

“What About Faith and Politics?”

Mark 12: 13-17

“Church and State”

The Faith of the Christian Church by Gustav Aulen

Rev. Brian Heron

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

July 4, 2010

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” It seems like a simple enough admonition. Caesar has a right to some things and God has rights to other things. The Pharisees were trying to set a political trap for Jesus. If he had said, *“Don’t pay taxes to the emperor”* he would have been tried for sedition by the Romans. If he had said, *“Honor the emperor by paying your taxes,”* he would have been accused of being a false teacher for supporting the oppressive Romans. So Jesus instead wiggled out of the predicament by having them show him a coin, a single denarius. With the head of emperor clearly stamped on the coin he asked, *“Whose head is this?”* and after they confirmed that it was indeed the emperor’s head, he told them to **“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”** Problem solved!

It seems simple enough, but imagine the confusion in today’s America if Jesus had tried the same ploy. Some of our best well-dressed, educated, upper middle class Presbyterians come to Jesus who is causing all kinds of trouble by playing his electric guitar in church. Trying to trap him our Presbyterian elders ask him, *“If Independence Day just happens to fall on a Sunday do we honor God or do we honor our country?”* Jesus says, *“This is easy. Just look around your sanctuary and what do you see?”* The elders say, *“We see a Christian flag and an American flag.”* Jesus says, *“Sorry, that wasn’t a very good example. Let me try one I used a long time ago with the Pharisees. Pull out a dollar bill. Now tell me whose image is on it?”* One elder replies, *“There is a picture of George Washington on it.”* “Exactly,” says Jesus. But just as he is about to make his point another elder adds, *“You know it also says, “In God We Trust.”*” At that Jesus throws up his hands and says, *“Whatever happened to the good ole days?”*

You would think this would be a simple issue. In America we use the concept of “the separation of church and state” as a way to frame the relationship between the two. Jesus said, **“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God’s.”** In our *Word from Today* Gustav Aulen describes very separate roles for church and state—the state protects the order of society and the church provides the conscience for society. In our courts we have those who are lobbying for prayer in schools on the one side and those who are suing to have the *Pledge of Allegiance* removed from school because of its “one nation under God” clause.

Today, Independence Day just happens to fall on a Sunday. If we are true to form some of you may feel that we won’t do enough to honor our country today in the service. Others of you may feel that we will have focused too much on it for a church that should be about God alone.

What I want to do today is present three different scenarios and have you offer your perspective on whether the person or persons got the balance right between honoring church and state. We aren’t going to get into a debate with each other or try to solve this. I figure if it has taken over 200 years and we still are arguing over this we probably aren’t going to come to any final conclusions this morning. But, we can at least hear our differing perspectives. And we can honor each other by listening and respecting the integrity we have in our positions.

Scenario Number One: Rev. Cary Smith is straight out of seminary and she is your new pastor. On her first Sunday here she walks in and sees the American flag. She quickly removes it and says, “*I didn’t go to seminary to make you good citizens. My plan is to help you become good disciples.*” **Did she get the balance right between church and state? Why or why not?**

Scenario Number Two: This is a true story. On May 31, 1934 several German Evangelical pastors met and approved the Barmen Declaration, now one of the confessions of our Presbyterian Church. The document was in response to a movement within Germany where most German Christians equated their Christianity, nationalism, and militarism as Christian truth. In the declaration they declared that they rejected the attempts by the Third Reich and Adolph Hitler to make the German Evangelical Lutheran Church a puppet institution of the State. **Did they get the balance right between church and state? Why or why not?**

Scenario Number Three: The Church of Perpetual Outreach wants to help their members with the coming national election. The pastor decides to put together a Christian voting guide. Although he doesn’t endorse any one candidate he does assess how strongly each candidate supports programs and legislation that seem Christ-like. **Did he get the balance right between church and state? Why or why not?**