

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (5)

In this department we will continue to consider the epistle to the church in Thyatira, the fourth of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. These seven churches are a prophetic type of the progress of the church throughout the course of the entire church age, from the time of the apostles to the Lord's second coming in the future. Christ as the heavenly High Priest walks in the midst of the churches and cares for them by addressing their respective conditions, needs, and shortcomings. To all but Laodicia He speaks a word of commendation, citing their works, labor, endurance, walk, and faithfulness to His name and to His word, and to each church He holds forth a promise of reward to the overcomers among them. However, the shepherding Christ is also the discerning and judging One, at whose feet John fell as dead (1:13-17). Verses 14 and 15 tell us, "His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like shining bronze, as having been fired in a furnace; and His voice was like the sound of many waters." Fire signifies divine judgment, and the sound of waters signifies the seriousness and solemnity of Christ's speaking (1 Cor. 3:13; Heb. 6:8; 10:27; 12:29; Rev. 10:3; Lee, Recovery Version, 1:14, note 4, and v. 15, note 3). Throughout the course of its history, the church has needed, and still needs, the judging enlightenment of Christ to expose and deal with its faults, errors, and wrongdoings until it is presented to Him glorious, holy, and without blemish, not having spot, wrinkle, or any such things (Eph. 5:27). We must treasure the salutary judgment of the Lord and not shrink from it, receiving it for our transformation and perfection in the divine life, for the sake of the church, so that He may have His corporate expression for His glory, and we—as His overcomers—may feast with Him and rule as His co-kings in the coming age, the age of the kingdom, which is the age of reward.

The Development of the Apostate Church in the Middle Ages

Revelation 2:18 says, "To the messenger of the church in Thyatira write: These things says the Son of God, He who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like shining bronze." This introduction of Christ to this church indicates that what follows is primarily a word of solemn rebuke and warning. He continues,

I know your works and love and faith and service and your

endurance and that your last works are more than the first. But I have something against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, she who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads My slaves astray to commit fornication and to eat idol sacrifices. (vv. 19-20)

The church in Thyatira prefigures the Roman Catholic Church, which was fully formed by the establishment of the papal system no later than the end of the sixth century.¹ This church is the growth and further development of the prophetic church in Pergamos, the church that became mixed with and tainted by the world after its acceptance by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early part of the fourth century. In the three centuries after it received favor from the worldly empire, the church deviated from the practices of the apostolic church and went even further to codify these deviant practices as the formal rule of church order. Then in the period of Thyatira, from the end of antiquity through the Middle Ages, all the errors sown in earlier centuries grew into fullness and bore the fruit of a church in nearly complete apostasy, which was the lowest point in the church's history.

The judging Christ spoke to the church in Thyatira about the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads the Lord's slaves astray to commit fornication and to eat idol sacrifices. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sidonians. She married Ahab, the king of Israel, urged him on to do what was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and slew Jehovah's prophets and servants (1 Kings 16:29-31; 21:25; 2 Kings 9:7). It is startling to find the name of such an evil person mentioned in connection with a New Testament church. Nevertheless, it is the Lord's assessment that among the church in Thyatira there was such an influence, whom the church tolerated, to whom the church listened, and by whom the church was led astray. This marks a dreadful juncture in the history of the Lord's people. The same woman appears again in Revelation 17. Verses 1 through 5 say,

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, Come here; I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits upon the many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and those who dwell on the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. And

he carried me away in spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns...And on her forehead there was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF THE HARLOTS AND THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

Verses 7 through 15 provide the interpretation of the woman and the beast. That the woman is a “mystery” indicates that Babylon the Great in chapter 17 is a religious entity. Therefore, in keeping with the themes and threads of Revelation, this woman must be the full development of Jezebel, the apostate church.

The Heavenly Nature of the Church

Verse 2 says that the “kings of the earth” have committed fornication with the mystery-woman, and verse 9 identifies seven kings in particular with the beast upon which she sits. This clearly denotes an illicit relationship between the woman and the political powers of the Satan-usurped world, exposing one of the major characteristics of the apostate church of the Middle Ages. This earthly, secular, and immoral relationship is in contrast to the heavenly nature of the church, as revealed in the New Testament.

The first preaching in the Gospels, as the opening of God’s New Testament economy, was the decree of John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (Matt. 3:2). When the Lord Jesus began His ministry, He also announced repentance for the kingdom of the heavens (4:17). The kingdom proclaimed in the Gospel of Matthew is “of the heavens,” emphasizing that it is heavenly and spiritual. The reality of the kingdom of the heavens in the present age was revealed by Christ, the new King, on the mountain in chapters 5 through 7. This reality begins with the human spirit in a proper condition (5:3) and is expressed through inward and spiritual virtues such as meekness, mourning, spiritual hunger and thirst, mercy, purity, peace, and rejoicing (vv. 4-12). The heavenly people of the kingdom are the salt of the earth for inward health and the light of world for spiritual enlightenment (vv. 13-16). Their righteousness is surpassing, and their expression is perfect in the heavenly Father’s life and nature (vv. 17-48). Their righteous deeds are done in secret before the Father who sees in secret (6:1-18); their ways are not covetous or anxious (vv. 19-34); they deal with others with forbearance and liberality (7:1-12); and their living and work grow organically, being grounded in the Lord’s word (vv. 13-29). Clearly these are the divine attributes of God

lived out in the inward virtues of man. They are heavenly and spiritual, not earthly and worldly.

The kingdom with which the New Testament church has to do is of the heavens and not of the earth. Jesus told the Pharisees, who colluded with the political Herodians, “Render then the things that are Caesar’s to Caesar and the things that are God’s to God” (22:21), indicating plainly that the things of Caesar are not the things of God, nor are the things of God those of Caesar. Later, when the heathen governor Pilate asked Jesus if He was the King of the Jews, Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My attendants would be struggling so that I would not be delivered to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). Unlike Pilate, a Roman procurator and agent of Caesar Tiberius, the kingdom of Christ is not “from here,” that is, not from or of this world.

Paul tells us that the blessings of the church are spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ (Eph. 1:3); we the believers are seated together with God in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus (2:6); the testimony of the church is to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies (3:10; 6:12); our commonwealth exists in the heavens (Phil. 3:20); our hope is laid up in the heavens (Col. 1:5); we are awaiting the Son of God from the heavens (1 Thes.

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1:10); we will be saved into the Lord’s heavenly kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18); we are partakers of a heavenly calling (Heb. 3:1); we have tasted of the heavenly gift (6:4); we long after a heavenly country, the heavenly Jerusalem (11:16; 12:22); and the church is enrolled in the heavens (v. 23). Because of this, the faithful are “strangers and sojourners on the earth” (11:13)—pilgrims, exiles, and expatriates in the present earthly realm. Peter says likewise that we are “strangers and sojourners” (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11), who were regenerated unto an inheritance kept in the heavens for us (1:4).

The church age is an age of mystery, in which God’s operation, activities, and manifestations are heavenly, spiritual, inward, and hidden. In the Satan-usurped world, however, the present age is “man’s day” (1 Cor. 4:3), in which men sit in judgment over those whom they rule openly, outwardly, materially, politically, judicially, economically, and militarily. These are the kings of the earth, with whom the genuine church has little to do. That the degraded, apostate Roman Catholic Church was and still is intimately and illicitly joined to the rule of nations was a great fall from the heavenly and spiritual nature of the church. The

history of the Roman Catholic Church reveals a relentless effort to dominate and direct the affairs of earthly kingdoms, as a woman sitting upon a beast (Rev. 17:3), under the guise of extending God's heavenly kingdom.

The History of Seeking for Earthly Domination

The illicit relationship of the woman of Revelation 2 and 17 with the political powers of the Satan-usurped world can be seen in many episodes of early and medieval history. After the church suffered two and a half centuries of persecution by the Roman Empire, Constantine established himself as the first emperor to take the name of Christian. It was always his self-appointed mission to be the outward protector of the church—in his own words, “a bishop, ordained by God to overlook whatever is external to the Church,” watching over his Christian subjects with episcopal care (Eusebius 546). The bishops, in turn, were merely his subjects to oversee the more esoteric and internal matters of the church. Nevertheless, their high place in Roman diplomacy was solidly established. Historian Eamon Duffy notes,

The conversion of Constantine had propelled the bishops of Rome into the heart of the Roman establishment. Already powerful and influential men, they now became grandees on a par with the wealthiest senators in the city. Bishops all over the Roman world would now be expected to take on the role of judges, governors, great servants of state. (37)

Ambrose, Ecclesiastical Sovereignty, and the Penance of Theodosius

After Constantine, the power and influence of the bishops increased even more, as exemplified in the career of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who served three emperors as a teacher and guide. When the empress Justina demanded of Ambrose a place of worship for the upbringing of her son in Arianism, he refused, asserting that, as the “lawful successor of the apostles,” he alone had jurisdiction over meeting places (Gibbon 103). In the public tumults that followed, Ambrose declared that “his life and fortune were in the hands of the emperor; but he would never betray the church of Christ, or degrade the dignity of the episcopal character” (105). Writing for *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, James Loughlin extols the defiance of Ambrose as a model and forerunner of the future Hildebrand and Becket, whose sovereignty over kings we will shortly examine.

Theodosius (r. 379-395), convinced of his duty as a Christian emperor, surpassed Constantine in zeal and completed the Christianizing work that the earlier emperor had begun, so much so that Augustine said of him, “Indeed, he rejoiced more to be a member of this church than he did to be a king upon the earth” (180).

His Edict of Thessalonica (A.D. 380) officially established the Christian faith of the orthodox Trinity as the religion of “all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation”; it declared that only those who held this faith could be called “Catholic Christians” and that all others were “foolish madmen” and heretics (qtd. in Bettenson 23). In the following year he convened the Council of Constantinople, which reaffirmed the Nicene Creed, and in the space of fifteen years he declared at least fifteen severe edicts against heretics.

Theodosius's shortcoming, however, was his inflammable temper. In 390 the military commander at Thessalonica with several of his officers were killed in a tumult of the populace. In his anger Theodosius ordered a bloody retribution upon the Thessalonians but then seemed to relent at the advice and intercession of Ambrose. Later, though, Theodosius's military advisers were able to procure his permission to continue with the original plan, keeping it secret from Ambrose, and a terrible massacre ensued. Ambrose fell into grief and wrote to the emperor, informing him that he would not be allowed to enter the church in Milan until Ambrose was satisfied with his repentance. When Theodosius attempted to enter the church, Ambrose prevented him and, reminding the emperor of the sin of David, charged him, “You have imitated him in his crime, imitate him in his repentance” (Miller 216).

The emperor retired to seclusion, where he remained penitently for eight months. He then presented himself to Ambrose and begged readmission to the church, to which the latter agreed only after the emperor agreed to rigorous conditions imposed by the bishop. Theodosius entered the church, put off his imperial robes, prostrated himself on the pavement, and prayed the words of Psalm 119:25. The people gathered around him were moved by his grief and humiliation, and they wept and prayed with him. Augustine records,

What could be more admirable than his religious humility, when...being laid hold of by the discipline of the church, did penance in such a way that the sight of his imperial loftiness prostrated made the people who were interceding for him weep more than the consciousness of offence had made them fear it when enraged? (180)

Loughlin in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* calls the humiliation and repentance of Theodosius “one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of the Church.” This extraordinary scene, in which for the first time an emperor submits to and prostrates himself before a bishop, evokes religious sentiments and appeals to a natural sense of justice. The church historian Andrew Miller offers a positive appraisal, asserting that the repentance of Theodosius was genuine, rising from his tender conscience and fear of God, and that Ambrose acted out of affection and

sincere concern for him. We have no reason to disagree with this. However, having the benefit of hindsight through the centuries, Miller adds a cautionary footnote to the actions of Ambrose:

He acted toward [Theodosius] from a solemn sense of his duty. He had a great idea, no doubt, of the dignity with which his office invested him; and he felt himself bound to use it in behalf of justice and humanity, and in *controlling the power of earthly sovereignty*: a character of power most certainly never granted by God to a Christian minister, and which often proved in after ages to be a most dangerous power, as the priest who holds in his hands the king's conscience may inflame or moderate his sanguinary passions...It is always disastrous to interfere with God's order, even when the best objects seems to be thereby gained. (217, emphasis added)

Ambrose deepened and strengthened the foundations of ecclesiastical power, which was to increase in the coming centuries. Henceforth, Christian bishops would enjoy, more and more, a quasi-monarchical position in the empire, and their use of this "dangerous power" to control earthly sovereignty would become ever greater.

The Superiority of Pope over Emperor

After the death of Theodosius in A.D. 395 the genius and power of Rome quickly waned. Much of that emperor's reign had been spent dealing with the Germanic tribes invading the empire from the east and north. After his death these Gothic nations spread destruction throughout Greece, Gaul, Italy, Spain, and North Africa until in 410 the Visigoth Alaric sacked Rome itself, and in 455 the Vandal Genseric looted the city. Finally, in 476 the last emperor was deposed by the Germanic general Odoacer, marking the end of the Western Roman Empire.

For a while western Christians were content to look to the Eastern Roman Empire for continuation and protection. However, when the eastern kingdom became tainted with heresy, Gelasius, bishop of Rome (r. 492-496), contended with the Eastern Roman Emperor Anastasius. Gelasius's approach to the doctrinal conflict was to assert the superiority of the spiritual rule of Rome over the political rule of the empire. He wrote,

There are, most august Emperor, two powers by which this world is chiefly ruled: the sacred authority of bishops and the royal power. Of these the priestly power is much more important...For you know, most gracious son, that

although you hold the chief place of dignity over the human race, yet you must submit yourself in faith to those who have charge of divine things, and look to them for the means of your salvation...And if the hearts of the faithful ought to be submitted to priests in general...how much more ought assent be given to him who presides over that See² which the most high God himself desired to be pre-eminent over all priests, and which the pious judgement of the whole Church has honoured ever since? (qtd. in Duffy 50)

This letter lays the groundwork for the conflict between pope and emperor that was to be the hallmark of the Middle Ages.³ It asserts that the priestly rulers—"those who have charge of divine things"—are superior to earthly rulers, and it claims that the Roman See is the focus and mouthpiece of priestly rule. Moreover, it calls for the submission of the emperor to the bishop of Rome and implies that his salvation depends upon it.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church reveals a relentless effort to dominate and direct the affairs of earthly kingdoms, as a woman sitting upon a beast, under the guise of extending God's heavenly kingdom.

The evil seed of the clericality system sown in the church in its early centuries had already blossomed into the corrupt tree of the papacy. In the coming centuries its terrible fruit would become more manifest. The Lord Jesus said, "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit...So then, by their fruits you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:18, 20). The fruits of papal prerogative over political power would become ambition, arrogance, corruption, and, eventually, bloodshed.

Gregory III and the Appeal to the Kingdom of the Franks

The work of the church for the next few centuries was to bring the gospel to the so-called barbarians—Franks, Gauls, Celts, and Slavs—that now occupied the former Western Roman Empire. In the realms of Francia and Germania this was carried out zealously by Columbanus, Kilian, Willibrord, and other missionaries. The first of the Germanic tribes to be converted were the Salian (Western) Franks under Clovis. After unsuccessfully praying to his pagan gods for a military victory, Clovis, like Constantine, prayed to the Christian God. Pleased with the result, he converted to Christianity and was baptized with three thousand of his warriors in 496.⁴ The Franks would henceforth become the most important ally of the church of Rome.

A notable missionary of this era was Winfrid (called

Boniface), a preacher of great strength and character. As a sworn vassal of the pope, he labored effectively with two goals in view: to bring the gospel of Christ to the heathen and to bring the christianized heathen under the sway of the Roman church. He not only brought about the end of German paganism but also subdued the Christianity of the earlier, independent Celts, bringing all Christian work into union with Rome. By the close of the seventh century, therefore, the gospel had been spread throughout many of the heathen lands, but it was, as Philip Schaff says, “the Christian religion with a strong infusion of popery” (4: 89).

The gap left by the collapse of the Roman Empire was now filled by the Roman Church. “The spiritual dominions of the Pope were now extended far and wide. From all parts of the empire bishops, princes, and people looked to Rome as the parent of their faith and the highest authority in Christendom” (Miller 273-274). It was in this era that the pope added to his vestments the crown that would later become the papal tiara. Thomas Hobbes writes,

If a man consider the original of this great ecclesiastical dominion, he will easily perceive that the papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof: for so did the papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power.

However, the preeminence of Rome was only in faith, morals, manners, and the practicalities of life. It attained a spiritual empire, but it still lacked a political one. Worldly power had turned irreversibly to the Germanic peoples.

Rome had come under the rule first of the Eastern Empire of Constantinople and then of the usurping Lombards, a powerful Germanic people. It was henceforth the goal of the Roman Church to regain its independent sovereignty and political possessions. In 732 Charles Martel defeated the Islamic army advancing into Gaul, strengthening the role of the Franks as the new protectors of Latin Christendom. Believing the Franks to be the ablest ally of the church, Pope Gregory III appealed to Martel to reestablish Roman sovereignty. Like Gelasius before him, Gregory’s language takes the imperious tone of papal superiority mixed with threat: “Close not your ears...against our supplications, lest St. Peter close against you the gates of heaven” (qtd. in Schaff 4: 232). This presumption of the power of the pope over earthly kings would be repeated throughout the Middle Ages.

Zachary and the Crowning of Pepin

Martel declined, but Gregory’s successor, Zachary, gained his purpose with Martel’s son Pepin. As Mayor of the Palace, Pepin exercised the powers of state more than

Childeric III, the nominal but ineffectual king. Being the sovereign in all but name, Pepin conspired with the missionary Boniface, now archbishop, to gain the title also and made an appeal to Pope Zachary. With a view toward appropriating a powerful ally against the Lombards, Zachary answered, according to Boniface’s covert prompting, “He who lawfully possesses the royal power may also lawfully assume the royal title” (qtd. in Miller 276). The word of the pope was sufficient to legitimize Pepin’s ambition. Childeric was stripped of his royalty, ending the Merovingian dynasty. His hair was tonsured, and he was confined to a monastery.

Pepin was crowned the new king by Boniface in 751. At the coronation bishops stood around the throne equal in rank to the armed nobles. As part of the ceremony, Boniface made the significant gesture of anointing Pepin with oil, a presumptuous imitation of Samuel, who at the command of Jehovah anointed David (1 Sam. 16:12-13). Pepin received from the pope the title Patrician of the Romans, and henceforth he called himself “by the grace of God king of the Franks” (Schaff 4: 234). This was as much a victory for the papacy as it was for Pepin. It marks the first instance of a major European king being deposed at the word of the bishop of Rome. It was an insurrection against a crowned monarch—a rebellion against a deputy authority of God—sanctioned by the pope, who attached the name of “Roman” to the new king’s title.

Pepin was soon able to overthrow the Lombards, and knowing from whom he received his power, he promised all the lands recovered to Rome. In terms of the history of nations, “this was the first step towards the creation of a Western empire and a new political system of Europe with the pope and the German emperor at the head” (233). In terms of the church, however, this was a deep corruption. Miller writes, “Every right principle and feeling, both human and Divine, were readily sacrificed to secure the alliance of Pepin” (276).

When the Lombards again resisted, Zachary appealed to King Pepin, declaring, “Of all nations under Heaven the Franks are the highest in the esteem of St. Peter,” and reminding him, “To me you owe all your victories” (qtd. in Miller 278). When Pepin delayed, the pope became desperate and wrote in the name of Peter,

I, Peter the apostle, protest, admonish, and conjure you...The mother of God likewise adjures you, and admonishes and commands you, she as well as the thrones and dominions, and all the host of Heaven, to save the beloved city Rome from the detested Lombards. If ye hearken, I, Peter the apostle, promise you my protection in this life and in the next, will prepare for you the most glorious mansions in Heaven, and will bestow on you the everlasting joys of paradise...I will grant whatever ye

may ask for. I conjure you not to yield up this city to be lacerated and tormented by the Lombards, lest your own souls be lacerated and tormented in Hell, with the Devil and his pestilential angels. (277-278)

Miller notes, "Nothing could give us a more expressive idea of the fearful apostasy of the Church of Rome than this letter" (278). To attain his purposes, the Roman pontiff invoked heaven itself with all its host and set himself forth as the giver of paradise and the dispenser, or withholder, of eternal life. The intrigue of Zachary exemplifies the boundless blasphemy and insolence with which the medieval papacy asserted its power over lordships in order to secure an earthly throne for itself. Miller concludes,

[This] is generally related as the first instance of the Pope's interference with the rights of princes and the allegiance of subjects. But the successors of Zachary made ample use of the precedent in after years. They asserted that the kings of France, from this time, held their crown only by the authority of the Pope, and that the papal sanction was their only legal title...It was the first great step towards the future kingdom of the Bishop of Rome. (276)

Leo III and the Empire of Charlemagne

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, important portions of the Italian peninsula became exarchates of the Eastern Roman Empire, and Rome itself was reduced to be a duchy of the empire. Later, though, this territory was captured by the Lombards. When Pepin overthrew these usurpers, Constantinople appealed to him to return the lands taken from the East by the Lombards. Pepin responded by saying that he had acted out of love for Peter, and he instead gave the lands to the pope. These ill-gotten territories, called the Donation of Pepin, became the Papal States, over which the pope was the earthly and temporal sovereign for the next eleven centuries.

In 768 Pepin's son, Charles (Charlemagne, Charles the Great), became king of the Franks. It was his goal to unite all German and Latin peoples into one nation with one religion. To this end he sought to christianize his remaining pagan subjects through the outward ritual of water baptism, and where that was not possible, to slaughter and exterminate them. His thirty-three year war against the Saxons, urged on by the missionary priests, was the first instance of a bloody crusade for the purpose of eliminating paganism and enlarging the

church.⁵ When the Lombards once again threatened the contested lands in Italy, Pope Adrian summoned the help of the new Patrician of the Romans. As the dutiful son of the Roman church, Charlemagne answered the call, abolished the Lombard kingdom once for all, and added King of the Lombards to his titles. In 774 he confirmed Pepin's donation, henceforth known as the Donation of Charlemagne, and in 787 he enlarged it substantially. With the weakening of the Eastern Roman Empire and the eradication of the Lombards, there remained no further obstacles to the earthly ambitions of the papacy. The pope's political sovereignty over the papal states, which included the city of Rome, was now secure.

The long looked-for and sighed-for day was come; the fond dream of centuries was realised. The successors of St. Peter are proclaimed sovereign pontiffs and lords of the city and territories of Rome. The last link of the shadowy vassalage and subserviency to the Greek Empire is broken for ever, and Rome has again become the acknowledged capital of the West. (Miller 304)

By the close of the seventh century, therefore, the gospel had been spread throughout many of the heathen lands, but it was, as Philip Schaff says, "the Christian religion with a strong infusion of popery."

Adrian's successor, Leo III, was opposed violently by his rivals and came under scandalous charges. Charlemagne came to Rome in 800 to assist him, resulting in the pope's vindication. Two days later, as the king was celebrating Christmas mass in St. Peter's Basilica, Leo placed a golden crown on his head, and

the Roman people assembled there shouted, "To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, the great and pacific emperor of the Romans!" (qtd. in Schaff 4: 251). This action by Leo appeared to be sudden and spontaneous, and Charlemagne seemed to be surprised by it. However, it was, no doubt, well calculated, being of such great import that it altered both the political and ecclesiastical history of Europe for centuries to come. By the pope's action, of his own conception and creation, and in the name of his own power a new Western empire was created. Charlemagne took the title of Augustus and compelled all his subjects to take an oath to him as Caesar. This was the revival of the ancient Roman Empire, which, together with the papacy, would become the dominant power of the Middle Ages.⁶

Charlemagne expanded the new empire from the border of Spain to the Elbe River in Germany, an extent unparalleled since the days of imperial Rome. However, the Roman Church also fared very well from Leo's transaction. The Bishop of Rome created the empire, and it was he that bestowed its crown on its first Caesar. From this time on, every new emperor would need to be anointed

by the pope. This was a major step in the fulfillment of the grand scheme of the papacy. John Norwich writes,

If Leo conferred a great honor on Charles that Christmas morning, he bestowed a still greater one on himself: the right to appoint, and to invest with crown and scepter, the Emperor of the Romans. Here was something new, even revolutionary. No pontiff had ever before claimed for himself such a privilege—not only establishing the imperial crown as his own personal gift but simultaneously granting himself implicit superiority over the emperor whom he had created. (57)

Watchman Nee admonishes, “Christians cannot exercise authority or reign now. In the Lord’s eyes, Satan is the prince of this age. All those who reign in this age are under his hand. Therefore, Christians should not reign in the territory of the enemy of Christ” (5: 461). In the vision of Daniel, the Roman Empire is foretold as the last of the four beasts that come up from the Mediterranean Sea (Dan. 7:2-7). Verse 7 says, “There was a fourth beast, dreadful and frightful and exceedingly strong; and it had large iron teeth; it devoured and crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns.” This beast is the beast with seven heads and ten horns in Revelation 17. Verse 9 tells us that the seven heads are seven mountains, a clear allusion to Rome, which is built on seven hills, and verse 12 identifies the ten horns as ten kings. Upon this beast sits a woman, the great harlot, who is Jezebel. The history of the nations around the Mediterranean provides no clearer, more accurate, and more fitting fulfillment of the beast and the woman than the renewed Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church, who commit the fornication of joining an earthly empire, under the direction of Satan, with an entity that calls herself the bride of Christ. The Lord rebuked the church in Thyatira for even tolerating such an evil woman (2:20), and He calls His people, even up to the present time, to overcome by coming out of her (18:4).

The Donation of Constantine

In the time of Pepin and Charlemagne a remarkable document appeared that seemed to provide the historical and legal precedent to the claims of the papacy over secular rulers and their territories. The “Donation of Constantine” purports to be a letter written by the fourth-century emperor. It is addressed to Sylvester, bishop of Rome, and to all his successors who sit in the chair of Peter, to the end of time. The author recounts how, when he was sick with leprosy, the apostles Peter and Paul appeared to him, instructing him to be baptized by Sylvester; when he did as instructed, the leprosy left him, and he was healed by the beneficence of Peter himself. In gratitude and after consulting the senate and all the Roman people, he concludes,

As the Blessed Peter is seen to have been constituted vicar of the Son of God on the earth, so the Pontiffs who are the representatives of that same chief of the apostles, should obtain from us and our empire the power of a supremacy greater than the clemency of our earthly imperial serenity is seen to have conceded to it...And to the extent of our earthly imperial power, we have decreed that his holy Roman church shall be honored with veneration, and that more than our empire and earthly throne the most sacred seat of the Blessed Peter shall be gloriously exalted, we giving to it power, and dignity of glory, and vigor, and honor imperial. (qtd. in Coleman 13)

The author then decrees that “Peter” (that is, the See of Rome, the pope himself) should have rule over the other four principal sees—Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem—as well as over all the churches throughout the world. As for the pope himself, the author commands,

The Pontiff, who at the time shall be at the head of the holy Roman church itself, shall be more exalted than, and chief over, all the priests of the whole world, and according to his judgment everything which is provided for the service of God and for the stability of the faith of Christians is to be administered. (qtd. in Coleman 13)

The author justifies the choice of Rome as the center of the church on the basis of the fable that Jesus had appointed Peter to the bishopric of that city. The author further expresses his gratitude by granting and conveying to the pope and his successors the Lateran palace in Rome, Constantine’s own crown, his stole, his purple cloak, all his imperial robes, and his command of the imperial cavalry with “all the standards, and banners, and the different ornaments, and all the pomp of our imperial eminence, and the glory of our power” (15). The author decrees that all clergy be made patricians and consuls and that henceforth they should bear the same eminence and power that senators have and be decorated no less grandly than they are, from their white saddle cloths to their felt socks. Moreover, in order that the crown of the pope should not be less than that of earthly sovereigns, he adds,

We have conferred landed estates of possessions, and have enriched them with different objects, and through our sacred imperial mandate we have granted him of our property in the east as well as in the west, and even in the northern and the southern quarter; namely, in Judea, Greece, Asia, Thrace, Africa, and Italy and the various islands; under this condition indeed, that all shall be administered by the hand of our most blessed father the supreme Pontiff, Sylvester, and his successors...We give over and relinquish to the aforesaid our most blessed Pontiff, Sylvester, the universal Pope, as well our palace, as has been said, as also the city of Rome, and all the

provinces, places and cities of Italy and the western regions, and we decree by this our godlike and pragmatic sanction that they are to be controlled by him and by his successors. (13, 17)

The author concludes with threats of the lower hell on all those who oppose his decree, and he claims to have validated it by placing it over the body of Peter.

In subsequent centuries the Roman church vindicated its claim to position, possessions, and superiority over kings by invoking the authenticity of antiquity conveniently provided by the "Donation." As early as the eleventh century, however, that authenticity began to be doubted, and by the fifteenth century it was universally acknowledged to be a fraud. Writing for *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Johann Kirsch admits what is now known, that "this document is without doubt a forgery" ("Donation"). Recent scholarship places the time of its fabrication between the years 750 and 850, probably no earlier than the pontificate of Stephen II (752-757). Neither its true author nor the place of its composition is known, but we can easily identify its source by means of the forensic tool "Cui Bono?"; that is, "For whose benefit is it?" This fraudulent document gives to the church of Rome rule over all the churches on the earth, and it sets up the pope as apostolic, universal, and supreme. It exalts the papacy over kings and enthrones the pope in his own palace, before whom the emperor himself casts his crown. It gives to the pope and all his successors, to the end of time, the secular rule over Italy, far-off lands, and islands wherever they are found. It makes the donations of Pepin and Charlemagne not a voluntary beneficence but the fulfillment of the pope's long-standing right. Clearly, this fraud has its source in the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

The Lord Jesus told the Pharisees, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks the lie, he speaks it out of his own possessions; for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44). In using the term *father*, the Lord indicated that sinners have an organic relationship, a relationship of life, with the devil. The satanic life dwells in the flesh of sinners, causing them to sin (Rom. 7:18, 20). In contrast, the truth—the divine reality embodied, revealed, and expressed in Christ—abides in the believers, causing them to put off the lie and speak truth (2 John 2; Eph. 4:25). The falsehood demonstrated by the fraudulent Donation of Constantine has its source in

the devil, and genuine believers who seek to overcome in the Lord's life must reject all its evil purposes.

The Theocratic Vision of Gregory VII

Nicholas I (r. 858-867) did much to consolidate the power and authority of the papacy. After his death, however, the papacy fell to the deepest point of degradation. Placed into office through the avarice, violence, and lusts of aristocratic families, many popes of this period—known as the "papal pornocracy"—ended their shameful reigns by being deposed, imprisoned, or murdered (Norwich 80). The reforms imposed by Emperor Otto were short-lived. Effective reforms were not enacted until the time of Hildebrand, under whom papal power began to reach its height in the Middle Ages.

A man of great intellect and character, Hildebrand came to Rome in 1049 as an advisor to the newly elected Pope Leo IX. There he learned the art of ruling through others, and for the next twenty-four years he was the actual vitality behind five successive popes, campaigning zealously against simony in the clergy and the concubinage of the priests. After being elected as Pope Gregory VII, however, the great object of his labor was to obtain for the Roman clergy complete independence from and superiority over the earthly rule of emperors and kings. This was

The history of the nations around the Mediterranean provides no clearer, more accurate, and more fitting fulfillment of the beast and the woman than the renewed Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church.

his vision of a papal theocracy based upon the model of the Old Testament, in which the rule of God and the rule of kings were, or were meant to be, indistinguishable. To Gregory, and contrary to the Scriptures, the kingdom of God was much more than the spiritual realm of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17); it was the outward church in the tangible world, as much a political reality as the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of France. Schaff records,

Gregory VII. actualized this politico-ecclesiastical system more fully than any previous pope, and as far as human energy and prudence would admit. The glory of the Church was the all-controlling passion of his life...Of earlier popes, Nicolas I. and Leo I. came nearest to him in lofty pretensions. But in him papal absolutism assumed flesh and blood...He did claim and exercise, as far as he could, an absolute authority over the temporal powers of Christendom. (5: 29)

Gregory expressed his ideal in a letter to William the Conqueror, using the analogy of the greater and lesser lights in Genesis 1:14 through 16:

The Almighty God has, for the rule of this world, provided the apostolic and royal powers, more excellent than all others. For just as He set the sun and the moon above all other lights,...He provided through the apostolic and royal dignities the different means of ruling. But just as in this case there is a difference between the greater and the lesser, so proceeds the Christian religion, so that the royal dignity would be governed, next after God, by the apostolic care and dispensation. (Gregory 568-569)⁷

The “apostolic” rule, he asserts, is like the sun, and the royal rule like the moon, which is less than the sun and derives all its light from it. Gregory’s theocracy required the absolute sovereignty of the church, headed by the pope as the vicar of Christ, not only over spiritual affairs but also over earthly and human affairs. Crucial to his thought was that all the power of the church was centered in the bishop of Rome, as successor of “the blessed apostle Peter, whom the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of glory, made prince over the kingdoms of the world” (qtd. in Labbé 282).⁸ In keeping with this theocratic vision, Gregory made repeated use of two verses in the Old Testament. The first is Samuel’s word to Saul: “Rebellion is like the sin of divination, / And insubordination is like idolatry and teraphim. / Because you have rejected the word of Jehovah, / He has also rejected you from being king” (1 Sam. 15:23). With this verse as the basis, Gregory believed that the pope could act as a New Testament Samuel to anoint or reject kings.

The second verse that he often employed is Jehovah’s word of judgment on Moab: “Cursed is he who does the work of Jehovah negligently, / And cursed is he who keeps his sword from blood” (Jer. 48:10). This reveals the heart of the medieval popes, who called armies to bloodshed and slaughter for the extirpation of heretics and the subduing of the disobedient monarchs.

Gregory’s ideal is expressed in the *Dictatus Papae* (Dictate of the Pope), either composed by Gregory himself or compiled from his letters.⁹ These are a list of twenty-seven statements regarding the prerogatives of the Roman church and pontiff. As to the church they assert,

That the Roman church was founded by God alone...
That the Roman church has never erred; nor will it err
to all eternity, the Scripture bearing witness...
That he who is not at peace with the Roman church
shall not be considered catholic.

As to the person and power of the pope they claim,

That the Roman pontiff alone can with right be called
universal.
That he alone can depose or reinstate bishops...

That his name alone shall be spoken in the churches.
That this is the only name in the world...
That no synod shall be called a general one without his
order.
That no chapter and no book shall be considered canonical
without his authority...
That he himself may be judged by no one...
That the Roman pontiff, if he have been canonically
ordained, is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits
of St. Peter.

As to the pope’s power over temporal rulers they assert,

That of the pope alone all princes shall kiss the feet...
That it may be permitted to him to depose emperors...
That he may absolve subjects from their fealty to
wicked men. (qtd. in Henderson 366-367)

The dictates of Gregory are not merely political, for they go far beyond a mere ideal or vision. The preeminent place to which they lift the pope is a plain expression of blasphemy and the usurpation of the person and position of Christ. Paul, a true apostle, declares that the Father raised up Christ and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:20),

far above all rule and authority and power and lordship
and every name that is named not only in this age but also
in that which is to come; and He subjected all things
under His feet and gave Him to be Head over all things
to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One
who fills all in all. (vv. 21-23)

How unlike the lowly yet God-exalted Jesus are those who grasp after preeminent positions! Paul tells us that Jesus, although existing in the form of God, did not consider being equal with God a treasure to be grasped. Rather, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, and became in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7). Therefore,

God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name
which is above every name, that in the name of Jesus every
knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth
and under the earth, and every tongue should openly confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the
Father. (vv. 9-11)

There is one name and one name only in the church; as Peter said, “There is salvation in no other, for neither is there another name under heaven given among men in which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). In setting himself above worldly kings, Gregory upset the God-ordained order in the universe (1 Pet. 2:13-15; Jude 9), but in claiming the preeminence in the church, he offended the person of Christ Himself. Thus were the pretensions and presumptions of the medieval papacy.

The Lord spoke to the church in Thyatira as His own church, despite its precarious condition, because in doing so He was seeking overcomers (Rev. 2:26). The New Testament gospel of grace announces that simply by believing in and confessing the Lord Jesus, a sinner may be saved, regardless of where he is. However, how can such a saved one be called an overcomer as long as he remains in the papal system and accepts its presumptuous teachings concerning the “Vicar of Christ?” The Lord cries, “Come out of her, My people, that you do not participate in her sins” (18:4). This is not merely a call to salvation by grace; it is a call for overcoming in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today.

Weapons of Darkness

The Roman clergy—popes, papal legates, and bishops—were able to carry out their theocratic vision, change the laws of nations, and bend kings and emperors to their lordship because of the power they held over the minds, conscience, and spiritual welfare of men. The Middle Ages were a time of widespread ignorance, credulity, and superstition. Stories of miracles, apparitions, and healings were readily accepted at face value, and fables grew more wondrous as they were spread. More importantly to the Roman church, priestcraft demanded the same fearful awe that it always had since its pagan origins. This can be seen, for example, in the sacrament of confession, in which a vocal confession of sins is made to a priest, who has the power of absolution, removal of guilt, deliverance from judgment, and conferring of grace. The pope and his duly ordained subordinates claimed the keys of the kingdom, the power of the church to remit or retain the guilt of sin and thus determine a person’s position before God and ultimately his eternal destiny. Medieval man accepted these presumptions without question, and it is very rare to find anyone with the spiritual light or intellectual innovation to challenge them. Thus,

The cunning priest could pretend to shake the keys of St. Peter in the face of his opponent, and threaten to lock him out of Heaven and to lock him up in Hell, if he did not obey the Church. It was their avowed sanctity and their wicked perversion of Scripture that gave them such power over the ignorant and superstitious. (Miller 391)

The most powerful of these weapons was excommunication. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* defines this as a “spiritual penalty that deprives the guilty Christian of all

participation in the common blessings of ecclesiastical society” (Boudinhon). It is not merely an external exclusion from a community but is one that reaches the soul and the conscience. Strictly speaking, excommunication does not cut off a soul from the grace of God; it simply cuts the soul off from the source of grace. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* continues,

Undoubtedly the Church cannot (nor does it wish to) oppose any obstacle to the internal relations of the soul with God...The rites of the Church, nevertheless, are always the providential and regular channel through which Divine grace is conveyed to Christians; exclusion from such rites, especially from the sacraments, entails therefore regularly the privation of this grace, to whose sources the excommunicated person has no longer access.

This is a mere technicality. The intention of such a ban is clearly the deprivation of grace, affecting the guilty one’s fellowship with God today and endangering his salvation in the future. Thus, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says, “It is the spiritual sword, the heaviest penalty that the Church can inflict.” To the medieval mind, excommunication was a terrible threat with the greatest of consequences.

A second weapon in the armory of the Roman church is interdiction, a concept adapted directly from Roman law. It is the suspension of all ecclesiastical functions, including the mass and other sacraments. Church doors were closed, priestly services withheld, and the dead were refused burial in consecrated ground. A community, region, or even an entire nation could be thus deprived of all Christian activity and benefit. Like excommunication, an interdict was a heavy burden to be borne by people of Christian mind and conscience, making it an “unbloody, yet awful and most effective, weapon” (Schaff 5: 106). The apostle Paul says,

Though we walk in flesh, we do not war according to flesh; for the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but powerful before God for the overthrowing of strongholds, as we overthrow reasonings and every high thing rising up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3-5)

True spiritual warfare has its source in the enthroned God and is carried out with authority by the church—which wears the whole armor of God—not against blood and flesh but against the authorities, the world-rulers of this darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:11-12). The weapons of the Roman church, in

The dictates of Gregory go far beyond a mere ideal or vision. The preeminent place to which they lift the pope is a plain expression of blasphemy and the usurpation of the person and position of Christ.

contrast, have their source in the papacy and are wielded with blasphemous presumption by the clerical hierarchy against the rulers of worldly empires. Thus, they themselves become high things “rising up against the knowledge of God.” This demonstrates the depths of the fall of the church in the period of Thyatira.

Gregory VII and the Humiliation of Henry IV

“Gregory’s pontificate represents the highest point of papal aspiration to dominion over the secular world” (Duffy 127). He assumed a superior position over kings and bishops alike, and he expected absolute obedience. That he exercised his theocratic ideal to the full extent of his ability and opportunity can be seen in his bold demands on Philip I of France, William the Conqueror of England, Alfonso of Castile, Sancho of Aragon, Sweyn II of Denmark, Solomon of Hungary, and other sovereigns. Gregory sought to free clergy at every level and all church property from any obligation to the state, but in so doing he made the state a vassal to the church. His spiritual despotism can be seen most vividly in his struggle with Emperor Henry IV over the right of the investiture of clergy.

In 1075 Henry, the young and rash heir of the new Roman Empire, refused to allow papal legates to convene councils in Germany to judge certain of the clergy who had been appointed by him. Gregory responded by deposing several of Henry’s favored bishops, including one archbishop, and decreed that any bishop or abbot who received an investiture from a layman, including the king, would be excommunicated. When Henry remained defiant, Gregory summoned him to appear before a papal tribunal. Henry called the bishops of his empire to a council at Worms, declared the pope deposed, and renounced all obedience to him. Gregory then excommunicated Henry, annulled his government, and released all Christians from obedience to him. Gregory’s ban was published in the form of a prayer to Peter:

Blessed Peter, chief of the apostles, incline thine holy ears to us, I pray...Especially to me, as thy representative, has been committed, and to me by thy grace has been given by God the power of binding and loosing in heaven and on earth...I withdraw the government of the whole kingdom of the Germans and of Italy from Henry the King...And I absolve all Christians from the bond of the oath which they have made to him or shall make. And I forbid anyone to serve him as King...On thy behalf I bind him with the bond of anathema. (qtd. in Bettenson 109)

This was a blatant sedition against a sitting monarch. Peter, to whom Gregory superstitiously prayed and whose authority he presumptuously claimed, said, “Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:17). Gregory’s decree reaches the height of arrogance, error, rebellion against

the ordination of God, and disobedience to the command of a genuine apostle.

Opportunistic nobles and prelates deserted Henry, and a diet of princes allowed him one year to make restitution with the pope on threat of losing his crown. After spending two months in seclusion, Henry succumbed to his rebellious subjects and agreed to seek out the pope, who in the meantime had traveled to Canossa in northern Italy. In an unusually severe winter, Henry—a penitent seeking absolution from the pope—left from Speyer in western Germany and trekked across the frozen Alps with his wife and infant son, who were carried through the icy slopes on rough sleds. On arriving at the stronghold at Canossa, Henry petitioned for an audience with Gregory. After making many objections, the pope agreed to see him only if he placed the crown of the kingdom in the pope’s hands and openly confessed his unworthiness to wear it. Henry agreed, and after three days of waiting at the door of the castle, in deep snow, fasting, barefoot, in the simple dress of a penitent, and in tears, he appealed again for entrance. Miller records, “Every heart was moved, except that of the representative of Jesus Christ...He acted in this matter more like a fiend incarnate than a human being”:

His one grand object was the consolidation of his own elaborated scheme of Papal authority. Having placed his foot on the neck of the greatest monarch in the world, he attempted the establishment of the Pontiff’s right, in the face of Europe, to judge kings, dispose of kingdoms, and absolve subjects from their oath of allegiance to excommunicated kings. This gave the Pope enormous power over the whole outer world. It constituted rebellion against a lawful sovereign a sacred duty to the Church and to God. (344-345)

Schaff adds,

Canossa marks the deepest humiliation of the State and the highest exaltation of the Church,—we mean the political papal Church of Rome, not the spiritual Church of Christ, who wore a crown of thorns in this world and who prayed on the cross for his murderers. (5: 57)

Gregory lifted the ban on Henry, but the Saxon and Swabian nobles, encouraged by Henry’s abasement and by the legates of the pope, rebelled and raised Duke Rudolf as anti-king of the empire. The result was an eleven-year civil war in Germany and Italy. In 1080 Gregory issued a second ban on Henry, much like the first, except that he prays to a second apostle as well:

St. Peter, chief of the apostles, and thou St. Paul, teacher of the nations, deign, I beg, to incline your ears to me and mercifully to hear me...Proceed now, I beg, O fathers and

most holy princes, in such way that the world may learn and know that, if ye can bind and loose in Heaven, so ye can on earth take away empires, kingdoms, principalities, duchies, margravates, counties and all possessions of men...Let kings and all secular princes now learn how great ye are and what your power is; and let them dread to disregard the command of your church. (Henderson 388, 391)

Not having exhausted his blasphemies, Gregory sent to Rudolf a crown with the inscription, "The Rock gave a crown to Peter; Peter gives it to Rudolf" (qtd. in Watterich 438).¹⁰ Although Germany had come to see, at least in part, the hypocrisy and wickedness of papal ambition, the wars continued. Germany was ravaged, and Rome was pillaged by the same Normans and Saracens that Gregory had summoned for help. Gregory died in exile, but in his will he never relented from his grand goal of asserting the dominion of the Roman Church over the kingdoms of the world. His ideal of a theocracy—a deformed imitation of the Old Testament, centered in Rome, and headed up by the self-proclaimed successors of Peter—continued to live in the heart of the papacy, whether or not future popes had the strength of Gregory to implement it. Watchman Nee reminds us of the true kingdom of the heavens:

This kingdom does not have any territory, army, or politics.

In this kingdom there is only God's rule to govern man's conduct. This kingdom is called the kingdom of the heavens. The position of this kingdom is heavenly. The Lord is not behind any nation on this earth. He has set up a spiritual kingdom to rule over His people. (60: 429)

Thomas Becket's Sedition against Henry II

Since the mission of Augustine of Canterbury at the end of the sixth century, England was a faithful and fruitful child of the Roman church. The Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles greatly enriched the church with extensive grants of land. Bishops ranked with nobles, and the archbishop of Canterbury served as regent during the absence of the king. In 1155 Adrian IV, the only pope of English birth, donated the whole of Ireland, as a feudal fief of the church, to King Henry II of England. John of Salisbury, a companion both of Adrian and Henry, records this act of surpassing presumption:

At my solicitation...he gave and granted Hibernia to Henry II, the illustrious King of England, to hold by hereditary right as his letter...to this day testifies. For all

islands of ancient right, according to the Donation of Constantine, are said to belong to the Roman Church, which he founded.¹¹ (qtd. in Ua Clerigh)

Nevertheless, the church and king clashed on several issues, particularly on whether or not the clergy were subject to the same laws and courts as the laity. Because clerics were not held liable to civil courts, they were able to commit every manner of crime with impunity, other than whatever punishments the church imposed. Henry Hart Milman writes,

Such were the prelates of England..., wearing arms, mingling in war, indulging in all the cruelties and exactions of war...Yet the Church demanded for the property and persons of such prelates and such clergy an absolute, inviolable sanctity. The seizure of their palaces, though fortified and garrisoned, was an invasion on the property of the Church. The seizure, maltreatment, imprisonment, far more any sentence of the law in the Kings's Courts upon their persons, was impiety, sacrilege...The churchman alone, down to the most menial of the clerical body, stood above such law. (19-20)

On the recommendation of the archbishop of Canterbury, who hoped to place a faithful churchman close to the new king, the capable and popular Thomas Becket was made chancellor of the kingdom. Becket enriched himself while

in office and lived sumptuously off of ecclesiastical benefices. As a bold warrior, he led over a thousand knights against France. Edward Grim, Becket's close attendant and standard-bearer, exclaims,

Who can recount the carnage, the desolation, which he made at the head of a strong body of soldiers? He attacked castles, razed towns and cities to the ground, burned down houses and farms without a touch of pity, and never showed the slightest mercy to any one who rose in insurrection against his master's authority. (qtd. in Milman 32)

In 1162 Becket was installed as the new archbishop of Canterbury. Because of his ideological importance to the Roman church and his rapid ascent to sainthood, the facts of Becket's transformation upon taking his new office are mixed with romance. We are told that although he possessed more wealth and power than most monarchs of his time, he became an austere and mortified monk, shedding tears of repentance, giving away his riches, trading his court dress for haircloth, living off a meager sustenance, and practicing ascetic self-mortification.¹² What we can

Gregory's ideal of a theocracy—a deformed imitation of the Old Testament, centered in Rome, and headed up by the self-proclaimed successors of Peter—continues to live in the heart of the papacy.

be assured of is that he wholeheartedly shifted his allegiance from the king to the church, becoming a powerful, rival sovereign with the backing of Pope Alexander III. With a view to strengthening the independence and superiority of the clergy, "Becket wielded the spiritual sword against Henry with the same gallantry with which he had wielded the temporal sword for him" (Schaff 5: 130).

Henry at first triumphed over the pretensions of the church by enacting the Constitutions of Clarendon, which made clerics subject to the same laws as the laity. Becket dissimulated, agreeing to the Constitutions, but he afterward turned, broke the oath he had taken, and encouraged the English prelates to do the same. This was the deceitful ploy of a man who had made himself "the sworn vassal to death of the Roman See, and the avowed enemy of every man and principle that opposed the interests of the chair of St. Peter" (Miller 398). Henry seized his revenues and banished him from the kingdom. Once he was in exile, Becket excommunicated the authors of the Constitutions, placed the whole of England under the interdict, and absolved the bishops from their oath to the king, declaring, "Who presumes to doubt that the priests of God are the fathers and masters of kings, princes, and all the faithful?" (qtd. in Milman 81).

Bitterness, antagonism, intrigues, and menacing continued between the two parties of bishops, as the representatives of rival, ambitious kingdoms. Gratian, a papal legate, warned Henry, "Think not to threaten us; we come from a court that is accustomed to command Emperors and Kings" (qtd. in Milman 101). Even after a tenuous reconciliation between Henry and Becket, the latter still pursued a course of revenge and sedition. In his exasperation, Henry rebuked his prelates for not relieving him from the "low-born and turbulent priest" (qtd. in Milman 121). Driven by this word, four of his knights accosted Becket in the cathedral at Canterbury and brutally slew him.

The Sainthood of Becket and Subjugation of Henry

The reports of Becket's death quickly grew in legend and romance until they rivaled the passion of Christ Himself in sorrow, in tragedy, and in the profusion of miracles wrought by his body. In grief and horror, Henry shut himself in his room without food until his friends feared for his life. Pope Alexander threatened excommunication of the king and interdiction on all his realms both in England and on the Continent, but he relented on the condition that Henry would provide satisfaction for the crime. Henry met papal legates at Normandy and in their presence swore that he had not ordered the assassination but rather had grieved greatly for it. The legates of the Holy See demanded, and Henry agreed, that he would maintain two hundred knights in the Holy Land at his own expense, abrogate the

Constitutions of Clarendon, restore the See of Canterbury and the possessions of all seditious prelates, hold the crown of England faithful to the pope, and if the pope so required, personally head a crusade against the Saracens in Spain.

Three years later, the humbled and depressed Henry visited the shrine of Becket, now a saint and a martyr. He dismounted three miles away, approached the shrine on bare and bleeding feet, and threw himself before it. Once in the cathedral, he submitted to be scourged by the monks, and for the next day and night he remained kneeling in bitter contrition on the bare stones. This, a repetition of the humiliation of the emperor at Canossa, was the final triumph of the Roman priesthood over the king and the law of the land. "Such is the true spirit of the relentless priesthood of Rome. If they cannot shed the blood of their victim, they will force him to drink the bitterest dregs of humiliation" (Miller 401).

Although Henry was a cruel and treacherous leader, it was not because of this that Becket opposed him. The archbishop's sedition was entirely for the cause of ecclesiastical privilege. Of all his labors for his Roman master, Becket's most profitable achievement was his assassination. Alexander expedited his sainthood with unprecedented rapidity, and collections of his miracles were quickly published. Superstitious penitents embarked on pilgrimages to his tomb, and the saint became an object of popular devotion. John of Salisbury reported that because of the martyr, "the blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the devils are cast out, even the dead are raised to life" (qtd. in Schaff 5: 145).

The Saint whom the Church hastened to canonise, was compared in language...to the Saviour himself. The worship of Becket...superseded, not in Canterbury alone, nor in England alone, that of the Son of God, and even his Virgin Mother...

Even if the clergy had had no interest in the miracles at the tomb of Becket, the high-strung faith of the people would have wrought them almost without suggestion or assistance. Cures would have been made or imagined; the latent powers of diseased or paralysed bodies would have been quickened into action. Belief, and the fear of disbelieving, would have multiplied one extraordinary event into a hundred; fraud would be outbid by zeal; the invention of the crafty, even if what may seem invention was not more often ignorance and credulity, would be outrun by the demands of superstition. (Milman 22, 131)

Becket was the martyr of the pope and his priesthood, not of the crucified and resurrected Lord. His death served the glory of the Roman church and its sacerdotal power, not the testimony of Jesus Christ, the faithful

Witness (Rev. 1:5). Rather than draw all men to Christ, Becket's martyrdom was an illustrious monument to the superiority of priestcraft over statecraft, of the pretensions of the Roman church over the kings of the earth. To be sure, the evil Jezebel of the Roman church mounted the beast and steered it at her pleasure (17:3).

The Church and Human Government

In Matthew 13:31 and 32 Jesus spoke of a mustard seed sown in a field, which when it grew, became a tree upon which the birds of heaven could roost. The mustard seed is very small and when grown becomes a low herb that resembles a flower. In this parable, the mustard seed signifies that the church is small and lowly yet producing food for the satisfaction of God and man. For a mustard seed to become a great tree is abnormal and contrary to God's creation. This is a picture of the abnormal development of the church that began at least in the fourth century, as signified by the church in Pergamos in Revelation 2. However, all the worldly elements, practices, and tendencies of the Pergamos period grew even larger and more elaborate until they reached the apostasy signified by the church in Thyatira, the Roman Catholic Church as it reached its present form at the dawn of the Middle Ages.

A primary characteristic of the apostate church is its extensive hierarchy and its mixture in the affairs of the secular state. In the Old Testament the government of the Gentiles is always presented in a negative way. The rule of empire and emperors is signified by the great and frightful human image in Daniel 2, whose destiny is that of being destroyed when Christ comes to set up His kingdom (vv. 31-35). It is the four dreadful beasts in chapter 7 that culminate in the future Antichrist (vv. 2-8). It is the cutting, swarming, licking, and consuming locusts in Joel 1:4, and it is the four horns in Zechariah 1 that are crushed by Christ when He comes the second time as the fourth Craftsman (vv. 18-21). In the New Testament, human government is exemplified by the oppressive rule of the Romans, who conspired with the religionists to crucify the Lord and who persecuted the early disciples (Matt. 2:13, 16; 14:3-10; 22:15-16; Mark 3:6; Acts 4:27; 12:1-4). The genuine and faithful church has no portion in the human government of earthly empires.

The church in Smyrna was cruelly persecuted by human government for two and a half centuries (Rev. 2:10). After this the church in Pergamos was received, favored, enticed, and corrupted by the Roman government. In the

time of Thyatira, however, the church took upon itself the actual rule, not only of its own affairs but those of the kingdoms of the earth and the kings themselves. Not content with its own ecclesiastical jurisdiction and jurisprudence, it assumed governmental control of the property, destiny, and even lives of all peoples. This was a great fall, even an apostasy, from the true nature and position of the church in the present age. Christians lost the vision of the church's intrinsic being and spiritual function. Church order became hierarchy, its service became priestcraft, and its place in the world became that of political advantage, influence, rule, and power. That which once was the salt of the earth became corruption, and what was the light of the world had long since lost its lampstand (Matt. 5:13-14; Rev. 2:5). This was the worsening of the decline of the church through the teachings of Jezebel, who is Babylon the Great (v. 20; 17:5). Watchman Nee writes,

The fornications and idolatry taught by Jezebel are the same as the fornications and abominations seen in

the great harlot in chapter seventeen. There we see that the kings of the earth commit the sin of fornication with her. Through her corrupt teachings, she has received power and authority in the world, while her Lord has only received a cross and a grave in the same world. It is an unimaginably evil thing that the church wants to gain authority in a

Christ-rejecting world. (5: 451)

Philip Schaff notes,

The mediaeval theocracy was at best a carnal anticipation of the millennial reign, when all the kingdoms of this world shall obey the peaceful scepter of Christ. The papacy degenerated more and more into a worldly institution and an intolerable tyranny over the hearts and minds of men...It was the abuse of priestly authority for the enslavement of men, the worldliness of the Church, and the degradation and profanation of religion. (5: 35)

In Matthew 16:19 Christ gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom of the heavens. Witness Lee writes,

According to history there were two keys. Peter used one on the day of Pentecost to open the gate so that the Jewish believers could enter the kingdom of the heavens (Acts. 2:38-42), and he used the other in the house of Cornelius to open the gate so that the Gentile believers could enter (Acts 10:34-48). (Recovery Version, Matt. 16:19, note 1)

All the worldly elements, practices, and tendencies of the Pergamos period grew even larger and more elaborate until they reached the apostasy signified by the church in Thyatira, the Roman Catholic Church.

Peter's use of the "keys" brought the gospel to the two peoples and brought them into the church so that they may be built up to be the Body of Christ and the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in the present age. There is absolutely no indication in the New Testament that the keys of the kingdom were to be used for governing state or empire, bending men through threat and coercion to satisfy the lust, greed, and ambition of ecclesiastical empire. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). "The pope," on the contrary, "coveted both kingdoms, and he got what he coveted" (Schaff 5: 5).

The Believers' Attitude toward Human Government

There is neither any teaching nor any example in the New Testament to indicate that the church has any direct involvement with human government or that a believer should strive for political position or power.¹³ Nee writes,

When the Lord was on the earth, He was very meek. He did not seek the greatness of this world. The Jews hoped that He would be their king, but He ignored this wish. He did not touch the matter of politics at all. Catholicism has mixed itself up with politics completely. The edicts of popes are often political maneuvers. Our Lord never touched politics. When He was on the earth, many Jews were ready to die for Him if He would only agree to be their king. But the Lord would not be their king. This does not mean that He did not have the power to reform the political system or to save the Jewish nation. His goal on earth was to save sinners. His work was spiritual, not worldly; it had nothing to do with politics. (60: 428)

Just as Christ maintained His position on earth, a Christian should do the same. Christians should not organize political activities, nor should they take advantage of the political system. Everything the Lord avoided in this world should be avoided by Christians, and everything that the Lord partook of in this world should be shared by Christians. We should be the same as He. This is the Christian position. (430)

Not only was it a great mistake for the church to involve itself with the rule of kingdoms in the Middle Ages, but it was also a violation of its nature and an offense to God. Peter tells the believers,

Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to a king as being supreme, or to governors as being sent by him for vengeance on evildoers and praise of those who do good. For so is the will of God, that by doing good you would muzzle the ignorance of foolish men...Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Pet. 2:13-15, 17)

This is a word with deep significance. Peter wrote this around A.D. 64, at which time the "king" in Rome was Caesar Nero (r. 54-68), under whom both Peter and Paul were soon to be martyred. History gives us no more despicable or monstrous tyrant than Nero, and there is no doubt that Peter discerned this. However, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he still admonished the believers to honor the one in power. To unconditionally honor the present ruler is to honor the God who knows all things and operates all things according to His wisdom, prudence, and decision. It is to allow God to have His place and to agree with Him as the unique Sovereign and Decision-maker, confessing that He is God, and we are not. To be sure, such a beautiful living by a group of willing God-men muzzles the ignorance of those who accuse and oppose the way of the Lord. Again Nee says,

The Lord was born shortly after the conquest of the Jewish nation. At that time the rulers, like Pontius Pilate, were Gentiles, yet they were still God's appointed authorities. Once the Pharisees tempted the Lord by asking Him, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" The Lord answered, "Render then the things that are Caesar's to Caesar and the things that are God's to God" (Matt. 22:17, 21). This means that the Lord acknowledged Caesar's authority. He acknowledged the existence of earthly authorities. If the Lord did not know God, He could very well have become a revolutionary leader. But He never gave Himself to any revolutionary movement. He recognized the authority of human government as coming from God. (59: 130)

Paul says likewise, tracing the present earthly authorities back to God, the One on the throne of the universe:

Let every person be subject to the authorities over him, for there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are ordained by God. So then he who resists the authority opposes God's ordination, and those who oppose will receive judgment to themselves. For the rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Do you want to have no fear of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from him; for he is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, fear; he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. (Rom. 13:1-5)

Paul twice uses the word *servant* (δῆκονος), the same Greek word for *deacon*, indicating that even temporal rulers serve the purpose of the sovereign God, the Ruler over the kingdom of men, who deposes kings and causes kings to ascend (Dan. 4:17; 2:21; Luke 1:52; Psa. 75:7; Jer. 27:5). It is a great matter to be right with the authority of God, either directly or through His deputies. Nee writes again,

May the Lord open our eyes to see that all authorities are of God and issue from God...Once a man touches deputy authority, he touches God, because all authority is from God...We do not need to know anything about the person who is acting as the deputy authority. All we have to ask is whether or not he is a deputy authority...According to the Bible, transgression against authority is a very serious thing. If we are wrong in our attitude towards God's servant, we stumble, and there is no way for us to go on. We must be very careful and exercised in dealing with God's servants. We cannot speak lightly against them. (59: 117-119)

The Overcomers in Thyatira

Psalm 2:8 and 9 speak prophetically of Christ in His kingdom: "Ask of Me, / And I will give the nations as Your inheritance / And the limits of the earth as Your possession. / You will break them with an iron rod; / You will shatter them like a potter's vessel." The Son of God says to the church in Thyatira,

I say to you—the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this teaching...He who overcomes and he who keeps My works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he will shepherd them with an iron rod, as vessels of pottery are broken in pieces, as I also have received from My Father. (Rev. 2:24, 26-27)

God gave to Christ authority to rule over the nations in the coming kingdom, and in Revelation Christ gives the same authority to His overcomers. Today is not the day of outward reigning. It is the day of following the rejected and suffering Christ "outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:13). Nee asks,

How can a witness of suffering who testifies for the rejected Christ receive high places in a Christ-rejecting world? The world is still in rebellion against God. How can a Christian be a reigning one in such a world?...The Lord's promise to us is not found in the present age. It is found in the second coming of the Lord Jesus and the advent of His kingdom. (5: 461)

In the present age the nations are in an uproar, and the peoples contemplate a vain thing; the kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers sit in counsel together against Jehovah and against His Anointed (Psa. 2:1-2). However, Christ will come a second time as the smashing stone to crush the Satan-led human government of the world—the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the

gold. Then God will raise up a kingdom that will never be destroyed but will stand forever. This is a certain and trustworthy prophecy (Dan. 2:44-45). Then the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). Verse 18 says,

The nations became angry, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to give the reward to Your slaves the prophets and to the saints and to those who fear Your name, to the small and to the great, and destroy those who destroy the earth.

In the great tribulation at the end of this age, the evil and corrupting Jezebel and her children will be destroyed. Then after Christ's coming in glory, He will set up His judgment seat to examine all His genuine believers, and He will give to each one according to his works (2:23). Those who did not receive the teaching of Jezebel, who separated themselves from the empire-seeking, hierarchical religious system, followed the suffering

Jesus in the time of His rejection, and held fast His name will be rewarded by the reigning Christ to share His rule over the earth in the millennial kingdom. Watchman Nee concludes,

At that time we will reign with Him. At that time the staff will not be turned to a serpent; rather, in His hand, the staff

will become a symbol of righteousness, and no opposer in the world will be able to withstand His power. At that time we will share with the Lord His government. What a blessing that will be! (5: 467)

by John Campbell

Notes

¹See "The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (4)." *Affirmation & Critique* 21.1 (2016): 71-87.

²That is, Rome. The term *See* derives from Latin *sedes*, meaning "seat," a metonymy for the office of a bishop. By extension, the Holy See, or Apostolic See, is the office or person of the bishop of Rome, that is, the pope.

³The Eastern Roman Emperor Anastasius replied to Hormisdas, Gelasius's successor, "You may thwart me, reverend sir, you may insult me: but you may not command me" (qtd. in Duffy 50). However, after the death of Anastasius, his successor, Justin, forced the eastern bishops to accept a formula of doctrine drawn up by Hormisdas. This declaration both condemned the heresies held at Constantinople and recognized the primacy of Rome as the keeper of the true faith. Its statement—"The

Catholic religion has been preserved ever immaculate in the Apostolic See”—was cited in the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) as a case for papal infallibility (Kirsch “Hormisdas”).

⁴Because the Franks were the first to be converted, France is called “the oldest son of the church” (Schaff 4: 80), that is, the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Merovingian rulers—Clovis and his successors—retained all the cruel and warlike ways of the barbarians. Medieval historian Charles Montalembert writes, “It is difficult to believe that, in embracing Christianity, they gave up a single pagan vice or adopted a single Christian virtue” (qtd. in Schaff 4: 83).

⁵Philip Schaff calls Charlemagne’s war with the Saxons, “A war of religion for the annihilation of heathenism, but conducted on the Mohammedan principle: submission to the faith, or death” (4: 43). Later, Gregory VII said that Charlemagne, as the pope’s collector, had bestowed Saxony on the pontiff.

⁶Adolph Hitler considered the empire of Charlemagne to be the First Reich, the first great German kingdom that reigned supreme in Europe. The Second Reich was that of Otto von Bismarck, and the Third was to be his own.

⁷“*Omnibus aliis excellentiores apostolicam et regiam dignitates huic mundo ad ejus regimina omnipotentem Deum distribuisset. Sicut enim...solem et lunam omnibus aliis eminentiora disposuit luminaria,...providit in apostolica et regia dignitate per diversa regetur officia. Qua tamen majoritatis et minoritatis distantia religio sic se movet Christiana, ut cura et dispensatione apostolicae dignitatis post Deum gubernetur regia.*”

⁸“*Beatus Petrus apostolus, quem dominus Jesus Christus rex gloriae principem super regna mundi constituit.*”

⁹If the *Dictatus Papae* was compiled from the letters of Gregory, they were probably done so in his lifetime by Cardinal Deusdedit, a close associate. *Dictatus* may also be translated “dictation.”

¹⁰“*Petra dedit Petro, Petrus diadema Rudolfo.*”

¹¹The donation of Ireland was alleged to be the subject of the papal bull *Laudabiliter*. The authenticity of that bull has been disputed, but the letter of John of Salisbury is admitted as genuine. The kings of England considered the donation as lawful and disputed in its favor for centuries to come.

¹²On Becket’s appointment one bishop wrote, “The king has wrought a miracle; he has turned a soldier and a layman into an archbishop” (qtd. in Milman 37).

¹³Erastus was a city treasurer of Corinth (Acts 19:22; Rom. 16:23; 2 Tim. 4:20). He was probably converted by Paul’s preaching there and afterward became an attendant to him. The Scriptures are silent as to whether he sought civic office before or after his salvation.

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