the coming realm of peace.

"And I said, Hear, I pray you, ye heads of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel: Is it not for you to know judgment? Ye who hate the good, and love evil; who pluck off their skin from them, and their flesh from off their bones; and who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones, and chop them in pieces as for the pot, and as flesh within the cauldron" (vv. 1-3).

Here the prophet addresses the leaders of the entire nation, the ten and the two tribes, charging them. What a characterization of self-interest, of greed for "base gain," is presented here! These leaders had no heart for the sheep entrusted to their care. They were but hirelings intent on their own profit. They followed the maxim that the sheep were there for them, not they for the sheep. Not only did they refrain from doing good, but they hated it. Not only did they fail to refrain from doing evil, but they loved it. What could possibly become of their leader's task with such a disposition! They were not a blessing but a curse to the people.

What a contrast between them and the apostle Paul, who lived out his words: "I do not seek yours but you"! The metaphors used in these verses point to violent extortion.

"Then shall they cry unto Jehovah, but He will not answer them; and He will hide His face from them at that time, according as they have wrought evil in their doings" (v. 4).

When the day of their retribution will come, they will cry to God in their fear and need, but God will hide His face from them and not answer. A terrible judgment! He, who despite His crying, was not answered, who experienced that God hid His face from Him in the hour when He suffered for our sins, He did also say that the fathers called upon the Lord and had been delivered (Ps. 22:3,6).

"Thus saith Jehovah concerning the prophets that cause My people to err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace! but who so putteth not into their mouths they prepare war against him, therefore ye shall have night without a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, without divination; and the sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them. And the seers shall be ashamed, and the diviners confounded; and they shall all cover their lips, for there will be no answer of God" (vv. 5-7).

These deceiving false prophets were just as much out for their own advantage as the other leaders of the people. To them who gave money or goods to these prophets they proclaimed salvation, but to those who have nothing, they proclaimed disaster. This would not have been the worst, for what these prophets said was not from God, and had no significance. What was worse, is that the people were led astray by these leaders. The prophets God had sent spoke the truth unabashedly, but besides approaching judgment they preached a way of escape, namely by humiliation and repentance. These false prophets, however, spoke of peace, of blessing, and did not point to the sins of the people. Soon, however, the day would come that they would be publicly put to shame. Then they would cover their lips as a sign that they could not answer anything against these demonstrations that publicly exposed them for what they were. They could say as little as a leper could against the declaration that he was unclean.

In Christendom, too, there are such false prophets, people who have an appearance of godliness, but who deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5). They do not know God's true thoughts. The truths, which God has clearly revealed in Scripture, are hidden from them. Therefore, they speak of peace, development, progress, while the judgment of God lies at the door.

"But truly I am filled with power by the Spirit of Jehovah, and with judgment and with might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin" (v. 8).

Here the prophet spoke about himself in contrast to the false prophets. The true ambassador from God is under the leading of God's Spirit, a Spirit of power, of right, of strength (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7). Micah did not lead the people astray but spoke freely to the people and its leaders about their trespasses and sins. It is not love when sinners are not confronted with their true condition, by speaking of peace and blessing when God is about to pour His judgment over them.

Micah describes himself as filled with power; this is obviously the power of the Lord. The spiritual power of a servant of the Lord is always accompanied with a deep realization of one's own weakness. It was so with Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6; 15:20). So Gideon realized his own weakness (Judg. 6:14-16). Daniel confessed having no more strength (Dan. 10:17-19). The apostle Paul also, while being full of strength provided by the Lord, said, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Whether it be to prophesy, to preach declaring the truth, to bring the gospel, or to gain the victory in difficulties or persecution, in all these and many besides, strength is only obtained in a deep realization of personal weakness. When Samson, trusting in his own strength, said, "I will go out as at other times before, and disengage myself," the Lord had already departed from him. The serious thing was that *Samson was not even aware of it* (Judg. 16:20).

"Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity, that build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with unrighteousness. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money; yet do they lean upon Jehovah, and say, Is not Jehovah in the midst of us? no evil shall come upon us" (vv. 9-11).

That Micah was truly a prophet of the Lord is confirmed by this charge against the mighty and influential leaders of the people. Without restraint he tells the truth to all; to chiefs, leaders, priests and prophets, to civil and religious authorities. With all, money played the main role and material interests overruled.

Is it any different in our days? Certainly, the circumstances differ and the dignitaries have a different character, but the principles that guide the various leaders are the same as they were then. Now, as then, self-interest controls the leaders, even those in Christendom. The most terrible thing is that *the name of the Lord is linked* to all this egoism.

Israel's sin in the wilderness was their doubting whether God was truly in the midst of His people or not. It says that they tempted God thereby (Ex. 17:7). In Micah we find the opposite. In the midst of all the evil done by the leaders, they excused this by appealing to the fact that the Lord was in their midst. *Thereby the name of God was connected with the evil.*

With the change of times, sin may bear a different character, but sin remains sin. The claim of unbelieving but religious people that God is with them, that He is in their midst and that He blesses there, is only self-deception. Governments, kings, teachers, pastors, prophets, who lead men to ruin, cry at the top of their voices, "Isn't the Lord with us?" Satan loves to instill the thought in man that God sanctions the totally wrong conditions, and that His name can be linked with them. Thus it was with Israel, even when the judgment lay at the door. That Gentile nations walk "everyone in the name of his god" (4:5) was not so amazing, but that God's own people linked trespasses, sin, disobedience, infidelity with the name of the Lord, that was the summit of blindness. So it is with that which is Christian in name only. They observe that all is in ruins, that there is a horrifying division, but instead of humbling themselves about this before God, they work on a world-wide organization that is to encompass all creeds and denominations. They seek to accomplish this through a policy of give and take, entirely according to worldly yardsticks. Then they connect the name of the Lord to this pitiful surrogate of the oneness of all the children of God. The devil awaits the moment that he can use this organization for his terrible ends.

"Therefore shall Zion for your sake be ploughed [as] a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest" (v. 12).

This is where all the boasting self-deception would end. The proof that the Lord was not in their midst would be given by themselves. This whole empty service of forms, this whole human system *would be deprived of the opportunity to link the name of the Lord to it any longer*. Mount Zion, the centre of the kingdom of Israel, would be ploughed under like a field. Jerusalem, the city of the great King, would become a ruinous heap. Even the temple, from which the Lord would have withdrawn Himself, would be destroyed. The temple mount would become like a high place of a forest.

So it will go, in a spiritual sense, with responsible Christendom and all that connected with a merely formal confession without any true life. In one hour, the whole corruptive system, which by then has become Babylon the great, will be brought to an end, to the consternation and amazement of the merchants of this earth who have been enriched by this system (Rev. 18:15-19).

About a hundred years later, in the days of Jeremiah, the elders of Israel referred to this important verse of Micah's prophecy to save Jeremiah from death.

During the same time as Micah, the prophet Isaiah, too, had foretold this demise of Jerusalem. In doing so, Isaiah also pointed to the future restoration during the time when "the Spirit [will] be poured upon us from on high" (Isa 32:12-15). In verses 1-8 of the next chapter, which are closely linked with the third chapter, Micah speaks also of this future restoration.

To be cont'd

Outline for Bible Study (78)

157. Ananias and Sapphira. The Apostles before the Sanhedrin. — Acts 4:32-5:42.

Outline

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|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. The life of the believers | Acts 4:32-37 |
| 2. Ananias and Sapphira's deception | Acts 5:1-2 |
| 3. God's judgment | Acts 5:3-11 |
| 4. Signs and wonders | Acts 5:12-16 |
| 5. The apostles in prison | Acts 5:17-32 |
| 6. Gamaliel | Acts 5:33-39 |
| 7. The apostles freed | Acts 5:40-42 |

Explanation

1. What a beautiful testimony to the world was the intimate love of the first Christians, and what an example for us! (Jn. 13:35; Heb. 13:16; Ps. 133:1). The believers in Jerusalem (we do not read about other places) shared all their goods with each other and those who possessed land sold it and gave the funds to the apostles. No one was forced to do this, nor was it a commandment of the Lord; it was the fruit of the working of the Holy Spirit, the work of faith and love. Joseph Barnabas is mentioned in particular (Acts 4:36-37) as one who sold his land and brought the money to the apostles. As a Levite, he used to receive gifts from the people, now, however, he himself gave everything to the Lord. Later he is as a co-labourer of the apostle Paul (Acts 11:22-25; 13:2).

2. Soon the devil was able to penetrate. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to appear to be as pious and loving as the others, but their act was one of hypocrisy and deceit (Rom. 12:9).

3. Now the presence of the Holy Spirit, so far only seen in the fruit of righteousness of the believers, revealed itself in His judgment of evil in the Church. He is a Person, He is God (Acts 5:3-4 and 13:2) Ananias and his wife lied to God and deceived the believers. Since the testimony of the Holy Spirit was then still new and fresh, their guilt was all the greater. The greater the light, the heavier the judgment. Their judgment was death. Great fear came upon all the assembly and upon the world (Acts 5:11; Gal. 6:7-8). This judgment is an example of what the Lord shall do every morning in His Kingdom. (Ps. 101:8; Zeph. 3:5).

4. Though no man dared to join them, believers were added to the Lord through the working of the Holy Spirit. As promised by the Lord (Jn. 14:12), the apostles did many signs and wonders. Clearly, God was with them (Heb. 2:4). This

caused jealousy, wrath, and hatred bringing fulfilment of what the Lord had said, "The bondman is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn. 15:18-25).

5. After an angel had led the apostles out of prison, the high-priest stood powerless. The apostles, clothed with power from on high (Lk. 24:49), were standing in the temple teaching the people (verse 20). They obeyed God rather than men. The high priest accused them of not obeying his order not to teach in this name (Acts 4:17-21), and he charged them that they brought the blood of this man upon the nation (Mt. 27:25). A short, powerful response from Peter called them to repentance, but they failed to heed this invitation too.

6. To many, Gamaliel seem to have been a wise man. He was, however, a politician, trying to escape an obvious dilemma. If Gamaliel had urged the other council-members to act like the Jews in Berea (Acts 17:11), there would have been hope for him and his people. Now they added one more deed of enmity by beating the apostles and once again forbidding them not to speak in the name of Jesus.

7. The disciples, who rejoiced in their suffering for the name of Jesus (Mt. 5:11-12; 1 Pet. 4:12-16), continued to announce that Jesus is the Christ. The Holy Spirit works such things in feeble men!

Lesson

Satan always brings destruction, soon after God has worked, and man always falls — the fall in Paradise just after creation; the golden calf immediately after the giving of the law; the fall of the priesthood in the sons of Aaron by their bringing strange fire.

God cannot tolerate evil; and least of all there where He dwells. With unbelievers He shows great patience and long-suffering until there is no salvation possible (men before the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Pharaoh), but in His Church He exercises strict discipline (1 Pet. 4:17).

158. Stephen. The Persecution. — Acts 6:1-8:3.

Outline

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|---------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Stephen's activities | Acts 6 |
| 2. His address to the Sanhedrin | Acts 7:1-53 |
| 3. His death | Acts 7:54-60 |
| 4. The persecution | Acts 8:1-3 |

Explanation

1. A new enemy threatened from inside. Jews of Grecian origin murmured to the Hebrew Jews about the administration of the gifts. The wisdom supplied by the Spirit solved the problem. Seven Grecian men were chosen to "serve the tables" so that the apostles could attend to praying and preaching. (Note that praying is mentioned first, before preaching). Of the seven, Philip and Stephen had the gift to minister the Word, which caused Stephen, a man full of grace and power, to receive opposition from the unbelievers. Using false witnesses, they charged him with preaching in Jesus name the destruction of the temple and changing the customs of Moses (Ex. 20:16; Prov. 19:5).

2. In his defence before the council, he pointed out that Israel had always resisted God's Spirit and rejected the saviours sent by God. Besides that, from Egypt on they had served idols. They had received the law but had not kept it, but slain the prophets, and had finally become the murderers of Christ. They had always resisted the Holy Spirit. Long ago already, God had left their temple, and did not dwell there any more (cf. Ezek. 10:4,18-19; 11:22-23). Their consciences were pricked, but their hearts were hardened; so these Jews also reject the last testimony (Lk. 19:14). They had slain Christ, now they rejected the Holy Spirit. God had tried everything to win His people, but Israel resisted every attempt. Both religious and political powers had rejected God's Son and crucified Him.

3. God opened the heavens for Stephen, who beheld the glorified Son of man standing at God's right hand. Jesus standing there possibly indicates that the Lord waited till the Jews also rejected this last testimony. Being occupied with the Lord

Jesus made Stephen similar to his Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). Stephen, the first martyr, died happily, his face shining with a heavenly glow; later many have followed him with the same happiness (Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, and others — Rev. 2:10).

4. According to God's plan the word of the cross was first preached to the Jews (Acts 13:46; 1:8; Lk. 24:26,47; Rom. 1:16). They, however, rejected the testimony of God completely; therefore God gave the vineyard to others, and turned to the nations (Mt. 21:43; Rom. 11:11) setting Israel aside. The Lord had commanded the disciples to reach out from Jerusalem (Mt. 28:18-20), but when they remained there, God reached His goal by allowing persecution to scatter them (Acts 8:1).

Lesson

After both the religious and political world had rejected God's testimony, God begins something entirely new. He brings in the second man, who is linked with heaven through Christ. The blessings and the portion of Israel were connected with earth, those of the Christian with heaven.

To be cont'd