

‘Government of the People, by the People, and for the People’

IN 1863, two years into the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln addressed a gathering at the consecration of the Soldiers National Cemetery, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, site of the recent battle four months earlier between Union and Confederate armies.

Lincoln’s speech is immortalised principally in the ringing quotation, ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’ – though his application of it is quite different than that of its originator, John Purvey, author of the *General Prologue* to John Wycliffe’s translation of the Bible (1397), in which the words first appear, and with which Lincoln was familiar. In each instance, the intended meaning is that of Liberty.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln looked ahead to a reconstructed, reunited nation and the reaffirmation of the founding principles of the U.S. Constitution, the closest approach then to ‘democracy’ – rule by the citizenry.

For Wycliffe (and Purvey), *God’s Word* was to be the guide and governor of the people. Known as ‘the morning star of the Reformation’, Wycliffe had witnessed the kidnapping of the Scriptures by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, who then privatised it and cloaked it in mystery. He laboured to make the Scriptures available in the language of the people (Middle English), so they could understand it, be consecrated by it, and live by its precepts. His followers, the Lollards, advanced the mission.

Modern democracy is a privilege long in the making, and who would want to be without it? The whole earth seeks it. To exercise one’s own will, to make commonplace decisions without fear of persecution or slavery – this is a privilege beyond price, and is rightly valued in the countries which safeguard it.

Christian Liberty

As we’ve pointed out before, the blessed freedoms we enjoy in Britain have been fought for and hammered out over centuries and – often after much bickering – legislated into the corpus of our political constitution. And not just here. The ‘unalienable’ rights to ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’ of the American Declaration of Independence are well known. Section 7 of Canada’s Charter of Rights makes a similar declaration regarding ‘life, liberty and security of the person’. The French Revolution gave us ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’. All these are noble and practical aspirations – when contained within appropriate religious or social boundaries, and with due regard to fundamental justice.

Over The Side You Go

In this increasingly secular world it is unfashionable to speak of restraints on personal emancipation. Indeed, one of the new ‘divine rights’ is that of *individual choice*. From this broad notion flow new liberties that run counter to the traditional, conservative mood in which just and necessary freedoms were originally developed.

The modern western world is now poised somewhere between the humiliating oppressions of the past and the libertine excesses of the future. The question could be decided either way. However, national and regional legislation increasingly takes the permissive side, touching on those stages of human life formerly regarded as semi-sacred events – birth, marriage, and death. Widespread abortion, innovative forms of ‘marriage’, and legal and medical moves toward assisted death are all extensions of this interpretation of personal freedom: taking control of one’s own body. Western society, enamoured with the goddess Freedom, is shifting perceptibly towards a world without meaningful moral restraint. And regardless of the shades of reasoning necessary in crafting such legislation – *pro* and *con* – the end result is likely to be pernicious.

‘Therefore honour God with your body’

The Apostle’s sentiments underscore the fundamental principle that, since God owns us (through Christ), we should always behave in such a way as to reflect credit on Him, not abusing or misusing our bodies and our energies in ungodly and damaging pursuits. But this appeal is made not simply on the basis of raw compulsion – you *must*, you *owe* – but rather on the grounds of our goodwill contract with Him, one grounded in reciprocal love and affection. ‘*We love*, because *He* first loved us’ (1 John 4: 19, *NIV-UK*; emphasis ours).

This reciprocity goes far beyond duty. It contains within it all the appreciation, gratitude and devotion which the ransomed soul feels toward the Saviour. It lies at the root of unselfish – *agape* love – that type of love which clings to righteousness *because it is good*. It is this highest form of love which the world in general cannot appreciate, not being spiritually minded. Without it, society will never modify its behaviour according to absolute morality, and expedience will eventually occupy the saddle.

Treading Water

It will be some time yet before the worst effects of these social changes will be felt. In the meantime, we must endure immoral times, like righteous Lot in Sodom, who was ‘distressed by the filthy lives’ of the lawless (2 Peter 2: 7). We do well to re-dedicate ourselves daily to the will of God in Christ, who bought us with His blood.

Appendix

The Gettysburg Address: There are five copies extant; the expression, ‘under God’, does not appear in all. The following is from the Bliss copy of 1864, written down the year following its delivery:

‘Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

‘Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

‘But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have

consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.’

See <<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>>

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