

Michael Brown Asks, 'Can Christians Handle Political Power?'

It's the perennial question going back to Constantine in the fourth century of this era. How much power can Christians handle? Put another way, are we better off when we are the persecuted minority or the empowered majority?

One of my friends, who lived in Israel for 16 years, was speaking with an Iranian Christian leader. He asked him, "Would you like to go back to the days of the Shah, when Christians had full religious liberty?"

The Iranian friend replied, "Absolutely not. The church is thriving now under Islamic persecution and growing like never before. We're actually praying for more persecution."

Yet in past centuries, the church in parts of the Middle East and Northern Africa was almost entirely wiped out by fierce Islamic persecution. Historian John Phillip Jenkins wrote an entire book on the subject titled, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died*. Certainly, for those Christians, persecution brought more death than growth.

But perhaps we're looking at this in too extreme forms.

What about here in America? Does the church do better with persecution (as limited as it may be, comparatively speaking) or with prosperity? Do we pray more, witness more and work harder for change when we have hostile administrations in power or friendly administrations in power? Do we look to God more when the government is against us and look to Him less when the government is for us?

Going back to the days of Constantine, Gene Edward Veith wrote, "The Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 legalized Christianity. Toleration of this new faith in Rome was not a gradual development. It happened suddenly, right after some of the most brutal persecutions of Christians. Soon, Roman officials were kissing the broken hands of Christian confessors whom they had tortured. Quickly, paganism faded as the official religion of the Roman Empire, only to be replaced by the Christian church. Christianity, once despised and persecuted, emerged from the catacombs in triumph. Whereupon its problems really began."

The great Methodist leader John Wesley saw things in similar terms, stating in one of his sermons, "Persecution never did, never could, give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love, which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true religion, was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians; more especially upon the Clergy."

And it was largely downhill from there, according to Wesley.

But Veith had more to say, explaining, "With the legalization of the church, Christianity under Constantine began to exert a positive moral influence upon a Rome that had become decadent." Yes, "women were terribly oppressed and misused under paganism, and it was Christianity that liberated them. ... The bloody spectator sport of watching gladiators kill each other was halted. Provision was made to care for widows and orphans, the sick and the poor."

Isn't this both positive and Christian, a cause for rejoicing rather than mourning?

The real issue, in Veith's view, was this: "But not only did

the church begin to influence the culture; the culture began to influence the church.”

That has been the challenge ever since (really, as long as God has singled out a people for Himself on the earth): Will the people of God change the culture, or will the culture change the people of God?

Wesley encountered a similar difficulty when preaching the gospel to drunkards and gamblers and others who were irresponsible with their money. When they were truly converted, they became hardworking and responsible, and they began to make more money. Then they became more worldly and less spiritual.

As Wesley remarked toward the end of his life, “I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long.”

On the other hand, financial provision can be a great blessing from God. We can help the poor and needy. We can support world missions. We can engage in all kinds of humanitarian efforts. We can provide for our own families. We can lend and give without having to borrow or beg. This is certainly positive. What, then, is the solution?

Some Christian leaders have argued that, for all of Wesley’s brilliance, he missed the simple answer here—namely, stewardship. If we could learn to be good stewards, we could be trusted with more money. Then, rather than money dominating our lives, it would simply be a tool in the service of others.

Could it be the same thing when it comes to political power?

On the one hand, it is a fatal mistake to put our trust in a political leader (or even a political system), as if our help

or deliverance could come from that leader (or system), or as if the political realm could advance righteousness or change hearts. During the Trump administration, this is something some of us addressed time and again (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#).)

On the other hand, we are instructed to pray for the salvation of our leaders (see 1 Tim. 2:1-4), meaning that having a godly leader is better than having an ungodly leader. And isn't it positive when the gospel spreads through a country, resulting in more genuine conversions and a higher percentage of the population following the Lord? How could that not be good?

Yet it seems that whenever we do have a sympathetic president, we tend to rely on that person to do our job. We also give the larger society the impression that we are trying to "take over" and impose our values by legal fiat. Worse still, we often become better known for our association with that leader than for association with the Lord.

What, then, should we do?

First, pastors and leaders must continually emphasize the priority of the gospel, keeping our focus on being disciples and making disciples. That can never change, regardless of who controls the government. The Great Commission must always come first.

Second, we must never cease praying for revival and awakening, never cease preaching repentance, never cease addressing the moral evils of the day. Surely change in these areas must come from the grass roots up.

Third, we must be known as servants in our communities, as those who lead the way in doing good, as people who care. Let us be known for our love.

Fourth, to the extent Christian leaders have open doors to minister to political leaders, they should try to influence

them behind closed doors rather than on a stage for the world to see. Billy Graham had access to numerous presidents but was largely perceived as being non-partisan. When the world sees us as an appendage to a political party, we have compromised our testimony.

Fifth, we should pray for political leaders who can model gospel principles in their conduct. They can be fearless, strong, uncompromising and firm without being nasty and mean-spirited. They can be gracious and decent human beings without being wimps. This, too, can have a positive impact on the larger culture.

In my personal opinion, we Christian conservatives did very poorly under the Trump administration, when we had so much favor, being better known as Trump supporters than as Jesus followers. Now, perhaps as a result of that, we have a hostile administration in power. Can we do better the next time around with a friendly administration in power?

God help us if we do not. {eo}