

Comments on John 18:36 by J. C. Ryle

"My Kingdom is Not of This World"

But our Lord did not intend to teach that the kings of this world have nothing to do with religion, and ought to ignore God altogether in the government of their subjects. No such idea, we may be sure, was in His mind. He knew perfectly well that it was written, "By Me kings reign" (Prov. viii. 15), and that kings are as much required to use their influence for God, as the meanest of their subjects. He knew that the prosperity of kingdoms is wholly dependent on the blessing of God, and that kings are as much bound to encourage righteousness and godliness, as to punish unrighteousness and immorality. To suppose that He meant to teach Pilate that, in His judgment an infidel might be as good a king as a Christian, and a man like Gallio as good a ruler as David or Solomon, is simply absurd.

Let us carefully hold fast the true meaning of our Lord's words in these latter days. Let us never be ashamed to maintain that no Government can expect to prosper which refuses to recognise religion, which deals with its subjects as if they had no souls, and cares not whether they serve God, or Baal, or no God at all. Such a Government will find, sooner or later, that its line of policy is suicidal, and damaging to its best interests. No doubt the kings of this world cannot make men Christians by laws and statutes. But they can encourage and support Christianity, and they will do so if they are wise. The kingdom where there is the most industry, temperance, truthfulness, and honesty, will always be the most prosperous of kingdoms. The king who wants to see these things abound among his subjects, should do all that lies in his power to help Christianity and to discourage irreligion.

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The following leading principles are worth remembering...

1. Every Government is responsible to God, and no Government can expect to prosper without God's blessing. Every Government therefore is bound to do all that lies in its power to obtain God's favour and blessing. The Government that does not strive to promote true religion, has no right to expect God's blessing.
2. Every good Government should endeavour to promote truth, charity, temperance, honesty, diligence, industry, chastity among its subjects. True religion is the only root from which these things can grow. The Government that does not labour to promote true religion cannot be called either wise or good.
3. To tell us that a Government must leave religion alone, because it cannot promote it without favouring one Church more than another, is simply absurd. It is equivalent to saying that, as we cannot do good to everybody, we are to sit still and do no good at all.
4. To tell us that no Government can find out what true religion is, and that consequently a Government should regard all religions with equal indifference, is an argument only fit for an infidel. In England at any rate a belief that the Bible is true is a part of the Constitution; an insult to the Bible is a punishable offence, and the testimony of an avowed atheist goes for nothing in a court of law.
5. It is undoubtedly true that Christ's kingdom is a kingdom independent of the rulers of this world, and one which they can neither begin, increase, nor overthrow. But it is utterly false that the rulers of this world have nothing to do with Christ's kingdom, may safely leave religion entirely alone, and may govern their subjects as if they were beasts and had no souls at all.