

The Divided States of America
Church, State & Power
July 7, 2019

Good morning everyone.

Just need to clarify one thing on that little video ... we have everything we need to pull off the old-fashioned Potluck and Worship Night *except for the food*. If you're coming to a Potluck, the number one rule is you need to bring something to share with everyone else. So bring a main dish, side dish or a dessert to share with everyone - drinks and paper products will be provided.

With that said, let's jump into the final message of our series, *The Divided States of America*.

If you've been here over the past four weeks,

you know that we've been looking at how to deal with the cultural and political tension that has divided our country to the point where it sometimes feels like there are two distinct nations occupying the same territory:

- Liberal vs. conservative
- Pro-choice vs. pro-life
- Democrat vs. Republican
- Traditionalist vs. Progressive
- And the list could go on and on.

And today, as we close things out, we're going to talk about *Church, State & Power* because a big source of so much of the tension these days has to do with the proper role (if any) of faith and religion in politics and government.

Three Voices

As I listen to the voices in our culture, I hear three basic perspectives on that issue:

One voice says “because church and state are to be kept separate, religion and faith have no place in the process.”

This one is pretty loud these days. With our culture becoming more and more secular, not only are there a lot of non-religious people who believe this, many serious Christians have adopted this view as well.

Another voice – also quite loud these days – says pretty much the opposite.

It says “God will not bless our nation if we do not live by godly values, so we need policies and politicians that uphold them.”

Not only do many serious Christians hold this

view, much of the political activity of conservative evangelical leaders and those who make up “the religious right” is based on it ... which is why their role in the election of Donald Trump is seen as hypocritical.

A third voice which is not nearly as loud as the first two says ...

“Political involvement wastes energy that could be better spent elsewhere.”

People who fall into this camp – many of whom are also serious Christians – are sometimes known as “separatists.” The older I get, the more I find myself personally leaning in this direction.

What about you? Which of those do you identify with?

More importantly, which one is right?

For Christians, there's a decent case to be made for the third voice ...

... in the Apostle Paul's reminder to followers of Christ that ...

*We are citizens of heaven,
where the Lord Jesus Christ
lives. Philippians 3:20 (NLT)*

... which means that our primary focus and energy – again, if we're Christians – is to be *that* Kingdom's values and agenda and not those of whatever earthly kingdom we find ourselves a part of.

And there's also a decent case for the second voice, such as in ...

... Proverbs 14:34 which says that ...

*Godliness [living according to
God's ways] exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any
people. Proverbs 14:34 (NLT)*

I won't go into it this morning (because it's not my purpose) but I think it can be demonstrated that many of the ills of our society stem from an increasing abandonment of god-centeredness and god-awareness both individually and collectively.

Now, I should say at this point that, if you're a Christian and you adopt either of those perspectives, you also need to factor in that we live in a very unique situation when compared to those to whom the scripture was written and, in fact, when compared to the great majority of people throughout history.

Almost everyone who has *ever* lived *has* lived under a theocracy ... or a monarchy ... or an oligarchy ... where someone else (maybe even God) or a group of “someone elses” is completely in charge of everything. And you pretty much have to do what they say ... or else.

That was the situation of followers of Jesus in the first century, which is why there is so much advice in the New Testament about how to think about and relate to the Roman Empire and its authority.

Of course, it's *also* why *there's no guidance* in the Bible on how followers of Jesus ought to participate - or *not* participate - in a representative republic (which is how our nation is set up constitutionally). The masses of people represented in the scripture simply

never had the kind of political influence and freedom that you and I do.

Even the founders of our nation recognized that.

For instance, John Jay, one of the major influencers on our Constitution and eventual first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court ...

... wrote that ...

“Americans are the first people whom Heaven has favored with an opportunity of deliberating upon and choosing the forms of government under which they should live.”

Nothing like what you and I experience politically ever existed before.

Point being ... if you're a Christian, it's probably wise to avoid being dogmatic when it comes to political involvement or non-involvement.

But what about that first voice? The one that says that church and state are to be kept separate? That religion and faith have no place in the political process?

To answer that one, I think we need to look at what is meant by the phrase "separation of church and state" as well as what our founders thought about the place of religion and faith in politics and government.

And I think this is so important because if

everyone had a better understanding of these things ... if liberals and conservatives and religious and non-religious groups and individuals had a better understanding of these things ...

... we might have been able in recent years to avoid *at least some* of the constant demonization of "the other side" - when it comes to their deeply held beliefs about matters of conscience and, more importantly, how those beliefs affect their political thinking and activity.

Let me put that more personally.

If *you* had a better understanding of what was meant by "separation of church and state" and the place that religion and faith were intended to have in our political process, your level of

negativity towards and your level of angst over *specific people in your life* - like family members, like neighbors and co-workers, like the people whose posts you read on FB and the people you watch on TV...

- If you had a better understanding of these things, your negativity and angst would be a lot lower than it is.
- Not only that, you would feel a lot more welcome to participate in the political process and you would be more welcoming of others' participation, too.
- And you would more highly value and appreciate the blessing that it is to live in this system of government with its unique emphasis on both religious freedom *and* separation of church and state.

You see, if not for an incredibly wise generation of leaders 250 years ago who had studied world history (to that point) and learned the lessons of the disaster wrought by the marriage of church and state, it's very likely that many of our constitutional rights would not exist.

Instead, it's very likely that the United States would have continued in the European model of a state-appointed, state-supported church ... a model which had produced centuries - *centuries* - of violence and bloodshed towards those who did not believe in Christ and would not participate in the government-sanctioned church ...

... a model which is still producing, even today, *staggering amounts* of violence and bloodshed

in vast areas of the world where conformity to a particular religious belief and practice is a demand – though today it’s not supposedly Christian regimes but those associated with radical Islam.

So, how did it happen that our founders chose a different course?

Well, let’s do a little bit of history this morning and find out.

A Bit of History

And since I am not a historian by trade, several years ago as I was working on a similar message, I spent some time studying the work of those who are. And I put together a series of video clips that came from PBS, American History TV and also the James Madison

Memorial Foundation.

I’m going to show some of them again today so, if you feel like you’ve seen these somewhere before, that’s why. 😊

The story begins with the arrival of the Puritans, who came to America by the tens of thousands in the 1630s. They were not the first colonists *chronologically* but they *were* the first who came for the purpose of escaping religious persecution they were experiencing in England.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip – 01 “CITY ON A HILL” (3.3 min)

(Begin) Voice: “John Winthrop in 1630 led a group of Puritans ...”

(End) Dr. Bushman: “He felt obligated to quiet

her or drive her from the colony.”

Even though they had been persecuted for their beliefs in England, the Puritans turned around and did the same thing to others in the New World!

They were interested in *their* freedom but not so much in the freedom of others.

Now, as it turns out, even though Anne Hutchison was banished from the colony, her influence continued to bear fruit.

A bright young preacher by the name of Roger Williams, who had attended her Bible studies, not only adopted her views on freedom of conscience and religious tolerance, but took them to the next logical step ... which eventually led to *him* getting kicked out of the

colony as well.

What happened next changed the course of religious and political history in the United States...

Video Clip – 02 ROGER WILLIAMS & THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH (2.7 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Roger Williams believed that the state had no role to play in religion.”

(End) Voice: “What Roger Williams did here still echoes in the larger context of the United States of America.”

Now, just to be clear, William’s motivation was *not* political. His motivation was spiritual. He believed that Christianity had been repeatedly and hopelessly perverted throughout history by its alliance with the state, so he wanted to keep government out of

religion.

In fact, *he* – not Thomas Jefferson – was the first to speak of the idea of “a wall of separation” between Church and State.

The wall, he said, kept the weeds of the world out of the garden of the church.

It was the practical application of Jesus’ command to ...

“Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:21 (NET)

It was the practical application of Jesus’ insistence that ...

“My kingdom is not from this world.” *John 18:3 (NET)*

More specifically, Williams had observed that one of the greatest problems with Christianity in his day was the fact that the government forced people to “profess Christ” without first having had an encounter *with Christ* and a true change of heart.

He said ...

“[This] is the bane of millions of souls in England and all other nations professing to be Christian nations. [They] are brought *by public authority* ...

... to baptism and fellowship with God in ordinances of worship, *before* the saving work of repentance and a true turning to God.”ⁱ

Now, as it turns out, even though Williams was

successful in his efforts and Rhode Island remained without an official church, most of colonial America did not. Following the European pattern, *every* colony officially adopted one church tradition.

But Williams' emphasis on the necessity of the heart and head to *willfully* choose Christ (instead of being forced to do so by the government) emboldened other preachers who began to emphasize the same quality of faith.

And, eventually, because of their efforts, something amazing happened in the American Colonies. It was called "The Great Awakening."

From the 1740s through the 1750s, preachers like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, John and Charles Wesley led revivals where

multitudes of people of all races, classes, and geographical locations repented of their unbelief, turned to Christ and began to experience God on a personal level.

Now - and this is really important to understand - because these preachers were not part of the state-sanctioned church, it began to dawn on many of the colonists that "authorities in the state are perhaps not any more necessary than they are in the church."ⁱⁱ

And now you can see where this is going. The war that's coming with Great Britain is not going to be only about taxation without representation.

That's part of it but, in reality, there's a lot more at stake.

Check it out.

Video Clip – 03 FORGED IN FAITH (1.7 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Today’s students of history believe that the root of the American Revolution was ...

(End) Professor: “... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

That’s a key thought to remember: *the Declaration of Independence was the mission statement of the colonies while the Constitution was the rule book.*

We’ll come back to that in just a minute but the point I want you to see is that there was a great deal of religious sentiment and energy at work.

People really did believe that “the Creator”

(whether the God of the Bible or the unnamed God of the Deists) had given them *unalienable* rights that were being usurped by Great Britain. And therefore, rebellion was justified. In fact, in the thinking of some, *not* to rebel was to disobey God.

Of course, many of those same folks had a *huge blind spot* in their thinking in that they didn’t apply this same logic to the slaves they owned.

But that’s just part of the human condition. Very rarely do people get it completely right in the first few generations. It takes a long time to work out all the implications of a new revelation and that new revelation often has to live uncomfortably alongside the old for a while.

Anyway ... all of this leads up to *The Declaration of Independence* – the mission statement – and the Revolutionary War, but once the war is over and victory is won, the states have to decide on the form of government. They have to design the rulebook – *The Constitution*.

And, for many people, the question of the relationship between church and state is at the top of the list. And because there is a great deal of apprehension over the issue, James Madison (the guy most responsible for the writing of our Constitution) reluctantly gives in to pressure to create an additional document ...

... which we know as “The Bill of Rights.”

Video Clip – 04 THE BILL OF RIGHTS (2.0 min)

(Begin) Voice: “Patrick Henry, George Mason – these prominent anti-federalists ...”

(End) Professor: “... without being pressured by or buffeted by larger forces.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Now, because most of us have lived in this culture for a long, long time and we’re used to the way things are, I don’t know that we really appreciate the magnitude of what happened. I don’t know if we appropriately value what it is we have in our Constitution. *For the very first time in world history, a national government – our national government – promised to stay out of religion.*

And don’t miss this point: the primary pressure to set it up this way did not come from anti-Christian secularists. It came from *Christians* (primarily *Baptists* and Baptist *pastors* no less!)

who eventually convinced other Christians of the value of the proposition.

And what we have today – what we enjoy in this country that multitudes around the world can only dream of and hope for and pray for – is not simply the freedom to choose whether to be Mormon or Muslim ... it is also the liberty *not* to believe.

Implications

Now, with all of that said by way of explanation – and, quite frankly, so much more *could* be said and probably *needs* to be said ... let's go back to the question that prompted this historical journey.

What about that first voice? The perspective that says that “church and state are to be kept

separate” *and* “that religion and faith have no place in the political process?”

I think several things are very clear both from the history and also from the wording of the First Amendment ...

... which, again, is “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

In fact, let's all just read that together out loud shall we?

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The first thing to notice is that the phrase “separation of church and state” is not present.

In fact, that phrase does not appear *anywhere* in our Constitution or the Bill of Rights.

Instead, it was coined by our founders as a short-handed way to express the basic idea contained in the First Amendment.

Unfortunately, however, because we don't understand the history behind it and we live in an overtly secular age, that phrase has led most of us to an interpretation that is exactly *opposite* of their intention.

- Most of us believe that it means a person's religion and faith is to be excluded from the political process.
- Most of us believe it means that morality isn't to affect legislation.

But that was never the intention.

Instead, the reason for separating church and state – the purpose of the First Amendment – is two-fold.

Purpose #1 is to keep government from establishing a national religion/church.

Because of what they had observed in history, the founders believed that the powers of government should not be used to compel belief or support a church. They wanted government to stay out of religion – not the other way around.

They believed that everyone should be able to choose their faith or non-faith according to their own conscience ...

... which is Purpose #2: to protect the right of

individuals in matters of faith.

The First Amendment is meant to let you and me decide what “god” we believe in – if any – and how we should worship – if at all. It’s meant to allow collectives of believers (and non-believers) to gather together as churches and synagogues and mosques and even atheist clubs without fear of persecution or reprisal.

And again, contrary to popular belief, what the First Amendment is *not* meant to do is to exclude “faith” (or even non-faith) and morality from the political process. Faith influencing politics and policy is not the same as the state endorsing a religion or a church.

In fact, it’s impossible for our morality – whatever it might be – *not* to affect our laws.

- Our collective morality is why murder is illegal.
- Our collective morality is why stealing is illegal.
- Our collective morality is also why abortion *is* legal.
- Our collective morality is why gambling is legal.
- It’s why killing an animal that’s part of an endangered species is *not* legal.

Someone’s morality – whatever it might be – is always represented in our laws.

Summing It Up

Now, I know we’ve covered a lot of ground this morning and that the subject matter is a little unusual for a message. But, in the context

of what we're experiencing not only in our culture at large but in our families and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces, I think it matters greatly that everyone understand what the rules are and where they came from.

In fact, as I was working on this message, I tried to figure out how to express the concept of the First Amendment in a way that might be better than "separation of church and state." That meant something *then* but not now.

And I came up with this statement.

Religion and government must never be *married*

Faith and politics must never be *divorced*

<repeat>

Religion and government as organized institutions should never be connected. One should not have any kind of coercive power over the other. They should never be married.

However, a person's beliefs and convictions must never be excluded from the political arena simply because they are religious. Faith and politics should never be divorced.

In fact, most people don't realize that, even though the founders were not interested in establishing a state religion or church, they strongly believed that religion and churches were indispensable to the success of a representative republic.

In his farewell address, George Washington said that "of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and

Morality are indispensable supports.”ⁱⁱⁱ

John Adams, signer of the Declaration of Independence and second president of our nation wrote: “[W]e have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. . . . Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”^{iv}

James Madison, the writer of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, wrote that “The belief in God all powerful wise and good, is so essential to the moral order of the world and to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources.”

Madison, along with the rest of the founders,

thought that belief in God was vital to a healthy republic.

Of course, you would have to be living under a rock these days to not be aware that everything I’ve just said is quickly fading from our collective consciousness as a nation.

One of these days, it’s highly possible that the ideas and ideals of our Founders will be rejected because of ...

- Political expediency (“we just don’t like their ideas anymore”)
- Or short-sighted political correctness (“they owned slaves which means everything they said was bad, wrong and

evil and should be rejected.”)

If that happens, those of us who are people of faith – and eventually everyone – will lose the protections of free speech and the right to assembly also afforded by the First Amendment.

If that happens, will Christians shrivel up and blow away?

I think not.

Christians have survived – and thrived – increasing in number and influence in every hostile political environment known to man: The Roman Empire, China, Russia, and Nazi Germany to name a few.

That’s because followers of Jesus do not

ultimately trust in politicians or policies. We do not trust in governments or constitutions.

As the writer of the 20th Psalm once put it:

*Some trust in chariots and
some in horses, but we trust in
the name of the Lord our God.*

Psalm 20:7 (NIV)

He is our true provider. He is our true protector. And we will not be shaken.

Let’s pray together.

Endnotes

ⁱ [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roger_Williams_\(theologian\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Roger_Williams_(theologian))

ⁱⁱ This idea is from The James Madison Foundations video “The Great Awakening During America’s Founding.”

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel06.html>

^{iv} <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=63>