

THE CROSS AND THE CROWN

How Are Church & State Rightly Related? | Luke 20:20-26

It was a question designed to trap Jesus, offered with all the hissing insincerity of an enemy masquerading as a friend: **Teacher**, asked one of Christ's opponents, **we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God.** So tell us: **Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? (Luke 20:21-22)**

The question was akin to the -- "Have you stopped beating your wife?" kind. Whether you answer "yes" or "no" you're bound to end up looking pretty bad. The Jewish people hated the Emperor and his burdensome taxes. If Jesus answered: "Yes, it *is* right to pay taxes to Caesar," he'd set himself up to being attacked as a collaborator -- a tool of the Roman oppressors from which most believed the *true* Messiah would set them free. If, on the other hand, Jesus were to say: "No, it is not part of God's law to pay such homage to Caesar," he would immediately throw himself open to accusations of being an insurrectionist. He would give his enemies the grounds they *sought* -- as verse 20 says -- to **"hand him over... to the [Roman] governor" (Luke 20:2)** and to the grisly judgment rendered upon all who challenged the authority of Caesar.

Christ's foes and friends alike must have waited breathlessly for his response. How was Jesus going to get himself out of this one? And then Jesus spoke: **Show me a denarius (Luke 20:24)** he said. I picture someone in the crowd fumbling through his money purse and then handing Christ a coin. On one side of the denarius was the image of the emperor, circled by an inscription which read: "*Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.*" I picture Jesus holding up the coin and saying: **Whose portrait and inscription are on it? Why, "Caesar's" they replied (Luke 20:24).** Jesus said to them, **Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's...** And then, I'm guessing, Jesus flipped the coin over, exposing the side which bore an image of the emperor's mother, along with the words "Highest Priest." It expressed the Roman belief that Caesar was worthy of worship. And I imagine Jesus concluding with steely voice: **And be sure to [give] to God what is God's (Luke 20:25).**

It was a remarkable answer, really. Not merely because it displayed the genius of Jesus in getting himself out of a jam, but even more so because of what those words suggest about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of man. We wonder ourselves about the linkage of piety and politics, don't we -- particularly around Independence Day or election time? When moral decline seems evident, or when earthly courts or congresses appear to lack the ethical judgment or the persuasive power to advance what seems to us the higher good, we wonder afresh: What is the right relationship between spirituality and statecraft, between personal faith and public life, between God and Caesar or the Cross and the Crown?

On this Nation Under God Sunday, I want to try to answer that question for you, but begin by asking an even more primary one: How are Christians meant to view government in the first place? What is supposed to be our attitude toward it? Well, if you take the scriptures seriously, then you will know that Christians are called to view the institution of human government as a gift of God. I know that may sound naïve or even irresponsible. After all, we've been living through a period of profound controversy when it comes to earthly administrations. It has become all the rage to mock and mistrust those in politics. A lot of us have been tempted to start thinking that government is hopelessly profane and to give in to the cynicism that is all around us. But God's Word says that we must not.

Christians are called to view government – even imperfect ones and they are all imperfect -- as a God-ordained blessing, an institution intended to create the practical conditions where individuals can be free and able to choose God's way and live it out. Chuck Colson once wrote: *"When God established ancient Israel as a nation, [it is noteworthy that] His first order of business was the propagation of law, not just for religious purposes, but for the ordering of civil life."*¹ Thus, the Bible teaches that even before the giving of the Ten Commandments... **Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people (Exo 18:13).**

Journalist, Brooks Alexander, suggests that the State was one of God's most important temporary measures, "invoked to deal with the emergency condition of sin."² Following the Fall and until that glorious Day when the reign of God is established in every human heart, the State is called upon to act as God's firm hand, restraining the expansion of evil and chaos; enforcing laws which protect liberty; upholding principles of justice and due process; preventing exploitation of the weak by the strong; and providing for the common good. When these things are done responsibly by government, both God and humanity are well served.

It was for this reason that the Apostle Paul urged his young colleague Timothy – and I quote -- to **Pray for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives (1 Tim 2:2).** In this spirit, Christians ought to be the last in our society to mock and deride public officials. We ought to be the first to show a profound respect and a prayerful concern for all who serve in government.

But let me also underline this important balancing perspective. Christians are called to never regard the State as the principal agent of redemption in a society. Restrain evil, yes. Renew spiritual life, no. As personally committed as most of the founding fathers were to Jesus Christ -- as deeply convinced as they clearly were that a people without loyalty to the God revealed in Holy Scripture were like a village cut off from fresh water, their source of life – it is also very telling that they did not write into the Constitution or other founding documents of this nation (when they could have) a mandate that the government teach the Bible or prayer. While they would clearly roll over in their graves to see how contemporary society has tried to root religious values out of the public

square, personal experience with the State-Churches of Europe had made the nation's founders deeply and rightly suspicious of any government that dared to assume the role of Pastor to its People.

Martin Luther was not a naive man on matters of piety or politics. But he once said: *"It is out of the question that there should be a Christian government even over one land... since the wicked always outnumber the good."* In his brilliant book, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, Chuck Colson offers a similar warning against the kind of utopian visions some Christians have for the fusion of religion and politics. Every time a government has stepped outside of its God-ordained role and tried to play the role of spiritual leader in a society, Colson maintains, it has resulted in either an extremely watered-down *civil religion* – devoid of the power to truly challenge or transform -- or else a *despotic regime* that manipulates religion for its own purposes.

Colson goes on to remind us that the doctrine of the separation of Church and State arose not to protect the State from the Church, but rather to protect the Church from the State. For again and again, history shows that when the cause of the Cross and the cause of the Crown are confused *under one institution*, Christ and the world suffers. The entanglement of mainline churches with the Democrat Party and of evangelical churches with the Republican Party have not been good for the witness of either branch of the Christian movement. Both have too easily become tools of political powers that care much more for building human empires than the kingdom of God.

It is telling that Jesus himself refused such a confusion. He spurned the temptation of Satan in the wilderness, and of the crowd on Palm Sunday, and even of Peter at the last Supper to adopt political power as a primary means for fostering a love for God or an obedience to his commandments. Jesus We may be prone to forget that Jesus' birth was met by a slaughter of innocents.

If we are waiting for is a spiritual renewal of our government to lead us out of the moral chaos of our day, then we are putting our hope in the wrong place. For just as Jesus didn't allow the sword to Peter, He didn't give the keys to the Kingdom to Caesar. He gave them to the Church. And if we are to follow Jesus' commandment in our lesson for this morning, then we must not only give Caesar respect and authority in political matters, we must also render unto God what is God's. What does that really mean? Well, let me close by suggesting a few practical ways we can do that.

For one thing, I believe it is our responsibility to hold government accountable to its God-ordained role. When government falls short of its calling -- by failing to restrain evil, preserve order, protect the defenseless, and promote justice – God-honoring citizens are called to remind elected officials by vote and voice that they are neglecting their duty. When a political body oversteps it's God-given role -- by claiming power to dictate religious values, or persistently violating the higher law of God, then Christians have a responsibility to challenge it prophetically and strenuously. When a political

leader or party is in concert with Christian principles in some areas but clearly contrary to the values of Jesus in others, we need to be able to distinguish that and call it out and not get used as a tool of political powers.

Additionally, Christians render honor to God and improve the work of Caesar when they work for transformation in public life. Some of the greatest redemptive gains for human societies have been achieved by what Chuck Colson calls "little platoons" of Christians -- people who dedicated themselves to running for public office, or lobbying legislators, or taking on tasks government wasn't really equipped to handle. The abolition of slavery and the gaining of civil rights... the ministry to inmates that has brought about a dramatic decline of recidivism in many prisons... the establishment of Habitat for Humanity, the largest enterprise in the world providing housing for the poor... the repelling of the pornographic and drug trades in many neighborhoods and the resulting decline of violence there... the battle against human trafficking... these are just a few of the life-changing movements God has enabled through faithful Christian action groups and statesmen. Through our mission partners and volunteer ministries, this church has been involved in many of these causes and it remains one of the most important things we do.

So let me summarize and then move us toward a close. It is the responsibility of people of Christian faith to view government as God's gift, but to never regard it as the primary vessel for redemption of our society. It is our calling to hold government to its God-ordained role and to play ours by being transforming agents (salt and light) through active involvement in the public square. But if you are looking for one final way to give God his due in the public arena then be a gracious witness about the hope you see in Christ.

Historian Will Durant once wrote: "The greatest question of our time is not communism versus individualism; it is not Europe versus America, not even the East [we might say China] versus the West." The greatest question of our time "is whether [people] can live without God." My friends, the world needs to hear you say that there is at least one more thoughtful man or woman who believes we cannot and we need not. Your loved ones and neighbors need to hear that you believe that the deepest solutions to your own struggles and those of our country are not finally political but spiritual ones.

Christians must resist being cowed by the claim that the "pluralistic" nature of the American populace now requires that discussion about absolute or religious values be cancelled on the grounds that they are offensive to some. That is censorship, not pluralism in its best sense. *Historical* pluralism has always implied a free exchange of ideas. I want to be clear that it does not serve the cause of Christ well for any of us to use the public square as a place for angry rants or at-a-distance Bible-banging. Rudeness should not be confused with righteousness. But to suggest that we can discuss or even understand crucial topics like justice, equality, and peace, without ever

mentioning the Absolute Ground from which these values spring is such a departure from reality that -- with gentleness and respect -- we must resist it.

As columnist Michael Novak observed in *Forbes Magazine* some time ago, we are hearing politicians calling for a "politics of meaning." "But politics is about who gets what, where, and how. It is about important but not ultimate things. If you seek a spiritual community, a link to a higher purpose, a renewal of the honest questioning and courage that are at the base of an ethic worthy of the human person, you don't [simply] join a political party. You join... a church."³

President James Madison once said the same thing in other words: "*We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to sustain ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God.*" You see, every time someone truly receives the gift of forgiveness which pours from the Cross and invites Jesus to become the Crowning Lord of all his or her thoughts and deeds, an amazing thing happens. He or she begins to exercise a liberty that doesn't have to be constantly monitored and coercively enforced by the government of Caesar, because it is constantly being inspired by the reign of God.

Can you imagine the political and social impact if every one of us gathered here today, and in churches across this nation, helped even *one* person come to know the King who laid down his Crown to take up a Cross? And then if that one person went out and did the same? And if all of us didn't just talk about Jesus, but lived like him. Talk about an American Revolution. Talk about a Nation Under God. It would not only lead, I believe, to the most beautiful era in the history of this country. It would make so many more of us ready to meet the one true Sovereign before whom even this world's Caesars will all humbly kneel and one day say: "My Lord and my God, what can I render to thee?"

Would you please pray with me this Responsive Prayer...

¹Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, p. 91.

²*Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal*, Summer 1993.

³Michael Novak in *Forbes Magazine*, July 5, 1993, p.46.

Dr. Meyer holds an honors degree in Political Science from Yale University and in Theology from Princeton Seminary. He recommends for further reading on the themes explored in this sermon, Chuck Colson's, *Kingdoms In Conflict*, and Reinhold Niebuhr's, *Moral Man & Immoral Society*.