

## RENDER, NOT SURRENDER, UNTO CAESAR

Secular Christians **SUR render** everything unto Caesar. Their very lives are pledged to the faith that **the nation** is God's community. That defines Secular Christianity. They are ready to die for the nation--as a last resort--and even readier to make others die for it as a first resort. They are ready to kill for the nation, or at least to watch the TV while the missiles do it on their behalf in those far away places where *evil doers* and their children may be lurking. Among the gospel texts which have been mangled by mis-interpretation to justify this religious faith in the empire, **RENDER UNTO CAESAR** has a prominent place. Since their faith is focused upon the God of the Nation, *the god of this world*, they **render unto Caesar** the lives of their first born sons, as a sacrifice to the great empire of **THIS WORLD**.

*Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar, or no ?* As recounted in Matthew 22.15-22, Mark 12.13-17 and Luke 20.20-26, the question of what we owe to the great empire was put to Jesus Christ by a little conspiracy of questioners--a temporary coalition of Pharisees and *Herodians*--those who accepted King Herod as the legitimate ruler of Israel, even though he was the puppet ruler appointed by the Romans.

As interpreted by the latter day Secular Christians of the empire, the answer Jesus gives to this question is simply *Yes*. Yes, of course. We all have to pay taxes, we all have to submit to the government. We must obey all the commands of the ruler because rulers are appointed by God. Having made a servile submission to *the kingdoms of this world*, these conforming Christians use **RENDER UNTO CAESAR** as the justification for their surrender.

But the question was not about *taxes*, it was about **TRIBUTE**. And Jesus gave three different responses to the question, none of which was **YES**. As He did on several occasions, such as those described in John 8.3-11 and Luke 20.8, Jesus avoided giving a yes or no answer to the question, for very compelling reasons, as we shall see. It resembles a question like *Have you stopped beating your wife ?* in that you cannot answer **YES** and you cannot answer **NO**. It was a Loaded Question designed to *entangle him in his talk*, as the conspirators foresaw when they put their heads together to come up with it. And the first response of Jesus, His indignant exclamation: *Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites ! ?* acknowledges the malicious effort that had gone into setting up the question and the situation. He couldn't answer **YES** and he couldn't answer **NO**. But why was it such a tough question and why was Jesus indignant if it only had to do with taxes ? Why did they **MARVEL** at his final answer, if all he really said was *Yes, pay your taxes ?*

### Why Was He Angry ?

Why was Jesus angry ? Why was the question a trap ? If you set yourself up as the moral philosopher in the town square, why should you be bothered by a question as to whether it is right to pay taxes ? Obviously it was a pressing concern for the Jews as to whether they were obligated to pay the heavy tribute which the Romans had levied upon them, which the hated *publicans* extorted from them. And, as they said, Jesus was fearless in his preaching. Why was he bothered by a question which the Secular Christians, the sheep of every empire, can so easily answer: *Yes, we all have to do what the emperor says and pay what he demands*. It would be wrong--and dangerous--to refuse. How *fearless* do you have to be if you are simply preaching conformity to the crowd and enthusiastic submission to the power of the empire, like all the other patriot preachers ?

So his first response to the question is the accusation that they are trying to trap him and he even calls them a name: *hypocrites*. That is, their question is not honestly put. But why is it a trap ? What was wrong with their question ? Let us understand better the realities surrounding that question which Jesus Christ was called upon to answer.

Set yourself up as the moral philosopher in the town square and answer the question. Do you have a moral obligation to pay your share of the upkeep for the town water and sewer and for the maintenance of the county road ? Of course you do. In cash or kind anyway. In Thoreau's time, a county resident had to show up once a year with a team of horses to work on the county road. In a small town where any citizen can attend the regular town meeting to argue that a new road grader isn't necessary--the old one can be repaired--or that the sewage system has to be extended to the new houses, there is no good excuse for ducking your civic responsibility.

But let's move the question into the world of the great empire. Are you **morally obligated** to pay the taxes which the mayor has imposed on all the residents of the city ? The mayor is appointed by the governor, who is appointed by the emperor. You have nothing to say about what taxes are imposed upon you. Everyone knows that large sums of money go to sustain the luxurious life style of the mayor, the governor and the imperial court. A large number of the mayor's relatives are on the city payroll. The city contracts given to his cronies mean that the city gets shoddy work at three times what it should cost. And that is only lunch money compared to the vast sums of tax money which are extracted to pay for the military forces of the empire, fighting imperial wars on distant continents.

It was a situation like this which supposedly justified the American Revolution: *Taxation without Representation is Tyranny !* The Boston Tea Party was an act of rebellion against taxes passed by the British Parliament, and it precipitated the war. Those taxes were needed to pay for the armies and navies of the world wide British Empire and of course for the conspicuous corruption of the British

establishment. But a lot of the military debt had been accumulated by the British in defending their American Colonies in the French and Indian War.

2

#### TRIBUTE, not taxes

But we are still a long way from the question that Jesus had to answer. Which was about **TRIBUTE**, not taxes. The people of Israel **were not citizens** of the Roman Empire, they were **conquered subjects**. They had no vote in the election of the Roman Senate, no voice in the selection of the Roman Emperor. Their once independent nation was now only a province of the empire, a chronically rebellious province kept in submission by a large garrison of Roman soldiers.

Put yourself in their position: Are you **MORALLY OBLIGATED** to pay the **TRIBUTE** imposed upon your nation by foreign conquest? The Great Soviet Empire conquers America. After looting the stores and houses, raping the women, and killing the men who tried to stop them, the soldiers of this multi-national force settle down to a more orderly administration. Heavy taxes are imposed by the *fiat* of Moscow. This **tribute** money maintains the soldiers occupying America. It goes to equip the armies which are extending the rule of the Soviet Empire to other countries, all around the world. It goes to the state schools which teach atheism, and which your children must attend.

That is something like the **TRIBUTE** question that was put to Jesus Christ. The pagan Romans had imposed their rule upon Israel at the point of a sword. Their very presence in Jerusalem was deeply felt as a violation of the patriotic and religious integrity of the Jewish people. Roman soldiers occupied the very precincts of The Temple, because it was the central fortress of Jerusalem as well as The Temple of the Lord. **TRIBUTE** was armed robbery. **TRIBUTE** meant that, after the residents of Jerusalem had been murdered and raped and robbed and enslaved by the Romans, they were sent a bill for services rendered. The **TRIBUTE** extracted from one conquered country paid for the army which set out to conquer another. **TRIBUTE** supported the gross luxury of the Roman court. It supported the pagan priesthood of imperial Rome and furnished the temples of Jupiter and Apollo. It paid for the statues of the **DEIFIED** emperors.

#### What **NO!** meant

So how do you answer this **TRIBUTE** question? You don't, if you are a prudent man. A resident of Poland or Czechoslovakia, when these countries were occupied by the Soviet Union, would avoid giving his real opinion if he did not wish to have the secret police knocking on his door that night. Informers were everywhere and any public expression of a negative attitude towards the Soviet occupation could bring a one way trip to the brutal Siberian labor camps. That describes half of the situation that Jesus was in when he was publicly questioned about his attitude towards the Roman occupation of Israel and the **TRIBUTE** it exacted.

The Roman Empire in the time of Jesus Christ encouraged free speech in its captive nations like Stalin's Soviet Empire encouraged free speech in its captive nations. Luke 20.20 states explicitly that they were trying to trap Jesus so as to **HAND HIM OVER TO THE GOVERNOR**. And Luke 23.2 shows that, despite his careful answer, they made it one of the accusations against Him when He was brought before Pilate: *We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King*. And these accusations are halfway true. If Jesus had said **NO, DON'T PAY!** He would have been in jeopardy of immediate arrest as a political rebel against Roman rule.

But for Jesus Christ, the situation was much more complicated than that. Because most of the Jewish people hated the Romans who occupied their country. They longed for deliverance from this Roman bondage and kept alive the hope that *The Messiah*, the *Son of David anointed by God*, would lead them in a successful rebellion against Roman rule. That was the kind of **WARRIOR KING** they all expected. That is what they wanted Jesus to be. They wanted Him to say **NO!** to Roman **TRIBUTE** and **NO!** to Roman rule. They were greatly impressed by Jesus, as the world has been ever since, and there is little doubt that they would have followed him in a rebellion against the Romans, as they followed false messiahs 30 years later. Had he said **NO!** emphatically, he would very likely have been arrested by the Romans the same day. And very likely busted out of jail by those who were waiting for just such a signal and just such a leader. John 6.15 says that they had tried to make him their King but he refused. That was the other half of his situation.

#### Why Wouldn't He Lead Them?

Many of the followers of Jesus still expected Him to lead a rebellion against Roman rule. Why did he refuse? Why did He not encourage them? If a British colony is justified in rebelling against the mother country over minor questions of taxes and parliamentary representation, the Jewish people had 100 times more justification for rebelling against this foreign oppression. Why wouldn't Jesus lead this rebellion or at least encourage it, as He later encouraged the American Rebellion against Britain--so the patriot believes?

That is the \$ 64 question about the life and death of Jesus Christ: Why does He persist in claiming the title of **KING** and yet persistently refuse to be the **KING** that his countrymen want? Or, alternately, why doesn't He save himself a great deal of trouble and misunderstanding by making it clear that he is a kind of prophet rather than a kind of king--*religion is my bag, I have nothing to do with politics*. Instead, by claiming the title of **KING**, he stirs up all the opposition that a pretender to the throne creates. But then He

alienates the political support that a serious and successful bid for power would bring him. Which raises the essential question about the mystery of the Kingdom and Kingship of Jesus Christ. And that was the major reason He was put in such a bind by the question of **TRIBUTE**.

Did He leave open the possibility that some day he would take the position **HE HAD JUST REFUSED** as the actual *secular* King of Israel ? Unless he wanted to confuse and mislead them, by raising false hopes, why did a first century Jewish audience, desperate to throw off the Roman yoke, need to know about something that would not happen in 2000 years ? As Jesus states in John 18.36, the **KINGDOM** of Jesus Christ is **NOT COMPATIBLE** with any secular kingdom.

3

### *Is it **LAWFUL** ? The Answer of Judas the Galilean*

They weren't simply asking, *in your opinion, is it right, is it moral, is it legal ?* They were asking: *Is it **LAWFUL** ?* Is it in accordance with **THE LAW**, given by The Lord Himself, which was the foundation of Israel and the basis of Jewish life. It was a practical moral question, not an abstract philosophical question, and it had to be answered within the strict definitions of **THE LAW**. But the question **had already been answered**, in a spectacular way, a generation earlier, and it had been answered **in blood**, not just words. That is why, in the immediate historical context, which Jesus, his questioners and the Roman authorities were all aware of, it was a political **hot potato** that they handed Him.

Some 20 years before this, when Jesus was still a boy, a fellow countryman from his own province of Galilee had led a revolt against Roman rule. His rebellion is described by Josephus in **JEWISH WAR** 2.118: *a certain Galilean, whose name was Judas, prevailed with his countrymen to revolt and said they were cowards if they would endure to pay a tax to the Romans, and would, after God, submit to mortal men as their lords.* He describes them further in **ANTIQUITIES** 18.23: *They have an inviolable attachment to liberty and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kind of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord.* The position of Judas the Galilean in respect to the terrible oppression of Israel by the Roman Empire was: **Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death !** Have we no sympathy with that position ? Did Jesus have none ?

The question put to Jesus was carefully worded to make it sound neutral. But, in the context of the rebellion led by his fellow Galilean 20 years before, the question **IS NOT** whether the Jews were morally obligated by The Law of God to pay the tribute extorted by foreign occupiers of their nation. Of course they weren't. The question was rather: Does **THE LAW** require us **TO REFUSE TO PAY TRIBUTE** to anyone except The Lord ? Are we morally obligated **TO REFUSE TO PAY TRIBUTE** to the idol-worshipping Romans, as Judas the Galilean had testified **by his heroic death** ?

The question **IS NOT** the silly question: *Are you morally obligated to hand over your purse when the highwayman confronts you with a drawn sword ?* The question is rather: *Are you morally obligated **TO REFUSE** to hand over your purse when the highwayman confronts you with a drawn sword, regardless of the consequences ?* And the highwayman demands only money and then goes on his way. The emperor demands money, obedience, military service and the religious worship of patriotism. You must love the empire with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul and for your whole life. He demands that you **BELIEVE** in the emperor and the empire enough to lay down your life for it. You must give your money and your life and the life of your son when called upon to do so.

**Refusing to pay the tribute** was the position that Judas the Galilean took. He and his sons paid with their lives for their failed rebellion against the Romans. He argued that it was **un **LAWFUL****--a transgression of **THE LAW**--to pay tribute to the Romans. They must die rather than submit. And Judas had a solid case. **THE LAW** spells out that they owe tithes to the Lord and His Temple and to **no one else**. To **PAY TRIBUTE** to foreign rulers is the equivalent of **SACRIFICING TO STRANGE GODS**--the demons who rule the *nations*.

The question raised by Judas in his revolt was both a moral question and a patriotic question. As if we were to ask: Is it right for an American to support that Soviet Empire which has conquered and occupied America ? Is it right for us to give our money to those who are out to destroy everything that we believe in ? Or **Are we honor bound to refuse and to resist, even at the price of our lives ?** And the answer that most of the countrymen of Jesus Christ would have made at this time was: *in theory, yes.* In practice, it was a much harder question: Must we rebel against the awesome power of the Roman Empire ? Paying the tribute was not voluntary. The *publicans* extracted it by force, using methods that the modern IRS can only envy. They could sell a man and his family into slavery for not being able to pay what they claimed he owed. The question **WAS NOT** whether people should **voluntarily** pay it, or **casually decline** to pay it. Those were options they did not have. The question was whether they were ready to rebel against Rome. Because that was the only realistic alternative to paying the tribute. Judas the Galilean had said they must refuse to pay the tribute, even at the cost of their lives. What would Jesus say ? Must we submit to foreign tyranny ? Or should we rebel against the **evil empire**, despite its awesome power ?

### An Aversion to Money

*Show me the coin of the tribute.* It is notable that Jesus has no **tribute coin** on his person and that, like any orthodox Jew, he avoids even touching it. It was an idolatrous object and even touching it made you *unclean*. The coin which Jesus instructed Peter to find in

the mouth of a fish to pay the temple tax in Matthew 17.27 was almost certainly a Jewish *shekel* with no **image** of a man or a beast upon it, because that was the only kind of coin which could be accepted in The Temple. That is why the money changers sat in the porch of the Temple, to trade idolatrous foreign coins for the *shekel* which the Temple required.

The Secular Christians have erased the basic gospel fact that Jesus Christ had a spiritual aversion to money. He lived as poorly and as simply as He could. Preaching against money, wealth and riches is the constant theme of his sermons--The love of money is the root of all evil; you cannot serve God and money both; the gospel seed is choked by riches; the rich man goes straight to hell while Lazarus the beggar goes to heaven; a rich man getting into heaven is like a camel passing through the eye of the needle. His betrayer was the apostle who handled the purse and he betrayed him for money. All the neglected teachings of Jesus about money provide the context for his answer to this question about what we owe to *the principalities and powers of this world*. He advises the wealthy young man to give away everything he has if he wishes to become a real follower of Jesus. The way He marks out is contrary to the way of the world and its pursuit of money. So here he possesses no coin of tribute and he won't even touch it. He says *show it to me*. And then he asks: *Whose IMAGE is this ?*

4

Whose **IMAGE** is This ? Whose **IKON** ?

If the question put to Jesus by the Herodians and the Pharisees was **loaded**, the counter question he handed back to them was a hand grenade with the pin pulled: *Whose IMAGE--Greek: EIKON--is this ?* Modern commentators treat it as a trivia question, like asking whose picture appears on the \$ 50 bill. But the major question put to Jesus: *Is it Lawful ?* was the most important question of Jewish life: what does **THE LAW** say ? And the most basic precept of the Jewish Law was that they worshipped an invisible God and the worship of **IMAGES** was strictly forbidden. The sweeping prohibition of **IMAGES** marks the whole of Jewish history, all the way back to Exodus 20.4: *thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image*. Unlike the pagan nations which surrounded them, they rejected the worship of secular rulers and they refused to acknowledge the divinity of the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Roman Emperor whose coins and statues presented them as gods. They constantly had to resist the **EMPEROR WORSHIP** pushed upon the captive nations of the Roman Empire. In 40 A.D., the Emperor Caligula tried to force the Jews to permit a statue of himself as Olympian Zeus to be placed in the Temple at Jerusalem.

How serious the Jews were in opposing the worship of **IMAGES**, especially the image of the **deified** Roman Emperor, is shown by a remarkable incident that Josephus relates in *Jewish War* 2.173, which happened about 26 A.D. Under cover of night, Roman soldiers brought their military ensigns into Jerusalem, and into the precincts of the Temple fortress where they were garrisoned. These **IMAGES OF CAESAR** were worshipped by the Romans, and they were the central focus of the patriotic cult of the army. But they were blasphemous objects to the Jews, objects which desecrated the Temple precincts by their very presence. The Jews confronted Pilate at Caesarea with a demand that these **IMAGES** be removed from The Temple and from Jerusalem. His reply was to surround them by a triple ring of Roman soldiers with drawn swords who threatened to kill all of them if they did not disperse. *Hereupon the Jews, as it were at one signal, fell down in vast numbers together, and exposed their necks bare, and cried out that they were sooner ready to be slain, than that their law should be transgressed. Hereupon Pilate was greatly surprised at their prodigious superstition, and gave order that the ensigns should be presently carried out of Jerusalem.* This episode, which must have happened about five years before the incident in which Jesus was questioned, shows the moral and political weight of the question which Jesus asks in respect to the Roman coin: *Whose IMAGE is this ?*

The Roman coin was in itself an idolatrous object. On the front was the image of the Roman emperor, depicted as a god, and on the back was the Roman goddess Victory. That is why Jesus won't even touch it, why He says *show me* the coin, not *hand me* the coin. The Roman coin could not be rendered to God. That is, it could not be accepted in the Temple, and even its presence there desecrated the Temple.

In the time of Jesus, the image would have been that of the Emperor Tiberius, if it was a contemporary coin. Like the emperors before and after him, he was a monster of moral depravity and oppressive cruelty. He built a pleasure palace and gardens for himself on the Isle of Capri where he devoted the final years of his reign to the pursuit of perverse pleasure, as Tacitus and Suetonius relate. When two pagan altar boys complained of his assault upon them, he ordered their legs to be broken. His paranoid fears of plots against his throne led him to execute any official accused of disloyalty by one of the legion of informers who were paid for making such allegations. That is why Pilate was at once intimidated by the threat recorded in John 19.12 *if thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend*. Like the others, this emperor was depicted as a god on the Roman coin of tribute. In an age without newspapers or television, these coins, together with the statues set up in temples and city squares, were the way the emperors promoted the cult of the emperor and the patriotic faith in the empire.

His Final Answer: **RENDER TO GOD**

**Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.** This is the answer which silenced his questioners. Luke 20.26 says *they marvelled at his answer, and held their peace*. He adroitly stepped out of their trap and shut them up. It was an answer which He set up by his prior questions and for which they provide the essential context. It was a home run of an answer which left the park and ended the game.

His carefully formulated and ambiguous answer, made under the pressure and the threat of an extremely difficult and complicated spiritual and political situation makes **a clear distinction between God and Caesar**. His answer points in two opposite directions. There is an implicit denial of Caesar's claim to be recognized as the representative of God. The common pagan doctrine that the head of the state is God's regent, which Augustine later interpolated into Romans 13.1-7, is conspicuously missing. (see *Church of the Empire* chapter XI) The acknowledgment which Jesus Christ gives stops at the self-evident proposition that, since Caesar's name and face are on this blasphemous object, it must be his.

Jesus says *render to Caesar*, **NOT** *surrender to Caesar*. He **does not say** that we owe the Emperor our faith, our fortunes, our lives and the lives of our first born sons. There is no sanction for the later Secular Christian doctrine that *we render to God by rendering to Caesar*--that you pay what you owe to God by conforming to secular society and serving the empire of *this world*. There is no justification for the empire-worshipping Christians who accepted the Emperor Constantine as the head of the new Imperial Church in the 4th century, and then persecuted the Christians who refused to conform. There is no room for that fusion of Church and State or that patriotic religious faith in the nation which has been characteristic of Secular Christians in the years since Constantine. His answer effectively negates the basic doctrine of the Imperial religion: the identity of the emperor and the empire with the gods who bless it with victory in its endless wars. For those who have eyes to see it, His answer negates the *GodBlessAmerica* faith of the American Cult--the confident identification of God with the American Empire.

5

His final answer, which shut them up, and made them *wonder* at Him, was a diplomatic way of saying: if you have any of this Roman trash, get rid of it. Give it back to the Romans ! What does it have to do with us ? In contrast to the episode of the Temple Tax, recounted in Matthew 17.27, Jesus sets no example of paying anything to Caesar and clearly wants nothing to do with it. And He did stand apart both from the Jewish establishment which depended upon the Roman establishment and also from the zealots and rebels against Roman rule who wanted the Son of David to be a military leader. His truly radical teaching of non conformity to ***This World*** and spiritual battle against ***THE PRINCE OF THIS WORLD*** is the only realistic alternative to either joining the imperial establishment or trying to rebel against it.

#### What Belongs to Caesar ?

What things belong to Caesar ? What belongs to God ? What Jesus teaches here must be understood in the light of the rest of his teaching: *You cannot serve two masters*. The world **HATES** Jesus and his real followers. *Friendship with the world is enmity with god*. It was the Jewish establishment, not Jesus, which counseled servile submission to Caesar. That was the reason the council of the chief priests and the Pharisees plotted His death, as John 12.47-53 relates: *they took counsel together to put him to death* because they feared that *the Romans shall come and take away both our place and our nation*. In demanding his crucifixion they assure Pilate: *We have no king but Caesar*. John 19.15 Those who call themselves *Christians*, while they make servile submission to Caesar, are the real followers of those who were responsible for crucifying Jesus Christ.

The *Herodians* who questioned Jesus accepted Herod as the legitimate King of Israel, despite his status as the appointed agent of Roman rule. But Jesus won't even speak to him: Luke 23.9 *he answered him nothing*. And in Luke 13.32, he calls him *that fox* after he is warned that *Herod will kill thee*. That shows the attitude of Jesus Christ towards secular authority and Roman authority. How much respect did Jesus show to King Herod by way of setting the example for his disciples ? But neither would he join a rebellion against the Roman occupation. And that was the basic reason for the seeming ambiguity of his answer. They in effect asked him: are you a cowardly conformist or a reckless rebel ? He in effect answered: ***NEITHER***. But He was a **moral revolutionary** against the ***Prince of THIS WORLD*** and those who receive their Power from him, as his true followers came to understand.

On the eve of his martyrdom in Rome about 110 AD, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Christians at Magnesia: *We have not only to be called Christians, but to be Christians. . . . there are two coinages, one God's, the other the world's. Each bears its own stamp--unbelievers that of this world; believers, who are spurred by love, the stamp of God the Father through Jesus Christ.* (4,5) The Church father Tertullian about 200 A.D. gives a simple Christian answer: the coin with Caesar's image belongs to Caesar. You, who are made in the image and likeness of God, belong to God.

The coin with Caesar's image belongs to Caesar. What else belongs to Caesar ? Does he mean that you should give your son to the Roman army ? Does he mean that you should give love, loyalty and reverence to the empire, that you should lay down your life to advance the flag of the empire ? That is what the state-worshipping so-called "Christians" of the fourth century learned to believe and that is what the state-worshipping so-called "Christians" of the twentieth century still believe, but it has nothing in common with what Jesus Christ taught us to believe.

In the four gospels, Jesus spells out for us what we owe to God and neighbor and one another. In these four gospels, nothing besides the idolatrous Roman coin is assigned to Caesar. Here is what we owe to God: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.* (Matthew 22.37) How much does that leave for Caesar ? How much encouragement for empire worship or flag worship is to be found in this great commandment ? And Jesus adds to it: *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*. How does that square with killing our neighbors to advance the flag of empire ? Or with the commandment to *love your enemies, do good to those who hate you* ? He tells us further that we must *love one another as I have loved you* and that *by this all men shall know that you are my disciples that you love one another*. And it was said of those first Christians: *See how they love one*

*another* ! They were ready to live and die for one another as Jesus died for them. They were not ready to kill and die for the emperor in one of those perennial wars which are the foundation of the empires of this world.

Does He say that we serve God when we serve Caesar ? Does He say that we are giving our lives to God when we sacrifice them for the state ? The Secular Christians twist His teachings into a pretzel to arrive at that doctrine. Does He say that we establish the Kingdom of God when we kill and die to establish secular kingdoms ? He says just the opposite: *My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews. But now is my kingdom not from hence.* (John 18.36)

#### The Question Behind the Question

The final question of Jesus and the answer they must give to it, puts the question of the coin of tribute into its true spiritual context. It underlines the fact that the coin is intimately connected to the central cult of the Roman Empire, in which submission to the emperor's authority and payment of the tribute is tied to the mandated worship of the emperors as gods. It points to the implicit question behind the explicit question put to Jesus: *What can we do about the Roman Empire ?* Must we submit to it ? Or how can we rebel against it ? The old nationalistic religion of Israel had no good answer to this question. It had two bad answers:

1. a cowardly and shameful submission to Roman rule.
2. a hopeless and suicidal attempt to rebel against Roman rule. As they confronted the situation in realistic terms, it was a hopeless and terrible question.

But there was a **THIRD ANSWER** to the question : the long delayed hope of the Anointed One who would lead Israel once again out of bondage and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. Which was also mixed up in the prophetic books with a great expectation of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. For several hundred years Israel had been the captive province of one empire or the other but they still believed the promise of the prophets that some day Israel would once again be freed from bondage. A true Son of David would sit upon the throne of Israel and the Kingdom of God would then appear.

#### 6

And Jesus Christ has presented himself as this third answer even while he refuses to be the answer they want and that they have some right to expect in accordance with the old prophecies. He follows John the Baptist in announcing that *The Kingdom of God is at hand* and he does not reject the title of *King of the Jews* even while he refuses to become the new king of Israel, even while he refuses to do anything to free Israel from the Roman yoke and restore the Kingdom of Israel. There were still those among the followers of Jesus whose expectation was fixed upon the restoration of Israel as is shown by Luke 24.21 and Acts 1.6.

Like most men then and most men now, the men of Israel in the time of Jesus could not understand the third answer except as it could be identified with the second answer or the first answer. That is, they did not understand how the power of God could be manifested except through political success and military triumph and national glory. They were blind to the reality of the Kingdom of God which Jesus had established and so they despised his claim to be the long awaited king. They did not understand the real bondage they were in and so they did not appreciate the real Freedom which Jesus offered them.

#### The Gospel Lesson

The full answer which Jesus Christ gives as to where His Kingdom is to be found, can be learned from his life and death and his gospel sayings, where we find His dozen definitions of **THE KINGDOM OF GOD** and how that **KINGDOM** must be built apart from the abandoned kingdom of Israel and in opposition to the powers of **THIS WORLD**. By its very nature, it must have **INDEPENDENCE** from the kingdoms and nations of **THIS WORLD**. How can we keep from conforming to the evil world which has us in its power ? By what power and with what weapons can we successfully fight against it ? And Jesus showed them how to fight with spiritual weapons against *the prince of this world* and the empires he rules and where the real **KINGDOM OF GOD** had to be built. Neither the cowardly conformists nor the reckless rebels understood the message, because they only understood the other kind of power, and, one way or the other, they had to have it. The nominal followers of Jesus did not understand his mission then and they refuse to understand it now. Their search for the Kingdom of God is strictly limited by the pursuit of political power and the achievement of personal ambition:  
*I serve God by running for Congress.*

Rightly understood, the episode of the coin of tribute shows what the real position of Jesus Christ was in relation to the states of his time, especially the conquered nation of Israel and the conquering Empire of Rome. It shows how he avoided both of the two opposite positions which were commonly taken by the other men of his time: A. loyalty to the empire, acknowledgment of the emperor, and recognition of rulers like King Herod, whom the emperor had appointed; versus B. rebellion against the Roman Empire on behalf of **FREEDOM**!--an independent nation of Israel. Jesus was leading his own kind of rebellion against the ruler of this world and thereby establishing his own kind of **FREEDOM**. He was more concerned with defeating the Satan in his own followers than with defeating the Satan who ruled the Roman Empire and controlled the Jewish establishment, as Matthew 16.23, Luke 4.6, John 8.44 show. And that is his basic teaching as to where and how Satan is to be fought.

In answering the question of the tribute coin, Jesus avoids encouraging any armed rebellion against the Roman Empire. And that was a primary reason that so many of his first followers abandoned him later. They wanted a secular king and a secular kingdom and they had little interest in the **KINGDOM OF GOD** which He announced, if it did not include secular power, and the re-establishment of an

independent Israel. They were the spiritual forerunners of today's Secular Christians. Having rejected the claim of Jesus to be the **ANOINTED** one, they followed false messiahs into a disastrous rebellion against the Romans in 66 A.D. which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 A.D. More than a million of them perished by sword and starvation.

#### The Real Enemy

But neither would Jesus join the chief priests and pharisees of the Jewish establishment who protected their own position by going along with Roman rule. That is why so many of them were executed by the rebels when the great rebellion broke out in 66 A.D. Jesus was not a rebel against the Roman Empire but he aimed a spiritual weapon at the power behind the Roman Empire, the Prince of this World as described in Luke 4.6, John 14.30 and Revelation 13.4. He saw the same power entrenched within the Jewish establishment. And saw **THE PRINCE OF THIS WORLD** as the primary threat to his own followers. So it has proven. Israel was destroyed and the Roman Empire disintegrated, but the false Christianity which conforms to this world and worships **the god of this world** is still very much with us.

Unlike his contemporaries, Jesus refused to join the establishment and he also refused to lead an armed rebellion against that establishment. He took a position which was adverse to the conformists and adverse to the violent rebels. Instead, He launched a spiritual and moral revolution on behalf of the true Kingdom of God. That Kingdom survived the destruction of Israel and the fall of the Roman Empire. Those who put their faith in the sword of rebellion perished. Those who put their faith in the sword of the Roman Empire perished. Those happy few who put their faith in the two edged gospel sword of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God survived. Their spiritual grandchildren will also survive while the nations and empires of this world *perish with the sword*.

*Terry Sullivan c 2008*