

## “Keep Them Separate”

Years ago, at a notable dinner in London, that world-famed statesman, John Bright, asked American statesman Dr. J. L. M. Curry, who happened to be a Baptist, “What distinct contribution has your America made to the science of government?” To that question Dr. Curry replied, “The doctrine of religious liberty.” After a moment’s reflection, Mr. Bright made the worthy reply, “It was a tremendous contribution.”

George W. Truett, noted Baptist preacher, included the following words in a sermon on the steps of the United States Capital in 1920: “Indeed the supreme contribution of the New World to the Old is the contribution of religious liberty. This is the chiefest contribution that America has thus far made to civilization. And historic justice compels us to say that it was pre-eminently a *Baptist* contribution. The impartial historian, whether in the past, present, or future, will ever agree with our American historian, Mr. Bancroft, when he says: “Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first, the trophy of Baptists.” (George W. Truett, Sermon: “Baptists and Religious Liberty”, *The Christian Index*, July 2, 1992).

Religious liberty is a *biblical* principle and a *Baptist* distinctive. Because Baptists throughout their history also have advocated separation of church and state, the understandable tendency to equate the two sometimes surfaces. Yet the two—religious freedom and separation of church and state—are *not* synonymous.

A better way to look at these two related principles is to see separation of church and state as the *political* corollary to the *biblical/theological* idea of religious liberty. Why is the distinction between the two important? In part, it is important because although God made every person with a free conscience, not all persons enjoy the benefits of a political system that separates the realms of church and state. To say it another way, all of God’s children have consciences that are free under any form of human government, but not all of God’s children are blessed to live in societies that keep church and state at a healthy distance from one another.

The best known passage on the subject is our focal text today. Jesus was in his last days; in the previous chapter, Matthew recorded that Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the next day, Jesus cleared the Temple of dishonest merchants. Jesus was shaking things up, and the Pharisees, the most religious men of their day, did not like it. The Pharisees wanted Jesus off the scene, so they sought to trap him.

Palestine was an occupied country, and the Jews were subject to taxation in support of the Roman Empire. The Pharisees contacted the Herodians to join their scheme. The Herodians were the most patriotic and nationalistic citizens of First Century Palestine. Their allegiance was to the heirs of Herod the Great, those placed in power by the Roman Emperor Caesar, to govern the province of Judea.

This was a strange alliance; generally the Pharisees *detested* the Herodians, because they represented the ruling party of government. The Herodians did not associate with the Pharisees, because Jews were seen as second class citizens in the Roman Empire. Yet they joined forces to entrap Jesus who posed a threat to the religious and political machinery of the day.

They called Jesus “Teacher,” which was a term of honor; they even praised him as true and impartial. They then posed a question that was sure to snag this popular holy man. “Is it lawful to give a tax to Caesar or not?” The Greek uses the word *give* rather than the word *pay*.

If Jesus said it was *unlawful* to give the tax, they would promptly report him to the Roman government as a seditious person who needed to be arrested. If he said it was lawful to give the tax, he would stand discredited in the eyes of the common people. The average Jew abhorred the tax; they had no king but God. They believed their nation was a *theocracy*; to pay tax to a *worldly* king would admit the validity of his kingship and thereby insult God. The most fanatical Pharisees insisted that

any tax paid to a foreign king was wrong. Whichever way Jesus might answer—so his questioners thought—he would leave himself open to trouble.

Jesus was well aware of what was happening. Pharisees and Herodians mixed as well as oil and water. He responded, “Why put **me** to the test you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.”

There was a special silver coin used for the poll tax that was roughly the equivalent of a day’s work for a laborer. The very fact that they *possessed* the coin proved that they already had acknowledged Caesar.

Jesus said to them, “Who’s likeness and inscription do you see?” During that era, when an Emperor came to power, he would issue coins with his picture on them. That coinage was held to be property of the king whose image it bore. The Pharisees and Herodians replied, “Caesar’s.”

Jesus then offered a statement that is foundational for our discussion of religious liberty. He said, “Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” The coinage realistically *already* belonged to Caesar; as the Emperor, he had issued it with his likeness. “Give it back to him; it is his,” Jesus said. “Give Caesar what belongs to him, but also give God what belongs to God.”

As Christians, we are to be citizens of two kingdoms. We are citizens of a country on earth, but also citizens of the Kingdom of God. We are to do all we can to preserve liberty on both fronts, religious and civil, yet church and state should remain separate.

Baptists were the first to take a stand for complete religious freedom in England. This principle was set forth clearly in the writings of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. These two English Baptists refused to admit that earthly monarchs had a right to interfere in the religious lives of their subjects.

Because of religious freedom, meaning that every person should be *free* to choose, a person can never *truly* be coerced to follow Jesus. It is a *voluntary* action, one that cannot be forced. Through the centuries, failure has been the end result of establishing a religion that has been favored or funded by the government.

Democratic America is indebted to the Baptists in colonial New England and Virginia, for it was their struggle for religious liberty that resulted in the exclusion of all religious tests and restrictions from the Constitution of the United States.

In 1774, Isaac Backus, a Baptist preacher living in Massachusetts, urged Samuel Adams to adopt a consistent policy insuring separation of church and state. He pointed out that British taxation of American colonies was no more unjust than Massachusetts’ taxation of Baptists in support of a state church, which by the way was the Congregationalist church. In the same year, Backus and the Baptists from the Warren Association presented a “Memorial” to the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress, the body that declared independence from England and set the basic framework for the new nation, laying before them their claims for religious liberty. After much debate, John Adams, the spokesman for the delegation said, “The Baptists might as well expect a change in the solar system as to expect Massachusetts to give up their establishment.” (*On These Truths We Stand*, Brochure published by Virginia Baptist Mission Board, 1989 p. 19-20)

But while his efforts in Philadelphia to change the Massachusetts delegates’ minds largely were unsuccessful, Backus found receptive ears among his fellow Baptists. He rallied them to the cause of religious liberty by traveling thousands of miles on horseback, visiting in their homes and preaching in their churches. He was indeed the most influential Baptist of his generation in America.

Backus lived long enough to see the Bill of Rights incorporated into the new federal Constitution, in no small measure because of his persistent efforts on its behalf. But he died long before his own Massachusetts became the last of the former colonies to disestablish its own state

church in 1833. (Brochure)

Unfortunately even in our country where separation of church and state is guaranteed through the First Amendment, there are efforts to blur the lines. Many Virginia Baptists were jailed and whipped publicly, because they refused to quit preaching. The separation of church and state is a strong Virginia Baptist distinctive.

Since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptists have championed religious freedom and our Baptist heritage behooves us to keep church and state separate. George W. Truett said, "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 around its neck." (Truett sermon)

So regarding church and state, we should keep them separate. My prayer is that we will give to the government what belongs to the government, but more importantly may we give to God what belongs to God, namely our whole life. As Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice; holy and acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service. Give to God what is God's.