

THE CHRISTIAN, GOVERNMENT, JESUS CHRIST & POLITICAL ACTIVITY¹

INTRODUCTION: There is nothing wrong with Christians being involved in political activity. In fact, we need more leaders in government that possess integrity & Christian moral standards.

In this paper though, I do not wish to talk about Christians seeking to win elected office or working for candidates who they feel would make good leaders. Instead, I wish to address the question of what types of activities Christians should and should not be engaged in when trying to reform or correct abuses by a government in power. In that regard, individuals have sometimes appealed to the example of Jesus Christ for support for the quasi-political & sometimes even violent activities they are engaging in. For instance, some claim that Jesus was a radical political revolutionary who was a threat to the Roman government of His day, and thus was killed for it. Such individuals then go on to say that since Christ was a political radical, Christians today should be too.

In the early 1990's a UPNG student leader & later a member of the staff of the law department (heavily influenced by an expatriate law lecturer)², was trying to recruit people to join a protest march his group was planning to stage. The purpose was to express their opposition to a government decision with which they didn't agree. In order to aid in recruiting a large crowd this particular leader pointed to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and claimed it was an example of Christ's "political" activity. He then attempted to use that to try to persuade Christians at the time to "follow Christ's example," join their rally and march down to the center of Pt. Moresby to protest a policy the government had implemented. (!)

Are such individuals right? Was Christ a political threat to the Roman government? Did Jesus use mob tactics to overthrow evil laws and policies? If He were here today physically, would Christ be marching down the street, blocking roads, throwing rocks, looting stores & shouting obscenities? The answer to all of the above questions is an emphatic "NO!"

Let's look at some principles we can glean from God's infallible word the Bible, which will give us direction as we seek to impact our towns, provinces and country for righteousness.

- I. **THE MOST IMPORTANT FREEDOM IS SPIRITUAL, NOT PHYSICAL.** The Bible makes it clear that spiritual freedom—not physical freedom—is the most important thing in life. In fact, until people possess freedom inside, they are basically incapable of producing peace in their family, village, province or country!
 - A. **Freedom from the punishment for sin** i.e. hell! "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free...If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.*" (**Jn. 8:32, 36**). "*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*" (**Gal. 5:1**).
 - B. **Freedom from the power of sin** i.e. in the life of a believer. "*for he who has died is freed from sin.*" (**Rom. 6:7**).
- II. **THE CHRISTIAN HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO OBEY THE LAWS & GOVERNMENT OF HIS COUNTRY UNLESS THEY VIOLATE GOD'S WORD.** **Rom. 13:1-7; I Pet. 2:13-17 & Tit. 3:1** cf. **Acts 4:32ff & 5:27-29**. The believer is warned to beware of using his freedom in a malicious or evil manner (**Gal. 5:13; I Pet. 2:16**).
- III. **WHAT ABOUT A CORRUPT, EVIL GOVERNMENT OR LEADERSHIP?** Even that does not allow a Christian to break the law in order to accomplish a good purpose. Paul himself was accused of that in Romans 3:8 i.e. of practicing the Jesuit philosophy of "*The End Justifies the Means*"—a charge which He vociferously rejected. We are free to use legal, decent, God-honoring avenues to dethrone evil and accomplish good (e.g. **Acts 16:37-39; I Cor. 14:26, 33, 40; cf. the OT laws; Eccl. 8:11**; etc.). Even when a government doesn't fear God and is corrupt, there are usually proper, decent, legal ways to see that justice is done (**I Cor. 7:22**). However in countries such as the former Soviet Union, Communist China, etc., where such rights & freedoms may not exist, a Christian should simply stand up for God, do what is right and accept the consequences—not overthrow the government with an illegal physical rebellion (**I Pet. 2:18-24** cf. **James 5:1-12**). We are not to be a stumbling block (**Rom. 14**) but an example in everything (**I Tim. 4:12**). Can marching behind obscene signs and engaging in evil & illegal conduct be honoring to Christ? (**I Thess. 5:22**).³

¹ By Mike Edwards. Written 21 March, 1997 while serving as Baptist Chaplain at the Univ. of Goroka, Papua New Guinea & based on earlier notes shared while serving in that same position at the Univ. of Papua New Guinea. All Bible quotations are from the *New American Standard Version*. (Notes slightly revised, Feb. 2015, Sept. 2016, Mar. 2017 & June 2020)

² A few years later this student leader went on to be elected to PNG's Parliament, and became the mayor of Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea!

³ This comment was in reference to behavior engaged in by a group of radical students & a communist/socialist student organization which existed then named *Melanesian Solidarity* or "*Mel-Sol*". The events took place in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea in the late 1980's & early 1990's. —mwe

- IV. **THE TESTIMONY AND EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST.** Those who claim that Christ was a "revolutionary" (e.g. "liberation theologians"), are totally wrong & completely off base. Note these things about Christ's earthly ministry:
- A. **JESUS EMPHASIZED THAT HIS KINGDOM WAS SPIRITUAL & ETERNAL, NOT EARTHLY & PHYSICAL.** Dan. 7:27 cf. Matt. 25:34; Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:28; Luke 22:29-30. Those who are truly born again are members of *His* kingdom, and not of this world. Phil. 3:20-21; Rev. 1:5 & I Pet. 2:9 (a kingdom & priests); Jn. 3:3; I Cor. 6:9 & 15:50.
- B. **CHRIST WAS ACCUSED—AND ACQUITTED OF—THE CHARGE OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY & ATTEMPTING TO OVERTHROW THE CORRUPT ROMAN GOVERNMENT.** Matt. 27:11-ff; Luke 23:2-4; Jn. 19:12-16; Matt. 27:20, 24 & 22:15-22 (where they tried to "bait" Him) Charles Ryrie observes:
- "The burning question in the minds of many Jews of that day was simply this: If God gave the land of Israel to the Hebrews, and if God meant them to live there, and if He received their sacrifices and offerings in acknowledgment of His relationship to them, how could they pay tribute to any other power, king, god, or person? If Christ said that they should pay, they could then charge Him with disloyalty to Judaism; if He said no, they could denounce Him to the Romans... Christ recognized the distinction between political and spiritual responsibilities. Caesar should be given taxes and all rightful political obedience; God should be given worship, obedience, service, and the dedication of one's whole life."*⁴
- C. **JESUS REFUSED TO BECOME A POLITICAL TOOL OR ESTABLISH AN EARTHLY KINGDOM.** Jn. 6:15. Ryrie: "*Jesus had to escape from the enthusiasm of the crowd, which would have forced Him to lead them in revolt against the Roman government. Jesus refused to become a political revolutionist*"⁵ Jn. 18:36; Matt. 26:51-56
- D. **WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED ON PALM SUNDAY?** – Matt. 21:9 This was not a political rally but Christ's formal presentation of Himself to the Jewish people to acknowledge who He was and surrender to Him as Lord. Ryrie observes: "*Hosanna = Save Now.* The acclamation is a quotation based upon Ps. 118:25-27, sung at the *Feast of Tabernacles*. The crowd wanted salvation from the oppression of Rome, not the spiritual salvation which Christ offered."⁶ Regarding Mk. 11:9 & Luke 19:38 Ryrie remarked: "*This occasion was the fulfillment of Zech. 9:9. In a few days the same crowd who now hailed Him would desert Him*"⁷. Christ's entry into Jerusalem was undeniably *not* a peace march! Note Christ's statement in **Matthew 5:17** that He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it! Christ was not setting up a political kingdom. That's why the Jewish people rejected Him!
- V. **HOW TO OVERCOME EVIL BIBLICALLY? BY OVERCOMING IT WITH GOOD!** Now *that* is a truly *revolutionary* idea! Matt. 5:43, 47; Lk. 6:27-35 & Rom. 12:14, 17, 19-21. **A couple of examples:**
- A. **Josef Tson of Romania.** The life of Romanian Baptist pastor Josef Tson is a powerful example of overcoming evil with good. Multitudes of Christians were being persecuted under the brutal Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. On several occasions pastor Tson was threatened with death unless he promised to stop preaching. He politely but firmly refused and kept on preaching. The communist regime died, not pastor Tson.
- B. **The impact of believers in the former Soviet Union.** Thousands of believers suffered terribly for decades under that atheistic government. Ultimately though, as we all now know, the Soviet Union collapsed. During that time period, as their political leaders tried desperately to keep the Soviet empire afloat in the face of its imminent demise, Mikhail Gorbachev reportedly fumed to his top Kremlin leadership regarding the thousands of believers who were languishing in prisons throughout the gulag: "*Why are we imprisoning our most productive workers?*"

⁴ Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* [NASV], Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1976, 1978, p. 1485

⁵ Ibid, p. 1610

⁶ Ibid, p. 1482

⁷ Ibid, p. 1526