

Uncivil Religion

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Matthew 4.1-11

Civil religion has always been a part of the American cultural landscape. Pilgrims old and new in the American experience have referenced Divine Providence as the Source of the liberty we hold so dear in this great nation. The purpose of this civil religion quite simply is to make good citizens, and the tenets of this civil religion are woven into the very fabric of our republic: recognition of our Creator and ceremonial invocation in the public square of that Creator's help; celebration of the religious and ethnic diversity that so "fearfully and wonderfully" makes our American family; separation of the strategic roles that church and state play in our national community; promotion of the general welfare of all of our citizens, particularly those with limited access to the blessings of liberty; and bi-partisan cooperation in advancing the democratic and republican (both spelled in lower case) ideals of our national life. This coming Sunday in pulpits all across our land, including the one God has entrusted to me, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession will be lifted up, summarized in lyrics of the beautiful hymn, "America, America, God shed His grace on Thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."

But today religion in the public square has been stripped of its civility. A disease of uncivil religion has infected our land. This disease has been incubating for 25 years, but has reached epidemic proportions in our current time of terror. The motivation of uncivil religion is not to recognize God in our national life, but, rather, to represent him. The high priests of this uncivil religion desire not so much to speak **to** God in the public square, but, rather, to speak **for** God. Toleration of diversity has been replaced by persecution of it. Ceremonial prayer has been supplanted by sectarian orthodoxy. Unity and consensus is seen as moral compromise; division and fear are the tools of choice. A weird historical revisionism seeks to rewrite the foundational value of religious liberty as something novel and exotic and dangerous, rather than the basis upon which our founding fathers and mothers built American democracy. Brent Walker is shockingly correct in saying, "If put to a vote today, the First Amendment would not pass." God has been kidnapped, co-opted for political ambitions. Houses of worship have been turned into precincts of partisanship. Uncivil religion no longer wants government to make citizens. It wants government to make converts.

A *Washington Post* report from this past Tuesday confirms this. The forces of uncivil religion reacted to Monday's Supreme Court decision on the posting of the Ten Commandments by launching a national campaign to place 100 Ten Commandments monuments this year on public property. This means that the disease is spreading to your town, only infecting our national family with further division and alienation. Free and

faithful Baptists know how to respond to this incivility. We are going to launch a counter national movement to post the Ten Commandments. We will not settle for only a paltry 100 postings. No, we will not stop until millions and millions of placements of God's Law are successfully positioned all over this land. We are not going to put them where the high priests of uncivil religion tell us they must be placed, but, rather where the Lord God himself tells us to put them. Hear the Word of the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah:

"But this is the covenant I will make, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31.33)

We are all for the display of the Ten Commandments, more displays than an Alabama judge can possibly imagine. We just want them put where God says to put them, on human hearts that cannot be corrupted by cynical powers and principalities--not on courthouse lawns. As Robert Parham says, we stand for a movement of God's Law, not a monument.

When a pompous politician in Mark Twain's day tried to manipulate the Ten Commandments for his own political ambitions, Twain made a suggestion that our contemporary politicians would do well to heed. It seems the mayor of Boston was holding forth in a social setting on his grandiose plan to lead a contingency to the Sinai Peninsula to discover the famous mysterious mount of Moses encounter with God. Upon finding the mountain, he would stand on the apex and read the Ten Commandments with great fanfare to his entourage. After having heard all of this hypocritical blather he could stand, Twain spoke up: "Mayor, I have a better idea. Instead of reading the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, why don't you just stay right here in Boston and try to keep them?"

American civil religion has always celebrated a free church in a free state. It recognizes the place of government as ordained by God, and manages the creative balance between the two spheres. This tension is spelled out with transcendent wisdom in both Scripture and the Constitution. Our civil liberty is carefully preserved in a rule of law that dictates neither the establishment of religion nor the prohibition of its free exercise. The interpretation and application of that law gets thorny sometimes in a diverse and complex society, but generally people of common sense and goodwill recognize excesses when they occur.

Our Lord himself endorsed the measured and appropriate recognition of government's role in his famous encounter with the Herod party of his day. They came to Jesus trying to get him to contradict and violate his legendary monotheism, and his exclusive allegiance to God. "Tell us then what you think," they asked Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus, knowing their malicious intent, asked them to show him the coin used to pay the tax to the Roman government, a denarius, about a day's wage for a common laborer. "Whose head is this?" Jesus asked, pointing to the image of

the emperor embossed on the coin. "And whose title?" When they answered, Jesus gave his classic response, "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22.15-22) Go ahead and give the government its proper due, but anybody with a lick of sense knows the guy on this coin isn't God. God cannot be imaged or titled. God is the great I AM, beyond representation and description. Give that God your life--completely, totally, exhaustively. Tip your hat to Caesar, turn over your heart to God.

I don't imagine that this text was read at that political rally, the so-called "Justice Sunday," held several weeks ago in a Kentucky church. You can't give your lives whole-hog to Caesar like those folks are doing and put up with Jesus at the same time. This is one of the many parts of the Scriptures that the uncivil religionists conveniently leave out of their canon. Would somebody show me in the Bible where it says we have to get our guy elected to office before we can advance the kingdom of God? I may have missed it, but I don't remember one single instance where the church ran a candidate for the Roman Senate.

It is no theological accident that Jesus was put to the test of uncivil religion by the Devil himself. At the outset of his ministry, he was shown all the kingdoms of world with their massive power and glittering prestige, and promised access to this wealth and power in exchange for only one small act of tribute. This was the original faith-based initiative, and Jesus knew it. The Devil knew it too, just like those operatives in Washington who dangle similar carrots in front of inner-city pastors know it. Imagine what Jesus could have done with all that money and all those resources. He could have set up schools and clinics and treatment centers and food banks and homeless shelters. The devil offered Jesus a voucher system. He didn't take it. If Jesus had wanted us to build his kingdom with the support of government, he would have chosen the Devil's option. Jesus knew you can't have the blessing of God and the buy-off of government at the same time. Jesus repudiated the Devil's tempting offer in a rebuke we need unambiguously to give the uncivil religionists of our day: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." (Matthew 4.10)

There is a cure for the infection of uncivil religion sweeping our land today: the liberating Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I sense power in this room today because of you and your witness to religious freedom. The army of the Lord's freedom fighters is not defeated today. We are all here because we know that the forces of love will prevail over the forces of fear. If faith is the evidence of things not seen, as St. Paul assures us, then the prospects for a faith of freedom have never been better. Faith is never so vital than when nothing else will do. Emily Dickinson was uncharacteristically off when she wrote:

Faith is a fine invention
When gentlemen can see
But microscopes are prudent
In an emergency.

The converse, of course, is the truth of the matter: never is faith more energized than when the prospects for it are dim. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith." In his very first sermon, our Lord gave us his--and our--marching orders:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4.18-19)

Let us go forth from this room proclaiming with bold faith the unhindered gospel of freedom. Start with your email. When somebody sends you yet another piece of spam about prayer being removed from public schools, take the time to educate your correspondent about the dangers of state-sponsored prayer in your children's classrooms, and hit the "reply to all" button when you send it. When you hear hate and division being broadcast on talk radio, take the time to call in and challenge your listeners to the "more excellent way" of love. Better yet, start your own radio program! You're more articulate than the guy you're listening to anyway. Preach the blessings of religious liberty from your pulpits, teach them from the lecterns of your Sunday School classes. Write op-ed pieces for your local newspapers. You're wiser and more insightful than the pundits printed there. Let those immortal words of Paul to the Galatians ring out in your congregations and communities: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5.1)

In the summer of 1977, when I was 20 years old, the Lord called me into the ministry of his wonderful gospel. The place of that call was our nation's capital where I worked in a faith and public policy internship sponsored by Riverside Baptist and St. Dominic's Catholic Churches. In the mornings, I visited the institutions of our national government in meetings arranged by the good folks of the two congregations. It was thrilling for a young man aspiring to be an attorney to meet senators, members of Congress, cabinet officials, and bureaucrats of the various governmental agencies. In fact, it was that part of the internship that attracted me most. What better place to learn about power and how it is wielded than Washington D.C.? But, in the afternoons, I conducted a day camp for the poor children living on the projects, literally in the shadow of the gilded shrines I had just visited that morning. The contrast of the two worlds gripped my young imagination. In the mornings, I was with some of the most powerful people on earth; in the afternoons, I was with the weakest and most marginal. It was those children of God--not the power-brokers of government-- that changed my life. God spoke to me through those kids in a way so compelling that if that speech had been audible it would not have been any more real. The exquisite way these children, who were deprived of every conceivable amenity and security of life, were able to give and receive love was stunning to me. They claimed me. I was driven to give myself to the service of Christ, a calling and a gift that, next only to my family, has been the unspeakable joy of my life.

My brothers and sisters, every one of you have a call and a claim on your life that is equally compelling. Such a claim cannot be made by Caesar, but only by the crucified Christ. I testify to you that the kingdom you are building is not of this world. It can neither be constructed nor restricted by government. We're not going to let a few false prophets of an uncivil religion deter us with their demagoguery. We're bigger and better than that.