

The Lord Does Not Prohibit the Use of Force against False Religion

2 Corinthians 10:4; Ezra 7:26

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In previous sermons in this series, we have sought to establish what a Christian nation is according to biblical revelation, and accordingly, why the United States of America cannot (according to Scripture) be truthfully affirmed to have been established as a Christian nation, nor be designated now as a Christian nation. We have also along the way responded to various biblical and historical claims that allegedly demonstrate that the United States was founded as a Christian nation upon the principle of universal toleration of all religions (as if the universal toleration of all religions by the magistrate was itself a “right” of conscience granted by God and revealed in Scripture).

We turn today to a discussion of perhaps one of the most emotionally-charged objections against establishing biblical Christianity as the official national religion (and thus officially establishing one Christian Church as the national Church and one Christian Confession of Faith alone as the national Confession of Faith); and it is this: The official establishment of one Christian Church and the establishment of one Christian Confession of Faith within the United States will inevitably lead to the persecution of a nation’s citizens whose consciences have led them to profess and practice different religions or sects of Christianity (or to profess and practice no religion at all). This it would seem is what is most feared by secularists and religious tolerationists. It is imagined that there would be bloodbaths, torture, thought police, religious wars waged all in the name of God and Christianity. The official establishment of a faithful, reformed, biblical Church and a faithful Confession of Faith (like the Westminster Confession of Faith) would certainly usher in some changes, but the imagined fears just mentioned would not be the result of such a national establishment of biblical Christianity. Over the next few sermons, I would like to respond to such objections and present a biblical perspective of what we might expect from the national establishment of biblical Christianity within the United States and in the nations of the world when at the establishment of the millennium “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15).

The main points for the sermon this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) The Holy Spirit Does Not Prohibit the Civil Magistrate from Using Force to Restrain Idolatry, Heresy, and Blasphemy (2 Corinthians 10:4); (2) A Biblical Examination of the Nature of Persecution.

I. The Holy Spirit Does Not Prohibit the Civil Magistrate from Using Force to Restrain Idolatry, Heresy, and Blasphemy (2 Corinthians 10:4).

A. The Second Epistle of Paul to the Church of Corinth was occasioned by the need to mark out false apostles who were seducing and misleading some within the Church and who were transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:13). In reality, they were “deceitful workers” and ministers of Satan (2 Corinthians 11:15). As is so often the case, these false ministers sought to mislead the Church by attacking the character and credentials of a faithful minister, namely Paul. It would seem that they accused Paul and his fellow faithful ministers of walking “according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:2). To walk “according to the flesh” is to live like one who is unregenerate (“For they that are after [literally, “according to”] the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after [“according to”] the Spirit the things of the Spirit” Romans 8:5). Thus, the attack against Paul in this instance focused on Paul’s manner of life and practice of the truth in his life. These false apostles seemed to have focused on Paul’s providential delay in

coming to Corinth and alleging that Paul could not be trusted because he did not keep his word (2 Corinthians 1:17).

1. A word of admonition is in order here. Let us not fall into league with these false ministers who attacked the character of Paul, and find ourselves doing the same thing toward others on the flimsiest evidence, or here-say.

2. It is also a popular (but fleshly) method of seeking to discredit someone by using *ad hominem* arguments rather than addressing what is of substance and what can be proven by credible witnesses. You may be sure that the character of one is being assassinated when the steps of Matthew 18 are not followed, and you are privately given unsubstantiated testimony against a brother or sister, co-worker, or neighbor, and told to keep it to yourself. Dear ones, that is the way the ministers of Satan operate, not the way we who belong to Christ are to operate.

B. Paul responds to this baseless charge of walking “according to the flesh” by elevating the seriousness of the agenda of these false ministers by invoking the language of war, “For though we [i.e. the true apostles and faithful ministers of Christ] walk in the flesh [i.e. walk in these earthly mortal bodies], we do not war after the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3). Paul clearly sees the situation for what it really is: a war against the enemies of Christ. There is a war going on in the hearts of men and women who are enslaved by nature to do the will of the flesh and the will of the devil. And Paul conveys to us that this battle only intensifies when darkness is exposed by the light of the gospel in revealing to man his only hope of eternal salvation, Jesus Christ. Paul has in view the spiritual battle he is waging by means of the preaching of the gospel against the fortresses and citadels of the enemy. Those who are held captive to sin can only be set free by the gospel of Jesus Christ who by His life, death, and resurrection conquered the enemy for all who will trust Him.

1. Dear ones, the Christian life (and the advance of Christ’s Kingdom) is not just a walk, it is an all-out war for the lives and souls of people (including our own lives and souls). The moment we minimize what is going on in politics, in education, in science, in philosophy, in families, in the church, and in the in current events every day, we lull ourselves to sleep in regard to the actual battle that is being waged in this world between Christ and Satan. You will never take sin seriously in your life (or in the lives of others) if you do not see and understand the war that is being waged between the flesh and the Spirit of God, between Christ and the devil. Paul understood this battle, and stated that he did not fight this war “according to the flesh” (i.e. according to the wisdom of this world, according to all the self-help gurus, according to the vain philosophers of this world, or according to the limited and corrupted resources of this world).

2. Where do ministers turn so often when attendance falls? To the methods of the world to entertain the people in the pews with jokes, with bands, with worship teams, with this or that innovation or sales pitch to appeal to the masses. Where do husbands and wives turn so often when their marriage is on the rocks? To the godless foundations of secular counseling and therapy. Dear ones, in the difficulties that you face from day to day, where do you first turn? Remember that every trial, every hardship, every affliction you face, and where you first turn for help will demonstrate whether you are taking this spiritual war lightly and warring according to the flesh (with a mere earthly wisdom), or whether you are taking this war seriously and warring according to the Spirit (and looking to Christ’s heavenly wisdom found in Scripture).

C. Now that Paul has introduced the spiritual war that he (along with every faithful minister) is in, he instructs us in the weapons that alone are effective in pulling down the strongholds of this spiritual enemy that has built his dark fortresses in the proud thoughts and wicked minds of men who have only their own limited human resources upon which to draw (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). For mere carnal, earthly weapons will not by themselves overcome enemies that are not of flesh and blood—we must become proficient in putting on the spiritual armor purchased for us by Christ (Ephesians 6:10-18). Dear ones, although Paul has immediately in view these false apostles that were misleading the flock in Corinth, we need (by God’s abundant grace) to

put off the weapons of worldly wisdom and worldly resources in battling our sins, in battling all enemies to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and put on this spiritual armor and all the means of grace daily in order that we might trust in our greater David (the Lord Jesus Christ) to defeat all our Goliaths that we face. And even when we use the armor of God and the means of grace to war against our spiritual enemies, our trust is not in the armor or the means of grace, our trust is always in Christ who uses the armor and the means of grace to strengthen and encourage us to persevere in fighting our battles. He alone is our help, our defense, and our mighty warrior.

D. Now that we have an overview of what Paul (by the Holy Spirit) is teaching in this text, how is it used by Christian tolerationists to promote their erroneous view? Briefly, it is maintained by Christian tolerationists that it is not by force or coercion of the sword that the magistrate is to fight against idolaters, heretics, blasphemers, or Sabbath-breakers. According to Christian tolerationists, when warring against those who are guilty of religious sins and errors, the magistrate must sheath his sword in restraining all such sins and errors, and must rather realize that this is a spiritual battle that can only be won by the power of the gospel in changing the hearts and lives of wicked men.

E. In response, we grant that it is indeed a spiritual war that manifests itself in idolatry, heresy, blasphemy, and Sabbath-breaking. No disagreement there. We also agree that this spiritual battle can only be won in the lives of sinners by the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the gospel in transforming the hearts and lives of wicked men. And so, faithful Christian ministers ought to be invited by the State to preach the gospel and to instruct in godliness all those guilty of civil and religious crimes, just as faithful Christian ministers ought to likewise do in the Church with all those guilty of censurable sins and errors.

1. However, we also maintain, first of all, that God Himself has ordained the magistrate as His minister to use the sword (which represents all civil punishments from capital punishment to a fine and every punishment in between) in order to restrain the outbreak of various civil and religious crimes in the nation (Romans 13:4), just as Christ has ordained His ministers and elders to use the key of discipline to restrain the outbreak of various sins and errors in the Church (Matthew 18:15-20). If using any compulsory power to restrain evil is forbidden by 2 Corinthians 10:4 (as is alleged by some Christian tolerationists), then ministers and elders ought not to use suspension from the Lord's Supper or excommunication as a restraint to those in the Church to refrain from evil. For these censures are indeed compulsory ("if you do not forsake this sin or error, you will be censured"—that is the very nature of coercive or compulsory power in the church—it requires repentance, and if there is no repentance, it administers censures, and very severe censures). Thus, it cannot be maintained that Paul was forbidding the use of all compulsory power to restrain evil in the civil realm without likewise forbidding the use of all compulsory power to restrain evil in the ecclesiastical realm as well. The argument of the Christian tolerationist proves too much, and therefore proves nothing at all

2. Second, it is not only those who are guilty of religious crimes whose hearts need to be changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, but those also who are guilty of civil crimes, like murder, rape, child molestation, incest, theft, extortion, and libel. In other words, if the sword of the civil magistrate ought to be sheathed for all religious crimes because of the corruption within man that can only be overcome by the gospel of peace, then likewise the sword of the civil magistrate ought to be sheathed for all civil crimes as well because of the corruption within man that can only be overcome by the gospel of peace. Again, the argument of the Christian tolerationist proves too much, and therefore proves nothing at all.

3. Third, if it is a moral injustice for civil magistrates to use force to restrain idolatry, false religion, heresy, blasphemy, or Sabbath-breaking (as is alleged by Christian tolerationists), then it would follow that God must be accused (by Christian tolerationists) of being morally unjust. For it was God Himself who required civil magistrates to use their compulsory power to restrain and punish religious crimes (Deuteronomy 13:1-5); and it was God who used Gentile magistrates (not simply Jewish magistrates) and their compulsory power to restrain and punish those who committed religious crimes against Jehovah and the one true religion

revealed in Scripture (Darius in Ezra 6:11,12; Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:26; Ahasuerus in Esther 8:11; Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:29; and Darius in Daniel 6:26).

4. Fourth, if all compulsory power against religious sins and errors is unlawful and is resorting to carnal weapons to fight against spiritual enemies, then Jesus used carnal weapons when he made a whip, turned over the tables of the moneychangers, and drove them out of the temple as corrupters of God's house. Then Peter used carnal weapons when he was used of God in the slaying of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). Then Paul used carnal weapons when he smote Elymas, the false prophet, with blindness for being an enemy to the gospel (Acts 13:4-12). Dear ones, it should be clear that the use of compulsory force against religious crimes, sins, and errors, whether by civil magistrates (Jewish or Gentile), whether by Christ, or whether by the apostles is not a resorting to the use of carnal weapons to war against spiritual enemies, but is rather in ordinary or in extraordinary circumstances a lawful means to restrain the outward manifestation and spread of evil within society and within the Church.

5. Fifth, if it be maintained by Christian tolerationists that the civil magistrate cannot use his compulsory power against religious sins and errors because civil government is immediately ordained by God as Creator (in a state of nature) and not immediately ordained by Christ as Mediator (in a state of grace), then the same argument must also extend to the family which is also immediately ordained by God as Creator (in a state of nature). What Christian would say that a father has no compulsory power to restrain his children from manifest idolatry, blasphemy, or Sabbath-breaking? Then on what moral grounds can it be said that the civil father of a nation does not possess the same compulsory power and ought not lawfully to use it? Thus, it should be apparent to all that God has entrusted compulsory power to the State (in the form of the sword), to the family (in the form of the rod), and to the Church (in the form of the keys); and that all compulsory power is to be lawfully used to restrain sins and crimes against God (Commandments 1-4) as well as to restrain sins and crimes against our neighbor (Commandments 5-10).

II. A Biblical Examination of the Nature of Persecution.

A. What is persecution? Christian tolerationists would say that a civil magistrate who uses compulsory power against anyone for simply following his/her conscience in matters of religion is persecuting that person. For it is alleged that it is a God-given right for everyone to worship according to one's conscience, as long as they are peaceable toward others with whom they differ. According to this view, you may strongly disagree with the false religion practiced by your neighbor; you may even believe it is satanic. However, it is claimed that neither the magistrate nor anyone else can use compulsory power to restrain their alleged God-given right to practice their religion according to their own conscience without your own alleged right to practice your religion according to your conscience being at some time in the future subject to the same restraint and persecution by the compulsory power of the civil magistrate as well. There are a number of problems that need to be addressed here with this definition of persecution in this and in the following sermons.

B. As a Christian, we cannot allow the world through its vain, earthly wisdom to shape our understanding of what is persecution or what is a God-given right. If we do not in this discussion submit our minds, emotions, and will to the Triune God of the Bible and learn of His revealed will from a study of His Holy Word, we will be walking and warring according to the flesh rather than walking and warring according to the Spirit. Ironically, it is those who would use 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 to warrant the official toleration of all false religion and would call the sword of the civil magistrate a carnal weapon when used in matters of religion that are walking and warring according to the flesh and who are using the carnal weapon of mere human reason in this discussion about the nature of persecution. I do not want the world's definition of persecution as a Christian, I want God's definition of persecution. And the only infallible source to which we can turn is the

Bible. Thus, let us seek to know and obey God's authoritative will in this matter. Let us now proceed to distinguish a biblical view of persecution from a worldly view of persecution.

1. According to God's Holy Word, persecution can only be committed against those professing and practicing the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ revealed in the Bible. Turn with me to the words of Christ in Matthew 5:10-11, where we read, "Blessed are they which are persecuted **for righteousness' sake**: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely **for my sake**" (not for the sake of an erring conscience, nor for the sake of a false religion, nor for the sake of any sin or error, but for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the righteousness revealed as truth in God's Word). In other words, when one suffers for a false religion, for an erring conscience, for a sin or error that is contrary to the religion and truth of Christ as revealed in the Bible, he/she is not suffering persecution as defined by Jesus Christ.

a. The Greek word used by Christ for "persecution" in Matthew 5:10-11 is only used in the New Testament when one suffers for the cause of Christ, the gospel of Christ, the commandment of Christ, the doctrine of Christ, the truth of Christ, and the righteousness of Christ. Persecution can only be suffered by those who are professing and practicing the truth revealed in Scripture (1 Peter 4:14-16; 2 Timothy 3:12).

b. Many people may suffer for their erring conscience, for their false religion, or for some sin or error, yet that which they suffer from others in such cases is not persecution. Was it persecution when God commanded civil magistrates in the Bible to execute those who were guilty of religious crimes for leading God's people away from the one true God and religion and into a false religion (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)? Was it persecution when Elijah slew the false prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:40)? Was it persecution when Jesus used a whip and force to drive the money changers out of the temple, not once but twice (John 2:13-17; Matthew 21:12-13)? Was it persecution when Peter pronounced the death sentence over Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10)? Was it persecution when Paul blinded the false prophet, Elymas, who withstood the truth of the gospel (Acts 13:6-12)? None of these were examples of people suffering persecution (even if they suffered for the sake of an erring conscience), but rather were examples of the wicked suffering the righteous judgment of God for religious sins and errors committed against God and His truth.

2. A warning at this point. Although those who are in a false religion cannot be persecuted (because their suffering is not for the truth and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Scripture), those who are in a false religion may have force and violence unlawfully and wickedly used against them by the magistrate or by ordinary citizens in various cases (which will be discussed in another sermon). In other words, unlawful force against those in a false religion may involve an abuse of authority and tyranny, and it may involve a use of unlawful force or compulsory power by one not authorized to use it (even if the one using the force professes the one true religion of Jesus Christ). Dear ones, there are also standards of righteousness in God's Word that must be followed in the administration of justice even when one is guilty of a crime (whether a civil crime or a religious crime identified in Scripture). In a covenanted Christian society, due process of law and strict limitations on authority are not thrown out the window, but are carefully regulated by the justice and righteousness found in God's holy commandments. There will be more to come in a future sermon on these important matters.

3. Persecution is not limited to the use of physical force or violence, but persecution according to God may also involve threatening words, mocking, insulting, reproaching, and verbally attacking those who are professing and practicing the truth and righteousness of Christ as revealed in Scripture (Job 19:22,28; Jeremiah 17:15,18; Galatians 4:28-29). Smiting with the tongue may (according to God's Word) be persecution as well as smiting with the sword. But again it must be remembered that verbal persecution can only be committed against those who profess and practice the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. Thus, it is not persecution to speak against or to verbally smite false teachers for their

wickedness in leading souls away from the truth and righteousness of Christ. To the contrary, it is righteous and loving to issue such warnings. The Scripture is full of examples of such verbal smiting of false teachers, idolaters, and heretics (Matthew 23:13-33; Acts 8:20-24; 2 Corinthians 11:13-14; Revelation 2:6,15). It is not a hate crime (according to Christ), to say that you hate evil, that you hate false religion, that you hate heresy and blasphemy, any more than it is a hate crime to say that you hate murder, that you hate abortion, that you hate adultery, that you hate homosexuality, or that you hate incest. For we are to hate all evil (Psalm 45:7; Revelation 2:6) wherever it is found (beginning with the evil in our own lives), and we are to use our tongues to condemn evil and to warn the sheep of Christ. Once again, we must realize that there are righteous standards that must be followed with the use of our tongue even when speaking against evil. We may not be guilty of persecuting a false teacher in smiting him with our tongue, but we may be guilty of pride, arrogance, or personal vengeance, rather than being motivated out of love for Christ and His truth and righteousness. Our smiting with the tongue may also be used in order to draw attention to ourselves rather than to Christ.

4. The Christian tolerationist is revealed by the biblical definition of persecution to have adopted the vain wisdom of this world in usurping the authority of Christ by using a definition of persecution that is contrary to Christ's definition. The Christian tolerationist has also usurped the place of God in stating that every man has a "God-given right" to practice their religion (whatever it may be) according to his own conscience. Nowhere in the Bible has God granted to anyone "a right" to serve other gods, or to practice a false religion, or to sin against Him and His commandments. Finally, the Christian tolerationist will not likely be able to consistently apply his own principle against persecuting those in a false religion, for according to the Scripture, persecution also involves smiting with the tongue. So is the Christian tolerationist going to also refuse to personally speak against all false religion, or will he as a minister or elder refuse to speak against and smite with the tongue false teachers, idolaters, and heretics (as Christ and the apostles did)? God help us to war not with carnal weapons of worldly wisdom, but with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

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