That Strange Covenanter Conviction

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REV. FRANK H. LATHOM

One evening in the fall of 1928 there came a knock at my front door. It proved to be a man working in the interest of the Republican party trying to get Herbert Hoover elected as president of the United States and Alfred E. Smith, then governor of New York, defeated. He said it was a great moral issue and every Christian ought to vote, but he had been to some of the members of my church and they had told him they were not going to vote. One member had said he was less tempted to vote after hearing a sermon that his pastor had preached recently. The Republican leader wanted to know what was said in that sermon that would keep any one from voting. He was told in a brief way and although not changed in his own convictions he said he at least would not urge Covenanters to vote. This is a synopsis of that sermon.

You know Christ one time said that all authority was given unto him in heaven and on earth. Every person that bears the name Christian says he believes that. It is a familiar text, one that is often quoted, and one of the few that is generally accepted by Christian churches everywhere.
We believe the sign that was placed over the head of Christ when he hung upon the cross saying, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." We also believe that John's vision was correct when he saw Jesus crowned with many crowns, and on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of kings, and Lord of lords. It was because of Christ's kingship that he was able to say to his disciples, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to obey all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

We as Christians say we believe that passage. That is why we are in existence and aggressive today. If it were not for that text we would have no authority for doing Christ's work; no authority for preaching; no authority for sending out missionaries. We must have an authority for everything we do, whether it be religious or otherwise. Some authorities are higher than others. For instance, you may be an authority in your home but the moment you step out into the street, you are subject to the town authorities. The town in turn is under the authority of the State and the State under the Federal government. The Federal government gets its authority from the Constitution. Nor does the process stop there. The Constitution must have some source of authority and naturally you would expect it to go right on up and recognize the Supreme Ruler of the universe as its source of authority, but alas, it goes clear back to the beginning and places its authority on "We The People."

Now what do "we the people" propose to do? First, to form a more perfect union. The union is vital to the life of this nation. Without it we would not be a nation. Thus to form a more perfect union means to form a more perfect nation. But who has the power to make nations? God is the only one who has done that so far. He alone could say to Abraham, "I will make of thee a great nation."

Again, "we the people" propose to establish justice. But God says, "By me kings rule and princes decree justice." Where does any nation get its right to administer justice? God is the only source of true justice so what can we expect of a nation that disregards this source? If you think this country is getting along all right without recognizing the supreme Judge of all the earth, read what some of the foremost lawyers have to say about American justice.

Also, "we the people" propose to insure domestic tranquility. Is that in the providence of man? Can any man do that without divine aid? In Job we read, "When he giveth quietness who then can make trouble?" We had a lesson along this line in the Civil War. We had to appeal to God to settle it. Abraham Lincoln and Congress both appealed to a Higher Power.
Why did they not go back and appeal to “we the people” as a last resort?

As supreme authority of this land “we the people” propose to provide for national defense. But God turns the nations as rivers of water. He is the one that smites the Syrians in the night and puts to flight the armies of the aliens. It is only under His wings that nations find protection.

Then “we the people” are going to promote the general welfare of our country. And on what does the general welfare of the country depend? Not the next President of the United States: not the next political party that gets in power; it depends upon the soil and the crops, the sunshine, the rain and the snow. Who determines these things? Man cannot even predict them certainly. At the close of that extraordinary impromptu speech which Paul made at Lystra, when the people were about to sacrifice to him and Barnabas, he said of the living God, “who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” “It is God that giveth the increase.”

The last statement in the preamble of the Constitution, “we the people” propose to secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and to our prosperity. Again may we ask, what is the groundwork of liberty?

Christ says, “ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” Again he says, “I am the truth.” What can we expect in the way of liberty when we disregard the true source of liberty?

Any one reading the above statements would probably think we were very much opposed to the present Constitution. On the contrary we believe it to be one of the greatest documents ever written. However we also believe that the makers of the Constitution left out one thing that was most important. They forgot to recognize in that great document the Sovereign of the universe. Nor was this merely an oversight. At the very crises of the constitutional convention, the venerable Franklin, then eighty-one years of age, the oldest member of the convention, made a wonderful speech in which he said he believed the reason they were making such slow progress was because of the imperfection of human understanding. They had searched all history for political wisdom and searching as they were in the dark had not once thought of appealing to the Father of lights to illuminate their understanding. He went on to show that when they were in the contest with Great Britain and sensible of danger they met in that same room for prayer and those prayers were answered. He asked if they had forgotten that great Friend or if they imagined they no longer needed his assistance. Then he said, “I have lived, sir, a long time and the longer I live the more convincing proof I see...”
of this truth; that God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it possible an empire can arise without his aid?"

"We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings that 'except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel."

With this speech Franklin made a plea that they henceforth have prayer every morning before proceeding to business and that they call in one or two of the clergymen of that city to officiate in that service.

Then it was that young Alexander Hamilton, only thirty years of age, one of the youngest members of the convention, arose and commenced a high-strung eulogy on the assemblage of wisdom, talent, and experience which the convention embraced. He said he was confidently of the opinion that they were competent to transact the business which had been intrusted to their care, and that they were equal to every exigency which might occur; and concluded by saying that therefore he did not see any need of calling in foreign aid.

If we trust Madison's very accurate notes Benjamin Franklin's plea was unheeded and the convention was adjourned for a recess of several days. It seemed to be another case of accepting the young man's advice instead of the old man's.

Several reasons have been given why the plea was unheeded. Some say they were afraid if the public found out they were resorting to prayer, it might cause undue alarm. Others say that the convention funds were too low at the time to pay the small fee of the clergyman. Still others say that since the whole work of the assembly was done in secret they were afraid to bring in any one from the outside for fear their secrets would get out. Another writer says perhaps they went on the theory that God helps them that help themselves, but that is not Scripture. To us it seems the Evil One must have gotten in his master stroke.

At any rate, we know that the Constitution as it comes to us differs from all the other documents written in America up until that time. All the colonial charters and State constitutions at least mentioned the great Governor of the world. The Declaration of Independence speaks of being endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights and appeals to the God of nature. The Articles of Confederation, which form the groundwork for the Constitution, made mention of the great Governor of the world. Yet for all this our own Constitution is absolutely without God and there is no getting around it. In theory it may not be, and that is all that has saved us thus far, but in reality it is and that is what is going to count in the long run.
Plato said, "the state is but the individual writ large." We think of nations as individuals, have even given some of them nicknames and call the United States Uncle Sam and Great Britain John Bull. Uncle Sam and John Bull and all the other nations choose their religion the same as you and I. There is no such thing as neutrality in religion. Not that every individual in the nation has to accept the religion of the nation; we might harbor people of different religious beliefs in our homes without making them conform to our religious beliefs. Christianity is the most tolerant religion on earth. It rules by love and not by force. So far our nation has tried to recognize all religions but in so doing has recognized none. We as Christians like to think of our nation as being Christian, but as far as our Constitution is concerned, it is no more Christian than any unbeliever.

We do not claim that the simple recognition of Christ in the Constitution would solve all our problems. Law will do some things but not everything. Edmund Burke spoke well when he said, "You cannot make men moral by act of parliament." Yet along with this it is well to add the words of Gladstone, "The object of law should be to make it as hard as possible to do wrong and as easy as possible to do right."

We must get on the right basis before we can expect any great good to come.

Under the present Constitution we have no authority to urge moral reforms. We have no authority for putting the Bible into public schools. As for complaining about political candidates for the presidency one man has just as much right to the office as another, religiously Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, unbeliever, or what not, we have absolutely no ground for opposing any man to any office because of his religion. In 1928 one of the candidates for president was a Catholic. Many Protestants became alarmed for fear he would be elected. Just why get alarmed over that? We have already had a Unitarian as President and there is nothing to keep us from having an atheist for President in the next election, if enough people in this land want one. The oath to office does not mean a thing except for evil-minded, ungodly men to laugh at as a bit of red-tape. As far as our Constitution is concerned the atheists are backed up in their threat to take down the cross from above the American flag, to stop the bootlegging of religion into the public schools, as they call it, to do away with public chaplains, stop government officials from issuing religious proclamations and erase the superstitious inscription that defaces our coins.

A year or two ago there appeared an article in the Forum Magazine making all manner of fun of the late William Jennings Bryan for trying to get God recognized in the Constitution. From that
the author went on to ridicule the idea of the Bible in the public school. It was an article that ought to make American Christians blush with shame and yet the author had the Constitution to back him in all that he said.

What can we ever hope to do to Christianize the nation when we leave Christ out of the supreme law where he belongs? People say we ought to vote and change all this. Vote! People have been trying that method ever since the Constitution was ratified and where have they gotten? Every year politics become more corrupt. Thinking people are becoming alarmed. Ballot boxes are stuffed by crooked politicians and the first thing we know they are elected and we wonder how it happened. It is like trying to purify a river that is contaminated with typhoid germs at its source by throwing in a pinch of lime at its mouth. And even if everybody along that river threw in a pinch of lime the river would still be contaminated until the source was cleaned up. "We the people" have proven themselves too corrupt to be the supreme authority in this land.

Yet no person should stay away from the polls simply because politics are corrupt. Such people are neither rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, nor unto God the things that are God's. There is only one good reason for staying away from the polls and that is conscience. The Covenant stand of not voting is merely a matter of consistency. If we will not take an oath to support a godless constitution, how can we vote for someone else and ask him to take the oath? It may be our duty to vote, and we would like to, but there is a higher duty and that is to recognize God and Christ in the affairs of the nation.

Why is it more people do not take the Covenant stand? One reason is because the average Protestant sees in it an attempt at a union of church and state. Immediately a cry goes up in protest and if that were true, he would have a right to protest for we all know what Protestantism came out of. But the idea of union of church and state loses its force when we think of what the Lordship of Jesus Christ would do. The church and state are both divine institutions. Both are under divine law and proper as they obey that law. Since all authority belongs to Jesus, he is ruler of one as truly as he is ruler of the other. Paul explains in the twelfth chapter of first Corinthians how men and institutions are intended to work together in the divine plan. They are to co-operate as hands and feet with one mind working through both. This common operation of mind would not unite them any more than it unites hands and feet. It only enables them to do what they could not do, to work together in harmony for the uplift of the race. Co-operation through the recognition by the church and state of the authority and teaching of
Jesus Christ is the divine plan. Union of church and state is the human plan, a plan which will soon be obsolete.

Another objection is that recognition of Christ in the Constitution would interfere with personal liberty. Yes it would. Just like prohibition interferes with personal liberty, just like a policeman interferes with personal liberty as he directs traffic on a busy street. It certainly is a strange conclusion that the recognition of Him who died to make men free would take away freedom, unless it is the freedom to do wrong. There is no freedom in a country anywhere in the world where Christ has not made him free. Why not submit our lives both public and private to Him in whom alone men have found freedom?

Another objection is that it would offend the Jew. Rather strange, is it not, that three or four percent of our population should control the policy of our national government? It is pretty hard to offend some of the Jews we have in this country but I suppose some of the orthodox Jews would be offended. But the Christian church is also an offense to them. The preaching of the gospel is offensive to them. In fact the Jew would like to destroy every memorial of the Christ he crucified if he could. There are several arguments to meet this objection but I think one is sufficient and that is that the Jew is safe and prosperous only in a country where the teaching of Jesus is accepted so that the Jew is protected and given his rights in the common brotherhood of man. Some Jews recognize this. And what is true of the Jew is also true of all other religions.

There may be other minor objections but all can be met. The trouble seems to be that Christians have held the idea that a nation can remain neutral in religion and that politics and religion should never be mixed. Christ said, "He that is not for me is against me," and that applies to nations as well as to individuals. Nations must choose their religion. So far ours has chosen to be pagan.

Covenanters are called unpatriotic for talking against the Constitution. Some even go so far as to say we ought to be deported. If that is true, we might better start deporting some of our own newsmen who talk against the Eighteenth Amendment. During the 1928 presidential campaign the New York Times came out with an editorial saying the Constitution was not a sacred thing but that it could be changed. If men who stand for the return of liquor in this country can talk against the Constitution in trying to tear it down, surely we Covenanters can talk concerning it in trying to make it better. The Bible says plainly, "The nation and kingdom that will not serve the shall perish." Surely if we are trying to keep the nation from
Some say we should not talk against the Constitution which gives us liberty and freedom. According to the October 1928 number of the National Republican Magazine, a magazine put out by the government, the question is asked, "Does the Constitution of the United States give us the rights of liberty?" and the answer is, "No—neither the Constitution nor the United States gives us these rights. They are inalienable, God gives rights. The Constitution merely guarantees them." Thus we are not depending on the Constitution for them.

Some one has said, "You can't make a horse race honest until you make the human race honest," and the same is true of politics. When men become converted and give Christ the proper place in their lives, there will be no trouble in getting him recognized in the Constitution. "In all thy ways acknowledge him and he will direct thy paths."

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Millville, Pa.