

The Right To Change Society?

A sinister development which seems to spring at least partly from the charismatic movement has been the apparent conviction that we Christians should be active in changing the society in which we live, that we have a responsibility and even a right to do so.

Some of this has probably washed over from an earlier age when some Western societies were seen as being 'Christian countries'. Many Christians in these countries, perhaps the majority, still long for a 'return to Christian values in society' and see this as one of the primary roles of the Church.

Believers in 'non-Christian' countries usually have no such illusions. They know that, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are in a minority and are likely to remain so. They have no reason, from Scripture or elsewhere, to expect to live in a 'Christian' society. From a distance, some of them may envy their brothers and sisters in so-called Christian countries but, if they once make a visit, they soon see the hollowness of the label and are often shocked at the lack of faith that they find.

I believe that the various attempts to 'restore' society are not only doomed to failure but are profoundly misguided and stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the true nature and role of the Church.

In the New Testament, we do not see Paul advocating any kind of tinkering with the setup of the pervading pagan Roman society. It would have been unrealistic, to say the least! Christians continued to find themselves relentlessly persecuted. This was the time in the Church's history when the most phenomenal growth was seen – should we be surprised?

Even the Lord Jesus himself, working largely within the Jewish community, taught right attitudes and behaviour and did not shrink from blunt criticism of those in authority, but he did not attempt to bring about changes in society. His whole teaching on the kingdom of heaven makes it very clear that he was aiming for internal spiritual change, not some sort of organisational rearrangement. The temptation to 'take the kingdom' and rule over the world system was not his idea, but Satan's. Simon Peter was still thinking in these 'world takeover' terms when he rejected Jesus' statement that he would suffer and die – no wonder the Lord spoke so strongly to him!

Internal change is the key. Of course there will be some change in society as individuals within it are themselves transformed by the new life of the Holy Spirit within. But that change will be at first infinitesimal, growing only as the number of changed lives grows, always organic and never organisational.

Maybe we doubt this and seek to hold on to the many Christian institutions that have been founded with clear intent to change society. Whilst I would not question the sincerity of those who founded them and those who work in them now, the least association with any of them will show us that they are prone to fall into the trap of becoming mere man-made organisations, incapable of fulfilling the vision with which they were founded.

The disciples asked their risen Lord whether he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel at that time (**Acts 1:6**). Even after all the years of listening to his teaching and their very recent intense experience of the enormous price of the grace of God, they still thought that maybe he was just about to take over as the conquering, ruling Messiah.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see how they had missed the point. We know that those same confused disciples were soon to know the enabling of the Holy Spirit, and how they would take the message of internal spiritual transformation to 'Jerusalem, Judea and the uttermost parts of the earth'.

In closing, let me pass on something I was told some time ago. Apparently there are some Jewish scholars who now say that it was a mistake for the Jews to be given the modern land of Israel in 1948. Their study of the scriptures leads them to believe that the only way they were supposed to re-occupy Israel would be under the command of the Messiah when he had returned in glory. In other words, they could not see the kingdom restored unless the king had returned.

The Lord Jesus does not look to us to get the world sorted out before he returns. He looks for the Church to have made herself ready, like a bride for her bridegroom. Only when he returns will the kingdoms of the world become the kingdom of God and of his Christ.

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