

***Church and State:
Religion and Politics
By Dr. Jim Denison***

Perhaps you've heard of the "Pulpit Initiative." A group of ministers came together in Fall 2009 to challenge the IRS regulation prohibiting pastors from making political endorsements from the pulpit. More than 30 ministers took partisan messages to their congregations in flagrant violation of the IRS ruling, hoping to generate a legal battle.

What should be the relationship of church to state, religion to politics? Should I use a website essay to critique the candidates and even endorse one? Should my church? Should yours? How should faith and politics intersect?

On Thursday, April 30, 1789, General George Washington was presented to the United States as our first president. As the General walked to the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City, thousands of people jammed into the street below gave him a thunderous ovation.

Suddenly the crowd became quiet as General Washington turned toward Judge Robert R. Livingston and placed his left hand on an opened Bible sitting upon a table beside him. He raised his right hand, and swore to "faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States."

There was a pause. Then the nation's first president added his own words, unscripted and unexpected: "I swear, so help me God." The president bent over and kissed the Bible. Then Justice Livingston turned to the crowd below and cried out, "Long live George Washington, President of the United States!" People cheered. Church bells pealed. Cannons at the nearby fort fired a salute.

From that day to this, every President of the United States has followed George Washington's precedent, concluding the oath of office with the words, "So help me God." But what do they mean by their confession of faith? How should Americans understand the relation of church and state, faith and politics?

This essay is only an introduction to an extremely involved and somewhat controversial subject. We'll survey briefly the history of the debate, examine the question biblically, and seek relevant applications for our country and our lives today.

President Washington and the church/state relationship

George Washington became president of a nation still bitterly divided by its War for Independence. When the Revolutionary War started on April 19, 1775 with "the shot

heard round the world," at least a fourth of the colonists supported England. Patriots and Loyalists maintained tensions and bitterness for years after the conflict was ended.

One nation?

It is a surprise to many to learn that Washington became president of a nation which was still not sure it was a nation. In April, 1507, Martin Waldseemuller, professor of cosmography at the University of Saint-Die, produced the first map showing the Western Hemisphere. He called it "America," after Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine merchant. But from the very beginning, it was a question much argued whether the country which emerged on these shores would be one nation or many.

The Declaration of Independence dropped the word "nation" from its text, with all references made to the separate states instead. Its final heading reads: "The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America." The resolution which adopted the declaration states, "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States." Many felt that independence did not create one nation, but thirteen.

Interestingly, the word "nation" or "national" appears nowhere in the Constitution. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson warned soberly that "a single consolidated government would become the most corrupt government on earth." New England threatened secession at the end of Jefferson's first term over his economic and political stances. His response: "Whether we remain in our confederacy, or break into Atlantic and Mississippi confederacies, I do not believe very important to the happiness of either part." And he added, "separate them if it be better."

Under God?

Washington also became president during a time of enormous conflict regarding the role of the church in the state. Protestant ministers cried out against "foreign Catholics" and warned of the dangers of electing "papal loyalists" to public office. "No Popery" banners flew in parts of New England. Following the constitutional decision to avoid any state-supported church, many were concerned that the nation's new leadership not endorse a particular denomination or faith tradition.

Despite such concerns, our first president made his personal faith commitment clear. He was a lifelong Episcopalian, worshipping regularly at Christ Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia. He rode ten miles to church (two to three hours on horseback) whenever weather permitted, an example which both shames and encourages us today.

John Marshall (Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and Washington's biographer) described him as "a sincere believer in the Christian faith and a truly devout man." He believed in God the creator, arguing that "it is impossible to account for the creation of the universe, without the agency of a Supreme Being. It is impossible to govern the universe, without the aid of a Supreme Being. It is impossible to reason without arriving at a Supreme Being. If there had been no God, mankind would have been obliged to imagine one."

He trusted God as his helper. Washington encouraged his troops during the Revolutionary War: "The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own...The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army...Let us therefore rely on the goodness of the cause and aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions."

Immediately following his first inauguration, President Washington and other officials rode to St. Paul's Chapel on Fulton Street and Broadway for a religious service. However, since most of the crowd could not fit into the sanctuary, the president suggested that they walk seven blocks to hear prayers offered by Episcopal Bishop Samuel Provoost, just named Chaplain of the Senate. This was the only time a religious service has been an official part of a presidential inauguration.

On October 3, 1789, General Washington issued the first thanksgiving proclamation in national history:

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor...Now, therefore, I do recommend...that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are now blessed...And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions...to promote the knowledge and practice of one true religion and virtue.

On March 11, 1792, he wrote: "I am sure there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a Divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that Agency which was so often manifested during our revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them."

In his farewell address (September 19, 1796), President Washington made clear his belief that religion is indispensable for the morality essential to America:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness,

these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and cherish them...And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. 'Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.

And yet our first president was a firm supporter of religious freedom. Writing to a general convention of the Episcopal Church in 1789, he stated, "The liberty enjoyed by the people of these States, of worshipping Almighty God agreeably to their consciences, is not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights."

Thomas Jefferson and the "wall of separation"

During his years as President, Thomas Jefferson frequently worshiped with the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He once explained: "No nation has yet existed or been governed without religion. I, as the Chief Magistrate of this nation, am bound to give it the sanction of my example." He also sent a note with \$50 (a large sum for the day) to the rector, Rev. Andrew J. McCormick, every New Year's Day while he was President.

Jefferson authorized federal support for military chaplains and Christian missions to the Indians. He attended Sunday services of Christian worship in the Capitol building, and designated space in the Rotunda of the University of Virginia for chapel services. He refused to issue Presidential proclamations for national days of prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving, but only because he considered this to be the responsibility of state governments rather than the federal authorities; as Governor of Virginia, he did issue such calls.

What was Thomas Jefferson's personal faith? What was his view of public faith?

Jefferson and Jesus

When President John Kennedy entertained a group of Nobel Prize winners in the White House in December 1962, he welcomed them as the most distinguished gathering of talents ever assembled in the Executive Mansion except for when Jefferson dined there alone. Our third president was indeed brilliant, a fact which affected his faith in significant ways.

His parents, Peter and Jane Randolph Jefferson, were devout Anglicans. When he was nine years old, Jefferson went to live with Rev. Douglas A. Scott, a committed Calvinist; Rev. Scott taught him Latin, Greek, and French. As a college student at William and Mary, he later confessed, "I got my first views of the expansion of science and of the system of things in which we are placed."

He wrote his friend Benjamin Rush that his religious beliefs were "the result of a life in inquiry and reflection and...very different from the anti-Christian system attributed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to genuine precepts of Jesus himself."

Then he added, "I am a Christian, but I am a Christian in the only sense in which I believe Jesus wished anyone to be, sincerely attached to his doctrine in preference to all others, ascribing to him all human excellence, and believing that he never claimed any other."

Jefferson never joined a Christian congregation. This statement helps to explain why: "the Christian religion when divested of the rags in which they [the domineering clergy] have enveloped [sic] it, and brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent institutor, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expression of the human mind."

He was, however, a great admirer of Jesus' ethical teachings. Their "system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime... ever taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the ancient philosophers." He mourned that Jesus' "character and doctrines have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special disciples, and who have disfigured and sophisticated his actions and precepts, from views of personal interest, so as to induce the unthinking part of mankind to throw off the whole system in disgust, and to pass sentence as an imposter on the most innocent, the most benevolent, and the most eloquent and sublime character that ever has been exhibited to man."

Jefferson and public faith

Thomas Jefferson was among our country's most staunch advocates for freedom of and from religion. In June of 1779 he sponsored a Bill for Religious Freedom in his home state of Virginia. He was more proud of that bill than of all the offices he held, including the Presidency.

As further proof of the importance of this bill for Jefferson, note the epitaph he wrote for his grave at Monticello, a statement which shows what he deemed most important: "Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." In a letter to his friend Benjamin Rush he asserted, "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Jefferson was author of the most widely quoted single phrase and metaphor on the subject of church-state relations. Upon his election as President, the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut sent him a letter of congratulations (October 7, 1801). They saw his anti-Federalist platform as assuring their (minority) rights of religious freedom, and they were right. In his response of January 1, 1802 he stated, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their

legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."

Jesus and Caesar

The most famous document in American history begins thus: "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. . . .

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

When the Continental Congress adopted this statement on July 4, 1776, they laid the foundations for freedoms we celebrate 229 years later. But what did Mr. Jefferson and his fellow patriots mean when they wrote, "all men are...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights"? According to their document, we are creatures of a Creator. How are we to relate both to Creator and country? Let's ask Jesus.

Understand the question

It is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is teaching the crowds gathered in the Temple corridors. Now the unlikeliest of political coalitions comes against him. The Pharisees hated the Roman occupation. But they also hated Jesus. They considered his grace-centered message in violation of the Law and its demands. He was a heretic whose influence must be stopped. On the other hand, the Herodians supported the Roman occupation in every way. They and the Pharisees were in constant political conflict. But they also saw Jesus as a threat to the Empire's power. Like the Pharisees, they wanted him arrested or even killed.

So these two groups "went out and laid plans to trap him in his words" (Matthew 22:15). Luke gives us their underlying motive: "They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). The Pharisees sent some of their "disciples" to him (Matthew 22:16), students at one of the two Pharisaic theological seminaries in Jerusalem. Their youth might endear them to Jesus; at any event, they would be less recognizable to him than their leaders.

After patronizing him with compliments, they spring their trap: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v. 17). Their grammar requires a "yes" or "no" answer. And either will

serve their purpose. They have pushed a very hot button. The "taxes" to which they refer were the poll-tax or "census" taxes paid by all males over the age of 14 and all females over the age of 12. They were paid directly to the Emperor himself.

And they required the use of a coin which was despised by the Jewish populace. This was the "denarius," a silver coin minted by the Emperor himself. It was the only Roman coin which claimed divine status for the Caesar. On one side it pictured the head of Emperor Tiberius with the Latin inscription, "Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus." On the other side it pictured Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the Latin inscription, "high priest." It was idolatrous in the extreme.

The tax it paid led to a Jewish revolt in A.D. 6 which established the Zealot movement. That movement eventually resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. At this time that movement was growing in power and influence. Jesus' opponents were asking him to take a position on the most inflammatory issue of the day.

If he says that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, the public will turn from him in revolt and his influence will be at an end. If he says that it is not, he will be a traitor to Rome and the authorities will arrest and execute him. Either way, the hands of these schemers will be clean, and they will be rid of their enemy.

We ask the same question today: are we to support our country or our Creator? To whom do we owe allegiance? Jesus' answer is yes.

Obey the answer

Our Lord asks for a denarius, and then asks them, "Whose portrait is this?" (v. 20). They tell him that it bears the image and inscription of Caesar. And he replies, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's" (v. 21). If taxes belong to the nation, pay them. If worship belongs to God, give it. Give to each what is due. Live in two countries, a citizen of both.

Paul clarifies this image of citizenship when he calls us "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Corinthians 5:20). American ambassadors live in foreign countries, under appointment by their president at home. They are to obey the laws of the country where they are stationed, and support their leaders. But always they will have a second, even higher allegiance to their home country and her leader. And if they must choose between the two, their loyalties are clear.

Like them, we are each to obey and support our governing authorities:

- "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1).
- "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Romans 13:6-7).

- "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1-2; cf. Titus 3:1-2).

But we are also to obey and serve our Lord:

- *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:7).*
- *"You kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Psalm 2:10-12).*
- Why? *"By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth" (Proverbs 8:15-16).*

Peter explains well the relationship between Christ and Caesar: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right . . . Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:13-14, 17).

So we are to love people, fear God, and honor the state. Do not fear people or state, but God alone. In other words, serve your highest authority. When you can serve Christ and state, serve both. If you must choose, choose Christ. The same apostles who taught us to serve the Empire were martyred by its emperors because they would not stop preaching the gospel. Because they chose to serve Caesar unless they could not also serve Christ. Serve your highest authority, always.

A free church in a free state

When each of our presidents ends his oath of office with the words, "so help me God," he will speak for Christians everywhere. We are to serve Caesar and Christ, but our highest authority first. We are to be loyal citizens of our country, but even more, loyal citizens of heaven.

This position is best for both. The Southern Baptist Convention met in Washington, D.C. in 1920. Standing on the east steps of the national capitol on Sunday, May 16, Dr. George W. Truett delivered the most significant address on religious liberty in American Baptist history. Among his remarks were these paragraphs, commenting on the biblical text we have just reviewed:

That utterance of Jesus, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's,' is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once for all, marked the divorcement of church and state. It marked a new era for the creeds and deeds of men. It was the sunrise gun of a new day, the echoes of which are to go on and on and on until in every land,

whether great or small, the doctrine shall have absolute supremacy everywhere of a free church in a free state.

In behalf of our Baptist people I am compelled to say that forgetfulness of the principles that I have just enumerated, in our judgment, explains many of the religious ills that now afflict the world. All went well with the early churches in their earlier days. They were incomparably triumphant days for the Christian faith. Those early disciples of Jesus, without prestige and worldly power, yet aflame with the love of God and the passion of Christ, went out and shook the pagan Roman empire from center to circumference, even in one brief generation. Christ's religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree that it is thus supported is a millstone hanged about its neck.

Dr. Truett echoed the remarks of John Leland, one of the most important Baptists in colonial history, when he said in 1791: "Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would have agreed. Mr. Washington was public about his faith, clear about his commitment to the authority of Scripture and the miraculous powers of his God. Mr. Jefferson was private about his faith, doubtful of biblical authority and unsure that the Maker of the universe ever intervenes in his creation. But both believed in religious liberty--freedom from, of, and for faith.

Neither wanted the state to control the church, or the church to control the state. Both wanted us to be free to choose which God, if any, we serve. Both would have us render to Caesar what is his, and to Christ what is his. Both are right.

Conclusion

In practical terms, then, how do we serve both? We give our taxes, as Jesus taught us. We give our obedience to the government whenever we can also obey our Lord. Luther said, "It is necessary to have governments because we are sinners." We need them, and must obey them so long as we can also obey Christ.

We give our service to our country as God directs. Churches are not to be political organizations, endorsing or supporting political candidates. But Christians are to be fully engaged in political and public leadership. Plato said, "The punishment of wise men who refuse to take part in the affairs of government is to be live under the government of unwise men."

And so we give our witness. We are salt and light to this decaying, dark planet. We preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, we use words. We serve both Caesar and Christ, but always our highest authority.

So, during an election, which candidate do I endorse? Neither. I should not and will not use my position as a minister to support a political candidate or party. I will resist vehemently any effort to polarize our church around a political agenda. Our job as believers is to be salt and light in a nation desperate for both, to pray for our leaders and our nation during these crucial days and to witness to our faith with our words and works.

During an election, which candidate should you choose? Pray hard; search your heart as the Spirit leads you; make the decision you believe most honors God and fulfills his will for you; then support whomever is elected with your prayers and encouragement. And never forget that your highest allegiance is not to a man but to your Master.

The Declaration of Independence ends thus: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States . . . And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Let's join them.