



For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)

Hymn #315 of the 1940 Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America (long extinct), is a hymn that should shame those who advocate a perfect and literal separation of Church and State - a principle nowhere expressed in the founding documents of America, or in her Constitution. Certainly, the First Amendment incorporates safeguards against the State meddling in religion, but not forbidding religion as a balm of improvement as Salt & Light to the process of government. If all morals are disregarded, we have only anarchy or harsh totalitarianism as a result.

WE GATHER TOGETHER

*We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known.
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing.
Sing praises to His Name; He forgets not His own.*

*Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning;
Thou, Lord, were at our side, all glory be Thine!*

*We all do extol Thee, Thou Leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our Defender will be.
Let Thy congregation escape tribulation;
Thy Name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!*

As the great Reformation was breaking over Germany under the courageous Martin Luther, and throughout other parts of Western Europe by the preaching of Zwingli and Calvin, the English Reformation was being watered by the blood of

martyrs such as Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. The Protestant faith, having found fertile ground for its precious Seed in the Netherlands, was the focus of intense struggle for religious freedom that was inseparable from that of political freedom. Just as in America today, religious faith was being subordinated to that of the Crown of the Holy Roman Empire under the King of Spain who suborned the religious inclination of the people to the representative of the Roman Pope (Cardinal de Granvelle) who neither knew, nor understood, the Dutch people and their faith.

The Dutch Protestants were harshly persecuted. The situation grew into a terrible and intolerable condition, and the Dutch rebelled under their Prince, William of Orange. The Spanish King invaded with overwhelming force, but the Dutch opened the gates of their dikes and flooded the low lying areas so completely that the Spanish invaders could neither move about nor wage war. Having no alternative, the King of Spain capitulated and granted independence to the Netherlands. In 1574, the synod of Dordrecht adopted the Reformed faith as the official religion of the country. The King of Spain later intimated that the Dutch victory "must have been sanctioned by Almighty God."

In 1597, to celebrate the Dutch victory, Adrianus Valerius set this hymn (of unknown authorship) to an old Dutch folk tune. It 's words represent the spirit of liberty and freedom that inflamed the hearts of the people of the Netherlands whose religious freedom from Rome came coincidentally joined to the political freedom they had won from Spain. It would have been hard to convince these courageous patriots that their religious faith should have taken a back seat to the secular power. The bleeding and trembling hearts of America that insist on moral and religious faith being subordinated to government are selling out their God and their faith much too cheaply. The words were translated into the English in 1894 by Theodore Baker.

The words are simple, yet profoundly powerful in meaning and truth. The words remind us that God, being with us and "beside us" we cannot fail of victory; however, his people are often chastened first for their sins ere God lifts the oppressors strong boot from their throats. Many in America are only beginning to feel the press of that boot. It shall grow more and more intense until we awaken from our cringing fears and stand up to the oppressor in the same way of the Dutch. But we need not the sword and lance - for we have the vote and the Gospel of Truth. The wicked will cease their oppressing the moment we are made aware of the will of God and resolve to follow that will to the exclusion of every other. Of course, we must not fail to acknowledge, in thankfulness, that the victory shall always be the Lord's.

It is God who ordains our freedoms, and it is He who joins in battle array against a truly defenseless enemy when He is present. Even if the outcome seems seriously in doubt, there is NO DOUBT of final victory.

The final stanza stands out in stark contrast to the "teeming masses, yearning to breathe free! on the oppressor's shore:

*We all do extol Thee, Thou Leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our Defender will be.
Let Thy congregation escape tribulation;
Thy Name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!*

If we, with our heart of hearts, truly extol God (Praise highly and glorify), we shall remain free in both politics and religious faith. If God is our Leader and King, His

kingdom shall be impregnable. What a blessing if the greater part of the citizenry of a nation are also those of His congregation. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord!" (Psalm 33;12)

Please peruse the First Amendment and see if the Spanish King, or the American Emperor, might be in violation by excluding School Prayer, Bible reading, and religious clubs:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

If the Federal Judiciary, or the Federal Congress, hands down orders that forbid prayer, Bible reading, or religious gatherings in a school club you will not find justification for it in the so-called *establishment clause* - that is a false proposition not contained in the US Constitution, but in a private letter of Thomas Jefferson to a Baptist Church which implied a wall of separation protecting the church from government interference. I am sure I know how the faithful Dutch would have reacted by the insinuation that government of man takes precedent over the government of God, but I believe I can guess.

Sing the hymn in your own private study, or public worship, and be blessed and strengthened.