

An Ancient Rabbi Brings an Urgent Warning to Christian Leaders Today

In the year A.D. 123, the Roman government launched a severe crackdown against the Jews, culminating in 134 A.D., when all Jewish practices were forbidden, including circumcision, Torah study and Sabbath observance.

How did the rabbis respond?

One of the noted leaders of that day, Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradyon, conducted public Torah classes, paying for it with his life.

But this was no emotional, spur-of-the-moment decision. There was a rationale behind his actions, traceable to Rabbi Akiva, the greatest rabbinic sage of that era, also martyred for his allegiance to the Torah.

The Talmud relates: "Once the wicked Roman government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus ben Judah came by and, upon finding Rabbi Akiva publicly holding sessions in which he occupied himself with the Torah, Pappus asked him: 'Akiva, are you not afraid of the government?'

"Rabbi Akiva replied: 'You, Pappus, who are said to be wise, are in fact a fool. I can explain what I am doing by means of a parable: A fox was walking on a river bank and, seeing fishes hastening here and there, asked them, "From whom are you fleeing?" They replied, "From the nets and traps set for us by men." So the fox said to them, "How would you like to come up on dry land, so that you and I may live together the way my ancestors lived with yours?" They replied, "You—the one they call the cleverest of animals—are in fact a fool. If we

are fearful in the place where we can stay alive, how much more fearful should we be in a place where we are sure to die!"

"So it is with us. If we are fearful when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, 'For that is thy life and the length of thy days' (Deut. 30:20), how much more fearful ought we to be should we cease the study of words of the Torah!" (see b. Berakhot 61b with Eyn Yaakov)

There is a lesson here for us today, especially those of us in Christian leadership. I pray that we will take heed!

You see, for years we have made careful calculations, not wanting to rock the boat, not wanting to offend our constituents, not wanting to stir up controversy, not wanting to provoke the ire of our ideological enemies. And outwardly, it appeared that our "tiptoe through the culture wars" strategy was succeeding, as our church buildings were full and our bank accounts overflowing.

But all the while, we were selling our souls, losing our lives to save our lives, denying the calling of the Lord to preserve our reputations. And now we are paying the price, with our religious freedoms being threatened and with some dangerous, uncharted waters ahead should Hillary Clinton be elected.

A Christian leader might protest and say, "You have it all wrong. If things get really rough, then we'll take a stand. When we're truly threatened with the loss of our freedoms, then we'll be courageous."

That, my friend, is a self-deceived mindset, like a morbidly obese man who says, "It's true that I can't get up the stairs without losing my breath, but if I need to run up those stairs, I'll be ready."

Not a chance.

As the Lord said to Jeremiah the prophet when he was complaining about the tough times he was experiencing in his hometown of Anathoth, "If you race with the foot-runners and they exhaust you, how then can you compete with horses? If you are secure only in a tranquil land, how will you fare in the jungle of the Jordan?" (Jer. 12:5, New Jewish Publication Society Version).

To apply this to us in America now, if we're afraid to speak up today because someone will unfriend us on Facebook, what will we do tomorrow when someone puts a gun to our heads? (That gun could be metaphorical or real.)

If we won't take a stand today for fear of losing some wealthy congregants, what will we do tomorrow when obedience to God will cost us our tax exemption?

If, in our Christian schools today, we won't address cultural controversies for fear of offending some board members (or drawing the attention of the local accrediting association), what will we do tomorrow when refusing to compromise could mean the complete shutting down of our schools, along with a possible prison sentence?

People of God, it's time for us to wake up. Do you sense the Lord stirring your heart?

If Donald Trump is our next president, he might well stand up for our religious liberties, helping to push back against the anti-Christian spirit rising in our land. But if we don't seize the moment and come out of our self-imposed closets, speaking the truth with boldness and love, a far worse fate will come upon us.

And if Hillary Clinton is our next president, you can be sure you will be in her crosshairs.

What will we do then?

Will we cave in and capitulate, claiming in our pseudo-spiritual language that, "The culture wars are over and God just wants to love others"?

Or will we demonstrate real love for God and our neighbor by declaring with Paul, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death"? (Phil. 1:20, NIV, and note that he wrote this from prison, facing potential martyrdom).

Now is the time to read the stories of men and women of God from past generations (and to this day) who refused to bow down to the gods of this age, laying down their lives rather than denying their Lord.

Now is the time for us to take a determined, uncompromised stand—while it is still light and while the door is still open—before we hang our heads in shame when our kids and grandkids ask us, "What were you afraid of? Why were you so silent? Why did you let this happen to us?"

I'm not counseling anyone to do anything foolish—to provoke some kind of religious conflict or to engage in self-righteous, obnoxious behavior or to respond in a fleshly, emotional way.

Instead, I'm urging each of us (in particular those of us in leadership), to do what is right today, to stand for what is true regardless of cost or consequences, walking in the footsteps of Jesus our Lord.

As He warned us repeatedly, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35, ESV).

It's time we find out exactly what He meant, before the spirit of the world entices us out of our element (like that fox enticing the fish), thereby leading us to our spiritual

graves.

In short, to compromise is to shrivel up and die; to obey the Lord at any cost is to flourish and thrive. What will we do?

Let us heed the wisdom of an ancient rabbi, and let us shout our message from the rooftops, without shame and without fear.

And let us remember again the words of Jesus, who said, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38, ESV).

It's time that the whole world know that we are not ashamed.