
Charitable Status

In the book of Genesis, we read the story of Joseph, son of Jacob, who, though sold as a slave into Egypt, became the second most powerful man in that country, second only to Pharaoh. As we recall, the land of Egypt enjoyed a seven year period of bountiful harvest during which Joseph collected the excess harvest and stored it because God had revealed to Pharaoh that bountiful period would be followed by a seven year period of famine. Joseph was able to keep the people of Egypt alive by selling them the food that he had stored over the seven years of bounty. In Genesis 47 we read that the people first bought grain with their money, and when the money ran out, they gave Pharaoh their livestock in exchange for food, and when the livestock were all sold, they sold their land and themselves to Pharaoh. The Egyptians became landless slaves, reduced to servitude to Pharaoh.

In verses 22 and 25 we are told that the only exception was that the priests of Egypt, because they received an allotment from Pharaoh, were able to keep their land and their freedom. By the end of the famine, only the priests of Egypt were free people who owned their own land. Pharaoh owned all the rest.

We might pass this mention of the special treatment of the priests by because it seems like an irrelevant point, but when we consider it more carefully, we understand how important the priests were considered to be for the welfare of Egypt. The Egyptians, along with nearly every other nation, attributed their wellbeing to the intervention and provision of their gods. Priests were employed to ensure that the gods were properly appeased and respected so that the nation would prosper.

The role of the priests, the religious sector of society, for most of history, has been considered to be essential for the wellbeing of most of the nations and peoples of the world. This was because the gods were considered to be relevant for the daily wellbeing of the people. If the gods were happy, the people were happy. If the gods were unhappy, the people suffered, so it was best to keep the gods happy. So essential was the presence of the priests that they were given special privilege, for the priests, after all, were the ones who kept the gods happy.

The point is this: religion and life were closely tied together. Religion was not a separate, private and individual choice, but, rather, an essential part of life. Every part of life was affected by religion, and religion was considered to hold life together, for God was the foundation of religion.

In the western world, which became predominantly Christian in the 4th and 5th centuries, the presence of God was seen to be essential. Prior to the upsurge in Christianity, the Roman gods held sway, and the Roman gods had the role of being sustainers and providers. When the Christian God was recognized and worshipped, he simply replaced the Roman gods, the true God replacing false gods. It was a transition, but the idea that the Lord God was as essential to daily life as the Roman gods had been did not change.

The western world, like ancient Egypt, gave special privilege to their religious sector, in particular, the church. Churches did not pay taxes on their land, and with the advent of income tax, donations to the religious sector resulted in the return of some of that income tax. Because God was considered important

for all of life, it was important that the church (the replacement for the priests of pagan religions) was given the opportunity to thrive.

As many of us are aware, our current federal government is considering removing the charitable status of faith based organizations, including but not limited to the church. There are some cries of outrage voiced by those who practice their faith, but, surprisingly, there is very little of this proposal in the news. The change, it seems, is going largely unnoticed.

Many of us are outraged by this proposal, but we should not be surprised by it. If it is true that religious institutions were given special privilege because they maintained the connection between God and the world, we must also recognize that in Canada as in much of the West, God has become unimportant and the church has become irrelevant, at least as far as maintaining the health and stability of society. The vast majority of Canadians don't acknowledge the importance of God, and, as a consequence, they don't see much advantage in helping faith-based organizations to thrive. While many people say that they believe in God, they live as if God doesn't exist (practical atheism), making the necessity of continuing to be connected to God irrelevant.

Our federal government may not be doing anything groundbreaking in proposing to eliminate the charitable status of faith-based organizations; all it might be doing is following the practices and beliefs of the people.

So, what has replaced God as the stabilizing force in society? Quite simply put, it is the economy. Economic numbers have taken the place of the proclamation of God's Word as being the driving force of change. Those who control interest rates are the new priests and economic forecasters are the new prophets. Economic growth is seen to be the stabilizing force for our world, replacing God as the Provider. And the ones receiving the tax breaks? Rich business people and their corporations, at least in some countries.

It should not surprise us that this is happening, for in a democracy the government does not lead but, rather, it follows the will and desires of the people. If the economy provides us with stability and prosperity, then it can be expected that the government will move its support from churches and give it to the economic movers and shakers. Thus, it is not surprising that money be withheld from faith-based organizations and be given to those who "can truly make our lives better."

Jesus would disagree with the trends we see. He would strongly argue against the belief that a growing economy is the most important thing. He would lament the privatization of religion and the growing idea that God has no relevance.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that the church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt preserves food and gives it flavour. Salt provides electrolytes to our bodies so that they thrive. Light enables us to see the way, and it enables people to do their work and so fulfill God's calling. The economy and its economists are not salt and light. But the church is, for it is the church that keeps this world connected to God, and God is the source of our lives, our provisions, and our stability.

Perhaps the best response, then, to the proposed changes in charitable receipts is not that we protest with outrage that our government is doing wrong, although protesting may be one way to make our voices heard. Again, our government seems merely seems to be following the leading of the people. Perhaps the best response by the church is to show how God is relevant, how it is to our Creator God that we owe our existence and our lives, and it is in his grace that we find security (salvation) both now and for eternity.

Our witness to the stabilizing, blessed presence of God in our lives and society may be the best way to respond to current trends. If the status of the church is minimized, it is because God has become insignificant. The way to change that trend is to witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The church, as the mediator between God and humanity, is relevant, for God is relevant. But to prove that point, the church needs to be faithful in making God known in the gospel message of Jesus Christ so that the world can again know that God is there and that we need him.

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