

Hot Topics

Church and State

Psalm 33:12; Proverbs 14:34; 2 Chronicles 7:14

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Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, The people He has chosen as His own inheritance (Psalm 33:12).

Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a reproach to *any* people (Proverbs 14:34).

...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Introduction

After six months of regular church attendance, the atheist/attorney finally called for an appointment. I was thrilled! Was there a transformation? Had the Lord touched his heart? People come to church for all sorts of reasons. Why had he been coming so consistently? I was more than happy to meet with him, a bit curious too.

He sat across from me in my study. He had listened to me for hours. Now I would listen to him. He was a thinker. He had pondered Christianity, but there were roadblocks. He voiced them.

“Why do Christians insist” he asked, “on forcing their political and ethical beliefs upon others?” I hadn’t anticipated this question. I was expecting something simple like, “why does God allow evil?” No, he just didn’t understand why something as personal and intimate as one’s faith, had to spill over into politics. After all, faith is so holy and politics are so...political.

I’ve heard this before. As a Christian, I am often bombarded by some undefined segment of our culture chastising me for seeking to “force” my beliefs on others and insist that they live by my morality.” There seems to

be legitimate confusion and even frustration. I sought to offer an explanation:

I asked my lawyer/friend if he thought I should vote. He said I should. To him voting was serious business. People ought to vote! Good Americans vote! People died so we can vote! But isn't it logically necessary that, in the very act of voting, a person is seeking to force their beliefs upon everyone who is voting against whatever that person might be voting for?

It doesn't seem consistent to tell me I should vote and then tell me that I shouldn't seek to force my beliefs upon others. That is exactly what voting does. Even the Amish, who shy away from political interactions in general, will occasionally vote.

Let's put some footsteps to this we walk with into the voting booth:

The propositions and candidates stare at me from the confusing little punch-card booklet. Pick a number, vote "yes" vote "no" vote for "ME!" It seems I have some decisions to make. Should marriage be only between a man and a woman? Should it be illegal to terminate babies prior to birth? Should murderers be put to death? Should pornography be outlawed? Should prostitution be a crime? Should creation be taught in schools? Should the pledge of allegiance (if we have it at all) include some reference to God?

These decisions lie before us. When we vote, whose beliefs should we be seeking to force upon others? I, personally, believe the reasonable and conscientious vote to all of the above should be 'yes'. It's someone else's belief that the vote be 'no'. Either way, somebody is seeking to force their beliefs on somebody else. In a society where people vote (voting is just an obvious example. It can be any action within the political exchange) this is simply unavoidable.

What's really going on here?

Since voters necessarily seek to force their beliefs upon others, it would appear that the actual objection is against those who have a religious genesis for their system of ethics and beliefs. This is where the famous *separation of church and state* (which, interestingly, is not in the Constitution) becomes the common mantra.

I don't have time for a deep dive here, be it said that the separation of church and state (which I actually agree with) is quite different than the separation of God and state. As we shall see, the founders had no such intention of separating God from our civil affairs. People don't want

religion forced upon them. If by saying this people mean they don't want to be forced to attend church against their will, 'amen'.

But people fail to understand that Christianity is also world view. My faith is not like my health club or butcher who I visit then forget about when I move on to a different category in my life. My faith informs every aspect of my life, including politics.

Why is it appropriate for certain people to vote in a manner consistent with what they learned from their parents or tabloids or sitcoms, but it is inappropriate for me to vote in a manner consistent with what I've learned from reading sacred Scripture? If I believe the Scriptures are the zenith of truth and wisdom, why would I look elsewhere in terms of appropriate choices in the booth?

It would appear that people offer one disqualified option when it comes to political decision making. If you're making a political decision that you have derived from studying your Bible, that is disallowed.

But why does the origin of my ideals somehow disqualify them (or me) from playing a part in the public arena? Why are the teachings of Moses and the Apostle Paul considered unacceptable influences in the venue of civic conscience, while the sentiments of Oprah Winfrey, Bruce Springsteen or Sean Penn or for that matter, Hobbes, Descartes, Bacon, Voltaire deemed admissible? It hardly seems fair to disqualify my opinion because you don't like its origin. It's a genetic fallacy.

People should vote (or participate politically at whatever level) in a manner consistent with their highest belief. The Christian source for the highest ideals is the Bible. It trumps all human wisdom. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," the Proverbs teach, "and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight." That includes politics.

Perhaps you will hear the objection that one cannot legislate morality. But the determination of crimes (which is the primary purpose of politics), by their very nature, are (or at least should be) determined by that which is moral or immoral. The popular slogan that you can't legislate morality is not a well-thought-out proposition. Why in the world would something be a crime if it were not immoral? If stealing were not immoral, it would not be a crime.

Our Country's Religious History

At this juncture I want to be clear that even if our country did not have a distinctly Christian foundation, it should have. I am not canonizing America or equating it to the Kingdom of heaven or some such thing. Nonetheless, I think it is important that we realize that it is simply false that our founders were irreligious in our nation's establishment.

About ten years ago the Los Angeles Times ran a full-page ad encouraging the people of the United States to "Celebrate Our Godless Constitution." The ad framed six founding fathers accompanied by dubious, out of context, quotations designed to enlighten the reader to the general disdain these fathers had when it came to God's unwanted intrusion into the political affairs of men. The ad was sponsored by the *Freedom From Religion Foundation*.

I won't take too much time here to see to debunk this obvious error. Suffice it to say that John Adams (the second president) wrote to his wife, Abigail that the celebration of our independence (he thought it would be the 2nd of July but was actually the 4th of July) should be "commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty." As well as a great deal of celebrating.

It was Adams opinion (which was the general opinion of the founders) that acknowledging the God of Scripture was necessary to the continued independence of any nation. The aged Benjamin Franklin would later mirror Adams' resolve in a famous speech given in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention. "The longer I live" Franklin explained, "the more convincing proofs I see of this Truth...that God governs in the Affairs of Men." In his inimitable style, Franklin pressed the issue, "I also believe that without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel."

Six hundred years prior to Christ, the prophet Jeremiah anticipated Babylon's coming attack upon Israel with the words:

Hear, O earth! Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people – The fruit of their thoughts, Because they have not heeded My words, Nor My law, but rejected it (Jeremiah 6:19).

Israel had developed a system of government and behavior which promoted and justified oppression, violence, plundering and false religion. Similar to present day America they were operating under their own godless life and world view which inevitably leads to the oppression of the poor, violence toward the defenseless and plundering of the productive – all in the name of charity and progress.

An early warning came to Israel from God that Adams, Franklin et al valued as wise counsel.

**Be instructed, O Jerusalem, Lest My soul depart from you;
Lest I make you desolate, A land not inhabited (Jeremiah 6:8).**

Could there be a worse judgment than a country without a true soul? As for me, I take rank with Adams. Whatever one thinks this country is, or should be, the notion that the founders and their predecessors did not view America as a Christian enterprise requires a tower of suspended disbelief.

Moses, holding the Ten Commandments, is the central figure atop the building where the U.S. Supreme Court meets; The Ten Commandments are also found in the Supreme Court courtroom; Bible verses are etched in stone in virtually every federal building and Monument in our nation's capital.¹ James Madison stated that "We have staked the whole of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind...to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God."

Patrick Henry said, "It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded not by religionists but by Christians, not on religions but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Since 1777, every session of congress has opened with prayer by a preacher subsidized with tax dollars. 52 of the 55 founders of the Constitution were members in good standing of orthodox Christian churches.

The Mayflower Compact opens with the words "In the name of God, Amen" followed by "Having undertaken, for the glorie of God, and the advancement of the Christian faith and honour of our king & country, a voyage to plan the first colonie in the Northerne parts of Virginia."

¹ Religious symbols appear so often that it takes Christian Heritage Tours three days to show visitors all the biblical references on buildings ranging from the Library of Congress to the Capitol itself.

The introductory paragraph of The Declaration of Independence appeals to the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Jefferson found it fitting, and within the boundaries of his views of politics to indicate that “men...are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” He justified his intentions by “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world.”

It is certainly true that the establishment clauses of the First Amendment indicate that “Congress will make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” And to this I say ‘Amen,’ for no clear-thinking person would desire a state-run church. We don’t want some counterpart to the Church of England, the Church of America. But the separation of church and state, at least according to the founders, was quite different than the separation of God and state.

It was clear to Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address that “this nation [was] under God,” as well as in his Emancipation Proclamation where he appeals to “the gracious favor of Almighty God.” I am halted now merely by space and not further content of the founder’s recognition of a country’s need for the ultimate and transcendent authority found in the God of the Holy Scriptures.

Of course, this type of thinking did not originate with America’s founders. It is perspicuously biblical as observed by John Calvin prior to our nation’s existence.

In his preface to the Institutes of the Christian Religion, we read the following directed and dedicated to Francis, King of the French – His Sovereign. I would suggest that there is no possible context where this quotation can be misunderstood by the objective reader.

The characteristic of a true sovereign is, to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God. He who does not make his reign subservient to the divine glory, acts the part not of a king, but a robber. He, moreover, deceives himself who anticipates long prosperity to any kingdom which is not ruled by the sceptre of God, that is, by his divine word. For the heavenly oracle is infallible which has declared, that “where there is no vision the people perish” (Prov. 29:18).”

The *Freedom From Religion Foundation* (of course, they have some cryptic religion) boasts in their appeal to reason as they seek to beguile us toward the notion of a godless constitution and the liberty thereof. Perhaps we would do well to ponder the godless political systems of the 20th century under Minh, Pot, Lenin, Stalin, Mao et al. The only liberty the tens of millions of the innocent found under these godless systems was liberation from their own lives. That doesn't sound reasonable to me.

Errors in the Camp

Perhaps this all seems very obvious, and well it should be. But as I see it, there are a variety of errors within the church that war against this simple teaching.

All would agree that the passages we opened with (blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; Righteousness exalts a nation; the healing of the land) had a primary application to Israel at the time of their writing, but that is where the agreements seem to end. Dispensationalists would argue that they still apply to Israel and that no other nation should claim them. They belong to Israel in the future millennium, and we should not think that any other "nation" can be blessed or healed according to those promises.

There are those within the Reformed community who would isolate these blessings to the church. The "nation" according to this view was Israel in the Old Covenant and the church in the New Covenant. Where certain aspects of the Old Covenant economy certainly see their fulfillment in the New Covenant institutional church, it is an exegetical (the way we interpret Scripture) strain to have the word "nation" exclude actual nations. The very Psalm displays a universal and generational context.

Let all the earth fear the Lord; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. ⁹ For He spoke, and it was *done*; He commanded, and it stood fast. ¹⁰ The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. ¹¹ The counsel of the Lord stands forever, The plans of His heart to all generations (Psalm 33:8-11).

In one Reformed book seeking to deemphasize the Christian's participation in culture, the subtitle reads, *Is America A Mission Field Or*

Battlefield? It is this type of false dichotomy that is pervasive in the discussion. Biblically, America or any other nation, is both. The Great Commission contains both the mission to evangelize and the battle to obey.

In the Great Commission we are called to baptize the nations (*ethnos*, the same word in the Septuagint in Psalm 33:12). Of course, we utilize this passage as an introduction to the baptizing of individuals. But strictly speaking, the commission tells us to baptize the nations.

True Liberty

I wouldn't consider myself a fan of President Woodrow Wilson (28th president. 1856-1924), but he did write a wonderful speech entitled *The New Freedom*, where he gave a definition of liberty which might seem counter-intuitive in today's culture of functional individualistic, narcissism. I would like to finish with this, lest we think we're seeking to apply biblical conviction at the expense of human liberty and blessing.

Wilson compared liberty to a great piece of "powerful machinery". If the parts of the machine were "awkwardly and unskillfully" assembled, the whole thing would "buckle up". No matter how powerful the individual pieces, if they all fail to harmoniously submit themselves to the singular master blueprint, everyone's quest for individual freedom and blessing results in corporate bondage.

"Liberty for the several parts", Wilson explained, "would consist in the best possible assembling and adjustment of them all." All-star teams are not always the best team. It is the team of players who selflessly grasp their roles and place their personal quests and ambitions beneath the master game-plan. That team walks away with the rings.

Wilson posited that freedom, and its attending happiness would never result from individualistic detachment or the scattered world views of a people who don't want to be a nation under God, while inevitably offering no alternative. "If you want the great piston of the engine to run with absolute freedom," Wilson added, "give it absolutely perfect alignment and adjustment with the other parts of the machine, so that it is free, not because it is let alone or isolated, but because it has been associated most skillfully and carefully with the other parts of the great structure."

There is endless discussion of the tempestuous nature of the Middle East. It is nothing new. R. J. Rushdoony was once asked who owns that land. His answer was the only true solution to that never-ending conflict. Jesus Christ owns that land. That may not address the nuts and bolts of the issue, but apart from that, there will never be peace in the Middle East or on earth for that matter (Luke 2:14).

Wilson compared liberty to a boat skimming on the water. "How free she runs" he said. True freedom is found by how perfectly the boat "adjusts to the force of the wind...obeys the great breath out of the heavens that fills her sails." If the boat resists the wind "she will halt and stagger...every sheet will shiver and her whole frame be shaken...she is in irons."

Resistance to the Creator's precepts and statutes puts man at the mercy of man and all his capricious tendencies. It is not without reason that James calls God's law the "**perfect law of liberty**" (James 1:25).

Wilson concludes his metaphor by suggesting that the boat will only find its freedom "when you have let her fall off again and...recover once more her nice adjustments to the forces she must obey and cannot defy."

Christians believe true and eternal freedom has been purchased by Christ and freely given to those who call on His name by faith. But freedom, in the sense of human liberty, consists of nothing less than the skillful adjustment of humanity to the perfect law of God. The more we are perfectly aligned with that law, the more our freedom, the greater our blessing. When we obey the breath out of heaven our sails are full. When we throw our heads back and stiffen our necks to the law of God, we too shall halt and stagger until we adjust to that benevolent force which we must obey and cannot defy.

We live in an environment where the world is quite comfortable of accusing Christians of hypocrisy. But this is exactly what they want of the Christian when it comes to the interaction of the Christian and the state. They want us to be the "**double-minded man**" (James 1:8), to neglect making decisions according to our highest ideals. Let us resist.

We are to be a people who humble ourselves before God, pray and seek His face. We are to turn from our wicked ways. Then God will hear. When He hears, we find forgiveness of our sins and a healing of our land.

