

The Word of Righteousness

The Overcomers in the Seven Churches (6)

In the fourth epistle to the churches in Revelation 2:18 through 29, the Son of God acknowledges, rebukes, exhorts, and incites the church in Thyatira. He knows her works, love, faith, service, and endurance and that her last works are more than the first. Moreover, to the overcomers in Thyatira He promises,

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. (vv. 26-27)

As I also have received from My Father recalls the prophecy of the coming Christ in Psalm 2. Verses 6 through 9 say,

I have installed My King / Upon Zion, My holy mountain. / I will recount the decree of Jehovah; / He said to Me: You are My Son; / Today I have begotten You. / 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 reign of Christ as King over the earth will take place in the thousand-year age of the kingdom. At this time the overcomers in the church age will sit with Christ on His throne and reign with Him as co-kings over the nations of the restored earth (Rev. 12:10; 20:4).

The Lord told the church in Thyatira that He has something against her, because she tolerates the woman Jezebel, the self-proclaimed prophetess. The church in Thyatira prefigures the apostate Roman Catholic Church from the full establishment of the papal system at the end of the sixth century to the Lord's second coming at the end of the present age. Jezebel, as a sign of the authoritarian hierarchy of the apostate church with its teaching, is seen again in chapter 17. There, she is "the great harlot who sits upon the many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication" (vv. 1-2). John continues,

I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns...The seven heads are the seven mountains where the woman

sits and are seven kings...And the ten horns which you saw are ten kings. (vv. 3, 9-10, 12)

In principle, the seven and ten kings represent godless, Satan-empowered human government that will culminate in the revived Roman Empire under Antichrist, the final Caesar, near the end of this age. History shows that the Roman Catholic Church has been borne by human empire and derives its secular and political power from it. This has been the case since antiquity, and it will continue to be so until the end of the age. Henry Alford writes,

By the woman *sitting* on the wild-beast, is signified that superintending and guiding power which the rider possesses over his beast: than which nothing could be chosen more apt to represent the superiority claimed and exercised by the See of Rome over the secular kingdoms of Christendom. (706)

Verse 6 says, "I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus." As we shall see, in its recourse to and participation in secular power, the apostate church inevitably persecuted teachers and practitioners of heterodoxy, until at last it shed the blood even of saints and the true witnesses of Jesus. The downward process that led the once-pure church into this wicked state under Roman Catholicism is the subject of this article.¹

A Spirit of Meekness, Not Coercion, in Dealing with Believers

The New Testament shows by word and example the way to deal with erring believers and even teachers of heresy. The members of Christ's Body are joined together by the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace and love (Eph. 4:3; Col. 3:14), and it is in this Spirit that the members minister to those who are weak or errant. Paul writes, "Brothers, even if a man is overtaken in some offense, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, looking to yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). A spirit of meekness is our regenerated human spirit indwelt by and mingled with the Holy Spirit in whom we live and walk (5:25; Rom. 8:16). In such a spirit the believers contact one another and those outside the

church in love and humility. John says, “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and he will give life to him” (1 John 5:16). *He* refers to the one asking:

It means that such an asker, who is abiding in the Lord, who is one with the Lord, and who is asking in one spirit with the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17), becomes the means by which God’s life-giving Spirit can give life to the ones for whom he is asking. (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 5:16, note 3)

It is manifestly clear that in the New Testament no forceful penalties were ever enacted by the church against erring believers or even against heretics. Temporal, material, or physical judgment was the result only of a direct act of governmental discipline, according to the wisdom of the Father and carried out by the Holy Spirit, for the spiritual health of a believer or of the entire church (Acts 5:4-5; 1 Cor. 11:29-30). To be sure, in the years of persecution under the Roman Empire, the church fostered no idea of discipline by force. Writing at the beginning of the third century, Tertullian says that obstinacy must be conquered by argument, not coaxed. He goes as far as saying that no Christian can be an executioner, jailor, or military commander that sits in judgment of a man’s life. He asserts, “It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions...It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion—to which free-will and not force should lead us” (105). Origen says likewise,

It must be impossible for the legislation of Moses, taken literally, to harmonize with the calling of the Gentiles... For Christians could not slay their enemies, or condemn to be burned or stoned, as Moses commands, those who had broken the law. (621)

Lactantius, the last of the church fathers in the time of persecution, writes,

There is no occasion for violence and injury, for religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected...Torture and piety are widely different; nor is it possible for truth to be united with violence, or justice with cruelty. (156)

The Catholic apologist Elphège Vacandard² writes,

As late as the middle of the fourth century and even later, all the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers who discuss the question of toleration are opposed to the use of force. To a man they reject absolutely the death penalty and enunciate that principle which was to prevail in the Church

down the centuries, *i.e. Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (the Church has a horror of bloodshed); and they declare faith must be absolutely free, and conscience a domain wherein violence must never enter. (7)

In the light of the examples in the New Testament and the tradition of the early fathers, it is remarkable that the church could plummet from faithful martyrdom in its early centuries to the Inquisition of the Middle Ages. As in every case of degradation, though, the fall was gradual and imperceptible to all but “Antipas” (Rev. 2:13), the overcoming anti-testimony against all that deviated from the pristine, unspoiled testimony of Jesus according to the teaching of the apostles.

The First Persecution of Heretics

The church’s temptation and fall into political power, along with its eventual use of coercive governmental power to impose conformity to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, even to the point of “the blood of the saints,” began from the time of Constantine in the fourth century. His support for Christianity created a fundamental confusion between the church and the secular establishment. Constantine added, as it were, a new branch to his government, composed of Christian bishops, and acted as the strong arm for enforcing its policies. Will Durant says of the emperor, “He became the most persistent preacher in his realm, persecuted heretics faithfully...By his aid Christianity became a state as well as a church” (664). This illicit duality of church and state became a damage to the Body of Christ, a damage that has persisted up to the present time.

Philip Schaff writes, “An inevitable consequence of the union of church and state was restriction of religious freedom in faith and worship, and the civil punishment of departure from the doctrine and discipline of the established church” (*History* 138). Paul Johnson notes,

The position adopted by Constantine, of general religious toleration, was not tenable for long...The empire, as it became less liberal, had found it impossible not to persecute Christianity. Now, having accepted Christianity, it found it increasingly difficult not to persecute its enemies, internal and external. (76)

Henry Charles Lea³ tells us,

The triumph of intolerance was inevitable when Christianity became the religion of the State, yet the slowness of its progress shows the difficulty of overcoming the incongruity between persecution and the gospel. Hardly had orthodoxy been defined by the Council of Nicaea when Constantine brought the power of the State to bear to enforce uniformity. (212)

The emperor was lenient toward pagan worship, but he could not countenance division in his chosen religion. He threatened schismatics, forbade them to assemble, confiscated their places of meeting, and ordered their writings to be burned. It was not until the reign of Theodosius I (A.D. 379-395), however, that rigid penalties were enacted against not only paganism but also Christian sects and heresies.

After the Nicene age all departures from the reigning state-church faith were not only abhorred and excommunicated as religious errors, but were treated also as crimes against the Christian state, and hence were punished with civil penalties. (Schaff, *History* 139)

Between the reigns of Valentinian I (A.D. 364-375) and Theodosius II (A.D. 408-450), as many as sixty-eight laws against heresy were enacted. In the course of fifteen years Theodosius I alone issued at least fifteen such penal laws. His Edict of Thessalonica (A.D. 380) states,

We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment, they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation, and in the second the punishment which our authority, in accordance with the will of Heaven, shall decide to inflict. (23)

Theodosius I's decree in effect repealed the Edict of Milan, by which Constantine had granted liberty to all religions. Sozomenus adds,

Great as were the punishments adjudged by the laws against heretics, they were not always carried into execution, for the emperor had no desire to persecute his subjects; he only desired to enforce uniformity of view about God *through the medium of intimidation*. (383, emphasis added)

The contemporary Western Roman Emperor Maximus was less constrained. Priscillian, a nobleman of Roman Hispania, promoted a Gnostic-Manichaean teaching later called by his name. He was censured at a synod of bishops at Zaragoza in 380, but he defied the synod and was elected bishop of Avila. Under the instigation of Priscillian's superior bishop, Maximus convened a synod at Bordeaux to consider Priscillian, whose case was then

transferred to the secular court at Trier. There, in 385, he was charged with sorcery, tortured, and beheaded with six of his companions.

Patrick Healy states in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "There is no ground in the condemnation and death of Priscillian for the charge made against the Church of having invoked the civil authority to punish heretics." However, this protest is thin and asserted only on a technicality. The case against Priscillian was made before the emperor by Ithacius, the metropolitan bishop of Lusitania, and with one exception the bishops assembled at Trier approved of the verdict.

It is true that Ambrose and Martin of Tours both protested against the execution, and Ithacius was later deposed for his part in it, but it is nevertheless a fact that high-ranking ecclesiastics were party to a case of spiritual error being handed over to a secular court of law, resulting in the condemnation and execution of the accused. This was the first case in the Christian era of blood spilled by a heretic through due process of law, and it established a pattern to be followed many times in the worsening decline of the church.

Augustine's Mistake

Augustine, the most influential of the Latin Christian writers, used his great gift both to mine the riches of the gospel of grace and to defeat the spread of Pelagianism, Arianism, and Manichaeism. As his theology developed, his grand vision of the church became one in which the church as the city of God exists alongside the earthly city, that is, human society, to have the greatest, salutary, practical, and material effect upon it. The scholarly Pope Leo XIII states that Augustine "set forth so clearly the efficacy of Christian wisdom and the way in which it is bound up with the well-being of States" (qtd. in Schaff, "City" v). In this respect Augustine was "the dark genius of imperial Christianity, the ideologue of the Church-State alliance" (Johnson 112). In his worldview,

Christianity was not the anti-society—it was society. Led by the elect, its duty was to transform, absorb, and perfect all existing bonds of human relations, all human activities and institutions, to regularize and codify and elevate every aspect of life. Here was the germ of the medieval idea of a total society, with the church permeating everything. (115)

In a chapter entitled "Augustine's Mistake" Benjamin Hart writes,

It is manifestly clear that in the New Testament no forceful penalties were ever enacted by the church against erring believers or even against heretics.

The only hope for civilization, in Augustine's mind...was to bring administrative conformity to a universal church. To survive the onslaught of the barbarians and heresy, he thought, the church could not be defined as merely the body of believers, but had to be a specific all-encompassing institutional structure. (41)

This all-encompassing Christian society was by necessity a compulsory one, in which even violence could be used in the cause of religious conformity (Johnson 115-116). Having belonged to the Manichaeian sect for nine years before his conversion, Augustine was at first liberal in his dealing with heretics and schismatics. He writes, "Originally my opinion was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason" ("Letters" 388). However, after witnessing the destructive and sometimes deadly disruptions caused by fanatical heretics, his feeling changed.

Augustine felt that the acceptance of Christianity by the Roman emperors had brought a change of dispensation to the world. Formerly, the nations were in an uproar, and the peoples contemplated a vain thing (Psa. 2:1), but now the kings had become prudent and should serve the Lord with fear (vv. 10-11). He argues,

How then are kings to serve the Lord with fear, except by preventing and chastising with religious severity all those acts which are done in opposition to the commandments of the Lord? For a man serves God in one way in that he is man, in another way in that he is also king. In that he is man, he serves Him by living faithfully; but in that he is also king, he serves Him by enforcing with suitable rigor such laws as ordain what is righteous, and punish what is the reverse. ("Correction" 640)

Referring to the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, Augustine writes,

The earlier time of that king represented the former age of emperors who did not believe in Christ, at whose hands the Christians suffered because of the wicked; but the later time of that king represented the age of the successors to the imperial throne, now believing in Christ, at whose hands *the wicked suffer because of the Christians*. ("Letters" 385, emphasis added).

As the ideologue of the church-state alliance, Augustine became "the fabricator of the medieval mentality" (Johnson 112). For centuries afterward, any human government that embraced the church was considered to be the divinely appointed arm for enforcing church policy and punishing heterodoxy, with all the coercion and violence necessary for this purpose. Augustine's ideology was fertile soil for the growth of the great evils of the Middle

Ages. Here we see how the woman in Revelation 17—Jezebel, Babylon the Great—was able to mount the blasphemous, many-headed beast of human government.

"Compel Them to Come In"

Augustine realized—by his own experience, his enlightenment from the gospel, and his observation that both Roman society and orthodox Christianity were on the brink of destruction—that man's nature is depraved and incapable of its own salvation. This, however, coupled with his view of the all-encompassing role of the city of God, led him to believe that coercion often needed to attend grace to work out man's salvation, especially in the context of human society. "The horrors he witnessed around him suggested that compulsory measures on behalf of Christian ideals were called for" (Hart 45). Augustine writes concerning those of one sect,

Why should not such persons be shaken up in a beneficial way by a law bringing upon them inconvenience in worldly things, in order that they might rise from their lethargic sleep, and awake to the salvation which is to be found in the unity of the Church? ("Letters" 382-383)

In Augustine's mind, divine light dispels darkness, but practical salvation is assisted by the civil magistrate. He states, "Wholesome instruction is added to means of inspiring salutary fear, so that not only the light of truth may dispel the darkness of error, but the force of fear may at the same time break the bonds of evil custom" (383).

Augustine fiercely opposed not only the Pelagians and Manichaeans, whose teachings perverted the truth of the gospel, but also the Donatists, who held the truth of Christ according to the Scriptures but differed from "catholic" church practice.⁴ Augustine says of them, "They, with wondrous blindness, while they would know nothing of Christ Himself save what is revealed in the Scriptures, yet form their notion of His Church from the vanity of human falsehood" ("Correction" 634). Formerly, the Donatists had appealed to Constantine for the deposition of Caecilian, a bishop of Carthage. Now, Augustine maintains, they, like the Pelagians and Manichaeans, were best served by persecution under the imperial laws. He claims,

The Donatists met with the same fate as the accusers of the holy Daniel. For as the lions were turned against them, so the laws by which they had proposed to crush an innocent victim [i.e., Caecilian] were turned against the Donatists...Let all be called to salvation, let all be recalled from the path of destruction,—those who may, by the sermons of Catholic preachers; those who may, by the edicts of Catholic princes; some through those who obey

the warnings of God, some through those who obey the emperor's commands. (635-636)

He asserts that as the Donatists suffered under the "Catholic princes," they could not claim to be persecuted, because they were simply being kept from their wrongs "by the laws which the emperors have passed to preserve the unity of Christ" (636).

Augustine was the first to appeal to Jesus' parable of the great dinner to justify civil coercion. In Luke 14 Jesus said,

A certain man was making a great dinner and invited many; and he sent his slave at the dinner hour to say to those who had been invited, Come, for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuses. (vv. 16-18)

Eventually, the master says to the slave, "Go out into the roads and hedges and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled" (v. 23). Witness Lee writes,

This great dinner is for God's full salvation. God, as the "certain man," prepared His full salvation as a great dinner and sent the first apostles as His slaves to invite the Jews (vv. 16-17). But because they were occupied by their riches, such as land, cattle, or a wife, they refused His invitation (v. 18-20). Then God sent the apostles to invite the people on the streets—the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Because of their poverty and misery, they accepted God's invitation (vv. 1-22a). Yet God's salvation still had room for more; so He sent His slaves to go out farther, to the Gentile world, signified by the roads and hedges, to compel the Gentiles to come in and fill up the house of His salvation (vv. 22b-23; Acts 13:46-48; Rom. 11:25). (Recovery Version, Luke 14:16, note 1)

Compel (ἀναγκάζω, v. 23) is used nine times in the New Testament, only once with the implication of force (Acts 26:11). It is otherwise always used with the sense of a verbal command or irresistible response (cf. 2 Cor. 12:11). In Luke 14 it is used parabolically for the compelling power of the word of preaching. Augustine, however, takes this word more darkly:

It is indeed better (as no one ever could deny) that men should be led to worship God by teaching, than that they should be driven to it by fear of punishment or pain; but it does not follow that because the former course

produces the better men, therefore those who do not yield to it should be neglected. For many have found advantage...in being first compelled by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching... Therefore the Church, in trying to compel the Donatists, is following the example of her Lord...He said to them, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in." In those, therefore, who were first brought in with gentleness, the former obedience is fulfilled; but in those who were compelled, the disobedience is avenged. ("Correction" 641-642)

By this he means that those who obey the call to God's full salvation enter into it with gentleness, but those who disobey the call are compelled to enter by vengeance, that is, by "fear of punishment or pain," according to the emperor's laws.

Augustine's Legacy

Philip Schaff writes,

Augustine's view of the all-encompassing role of the city of God led him to believe that coercion often needed to attend grace to work out man's salvation.

Augustine...is a philosophical and theological genius of the first order, towering like a pyramid above his age, and looking down commandingly upon succeeding centuries... He stands of right by the side of the greatest philosophers of antiquity and of modern times...It was his need and his delight to wrestle again and

again with the hardest problems of thought, and to comprehend to the utmost the divinely revealed matter of the faith. (*History* 997-998)

Most importantly he adds, Augustine "had a creative and decisive hand in almost every dogma of the church, completing some, and advancing others" (998). However, Augustine was not only a wellspring of Christian thought in general, but in fundamental ways he was also the "Father of Roman Catholicism" in particular (Portalié), leading Martin Luther to conclude, "Augustine often erred; he cannot be trusted" (Schaff, *History* 1022). In Augustine's worldview of the role of the state in church affairs, we easily concur with Luther. Augustus Neander writes,

[Augustine] was, in this case, carried along by the spirit of the times; and this spirit had found a point of union for such errors in his habit of confounding the visible and the invisible church...Pity it was that errors which grew first out of practice should, by the application of Augustin's logic,—so adroit in combining things true, half true, and false, into a plausible whole,—be wrought into a

systematic theory, and thereby become the more firmly rooted in the ecclesiastical polity. (286-287)

An Improper View of the Dispensations

We offer the following four aspects of Augustine's error in this regard. First, Augustine's view of the dispensation of the church age was clouded by his overestimation of the Christian emperors of Rome. We have already cited his interpretation of Psalm 2, showing, in his mind, that the age of the nations' raging against Christ had passed to the age of the Son's reign simply because the emperors had accepted Christianity and were now willing to legislate to its advantage. When the Donatists objected to their persecution on scriptural grounds, Augustine argued,

When they say that the apostles never sought such measures from the kings of the earth, they do not consider the different character of that age, and that everything comes in its own season. For what emperor had as yet believed in Christ, so as to serve Him in the cause of piety by enacting laws against impiety? ("Correction" 640)

To Augustine, the time of the nations' opposition to Christ was "that age," that is, the former age, and a new season had brought in a better age. Augustine continues,

Seeing, then, that the kings of the earth were not yet serving the Lord in the time of the apostles, but were still imagining vain things against the Lord and against His Anointed, that all might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, it must be granted that at that time acts of impiety could not possibly be prevented by the laws, but were rather performed under their sanction...But so soon as the fulfillment began of what is written in a later psalm, "All kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him," what sober-minded man could say to the kings, "Let not any thought trouble you within your kingdom as to who restrains or attacks the Church of your Lord." (640)

Accordingly, Augustine proclaims, "Let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause" ("Letters" 389). The Donatist bishop Petilian was right to protest, "What have you to do with the princes of this world, in whom the Christian cause has ever found only its enemies?" He asserts that the new emperors were no different from the ones of old, except that the Catholics had misled them "to turn the weapons prepared against the enemies of the state, against Christians" (Neander 286).

The Church as Persecutor

Second, the argument cannot be made from Augustine, as

it frequently was made in the Middle Ages, that it is not the church itself but the state that exercises judicial compulsion and punishment. Augustine drew no such line between the church and the Roman state. He says,

There is a persecution of unrighteousness, which the impious inflict upon the Church of Christ; and there is a righteous persecution, which the Church of Christ inflicts upon the impious...She [i.e., the church] persecutes her enemies and arrests them, until they become weary in their vain opinions, so that they should make advance in the truth. ("Correction" 637)

Clearly, Augustine sees the church, not only the state, as the party that "inflicts," "persecutes," and "arrests." Petilian rightfully states,

God has not executioners for his priests. Christ persecutes no one; for he was for inviting, not forcing, men to the faith...Christ, in dying for men, has given Christians the example to die, but not to kill...The almighty God employed prophets to convert the people of Israel; he enjoined it not on princes; the Saviour of souls, the Lord Christ, sent fishermen, and not soldiers, to preach his faith. (qtd. in Neander 285-286)

Persecuting Both Heretics and Believers

The third aspect of Augustine's error is that it cannot be argued from him that the church persecutes only external heretics and not genuine believers. As we have seen, Augustine acknowledged that the Donatists sought nothing but the Scriptures for their belief in Christ. He asks, "Why, therefore, should not the Church use force in compelling her lost sons to return?" ("Correction" 642). The Donatists were true believers, as Augustine admits, who were simply "lost" in their proud separatism. He says, "They recognize Christ together with us...and yet they refuse to recognize the Church" (634). For this reason he repeatedly and appropriately refers to them as "sons" and "sheep" (642).

Jesus told His disciples that if an intransigent brother refuses to hear the church, "Let him be to you just like the Gentile and the tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). How then should the church treat "the Gentile and the tax collector"? To be sure, it is not by turning them over to the government for trial and punishment. Immediately after the Lord spoke this word, He said,

Whatever you bind on the earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again, truly I say to you that if two of you are in harmony on earth concerning any matter for which they ask, it will be done for them from My Father who is in the heavens. (vv. 18-19)

Lee writes,

We should touch heaven by our binding and releasing prayer...If a brother sins against us, we need to deal with him first in love. If we cannot get through, we should bring with us one or two more to contact him. If we still cannot get through, we should tell it to the church, and if the church cannot get through, then the sinner brother will lose the fellowship of the church. But this is not all. We have to then pray in the way of binding and releasing, and we have to pray in harmony. Whatever we pray, our Father in heaven will accomplish to gain that person. (*Vital* 4-5)

Even a schismatic brother who does not repent is not lost to the Lord. The church must continue to pray for him, as it does for every "Gentile" and "tax collector." Lee continues,

The church is not a police station to arrest people or a law court to judge people, but a home to raise up the believers...The church is also a hospital to heal and to recover the sick ones. Finally, the church is a school to teach and edify the unlearned ones who do not have much understanding. (75)

It is not in the church's divinely human nature to arrest, persecute, or prosecute anyone over a spiritual matter, needless to say, turn them over to the civil government for merciless treatment.

The Rationale for the Inquisition

Fourth, Augustine's misinterpretation of "compel them to come in" (Luke 14:23) set the church on a course of persecution that became the horror and shame of the Middle Ages. Neander writes,

It was the case with Augustin here, as in many other instances, that, owing to his ignorance of the rules of a right interpretation of scripture, he imagined he had found, in some detached and misapprehended passages of the Bible, a false theory, which, in his systematizing mind, he had framed to himself independently of holy writ; and thus, by his means, the wrong apprehension of such a passage of scripture was established as the classical foundation of an error that prevailed for centuries. (290)

Hart writes,

Nowhere in the New Testament is it remotely suggested

that Christians employ the resources of the state to compel belief or force religious conformity... "Compel them to come in"...was certainly strong language, but it was not a mandate to employ the coercive powers of the state. (33, 49).

Nevertheless, *Compelle Intrare* became the battle cry of the heinous and bloody persecutions in the early centuries of the second millennium. Hart concludes,

[Augustine] provided the rationale for the Spanish Inquisition of the 13th century...Augustine's marriage of church and state was counter to the entire spirit of the New Testament, and ultimately failed. It led to a savagery of its own. (48)

Schaff's evaluation of Augustine's mistake is the same: "The great authority of his name was often afterward made to justify cruelties from which he himself would have shrunk with horror" (*History* 145). Neander concludes,

*Even a schismatic brother
who does not repent is not lost to
the Lord. The church must continue
to pray for him, as it does for every
"Gentile" and "tax collector."*

How often was not the holy name of love abused by fanaticism and the love of power? It was by Augustin, then, that a theory was proposed and founded, which, tempered though it was, in its practical application, by his own pious, philanthropic spirit, nevertheless contained the germ of that whole system of spiritual

despotism, of intolerance and persecution, which ended in the tribunals of the inquisition. (291)

Citing the Example of Phinehas

Like Augustine, Optatus of Milevis acknowledges that those of the Donatist schism were fellow believers. He says, "They therefore are without doubt brothers, though not good brothers...They and we have one spiritual birth, though widely differing is our conduct" (6). His charge against them was that they held to a different discipline. He writes to one, "Your party is a quasi-church, but is not the Catholic Church" (167). In A.D. 347 Paulus and Macarius, commissioners of Emperor Constans, came to Africa with large sums of money, attempting to lure the followers of Donatus back to catholic unity. Donatus refused the bribe and exclaimed, "What has the Emperor to do with the Church?" (131). In the ensuing conflict Macarius took arms against them. Johann Mosheim writes,

During these troubles, which continued near thirteen years, several steps were taken against the Donatists,

which the equitable and impartial will be at a loss to reconcile with the dictates of humanity and justice; nor, indeed, do the Catholics themselves deny the truth of this assertion. (123)

Optatus vindicates the killing of the brothers under Macarius as ordained by God. He writes to Parmenian, the successor of Donatus, “Some evil things are done in an evil way; some evil things are done in a good way. The murderer does an evil thing in an evil way, the judge does an evil thing in a good way when he punishes the murderer” (150). He cites the example of Phinehas, who slew a man of Israel and a Midianite woman, turning away the anger of Jehovah (Num. 25:6-8). Optatus says,

God was pleased with the act of homicide, because thereby adultery was punished. What if God has now been pleased with those things which you say that you have suffered—you who refused to have unity, well pleasing to God, with the whole [Catholic] world, and with the “Shrines” of the Apostles? (151-152)

He derides Parmenian for calling those slain by Macarius martyrs, claiming that a war waged against schismatics was not a war against Christians, and the death of those outside “Mother Church” could not be called a martyrdom (164). He notes sardonically, “As if no one at all ought ever to be killed in punishment of offences against God” (152). Clearly, Optatus believes that the killing of brothers in division is justified, being a “punishment” and not a “persecution” (167).

Jerome expresses a similar feeling. A certain Vigilantius preached in southern Gaul against superstitions, particularly the veneration of relics. When Riparius of Aquitaine informed Jerome of this, Jerome was indignant. Writing in A.D. 404, he says,

He calls us who cherish them [i.e., the relics] ashmongers and idolaters who pay homage to dead men’s bones... I will frankly admit that my indignation overpowers me; I cannot listen with patience to such sacrilegious opinions. I have read of the javelin of Phinehas, of the harshness of Elijah, of the jealous anger of Simon the zealot, of the severity of Peter in putting to death Ananias and Sapphira, and of the firmness of Paul who, when Elymas the sorcerer withstood the ways of the Lord, doomed him to lifelong blindness. There is no cruelty in regard for God’s honour. Wherefore also in the Law it is said: “If thy brother or thy friend or the wife of thy bosom entice thee from the truth, thine hand shall be upon them and thou shalt shed their blood, and so shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of Israel.” (212-213)

Leo I, called Great, writes concerning the execution of Priscillian,

Even the leaders of the world so abhorred this profane folly that they laid low its originator, with most of his disciples, by the sword of the public laws...And this rigorous treatment was for long a help to the Church’s law of gentleness which, although it relies upon the priestly judgment, and shuns blood-stained vengeance, yet is assisted by the stern decrees of Christian princes at times when men, who dread bodily punishment, have recourse to merely spiritual correction. (20)

Lea summarizes this period of the development of the theory of the church’s coercive power:

It was only sixty-two years after the slaughter of Priscillian and his followers had excited so much horror, that Leo. I., when the heresy seemed to be reviving, in 447, not only justified the act, but declared that if the followers of heresy so damnable were allowed to live there would be an end of human and divine law. The final step had been taken, and the Church was definitely pledged to the suppression of heresy at whatever cost. (215)

Not Collecting the Tares

Jesus spoke to His disciples in parable: “The kingdom of the heavens has become like a man sowing good seed in his field. But while the men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares in the midst of the wheat and went away” (Matt. 13:24-25). A tare is a weed resembling wheat, signifying the false believers sown among the true after the day of Pentecost, creating a mere appearance of the kingdom of the heavens. In the parable the slaves asked the master, “Do you want us then to go and collect them?” He said, “No, lest while collecting the tares, you uproot the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest” (vv. 28-30). Lee writes,

Both the tares and the wheat grow in the field, and the field is the world (v. 38). The false believers and the true live in the world. To collect the tares from the field means to take away the false believers from the world. The Lord did not want His slaves to do this, because while taking away the false believers from the world, they might also take the true ones away. (Recovery Version, v. 29, note 1).

No other interpretation of this parable is justifiable. Chrysostom asserts that to put a heretic to death is an unpardonable crime (Vacandard 29). He says,

What then doth the Master? He forbids them, saying, “Lest haply ye root up the wheat with them.”...For it is not right to put a heretic to death...So long as [the tares] stand by the wheat, we must spare them, for it is possible for them even to become wheat. (Chrysostom 288-289)

The “field” is the world of men, within which the church

is the treasure hidden in the field (v. 44), the practical kingdom today, which is outwardly visible but possesses a hidden reality. The Lord plainly indicated that it is not for the church to remove false believers from the “field.” They must be allowed to continue until the consummation of the present age, when the Son of Man will send His angels to collect the lawless and cast them into the fire (vv. 40-41).

Jesus said to Pilate, “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). Later, when Peter struck the slave of the high priest, Jesus told him, “Return your sword to its place” (Matt. 26:52). According to God’s ordination, the authorities in the civil realm bear the sword in order to maintain a lawful and orderly society (Rom. 13:1-4), but nowhere in the New Testament do we find an apostle, church, or individual believer wielding anything other than a spiritual sword to minister a teaching or establish a practice. If this is the case in the defense and confirmation of the gospel against heresies from without, how much more it is with unruly or divisive brothers within the church.

Paul exhorts Timothy to charge certain ones not to teach things other than God’s economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4). He says, “Mark those who make divisions and causes of stumbling contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and turn away from them” (Rom. 16:17) and, “A factious man, after a first and second admonition, refuse” (Titus 3:10). Taking Paul’s way to deal with factious men protects against contagiously divisive persons and preserves the oneness of the Body of Christ. However, *mark those*, *turn away*, and *refuse* in no way imply a corporal, material, or civil coercion or punishment, as was practiced by the apostate church in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Shepherding the Nations in the Millennial Kingdom

Jezebel, the false prophetess, the woman in Revelation 17, rides the “beast” of human government in order to make the apostate church a branch of government, and government, the arm of the church, in order to rule over the lives, wealth, and destiny of men. This is a great evil. According to God’s economy and in His divine ordination, the time of reigning both of Christ as King over the earth and of the overcomers as His co-kings is not in the present age but in the coming dispensation of the kingdom. Today is the time of the church’s sojourn, in which

the believers are strangers and pilgrims (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11; Heb. 11:13). In God’s kingdom we are fellow citizens, but in the world we are foreigners, aliens, exiles, and expatriates, “one who comes from a foreign country into a city or land to reside there by the side of the natives” (Thayer 488). How can the church presume to exercise political and civil power in a kingdom that is not her own, even to arrest, imprison, and execute her enemies?

When the Samaritans did not receive Jesus, James and John asked, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Jesus rebuked them and said, “You do not know of what kind of spirit you are. The Son of Man has not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Luke 9:54-56). The disciples’ impetuous question was against the nature of the One who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). To be sure, those who take up the physical sword against the enemies of the church are not living out the One who said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (v. 5).

*The time to inherit
the earth will be in the
coming age, in which the
overcomers will rule with
authority, yet as shepherds.*

The time to inherit the earth will be in the coming age, in which the overcomers—including those in Thyatira who do not tolerate the woman Jezebel—will rule with authority, yet as shepherds. However, the Lord’s promise to Thyatira strongly implies that those

who do not overcome—including those who receive and follow the evil ways of Jezebel—will not participate in the heavenly rule with Christ in the millennial kingdom. The tares will be cast into the furnace of fire, and those genuine believers who followed Jezebel will be disciplined dispensationally so that they may be prepared to take their place among the shepherding co-kings of Christ in eternity.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Although the focus of this writing is the prophetic church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29), much that is related here belongs, strictly speaking, to the period signified by the church in Pergamos (vv. 12-17). This is necessary to demonstrate the ideological and political seeds of wrongful persecution that were planted early in the church’s history. The preface to Elphège Vacandard’s *Inquisition* says, “We must also go back further than the thirteenth century and ascertain how the coercive power which the Church finally confided to the Inquisition

developed from the beginning” (viii). The seeds planted in the early centuries reach their full blossom in the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. This will be the subject of a subsequent installment of this department.

²The Catholic priest and abbot Elphège Vacandard is a respected authority on and apologist for the Inquisition and the use of coercive power by the Catholic Church.

³The preface to Vacandard’s *Inquisition* says that Henry Charles Lea’s work is “the most extensive, the most profound, and the most thorough history of the Inquisition that we possess” (vii).

⁴Donatus was the successor to Majorinus, who was appointed bishop of Carthage in opposition to Caecilian, who had been consecrated by a traditor. *Traditor* was the name given to those who had yielded under the persecution of Diocletian and given up copies of the Scriptures as tokens of their capitulation. The followers of Donatus insisted that all consecrations and sacraments performed by traditores were nullified, and they refused to accept a traditor into fellowship. Although their faith in the person and work of Christ was sound, their fellowship was restrictive and divisive, and their unruly methods caused turmoil in northern Africa.

Works Cited

- Alford, Henry. *Alford's Greek Testament*. Vol. 4, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. Print.
- Augustine. “The Correction of the Donatists.” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. First Series. Ed. Philip Schaff. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- . “Letters.” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. First Series. Ed. Philip Schaff. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Chrysostom. “Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew.” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. First Series. Ed. Philip Schaff. Vol. 10. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- Durant, Will. *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to A.D. 325*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. Print.
- Hart, Benjamin. *Faith & Freedom: The Christian Roots of American Liberty*. Dallas: Lewis and Stanley, 1990. Print.
- Healy, Patrick. “Priscillianism.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 12. New York: Robert Appleton, 1911. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.
- Jerome. “Letter CIX.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Johnson, Paul. *A History of Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Print.
- Lactantius. “The Divine Institutes.” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Lea, Henry Charles. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*. Vol. 1. New York: Harper, 1888. Print.
- Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.
- . *The Vital Groups*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1996. Print.
- Leo. “Letter XV” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Mosheim, John Laurence. *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*. Trans. Archibald McClaine. Vol. 1. New York: Harper, 1856. Print.
- Neander, Augustus. *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*. Trans. Joseph Torrey. Vol. 3. Edinburgh: Clark, 1848. Print.
- Optatus. *The Works of St. Optatus, Bishop of Mikvis: Against the Donatists*. Trans. O. R. Vassal-Phillips. London: Longmans, 1917. Print.
- Origen. “Origen Against Celsus.” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Portalié, Eugène. “Teaching of St. Augustine of Hippo.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2. New York: Robert Appleton, 1907. Web. 19 Jan. 2017.
- Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. 3. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996. Print.
- . Preface. “The City of God.” By Augustine. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. First Series. Ed. Philip Schaff. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Sozomenus. “The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. Print.
- Tertullian. “To Scapula.” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Print.
- Thayer, Joseph H. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003. Print.
- Theodosius I. “Cuntos Populos.” *Documents of the Christian Church*. Eds. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder. Oxford: University Press, 2011. Print.
- Vacandard, Elphège. *The Inquisition: A Critical and Historical Study of the Coercive Power of the Church*. Trans. Bertrand L. Conway. New York: Longmans, 1908. Print.