

Using and Being Used

Matthew 23:15-21; John 18:33-40

sermon digest

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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our promise to "support a free church in a free state, advocating religious liberty through the separation of church and state and meticulously seeking to avoid using or being used by government authorities."

Religious liberty is one of the few social-ethical positions specifically stated in our church covenant. Politically and theologically I stand in support of religious liberty through the separation of church and state as stated in the First Amendment to the Constitution. I once thought that I had a simple biblical directive for my theology, but I have come to realize that the New Testament contains neither a commentary on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America nor a prophetic prediction of a nation like ours, and the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah were no more committed to the principle of religious liberty than the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

We swim against the biblical stream. The Jewish State was a theocracy governed by the religious principles and values established in the Torah, the "Five Books of Moses." The Law was firmly anchored in the opening sentence of the Ten Commandments, "I am the LORD your God"; and the king ruled by divine right determined by his faithful service to God. The plurality of religions, a fact of the ancient world, was absolutely intolerable within the borders of Israel. Jewish prejudice against Gentiles at the time of Jesus was a defensive stance designed to protect the purity of Jewish religion against corruption by foreign influence. The history, however, was not so pure as the ideal. Other religions, although strongly condemned, did exist and were practiced within the borders of ancient Israel. In fact, the golden age of Solomon was challenged by the Prophets as an age of compromise of religious purity as well as a corruption of social justice. With Solomon's marriage diplomacy in a harem of thousand wives and concubines most of the religions of the neighboring nations were both permitted and supported.

The ideal Jewish State, however, was almost identical with the radical Islamic nation that so offends our American conscience today. The ambivalence of the American Religious Right toward the First Amendment may be an offense to all who wish to conserve the Constitution, but it should not be a surprise to anyone familiar with the national history of Israel in the Old Testament ideal state. Folks who have a vision of restoring the Davidic Kingdom as presented in the *Left Behind* novels are not likely to tolerate conflicting religious visions even if they come from other Christian communions. A rigid biblical literalism is naturally inclined toward conflict with the civil liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment. We should not be surprised at the comment the late W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas pastor: "There is no such thing as the separation of church and state. It is the figment of the imagination of infidels." Criswell was partly right: Jefferson did not share Criswell's view of the Bible, his commitment to set limits the plurality of religions in the USA, and his drive to establish his own interpretation of the ideal society as the law of the land. By Criswell standards, Jefferson was indeed an "infidel" as are all who share the Jeffersonian ideal of a free church in a free state.

Ironically, American Jews have been consistent advocates of church-state separation in the US in spite of their biblical roots. As a general principle, religious liberty has usually been opposed by majority religious groups, who have strong ties with the powers that be (the State) or who hold to the promise of a religious monopoly. In contrast, religious liberty through the separation of church and state is the darling of religious minorities, victims of religious oppression, and secular people who fear the social power of religion. Controlling the religious agenda of a society through the power of government has long been the standard modus operandi of established religions.

Regardless of politics, power, and influence in society, what possible faith foundation do we have for supporting the separation of church and state?

The rebellion against Rome continues. We can never ignore or forget the political context in which Jesus was born and the gospel was proclaimed. Both Matthew and Luke begin the story of Jesus with birth narratives, and both locate the story of Jesus squarely in the political setting of Caesar's world. With Matthew, Jesus came during the rule of King Herod. With Luke, his birth was associated with a decree from Emperor Augustus. The one uncontested fact of the Four Gospels is that Jesus died at the hands of Pontius Pilate acting under the authority of Rome. Given the context in which Jesus was born, lived, and died, the Gospels could not ignore the Roman political setting. Within forty years of the crucifixion of Jesus, the power of Rome was extended as the Holy City of Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by Roman legions to control revolutionaries daring to defy the authority of Caesar. The Jews hated Rome. Their sacred history had established rule by God as the ultimate authority for life, death, and faith.

Thus, the interrogation of the Pharisees motivated by entrapment was not a random question; it addressed the raging issue of the day. In the contest with antagonists in the Temple during Holy Week, Jesus was asked whether paying taxes to Caesar is permitted. He challenged the hypocrisy of those who carried coins with a "graven image" of Caesar and conveying Roman ideology, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus and high priest." They

had already violated Jewish Law with the possession of these coins. Jesus set forth the simple principle: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Pay your taxes, and worship your God. You have to decide what belongs to Lord Caesar and what belongs to Lord God. He asserted no direct protest to Caesar's authority, but suggested a devotion to God that ultimately takes precedence over all the powers that be. Rome claimed absolute domination over all of her provinces and over every thought and practice of her subjects. Religion was permitted and tolerated to the extent that it was useful for controlling the population. Jesus dared to suggest a realm where God rules that may not have anything to do with Caesar, one beyond Caesar's reach.

John Dominic Crossan does not like the familiar translation of *basileia* in the Gospels, *Kingdom*: "It is not only that *king-* is chauvinistic but that *-dom* sounds primarily local, as if we were talking about some specific site or some geographically delineated location on earth." (*Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*, p. 55) For Crossan the basic question is, "How does human power exercise its rule and how, in contrast, does divine power exercise its rule?" Jesus proclaimed the vision of a world ruled by God, thus, in the interrogation by Pilate before the crucifixion, the focus was on the claimed kingship of Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus responded, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews." Jesus denounced any intention of starting a local revolution against Caesar; nevertheless, his movement was more revolutionary and contained the seeds of rebellion more dramatic than any Rome had ever experienced.

Faith transcends the utilitarian objective. Here lies the theological root of our support of separation of church and state: *Jesus refused either to use or to be used by the authorities of religion or state.* At numerous points in his ministry, Jesus could have made subtle compromises and plays for power to utilize the existing structures to advance his cause. A few minor adjustments in message could have won enough support among the Pharisees and Sadducees to stay within the graces of his religion. Simply avoiding Jerusalem at the time he chose to march directly into the face of controversy would have been a strategic move to avoid the showdown that led to his death. But Jesus died as a rebel both to the religious and secular rule of his time. If the rule of God that he preached is to be taken seriously, it will challenge all the powers of our time.

A principle of Christian stewardship that sets our priorities in life and determines our hierarchy of values is: *worship God; love people; use things.* Misplacing the verbs and objects distorts the values of our faith. To worship things is idolatry. Loving things is materialistic. To use people or to use God is utilitarian. Our covenant interpretation of the meaning of religious liberty through the separation of church and state is "to avoid using or being used by government authorities." To use the resources, authority, or even the influence of the state to advance religious views sets us up for a utilitarian relationship that requires some pay off or reciprocal benefit to the state. If the church uses government funds to operate her programs, then she should not be surprised when the secular state eclipses her values and mission.