

Insert here Your individual/Church's/ministry's mantra

Insert here your Issue No.

DON'T TRUST IN PRINCES!

If you think the Bible irrelevant, think again! Amid our present crisis of trust, how many sympathize with the familiar saying, *“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation”* (Psalm 146:3)? The Psalmist warns us not only of inordinate confidence in literal princes, but of excessive reliance on any power or influence: government, media, scientists, philanthropists.

FINDING BALANCE

The danger remains real today, not least because our materialism has belittled trust in God. The more we disdain him, the more we trust in man (chiefly in ourselves). The more we do so, the more we set ourselves up for disappointment. After all, man, despite his hubris, is an impossible substitute for the living God.

Thus, cynicism—once the near monopoly of conspiracy theorists and the depressive—is now widespread. Our postmodern denial of truth cradled it, mass communication spreads it, and the response to the origin and international handling of COVID is exacerbating it. Across the world, we echo the mantra, “We don’t know who to believe!” and polarize among ourselves between believing everything and believing nothing.

The Bible offers us a *via media*. Since God is good, we are to think the best of the powers he has ordained, yet, since man is fallen, we need to weigh them carefully. Said John Philpott Curran (1790), “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” Or, to quote the Russian proverb, “Trust, but verify.”

ACHIEVING BALANCE

We recall, *first*, that princes are not perfect. This is not just a Christian observation. It was promoted by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the father of modern political theory. Advocating a path to stability in Italy, his treatise *The Prince* brazenly espouses ruthless-



ness as a means by which government can bring social cohesion. His pragmatic realism, said by the Christians of his day, to have come from Satan, has greatly influenced world dictators.

We make light of dictatorships when, out of fear and disgruntlement, we band around charges of Hitlerism and Stalinism for lesser overreaches of power and influence. Nevertheless, imperfect princes overreach, and are capable of coopting legitimate issues of climate change, population growth, and mask and vaccine mandates for political, economic, or social gain. History will record its verdict.

Already we know that princes have their “feet of clay” (“demons,” to use the current lingo). Once seen as messiahs, their failure is certain. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr., “the hypocritical preacher” (Lyndon B. Johnson), was tragically shot the morning after he had been cheating on, it is said, the girlfriend with whom he had been cheating on his wife. Today, Boris Johnson may have gotten more grace for breaking his lockdown protocols on the eve of Prince Philip’s funeral but for his multiple marriages, affairs, and children out of wedlock.

Second, we recall that princes are not all-powerful. Even Winston Churchill, despite his sense of destiny, could not have saved the West alone. Once the victor, he was ousted by a landslide general election defeat in 1945. Meanwhile, Magda Goebbels, so locked into the “messiahship” of Hitler, preferred to poison her six children than to have them live beyond the fall of the “thousand-year” Reich.

Let us remember, then, the fragility of human power, whether of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, or Kim Jong-un, or, yes, the dictates of past or present White House incumbents. We advocate not cynicism, but a principled realism. The weight

of our trust must rest elsewhere.

LORD ACTON

POWER TENDS TO CORRUPT, AND ABSOLUTE POWER CORRUPTS ABSOLUTELY.

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SUNDAY WORSHIP TIMES



ONE PRINCE COMPELS OUR TRUST

Whereas the cynic promotes the ingratitude, anachronisms, and hypocrisies of cancel culture, the Christian points to the one prince throughout history and the world whose character was flawless and whose power is undiminished: the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

From Old Testament times, men and women looked for one who would never let them down. Indeed, no sooner had the children of Israel gotten their wish for a king, than Saul began to fail them. Yet, to his successor King David was revealed a King to come whose kingdom would never end. His son, Solomon, yearning in turn for justice and righteousness to govern the people (Psalm 72:1), painted a picture of what the coming King would be like.

How Israel needed this King! After Solomon’s days, the kingdom split. In the northern kingdom, every king of Israel was disobedient to God and did evil, and all but six of the kings of Judah (the southern kingdom). Yet, during the reign of the self-confident Ahaz, God graciously promised one who would never disappoint. *“The government”* would *“be upon his shoulder.”* He would rule as the *“Wonderful Counselor”* (Isaiah 9:6).

WE TRUST HIS PERSON

Eight hundred years later, God’s promises were fulfilled. Coming from God, it follows that Jesus embodied *“the truth”* (John 14:6). He proved his claim by telling the truth, living it, and teaching it. He never lied, misspoke, exaggerated, shaded the truth, or hid it. Never did he sacrifice the truth to save his skin.

When tried by Pilate, and challenged as to his kingdom, Jesus replied: *“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth”* (John 18:37). On account of this, he railed against those religious leaders who distorted the truth of God, yet spent his life serving the crowds as one, John testified, *“full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

The apostles, spent three years with Jesus, but never charged him with anything. Peter, on one occasion, rebuked the Lord; not for sin, but for forewarning of his sufferings and death in Jerusalem due to the hostility of the elders, chief priests, and scribes. Sensing Satan seeking, through Peter, to deflect him from his obedience to his Father in heaven, the Lord retorted: *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”* (Matthew 16:23).

Significantly, when the religious hierarchy bribed Judas to betray Jesus, he did so with a kiss and not, as in our mirky relationships, with the airing of Jesus’ dirty laundry. There was none to air! Indeed, the religious leaders had to acquire false witnesses to secure Jesus’ guilty verdict. As his trial progressed from the initial phase before the Sanhedrin to that before Pilate the Roman Governor, its sham became increasingly obvious. Pilate not only realized that Jesus had been delivered for envy, he twice told the Jewish crowds that he found no guilt in Jesus (John 18:38; 19:6). It was, then, on Jesus’ own merit that on the cross he proclaimed to the penitent thief, *“Today, you will be with me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43).

WE TRUST HIS POWER

Although perfect, Jesus would have no relevance had he not also power to save us. Without it, he would be just another prince who overpromised and just another victim of crucifixion.

For a start, Jesus could accomplish a salvation every bit as impressive as the best of human princes: a better economy, victory in battle, national security, or the end of COVID. Recall his miracles (known as signs or wonders). At his word, he filled nets to breaking with fish, so impressing seasoned fishermen who had toiled all night and caught nothing, that Peter *“fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’”* (Luke 5:8). He and James and John thus gave up their fishing to follow Jesus and to *“to catch men.”* At no point thereafter did Jesus disillusion them. Rather, they followed him for the rest of their lives, James and Peter losing their lives on account of being his apostles (Acts 12:2; John 21:18-19, and 2 Peter 1:13-14).

They did so for a greater salvation than any earthly prince could guarantee. The name Jesus was given—the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Jeshua* (the shortened form of Joshua)—means “the Lord saves.” To underline Jesus’ power, Joseph, his legal earthly father, was then told that he would *“save his people from their sins”* (Matt. 1:21).

He did so. His perfect life procured for the believer a righteousness we could never attain for ourselves, and his death paid for all the believer’s sins. On the one hand, his shed blood turned, by the Father’s design, God’s throne of judgment into a throne from which sinners may receive his unmerited favor. On the other hand, Christ’s blood covers all the believer’s sins from God’s sight.

What, then, will you do with Jesus? Join the worst insanity of our age, seeking, with futility, to cancel him, or, wearied by princes who have broken your trust, come to rest in him?

“I FIND NO GUILT IN THIS MAN”

PONTIUS PILATE, ROMAN GOVERNOR

TRUSTING IN THE PRINCE

Christ does not promise his followers an easy life, but he promises never to let us down, and meets with us in life's darkest moments. One such disciple who found this to be true was Romanian pastor Sándor Szilagyí.



IMPRISONED FOR CHRIST

Sándor Szilagyí grew up in Romania, an ethnic Hungarian. There he ministered as a Protestant in the Reformed Church, experiencing the formation in 1947 of the Soviet-aligned Socialist Republic of Romania. When, in 1956, there occurred across the border the Hungarian Uprising against Communist rule, many ethnic Hungarians in Romania were tried and imprisoned.

Ministering in Újszentanna in May 1958, Pastor Szilagyí had reason to comfort a young girl with the words of Revelation 2:10: *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”* As he did so, it occurred to him that the rest of the verse was applicable to him: *“Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

On his way home from Újszentanna, he stopped off at the town of Arad to visit his son. That night, the *Securitate* (secret police) called to arrest him, and then drove him back to his town of Pankota to conduct a house search. From there, he was taken to Oradea to await trial. Stripped naked, searched, and denuded of possessions, Pastor Szilagyí entered a spartan cell with but a straw mattress, lavatory bucket, and list of rules.

He was at peace, though, that he was innocent of the charge of inciting opposition to Romania's one party Marxist-Leninist regime. He had, however, preached the good news of Christ more widely than the law permitted. Following interrogations, he appeared in September 1956 before the Romanian regional military court. His defense lawyer was assigned 15 minutes to present his case, but as was typical of show trials, only five minutes were permitted. With the intent of connecting Pastor Szilagyí to the events of the Hungarian Uprising two years earlier, he was sentenced along with eight others to 20 years forced labor.

SENTENCED TO JOY

Naturally, Pastor Szilagyí felt loneliness and a burden for his family and the church family he had pastored for 22 years. Diatribes by his interrogators against religion, faith, and the Holy Scriptures grated on his ears. Moments came

and went of rebellion against the guards. Nevertheless, he was at peace that God had purposes in his incarceration, and that a new opportunity had opened to him to witness to God's grace and love in Christ.

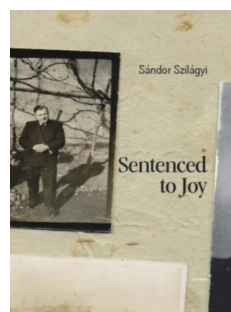
“Goodness, am I hearing about the Lord Jesus here?” exclaimed a “frightened-faced Romanian peasant.” With that he praised God and asked to hear more of Jesus. Another complained that pastors were not allowed in to minister to the prisoners, only to be housed with Pastor Szilagyí! There were words of hope for the *Securitate*, too. What joy Pastor Szilagyí gained from telling an interrogator of his prayers for him; not for his destruction, but that he would know the peace of God passing all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

The Lord, though, was working in Pastor Szilagyí, too. “My relationship with the Saviour became wonderfully profound.” It showed. Asked by the prison committee why he was smiling, he testified: “Because I am happier in Christ in prison, than are those free outside who don't know Him.” There were unbelievers inside, too. Pastor Szilagyí found joy in commending Christ to them. He so gained their trust that prisoners were sent to him, one by a communist imprisoned for excessive criticism of the party.

Satan's attacks against the pastor made his joy all the more remarkable. They came by way of taunting, fears of imaginary happenings, the fatigue and illness of forced labor (e.g., for dam building), and tensions over food supplies.

Pastor Szilagyí's victory lay in meditating on God's Word (by memory) and in witnessing its impact on others. Not permitting his sufferings to be compared with Christ's on his behalf, he nevertheless lived with the prospect of death. Publicly abused by a hate-filled commander, Pastor Szilagyí took it so meekly that a young prisoner later came to him: “Your conduct prepared the way for Christ in me.”

In spring 1964, a work party returned with news gleaned from a paper that on August 23 all political detainees would be released. Convicted on trumped up charges, Pastor Szilagyí was deemed to be one. Although warned not to speak further of Christ, his release came early. On August 2, he received back his civilian clothes after nearly seven years. Short of money, his arrival home was delayed. His congregation now had a new pastor and his wife,



sharing her husband's opprobrium, had left the village. Encouraged to divorce him, she countered, “My husband is suffering for the Lord Jesus Christ; divorcing him would be both faithlessness to him and a betrayal of Christ.” Clearly, trust in the Lord was not only his, but hers also. Never did they regret it. True believers never do.

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COMING TO TRUST THE PRINCE

“OK, you’ve told me I would be better off trusting Jesus for salvation than anything earthly princes have to offer, but what does this trust entail?”

First, get to know about Jesus. He’ll never let you down nor will he let you go. Get hold of a Bible to learn of him. Start in the New Testament with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Feel the sincerity of those who encountered Jesus, but more than that, listen to Jesus and watch him as he makes his way to the cross. He was loved and hated, but no one could dismiss him.

Second, take time out from fixating on the failures of others. Personal blessing comes not from minutely and unendingly identifying how our “princes” fail us, but how we, individually, have failed our God. Note that Jesus did not say that the blessed (seriously happy) do most to highlight and mourn the spiritual bankruptcy of others. They are the ones who see, in the light of God, that they themselves are the spiritually bankrupt and mourn accordingly. Forsake, then, the cancel culture. While it is right to note grievances which were illegal *at the time*, overall cancel culture fosters self-righteousness and judgmentalism.



The vandalizing of the Reformation Wall in Geneva has been one of the most egregious instances of cancel culture, not least because the Protestant reformers, while imperfect, spent their lives pointing men and women to Christ for relief from their sins.

From them we learn, *third*, that relief is found in confessing our sins to God and in receiving with empty hands his gift of salvation. You’ll know it’s yours by the Holy Spirit’s assurance that, in Christ, you are tremendously loved and so graciously forgiven by God, and by a hitherto unknown desire to please God and to live for him.

(Photo: LemanBleu.ch.)

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