

MESSIAH THE PRINCE,
Or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ.
By William Symington.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 30.

CHAPTER 9.
THE MEDIATORIAL DOMINION
OVER THE NATIONS.

(The Magistrate's Power *Circa Sacra*, Restraint, etc.)

The interposition of civil authority may be of service, in the way of restraining many things injurious to religion. This is confessedly a point of great delicacy; and to define the full extent to which the magistrate is entitled or bound to go, in this department, must be acknowledged to be a matter of no ordinary difficulty. On the general point, however, there is no difficulty at all. Because it is not easy, in every case, to describe exactly the limits of magistratical interference in the way of restraint, to conclude that the magistrate should not interfere in this way at all, is no better reasoning than it would be, to maintain that a father should have no manner of discipline in his family, because he may feel at a loss, in certain cases, to determine to what extent he should carry the restraints of parental authority. That restraint of some kind belongs to the civil ruler must be admitted. 'He is a revenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil' 'A wise king scattereth the wicked, and bringeth the wheel over them.' 'A king that sitteth in the throne of judgment scattereth away all evil with his eyes.' 'Governors are sent for the punishment of evil doers.' 'Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.'¹ ► Now, that the restraint of evils which affect the interests of religion should come within the province of the magistrate, might be inferred from the tendency of religion to benefit civil society, which, of course, supposes a tendency in irreligion to injure it. The Scriptures confirm this view. They furnish us with examples of pious kings, whose authoritative and judicial suppression of blasphemy, idolatry, and Sabbath profanation, are spoken of with manifest commendation, while others, for the neglect of this, are reproved. Take the case of king Asa, for instance. 'And Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God; for he took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and broke down the images, and cut down the groves; and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment. Also he took away, out of all the cities of Judah, the high places and the images, and the kingdom was quiet before him.' [2 Chron, 14.2-5.] The well-known words of Job shew the conviction that was entertained by that individual, apart altogether from the judicial institutes of the Jews, that idolatry was a fit object of civil restraint. 'If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness, and my heart hath been secretly enticed, or

1 Rom. 13.4; Prov. 20.26,28; 1 Pet. 2.14; Rom. 13.3.

my mouth hath kissed my hand; *this also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge*; for I should have denied the God that is above.’ [Job 31.26-28.] ► Gross blasphemy, profane swearing, open idolatry, and desecration of the Lord’s day, are legitimate objects of magistratical interference; not merely as things hurtful to the commonwealth, and offensive to a majority of the members of society, but as injurious to religion, and highly displeasing to the Almighty. It is altogether out of the question to suppose that ‘the minister of God,’ in using his influence to put a stop to such iniquities, is to lay aside all regard to the glory of God, and to restrict himself to a low motive of political expediency. The thing is impossible. What is it that renders it politically expedient to restrain such evils, but that they are calculated to bring evil upon the community? And how is it that they bring evil upon the community, but by incurring the displeasure of God, and provoking him to visit them with providential rebukes? It is, as offences against religion, and on religious as well as political grounds, therefore, that the magistrate can alone interpose in cases of this kind. The manner in which the offences are to be met, and the degree of restraint which it may be necessary to exercise in particular cases, are matters in which great prudence and discretion will be required. Whether it may be proper to inflict civil pains, or to interpose only civil disabilities, or perhaps to exercise forbearance, must depend upon the nature and degree of the offences; and the determination of these points must be left to the judgment of the framers and executors of the constitution and laws. *Wisdom is profitable to direct.* [Eccl. 10.10.]

It is vain to say, in reply to all this, that civil interference cannot promote inward reverence of God’s name, or the spirituality of his worship, or the internal sanctification of his holy day. We know that it cannot. But it is not these things we are speaking of. We are speaking of overt acts of profanity, impiety, and immorality. And, although the authority of the civil magistrate cannot promote the former, it is fully within its power to restrain the latter, and, by so doing, to confer no mean benefit both on society at large and on the church. Nor will it do to plead, in opposition to what we have here advanced, that it interferes with liberty of conscience. The conscience has no inherent absolute rights; all the liberty it possesses is conferred upon it by God; and it is utterly absurd to suppose that any man possesses from God a right to blaspheme his name, to worship an idol, or to profane his sacred day. As well might a man claim a right to murder, to commit adultery, or to steal, if only his conscience might permit or prompt him to perpetrate such atrocities. Were civil authority interposed, for the purpose of enforcing on men the profession of certain principles, or the observance of certain forms of worship, or of compelling them to wait on public ordinances on the Sabbath, there might be some ground for complaint on the score of violating the rights of conscience. But the restraint of gross and open acts of irreligion and ungodliness is quite a different thing, and can afford no legitimate ground for such an objection.

A nation may promote the interests of religion by contributing pecuniary support.² For the erection of places of worship, for the maintenance of ministers, and for providing the elements requisite in the administration of at least one of the ordinances, the church must have

2 The author refers to Birks, pp. 404-407.

emoluments. Now, a nation, as such, not only may, but ought to interest itself in providing these supplies. That there was a legal provision for similar purposes, under the Law, will be admitted. In what it consisted we wait not now to inquire. Neither do we wait to discuss, whether a nation ought to interfere in this matter, by direct legal assessment, or only by giving encouragement to voluntary liberality. All that we insist upon is, the obligation of a nation to interfere, some way or other. We observe, that there was once an ample legal provision for religion, which was collected according to law, and could not be withheld by any one, without violating the commandment of God, incurring the divine displeasure, and subjecting to civil coercion.³ ► Now, why should not something of the same kind exist in New Testament times? Has God forbidden it? Shew us the prohibition. God has, it is true, ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel, and that he that is taught in the Word should communicate to him that teacheth in all good things. But is the teacher to go forth only among such as are able and willing to pay? Is he not also to go forth, among those who have as yet no relish for his spiritual communications, and who, consequently, cannot be expected to contribute for what they have yet to learn to appreciate? How is he to subsist, till his labours have been blessed for the conversion of a number sufficient to support him? And, supposing the teacher supported, how is the place of worship to be provided? By the voluntary contributions, do you say, of such as have already felt the power of divine truth? Not to say that most of these have enough to do with themselves, does not this suppose religion to have been formerly introduced, and to have taken root to some extent in the land? thus shifting the difficulty only a step farther back, where it meets us again with all its force.

It is insisted upon, that it is a *privilege*, as well as a duty, for the people to support religion themselves, and that legal support goes to deprive them of this privilege. Sure we are that the apostle Paul had no such transcendental view of Christian privilege; for, so far from thinking that he had done wrong, in preaching the Gospel freely to the Corinthians, he boldly vindicates his conduct: ‘Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the Gospel of God freely? When I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man. In all things I have kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself.’ [2 Cor. 11.7,9.] Is it still contended that the Scripture rule is, that those who receive the benefit of the Gospel shall contribute to the support of the Gospel? Be it so. And does the nation derive no benefit from the existence of religious institutions in a land? —If, after all, taking refuge in a word, it is insisted upon that the support of religion must be voluntary, we ask what should hinder it to be both legal and voluntary too? ► May not a thing be legal and voluntary at the same time? Everything that is *legal* is not necessarily *compulsory*, as everything that is *voluntary* is not necessarily *optional*. [Birks, p. 482.] We do many things voluntarily every day, which it is not optional with us, as far as law and obligation are concerned, whether we shall do them or not. A legal assessment for the support of religion, it is easy to see, may be rendered compulsory, by those who ought to pay it voluntarily and cheerfully refusing to do so. But on whom, in this case, is the evil of compulsion to be

3 Num. 18.26; 1 Sam. 8.15; 2 Chron. 31.4,5; Neh. 10.32; 13.10, &c.

charged? Why dwell, however, on such points as these? To what object, we ask, can the resources of a nation be, not only more harmlessly, but more profitably applied, than the maintenance and diffusion of that religion which exalteth a nation, and which is at once the glory and safety of a land? Shall countless sums be lavished on wars, and bridewells, and prisons, and penitentiaries, and all the machinery of legal, judicial, and police establishments, for the detection and punishment of crime; and shall not a single farthing be given from the public purse for the support of those religious institutions, the due administration of which is calculated to effect the suppression of crime of every name, and thus, not only to advance the comfort of the community, but to save the expenditure of the national funds?⁴ ► Nay, do not the predictions which refer to the diffusion of Christ's kingdom in New Testament times, make mention expressly of the pecuniary contributions of persons in authority in their official character? 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring *presents*: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer *gifts*. He shall live, and to him shall be given of the *gold* of Sheba.—The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising—they shall bring *gold* and incense, and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord. Surely the isles will wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far, their *silver* and their *gold* with them, unto the name of the Lord thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.' [Psalm 72.10,15; Isa. 60.3,6,9.]⁵

Thus do we see the benefit which a nation, as such, has it in its power to confer on the church. This may be deemed a sufficient answer to those who would represent all national

4 In the second edition the author inserts here the following passage from the Hon. and Rev. Baptist Noel's *Letter to Lord Melbourne*, p. 34:—'A body of faithful Christian ministers, whether in the establishment or out of it, are the means of diffusing religion throughout the land. By thus implanting in men's minds the fear and love of God, they dry up the sources of crime, diminish the cost of gaols and hulks, of convict ships and penal settlements, sweeten social life, discountenance fraud, condemn oppression, and lay solidly the foundation of all national prosperity. A grant, therefore, for the erection of new churches by increasing the number of such ministers, would lessen the labours of the police, support the magistracy, uphold the laws, and tend to perpetuate sobriety, good order, industry, wealth, and contentment in the whole nation. That grant refused, the legislature will consign a dense population to religious ignorance,—with the full and certain knowledge that, by the operation of its own laws, by the force of circumstances which it has itself created, they are prevented from being otherwise instructed. It will then doom them to the influence of gin and Sunday newspapers, of vice and ungodliness, of revolutionary orators and furious demagogues. It will provide policemen to apprehend them, gaols to shut them up, ships to transport them, and soldiers to shoot and sabre them when necessary; but it will give them no instructors. It will raise the most costly apparatus to punish them, if criminal, but will not devote a farthing to render them virtuous.'

5 Those who knew the author could not mistake the reference of this passage to be purely theoretical. For the sake of others, it may be said that no one stood more thoroughly aloof from any gifts of the state which involved compromise of the church's purity and freedom; no one rejoiced with more enthusiasm in the great Act by which state support was relinquished in 1843; and no one more earnestly and intelligently taught those principles of Christian giving which are embodied in such books as *Gold and the Gospel*. The conclusion of this chapter sufficiently indicates what the author's position was as to any practical connexion with the existing state.—EDITOR. [AMS].

interference with religion as calculated only to injure it. To say that it is capable of being abused, is only what may be said of the very best things that exist. That it has never been abused, we have no design to maintain. But that such interposition of the civil power, as we have supposed, must necessarily tend to secularise and corrupt the religion of Christ we cannot admit. Many, we are firmly persuaded, practise deceit upon themselves here, by confounding the *state* and the *world* with one another. The world of the ungodly, which is the kingdom of Satan, is confounded with civil society, which is the moral ordinance of God: and, because all connexion of the church with the former cannot but injure her, it is concluded that so must all connexion with the latter. ► But merely to name the distinction between the *state* and the *world*, is all that is necessary to detect the fallacy. Civil society and the church of Christ, being both ordinances of God, can have no *necessary* tendency to corrupt each other, but must be capable of dwelling together in friendly co-operation, and of exerting a mutually beneficial influence. And, as for the case of Constantine, so frequently and so vauntingly brought forward in support of the opposite opinion, who does not know that the corruptions which were brought to light at the period in question, had been long before in operation, and that the more flagrant of them proceeded from the excess of that very principle which is contended for, in opposition to all legal recognition of religion?

But, it may be asked, does not such a connexion as that contended for, tend to confound church and state, to blend in confusion things that are essentially distinct? By no means. Our argument, not only is consistent with, but necessarily supposes, an essential distinction between the two. But *distinction* does not necessarily imply *hostility*. Things may be *diverse* without being *adverse*. ‘That civil society and ecclesiastical society differ, we admit;—they differ in their immediate origin, objects, and ends; in their form of administration; in the light in which they regard their subjects; and in the character of the effects they respectively produce. But they are not, on this account, necessarily opposed to each other. On the contrary, there are many things in which they agree;—they agree in their original author, God; in the rule and standard of their administration, the Word of God; in their ultimate end, the glory of God; and in their subjection to the Messiah. They are, therefore, capable of existing in close combination, without being confounded. The church and the state were always distinct; yet we know that once they existed together in perfect harmony, without confusion: so that the objection in question is at variance as much with fact as with the very nature of the respective societies themselves.’⁶

6 ‘It is not true, though it has been often recklessly affirmed by the opponents of establishments, that under the former economy the church and the state were blended together. A most obvious distinction was marked between them. The church was not the nation, nor was the nation the church. Each had its distinct rulers, courts, laws, subjects, penalties, and duration. Moses and his successors were the rulers in the state; Aaron and his successors rulers in the church. The church had her courts of the synagogue and ecclesiastical sanhedrim; the state, those of the gate and the civil sanhedrim. The ceremonial laws were those of the church; the judicial those of the state. Civil and religious privileges were not necessarily extended to the same persons. Proselytes might be members of the church without participating in the privileges of the state; whilst, on the other hand, scandalous offenders against the ceremonial and the moral law, permitted to enjoy civil rights, were

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Discussion Questions:

1. Having finished discussion focused specifically on the Sabbath, how else does Dr. Symington say that civil authority may be useful for the cause of religion?

A. It may be useful “in the way of restraining many things injurious to religion.”

2. When reasoning that the magistrate should restrain evils that affect religion, because religion tends to be a benefit to society, and irreligion a harm to society, is there something more from Scripture itself which may be presented to verify the argument?

A. The examples of pious kings who authoritatively suppressed blasphemy, idolatry, and Sabbath profanation, and were commended in Scripture for their efforts.

3. What will be required to answer each question about the manner in which irreligious offenses are to be met by the magistrate, and the degree of restraint which will be proper for him to exercise?

A. “Great prudence and discretion will be required.” (Which may also be the case in other matters.)

4. Why is it absurd to reason from the individual man’s liberty of conscience, to a conclusion that the magistrate should not exercise restraint in matters of religion?

A. Because all the liberty which the conscience possesses is given by God himself, and he has given no right to blaspheme his name, worship idols, etc.

5. How else may a nation promote the interests of religion?

A. “A nation may promote the interests of religion by contributing pecuniary support.” Dr. Symington suggests this may be done for building places of worship, for maintaining ministers, and for providing the elements required for at least one of the ordinances.

6. When considering the commission of the teachers of religion, what makes it necessary that at least in some cases their support would come from others than those among whom they labor?

A. Christ sends his laborers not only to those are able and willing to support them, but to those who are not yet willing, and also to those who are not able to do so.

7. What are the ideal qualities of man’s support-for-religion which are pleaded as incompatible with any public support for religion? and what opposite quality is opposed by those who reject the policy?

A. It is argued that it should be thought of as a privilege rather than a duty; and as something voluntary rather than compulsory.

8. What responses are offered by Dr. Symington to dismiss the mistaken dichotomies behind this?

A. (1) It deprives of privilege no more than Paul’s policy, 2 Cor. 11.7,9. And (2) Everything that is legal is not necessarily compulsory, just as everything that is voluntary is not necessarily optional.

9. What prophecies from Scripture (or examples from Scripture or history) can be cited as putting such support for religion in a better light as what is good and hopeful?

A. Prophecies in Psalm 72.10,15; Isa. 60.3,6,9. Scripture History in Ezra 7.12,15,16, etc.; Luke 7.2,4,5.

nevertheless debarred from the fellowship of the church. A distinction was marked, too, in respect of penalties. Those of the church were purely ecclesiastical, as casting out of the synagogue; those of the state extended to fine, and even to death. In short, the distinction between the Jewish church and state is obviously marked in their respective duration. The latter ended when it became a province of Rome; the former subsisted and retained its ecclesiastical character, down to the destruction of the temple, and the scattering abroad of the Jewish people among all nations.’—*Mackray’s Defence of Civil Establishments*, p. 53.