

Two Sides of the Same Coin

By J. Brent Walker

Matthew 22:15-22; Gal. 5:1, 13-14

It started out as a clever plot to trap Jesus ó hatched by the most unlikely of allies: Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees: they were religious purists, Jewish patriots who despised Roman rule. The Herodians: they supported the descendants of Herod and were in league with the Romans. But they feared Jesus more than they respected God; they despised Jesus more than they hated each other. So they got together to ask Jesus a question that was bound to get him in trouble.

With sweet mockery and feigned interest they said: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God, and don't care what people think of you, tell us what you think ó is it lawful to pay a poll tax to Caesar?" Must have happened sometime in the month of April.

Ah! They had him. The tax was despised by the Jewish people. If he said yes, his credibility would be ruined. But, if he said no, the Romans would charge him with treason. "We win, Jesus loses, either way."

But Jesus saw through their trick, and he would not be trapped. Nor would he avoid the issue. It must be addressed. In a day when the state was sacred, Jesus dropped a bombshell that silenced his critics. "Yes," he said, "you do have an obligation to support the government. But, the authority of the state has its limits, because there is also a duty to God's kingdom -- which claims a higher citizenship. So, pay your tax to Caesar ó it belongs to him. See, his picture is on it. But render to God the things that are God's ó obedience, service, praise, honor, -- the things that are due in God's kingdom."

Part of our difficulty here is Jesus didn't give us specific instructions. He didn't tell us exactly what belonged to whom. He didn't say, for example, how many taxes to pay Caesar. Remember that song titled, "If 10% is good enough for Jesus, it ought to be enough for Uncle Sam?" Jesus did not say that. And, we don't know if Jesus would support a cut in capital gains tax as someone in a Sunday school class of mine once tried to argue with a straight face.

But the general principle is clear that we are citizens of two realms ó the country in which we live and the kingdom of God. Although the two realms only sometimes clash, they often require us to make difficult choices about to whom to "render"!

Jesus used a coin ó a denarius ó for an object lesson, and this quarter continues to serve us well today. As we think about: (1) our allegiance to these two kingdoms, (2) the proper relationship between church and state and (3) the connection between rights and responsibility, we are confronted by both sides of that coin. The coin always has two

sides. We can't simply flip the coin and hope for the best! Faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship require us to grapple with the tension between the two.

1. Patriotism v. Piety

The first tension is between patriotism and piety. We have struggled with this for ever. In fact, the quarter I'm using for an object lesson, itself, bears the religious inscription "In God We Trust" on one side, and the secular motto, E Pluribus Unum, on the other. And since 1954 our patriotic pledge to Caesar has included the pietistic affirmation "under God."

This dualism has always challenged us, but perhaps never so clearly as during the last three years. A healthy sense of patriotism is good, natural and even biblical. The Apostle Paul tells us, in Romans 13, to respect civil leaders and governmental structures, because they are put in place by God for our protection. We should celebrate the uniqueness of America and thank God for our freedom.

But the same Paul who tells us to respect government authorities, also warns us to discriminate when listening to the "rulers of this age" (1 Corinthians 2:6). And we should always read Romans 13 alongside of Revelation 13 and 17 where the state is called a blasphemous beast and a great harlot.

In times of national crisis and war we often see a rise in a "civil religion" ó a merger of piety and patriotism ó where love of country becomes a secularized religion and Jesus is relegated to a deputy secretary of defense.

In an attempt to express our patriotism we often say or sing "God Bless America." Now, I love the song and the sentiment. I fondly remember my mother singing it when I was a child. When sung in a spirit of worship, "God Bless America" is a beautiful prayer for our country and its leaders ó something we are told to do in Scriptures. But when we say "God Bless America" in a spirit of triumph that assumes "God's on our side," it is not a pious prayer but a patriotic boast. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges us to pray not only for ourselves, but also for our enemies. (Jesus reminds us that what makes us different as Children of God is that we love all people, and leave it to God to judge good and evil (Matthew 5:43-48).) So when we pray, "God, Bless America" we should also pray "God, Bless the Whole World: No Exceptions." And when we sing "God Bless America," we should also sing "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world."

Piety and patriotism? They are both good things; but they are not the same thing. It is wrong to baptize our political agendas and policy aims in the sacred water of divine approval.

2. Church v. State

The second tension is the one between church and state on a more constitutional level. Our wise founders gave us the First Amendment to protect our God-given religious liberty by prohibiting the government from entering the precincts of religion.

The first sixteen words of the First Amendment provide: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

These two clauses, working together, require government to be neutral towards religion ó neither helping nor hurting religion, but turning it loose to allow people of faith to practice their religion as they see fit, not as government sees fit. Government must accommodate religion without advancing it; protect religion without privileging it; sometimes lift burdens on our religious liberty without extending religion a benefit.

Both of these clauses ensure our religious liberty; both require the separation of church and state. Full religious liberty is a goal; church-state separation is the political means of accomplishing that goal.

Yes, history teaches that government and religion are both better off when neither tries to do the job of the other. This is especially important in our religiously diverse culture. The plush pluralism that we see all around us demands a robust enforcement of the First Amendment. An institutional and functional separation of church and state promotes a free state and a healthy church.

As we survey historyô the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, religious wars in 17th century Europe, the jailing of Baptist preachers in colonial Virginiaô and contemporary eventsô the September 11 tragedy, the atrocities of the Taliban and repressive theocracies from East to Westô we see what happens when religious zeal is combined with coercive power. We are alarmed by the demands of clerics for a theocratic regime in post-war Iraq. Americans now should be even more insistent upon upholding the wall of separation.

But, I'm afraid we're headed in the opposite direction.

It's one thing for our federal government to encourage private charitable giving and to work with religious organizations to fight poverty; but quite another to dump tax dollars into the coffers of churches to finance their ministries--along with the regulations and entanglements that will surely follow.

The movement to post the 10 Commandments in our classrooms and courthouses across the country has been reinvigorated. The 10 Commandments embody sound moral instruction, but they are also holy writ: "I am the Lord your God you shall have no other God before me." I can think of little better than for everyone to read and obey those words and the 10 Commandments; I can think of little worse than for American politicians to tell us to do it.

Every day should be a "National Day of Prayer" — not just the one Congress designates on the first Thursday in May. In recent years, the Senate chaplain — a government official — even wrote the prayer for us to say! Roger Williams, John Leland and George Truett must be turning over! It's not government's job to tell us when or what or for whom to pray.

And, there is a pending bill in the House of Representatives that would encourage churches to endorse candidates, while maintaining their tax-exempt status. What a divisive and corrosive idea — one that dismisses our very calling to challenge the "principalities and powers" and which surely would turn our pulpit prophets into political puppets!

Some of this is an understandable reaction to the grief and outrage we have all shared over the last three years. But, we need to be especially careful in times of national crisis and grief — days of heightened nationalism and war — not to forsake these time-honored constitutional principles that make America America!

Rights v. Responsibility

The final tension is between rights v. responsibility. Freedom is fundamental to what it means to be an American and a Baptist Christian. But it is important to realize that our freedom is not unlimited. We are to avoid license as well as legalism, and put freedom to good use. After extolling the virtues of Christian freedom, Paul writes in the fifth chapter of Galatians:

"Brothers and Sisters, do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, —you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:13-14, NRSV)

Our freedom can never be separated from — and must always be limited by — the responsibility that we have to one another. As journalist Bill Moyers has aptly put it:

"[Our Baptist beliefs]...do not make for lawless anarchy or the religion of Lone Rangers... They aim for a community with moral integrity, the wholeness that flows from mutual obligation. Our religion is an adventure in freedom within the bounds of accountability."

Part of what it means to love one's neighbor and to be accountable to one another, is to take responsibility for each other's rights and to respect differing opinions — even those with which we disagree. In our diverse culture, we will never agree on religious dogma — not even in Baptist life. Nor should we water down our own beliefs to achieve some politically correct (or patriotically correct) superficial consensus. The vague relativism of a lowest-common-denominator religion is offensive to all who possess strong religious conviction. But we can agree to take responsibility for ensuring that everyone has the right to his or her opinion and religious belief. My rights are no stronger than your willingness to stand up for them; your rights are no more secure than my courage to defend them.

Martin Niemoeller, a German Evangelical Lutheran pastor, was imprisoned for eight years by the Nazi regime. He spoke of the days in the 1930's when Hitler was coming to power:

"First they came for the Communists, but we were not communists, so we said nothing. Then they came for the trade unionists, but we were not trade unionists, so we said nothing. They then came for the Jews, but we were not Jews, so we said nothing. They then came for the mentally deficient, but we were not mentally deficient, so we said nothing. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to say anything."

Pastor Niemoeller's haunting words remind us that liberal protestants, conservative evangelicals, moderate and fundamentalist Baptist and Catholics of every stripe must be as concerned about the religious liberty of the Muslim, the Mormon, the Jew, the Jain, the Rastafarian, the Zoroastrian, the Buddhist, the Baha'i, the Hindu, the Hare Krishna, the Christian Scientist, the Scientologist, as they are for their own.

We've made some strides here, in recent years. Many (including President Bush) have stepped forward to defend the rights of American Muslims ó so much so that the President has been attacked by some on the far right as being too sympathetic to Islam. But we still fall short. "Religious Liberty for me but not for thee" often characterizes how we treat others. A recent survey shows that nearly half of those polled think church-state separation either goes too far or is unnecessary and nearly 20 percent are okay with an officially established church. Forty percent endorse greater surveillance of Islamic mosques. I worry about how we will treat Muslims and others of Arab decent on our soil as we continue to wage war in Iraq and fight terrorism! We must respect, defend, stand up for the "least among us" ó even those, particularly those, with whom we disagree.

Conclusion

The two sides of that coin continue to confront and challenge usô piety/patriotism, church/state, rights/responsibility. They will not go away! Faithful discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ and responsible citizenship in the United States of America require that we pay attention to both sides as we seek to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we go, and may God forgive and be gracious unto us if we don't quite get it right.