

Critical Questions for American Christians
“What is the Connection Between Church and State?”

Mark 12: 14-17

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Well, here we are on the 4th of July. What a great time to be alive. What a privilege to be an American. What a joy to worship God in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Among other things, we hold this right to be sacred: “That Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” We believe in the separation of Church and State. The thought is inherent in the statement of Jesus who said, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to the God the things that are God’s.” The First Amendment guarantees freedom OF religion, not freedom FROM religion in America. That’s what I would like to talk about today.

IT’S TIME TO MOVE FROM CIVIL RELIGION TO AUTHENTIC FAITH.

For my entire life, there has been a concentrated effort in the name of pluralism to remove religion from public life. The urge to purge God, however, has proven to be more difficult than most crusaders anticipated.

True, we no longer have prayer in public schools, yet the same Congress which banned the practice in public schools begins each session with a prayer from a tax paid chaplain. Maybe Congress needs prayer more than school children do.

Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore was relieved of his office two years ago for refusing to remove a 2.6 ton granite monument containing the Ten Commandments from a state building. Meanwhile, the east entrance to the Supreme Court building showcases a massive sculpture of Moses bearing two tablets on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed.

Isn’t that just like God? Kick Him out the front door and He sneaks in the back. The Supreme Court itself begins each of its sessions with the phrase, “God save the United States and this honorable court.” How dare God to be that mischievous! George Washington as an afterthought said, “So help me God” after taking the oath of office for President and presidents have been saying it ever since. There are Biblical passages etched in stone everywhere. To purge Washington of God’s name would take more tax dollars than we can afford. It would even alter our currency itself, which continues to proclaim “IN GOD WE TRUST.” Getting God out of public life is proving to be more difficult than we ever imagined.

So a more recent tactic and, in my opinion, a more offensive one is to render public religious statements meaningless. Justice David Souter wrote this

concerning the current conflict over the Pledge of Allegiance: “The usage of “under God” in the pledge is kind of a “civic exercise.” It is something that is so tepid, so diluted, so far from a compulsory prayer that it should be beneath the constitutional radar.” Reciting it is a rote civic exercise with little or no religious meaning. “Under God” is a patriotic statement, not a religious one. That sounds like a very different interpretation than that of Dwight Eisenhower who said upon the insertion of “under God” in the pledge in 1954 that “school children would now daily proclaim the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty.”

Perhaps the real answer to religion in America comes not from words written by our forefathers in documents and stone, but words written on the hearts of our people and practiced in our relationships with one another. Not civil religion, but authentic faith is our hope of salvation.

We continue to be an incurably religious people. Ninety percent of us believe in God. Eighty-five percent of us are Christian. Sixty-five percent of us consider religion to be important in daily life. Forty percent of us attend a religious service weekly. Can we transform that emotion into daily devotion and authentic faithful living?

IT'S TIME TO MOVE FROM INSTITUTIONAL SURVIVAL TO PROPHETIC SERVICE.

Twenty-five years ago, Marlene Wilson wrote an article entitled “Religion, the Sleeping Giant.” In it she defined the enormous potential of churches and other religious organizations to materialize thousands of volunteers, acting on their faith and moral principles to tackle social needs.

In 1996, the Welfare Reform Act signed by President Clinton enabled some houses of worship to receive tax dollars for the delivery of social services. President Bush, in presenting his Faith Based Initiative, effectively threw down the gauntlet to churches and religious organizations saying, “It’s time to unleash the armies of compassion in every city of America to provide hope for people where hope doesn’t exist.”

Oh I know, any partnership between government and churches is laced with poison and packed with dynamite. It raises all kinds of questions about the separation of Church and State and rightfully so. But the challenge is clear whether or not the government pays for it. The Church can no longer be the Church and continue to ignore the homeless, the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned, the addicted, the welfare to work families and those infected with HIV or AIDS. Furthermore, we are discovering that faith-based initiatives with a clear hope of transformation and challenge to disciplined living are very successful in tackling these social problems.

Let me explain what I mean by telling you three stories, one about my son and two about my sons in ministry. Two years ago our son, Wes, was assigned to a hopeless parish in a poor section of Lexington, KY. The handful of people

remaining in that church was hostile and offensive. One woman met Wes at the door his first Sunday and informed him that he would not be there long for they intended to run him off like they had the previous two pastors. Wes asked for prayers. When a homeless man died on the church steps, Wes organized a Room in the Inn ministry like the one here in Nashville. When the neighborhood association complained of decline, he invited them to the church to strategize community improvement ministries. He organized a recovery program for alcohol and drug addicts. Meanwhile, he preached the gospel in what has emerged as one of the most diverse, eclectic, multi-ethnic congregations I have seen. Last year he baptized more people than this church did. He led the conference in professions of faith. People are coming to know the Lord and finding help in the time of need.

For the last 15 years, a couple from one of my former churches have invested themselves in ministry with the poverty stricken Portland area of western Louisville. I held their hands the Sunday they decided to move their family to that neighborhood because God was calling them to live there. A large state-of-the-art community center was built with the help of area churches. Habitat houses are replacing shacks in the neighborhood. And last year, the first young person from their youth group enrolled in Lindsay Wilson College, the first of her family to pursue a higher education. Changing lives, one person at a time.

Shortly before I left Louisville, I asked my district superintendent for the use of an abandoned church in downtown Louisville. He was in the process of closing it and I had a youth minister who was interested in inner city ministries. It has gone through several evolutions over the past three years, but about six months ago Brian and his wife, out of their own resources, started inviting the people in the surrounding housing projects to Sunday morning breakfast and worship. The sanctuary was transformed into a breakfast table. Today, they feed about 200 people breakfast every Sunday morning and then lead them in worship and Bible study.

IT'S TIME TO MOVE FROM POLITICAL POSTURING TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER.

Every time our General Conference meets, they pass resolutions on every subject under the sun. Most of them come to the floor late at night when delegates are too tired to debate or fast asleep. After conference, these resolutions are published in a book which people seldom read.

I have often wondered if a better use of time would be spent in prayer instead of protest. When the early Church wanted to change the culture of the world, they prayed. When the early Church had a disagreement, they prayed. When their leaders were put in jail, they prayed. When the circle of believers needed to be expanded to the Gentiles, it was revealed to Peter through prayer.

It all reminds me of one of my favorite stories. A local congregation became greatly disturbed that a nightclub was opening in the neighborhood. The

concerned pastor called the members together for a prayer meeting where the people asked the Lord to intervene. That night, lightning struck the nightclub and burned it down. The owner of the club proceeded to sue the church for damages. The church denied any responsibility. When the case finally reached the judge, he made this observation: "Whether or not the church is responsible for the fire, only God knows. But it does appear that the nightclub owners believe in prayer while the church members do not."

So when we sing "God Bless America" this 4th of July, do we mean it as a prayer or a protest? If God were to truly bless America, would we be ready for the kind of blessing he would likely bring?

As we come to Holy Communion, let us make it a season of prayer: prayer for our country, prayer for our sons and daughters in the military, prayer for our church, prayer for one another. Today let this be a house of prayer.

Amen.