

The Christian American Citizen

By J. Brent Walker

Matthew 22:17-21, Romans 13:1-5, Acts 4:13-20

Once again in an election year the subject of religion and politics fills our public discourse. We've come a long way since 1976 when Baptist Jimmy Carter announced he was a "born again" Christian and the entire Washington press corps ó and much of the country ó responded with befuddled amusement. They really didn't know what he was talking about, and were stunned that he spoke so freely and publicly about his faith.

Today, God-talk saturates the candidates' speeches and debates. Religion animates most of the divisive issues from same-sex marriage, to abortion, to faith-based initiatives, to the Ten Commandments, to the Pledge of Allegiance. And the media too! Larry King, Crossfire, Hardball, Real Time, the O'Reilly Factor, Today Show, the evening news ó they just can't seem to get enough of it.

Yes, we've come a long way over the past 25 years ó some would say we've overshot the mark ó as God-talk is now a mandatory (not just a permissible) part of our political rhetoric. And our willingness as a culture to talk about religion openly belies any claim that we have a "naked public square." Religious speech in public places by government leaders, the media and private citizens abounds. Bumper stickers, billboards, truck signs, John 3:16 end zone signs, post-game prayer huddles, cover stories in national news magazines, and religious programming on T.V. and radio. And this year, "The Passion of the Christ" has taken this to a new level.

These days the public square is not naked; in fact, it is "dressed to the nines." We are one of the most religious and certainly the most religiously diverse nation on this planet!

Well, how do we honor our Baptist and American commitment to separation of church and state, while affirming the relevance of religious ethics to politics? How do we have a public conversation about religion without dragging it through the mud of political campaigns? How do we give religion its due ó without promoting a watered-down "civil religion" that in its extreme morphs into an idolatry of nationalism or that trivializes genuine faith?

We need to think clearly about our duties as Christian citizens and our responsibilities to the two kingdoms of which we are a partô the United States of America and the kingdom of God. How we define and respond to those two allegiances is a difficult and often divisive question.

I.

The scriptures give us some guidance, but no easy answers. Jesus told us to "render unto Caesar, the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:15-

22) He affirmed the two kingdoms and our dual allegiance, but he didn't tell us what belonged to whom, did he? He did not say how many taxes to pay to Caesar!

And then we turn to the writings of Paul. In Romans 13 he speaks glowingly of the state. Paul affirms not only allegiance to the state, but he plainly says that the authority of the state is divinely ordained. Civil government is good. God created it to keep order, and to provide for the general welfare. And if Paul's teachings applied to the heavy-handed Roman rule in the first century, how much more should they apply to us living in a robust constitutional democracy. This is the passage we just love to read on the 4th of July.

But then we turn over to Acts 4 and see the encounter of Peter and John with the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a high court who had civic, as well as religious, jurisdiction over the internal affairs of Palestine. The Sanhedrin was exercising the same kind of authority that Paul spoke of so approvingly in Romans 13. When they ordered Peter and John not to preach anymore in Jesus' name, we get a decidedly negative picture of government here. The disciples repudiated civil authority because it sought to interfere with their proclamation of gospel. There are others too ó such as Revelation 13 and 17 ó where the state is called a blasphemous beast and a great harlot. These are the passages we turn to for comfort on the 15th of April!

So we have both of those strains in the Bible. The state is good, but not the ultimate good! And that should not surprise us. The Bible is full of tensions and seeming paradoxes on a variety of scores. These two views of the state also pick up on the theme of "priest" versus "prophet" that we see throughout scripture.

Sometimes Christian citizens are called to be priests to the government ólike Elisha, pasturing, cajoling and comforting Naaman (2 Kings 5). Sometimes we provide a pastoral word to government. (This is hardest to do when your political opponents are in office.) Modern political philosophers, including many of our nation's Founders and other since then, have recognized the value of religion to a stable, democratic government. Civic virtue grounded in religion is part of the glue that holds us together as a society. We should do no less than to pray for our leaders.

But our citizenship demands more. It also drives us to be prophets. Sometimes it requires us to be propheticô like Nathan calling upon David to repent from his sinful ways and to toe the line of righteousness. Religion doesn't exist just to prop up government, but to challenge government and call it to judgment. (This is hard to do when you like those who control the reins of power.)

So, again, how as American citizens of faith do we strike the appropriate balance? We can look to history, as well as scripture. The wise Founders of our republic fashioned a Constitution that outlaws any religious test for public office and protects the freedom of religion and the rights of conscience. Informed by centuries of religious persecution that always occurred when political power and religious zeal come together, the Founders took the radical step of separating church and stateô forbidding government from taking sides in matters of religion.

As a preacher, I know the separation of church and state is goodô not badô for religion; and as a lawyer I know it is good for government too. When we separate the two, religion tends to flourish and flower, and the state is freed from the daunting task of making decisions about religionô something it's not very good at. But you don't have to take my word for it, and it's not a modern notion. James Madisonô the father of the Constitutionó recognized its value when he reflected on this audacious experiment in the 1820s: "The number, industry and morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of church and state."

Having said this, let me quickly add that the separation of church and state does not require a divorcement of religion from politics, or God from government, or Christians from their duties of citizenship. Religious people have as much right as anybody else to seek to vend their convictions in the marketplace of ideas and (with some limits) to convert their religious ethics into public policy by preaching, teaching, voting, getting involved, and even running for office. And candidates for office need not shed their religious beliefs or keep silent about them. Not only is this not prevented, but as a Christian I would say it is required. This is what being salt and light that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount, is all about.

A critic once took the late 19th century preacher Dwight Moody to task for his involvement in political and social affairs. "Are you not a citizen of heaven?" the detractor asked. "Yes, someday I shall be," Moody responded, "but right now I'm registered to vote in Cook County, Illinois." The same is true for us.

We need not limit our piety to the church house or to acts of private devotion, nor do we have to concede the public square to others. We must speak out, become involved, and transform our culture in part through the political process.

II.

We hear a lot of talk these days about the Ten Commandmentsô we'd be better off if we wrote them on our hearts instead of carving them in stone. I want to set out five, not ten, commandments for us to follow as we enter the fray of political life. (Based on "Ten Commandments of Moderate Political Behavior" óRandall Frame and Alan Tharpe.)

1.) Thou shalt acknowledge the limited scope of thy perspective, exercising much humility.

Any foray into politics with focused religious motivation should be tempered with a good dose of humility and self-criticism. Blaise Pascal reminded us that "men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." We need to understand that, however sure we think we are of our position, the other person at least has something to say and maybe in the final analysis is right. This reflects the main problem I have with the bombastic broadsides that we hear mainly from the religious right in recent years. As James Dunn has said, "What they say is not totally false; it is falsely total." It lacks a note of self-evaluation, of tentativeness, of humility that one

needs to bring to bear on a public policy message based squarely on one's religious conviction. This goes for fundamentalism on the religious left as well. We all "see through glass darkly."

Barbara Jordan, our Baptist sister, had it right. At a meeting of the Baptist Joint Committee some fifteen years ago, she was asked how properly to articulate Christian values in government. Her response went something like this: "You would do well to pursue your causes with vigor, while remembering that you are a servant of God, not a spokesperson for God— a servant of God, not a spokesperson for God— and remembering that God might well choose to bless an opposing point of view for reasons that have not been revealed to you." Some humility is called for here.

2.) Thou shalt acknowledge thy brother and sister may disagree with thee and yet deserve thy respect.

Any attempt to elevate "my" view on an issue to the status of "the Christian" position, to the exclusion of others, should be held in check. Religious persons of good will can (and usually do) disagree over how their religious convictions play out in the public arena. As Carl F.H. Henry once said, "there is no direct line from the Bible to the ballot box."

We even see this in Baptist life. Bill Moyers, in his own inimitable way, paints a portrait of Baptists in history and contemporary culture:

Baptists have been to the left of the American establishment — and to the right. Jesse Jackson is a Baptist; so is Jesse Helms. Baptists defended slavery, and Baptists agitated to end it. Some black Baptists churches are precincts of the Democratic Party, while in some white churches GOP stands for God's Own Preserve. Some Baptists read the Bible as if it were a AAA road map to Armageddon: others find it a spiritual codebook to the mysteries and miracles of the Kingdom within. Millions of Baptists see American culture as the enemy. Millions of others proclaim that we are part of the show. On-lookers shake their heads at how people so disputatious could be defined by a common name; those of us who wear it shrug our shoulders at the anomalies and schisms and go on punching (usually each other).

We need to stop trying to convince each other we've got God in our hip pockets. God is not a Republican or a Democrat, nor even an American for that matter. God's precinct is the universe. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln's famous pronouncement about the Civil War, the question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side. God is not aligned with any political party, but is able to work within and through all political movements and nations to accomplish his purposes.

We will not always agree on issues of public policy or vote the same way.

3.) Thou shalt speak and act in a way that does not undercut thy Christian witness, resisting the temptation to stereotype.

This means at least that we don't lie about our opponents, or distort their positions or resort to violence. It means that we speak forcefully to be sure but also truthfully, directly, and lovingly ó always paying proper attention to nuance. Charles Colson has warned conservatives and liberals alike "to cool the incendiary rhetoric. " He says the so-called culture war will "never be won by waving placards in the faces of supposed enemies or whacking them with leather bound Bibles."

And bumper stickers, sound bites, and clever sloganeering do little to advance the commonweal. Shrill examples fill and often debase our politics. For example, (1) Those who are pro-choice are not "pro-abortion"ô they simply don't want government to invade the sanctity of a woman's body. Those who are pro-life are not necessarily "anti-choice" ó they simply move the time for choosing back to the act of conception. (2) Those who favor same-sex marriages or civil unions may not be as much "pro-gay" as they are pro-equal protection and in favor of civil rights for all. Those who oppose such measures are not always "homophobic bigots, " but people who are trying to be faithful to their understanding of biblical truth. (3) Those who oppose government hanging of the Ten Commandments in public places are not "anti-Ten Commandments;" they simply don't want government officials picking the preferred religion and scriptural passage endorsing the message, "I am the Lord your Godí You shall have no other gods before me." (4) Those who decry the policies of the Religious Right are not all "Christian bashers;" and those who rail against the coarsening and secularization of our culture are not all "benighted reactionaries."

But these outlandish diatribes against one another continue. We need to watch what we say and debate our differences responsibly. There's no room for this kind of thing, particularly among persons of faith. We must speak and act in a way that sheds light, not heat, on the important issues of our day.

4.) Thou shalt not fall into the civil religion trap.

Through our debate should be civil, our religion shouldn't be. Civil Religion? Robert Linder defines it as "that generalized form of national faith that mixes ... piety with patriotism and traditional religion with national life until it is impossible to distinguish between the two." It's the merger of a fuzzy Judeo/ Christian consensus with uncritical, flag-waving Americanism. Former Senator Mark Hatfield adds that, civil religion "distorts the relationship between the state and our faith. It tends to enshrine ... national righteousness while failing to speak of repentance, salvation and God's standard of justice."

Civil religion results when we fail properly to distinguish between god and government. It happens when we go too long on the pastoral and too short on the prophetic. When we fail to keep that healthy distance from government, we can get captured by government and used for political purposes. We can become "cheerleaders" instead of "referees."

Civil religion in its extreme form amounts to an idolatry of nationalism, sure enough. We need to place our faith in the biblical God of justice and righteousness, not the puny deity of civil religion.

5.) Thou shalt not involve thy church in electoral politics.

While our duties as citizens of faith require individuals to become involved, churches and religious organizations must be more circumspect. First, it can jeopardize our tax-exempt status. The tax code is clear that, while churches may take position on public issues, they may not support or oppose candidates for public office. This includes outright endorsement, financial support, distributing campaign literature and joining political action committees.

Churches, of course, may encourage good citizenship and promote voter education by distributing voting records of candidates and unbiased results of candidates questionnaires on a range of issues, holding a public forum and debate (as long as all candidates are invited), and spearheading voter registration drives. Ministers and other church leaders may become involved in politics as long as it's clear that they are doing so as individuals, not representing the church.

Even if you don't care about your tax-exempt status^o which I can't believe^o it's still not a good idea for a church to become involved. It can be dangerous and highly divisive and turn our pulpit prophets into political puppets. We must be careful about the activities of the church in the arena of political campaigns.

Thou shalt not involve thy church in electoral politics!

III.

Richard Niebuhr wrote a very thoughtful book years ago called *Christ and Culture*. It outlined five different ways Christians can (and do) relate to the surrounding culture. (1) Christ against culture, (2) Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, (4) Christ and culture in paradox, and finally, the one he likes the best, (5) Christ transforming culture ^o for the church to so penetrate culture that it converts the world around it through its public presence and witness. And, at the very end of the book he gives this parting advice ^o advice to guide our decision making as we try to transform culture:

[We] make our decisions in faith ... [and] make them in view of the fact that no single [person] or group or historical time is the church; but there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work, ... [We] make them in view of the fact that Christ ... is not only the head of the church but the redeemer of the world. [We] make them, in view of the fact that the world of culture^o man's achievement ^o exists within the world of grace ^o God's Kingdom.

So the Christian American Citizen moves in both realms ^o the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. And we are at the proper time both pastoral and prophetic. We speak

our piece and advance our cause with humility, not expecting that others will agree, or claiming to know for sure the mind of God. And we behave responsibly and with integrity knowing that unworthy means are never justified by even the worthiest of ends.

May God bless us and forgive our failures as we go.