

When You Can't Buy or Sell

Buying and selling are a fact of life, as certain as taxes and almost as certain as death. From the time when folks bought and sold by bartering— exchanging sheep and goats for spices and wine—to our present transactions that are transmitted online with the speed of light, the human way of life consists of buying and selling. From the trade routes of the ancient world to Communist China today, and from the feudal system of medieval Europe to Wall Street, human beings have been engaged in a constant exchange of goods and services that are traded for some form of payment. These payments run the gamut from goats to hard cash to online money transfers. In one way or another, buying and selling lie at the core of our human existence. It's hard to imagine civilization—any civilization—without the ability to exchange goods and services for money.

What, then, are we to make of a warning in the biblical book of Revelation, which explicitly talks about the last days and the events that lead to them? In the context of the great struggle between good and evil that will unfold with increasing drama as we near the end of time, Revelation says, “He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:15–17).

You can't buy or sell? You should be killed? Clearly, people will be playing hardball in the last days! What are these texts talking about? And what forces are at work now that could conceivably be involved in this end-time persecution?

Global village

If there's any lesson the ongoing economic crisis should have taught us it's that our world today is very intricately intertwined economically, regardless of the vast cultural, political, and social divides between nations. What happens to one nation's economy, even a relatively small one, can have a huge impact on another nation's welfare halfway around the world. It's pretty scary when a strike by civil servants in Greece, for instance, can greatly impact the retirement savings of millions in the United States. The idea of a “global village,” while it sounds nice, can have some major unfortunate consequences.

All of which is very interesting in light of the biblical warning seen in Revelation 13. Though the immediate context is religious persecution, this persecution won't happen in a vacuum. It will have a definite economic element with global implications, which in a pre-Internet age would have been much harder to accomplish. Revelation 18 speaks of what appears to be a global economic collapse in the last days. Thus one could rightly conclude that the religious persecution warned about in Revelation 13 will happen in a time of economic distress.

Indeed, as history has shown, it's often in times of economic hardship— when our human tendency is to find someone to blame for our woes—that persecution of any kind, often religious, is most likely to rise. And there's no question that one of the most extreme examples of this was found in Europe in the 1930s, with the rise of Adolf Hitler, who found one particular religious group, the Jews, a convenient scapegoat for the economic ills of the time. Something similar, most likely, will be involved in the persecution depicted in Revelation 13.

Here? No way!

For many, the idea of religious persecution occurring in the Western world seems most unlikely. Religious persecution is supposed to happen elsewhere—in Islamic theocracies, for example—but not here. Western liberal democracies have been at the forefront of creating societies in which this kind of thing does not occur. And, for the most part, these societies have been very successful, not only in protecting religious freedom, but in inspiring folks in other parts of the world to seek the same.

Our success, though, could blind us to the fact that, in the whole stream of world history, the Western idea of religious freedom is still a relatively new concept. For most of history, most of humanity knew little or nothing of the kind of religious freedoms that we in the West take so much for granted. It seems so natural to us because that's all most of us have known. Thus, when the Bible's predictions of persecution do indeed come to pass—as I believe they will—humanity will be pretty much playing by the rules of history, not the recent Western exceptions.

Jesus Himself was very explicit about the persecution His true followers would face and the global nature of that persecution. He said, "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me" (Matthew 24:9). In the context of the end time, which was the focus of Jesus' statement, Western nations are among the "all nations" that He referred to.

You can't buy or sell

And in any case, whatever the economic situation that contributes to the persecution of those who refuse to receive the mark of the beast, the persecution is based on religion, not on economics. The boycott—the refusal of their right to buy and sell—is part of the punishment that they face, the pressure that is placed on them to conform to the religious views of the vast majority of the world's leaders and people.

The issue is quite clear: they are told that they must "worship" the beast and his image. The word worship, in the context of last-day events, appears six times in Revelation 13 and 14—two of the chapters that deal with the final conflict between good and evil—making it crystal clear that the great issue facing humanity at that time will be worship. Those who worship the Creator, the One who "made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters" (Revelation 14:7), will be persecuted by those who enforce the "worship" of the beast and his image upon humanity. And those who remain faithful to Jesus, the world's Creator and Saviour, and therefore refuse to worship the beast, will face the economic boycott depicted in Revelation 13:17.

A lot of speculation has existed over the centuries in regard to "the mark of the beast" and those who get it. What is clear, however, is that some massive religious and political power will seek for itself the kind of loyalty and obedience that belongs only to God. The apostle Paul warned about this kind of power when he wrote, "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4). Here, Paul clearly warns about a

power seeking the prerogatives that belong to God, including worship, which is so central to issues regarding the end- time- economic boycott.

What nations in today's world might enforce a boycott that involved even the death penalty? We need to beware of any combination of political might and religious authority, for only those two combined could wield the power needed to bring about the global persecution that Revelation predicts. Though these exact nations haven't been made manifest yet, in our day of instant communication and a tightly linked worldwide economy, events could quickly unfold, leading to this final crisis.

Conclusion

Buying and selling are essential to our human existence. They are part of what it means to live in society. But in the last days before Christ returns, a combination of civil and religious authorities will enforce something even more basic: the human need to worship. Will people worship the only Person in all the creation worthy of worship, our Creator and Redeemer; or will they worship the end-time powers that seek to take the place of our Creator and Redeemer?

Around those two issues, the world's final events will unfold.