

Column

“A free church in a free state” is a noble slogan and one which represents the sentiment of many in this country. It has much to commend itself.

What was originally meant by the phrase is that the Church should not be subservient to the State but rather to her Lord alone. Meanwhile, the Church should not get unnecessarily bogged down with those duties assigned by God to the State.

Put another way, the Church should set about to ‘save souls’ and by her teaching make virtuous citizens. The State, in a separate sphere, should ensure the conditions whereby people, Christians included, could go about their business without fear or restraint.

As noble as this concept is, it has a danger. That danger is that the wall separating Church and State can grow so high that there is no longer any creative interplay between these two institutions.

When this happens, faith becomes privatized. If a person wants to believe in God and attend religious services, that is fine so long as his faith does not impinge on his public life. Secular society, including the State, is thus left to operate without a canon of objective truth or moral restraint.

For quite some time, we have been on this trajectory in this country and are now reaping the consequences, which include violence, discord, incivility and the breakdown of the home. Indeed, the end of Western Christian civilization seems to be at hand.

Does the Bible say anything about the wall between Church and State? I would want to argue that it does. While acknowledging a distinct role of each, these roles are meant to complement each other. Perhaps the clearest place where these two roles are seen is 1 Timothy 2:1, 2:

“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”

Looking closely at these two verses, we discover that both institutions have a God-given but distinct role to play. Christian people are to pray for those in authority, while those in authority are to work to maintain the conditions

whereby human society might flourish and those institutions within it (including the Church) might go about their business unimpeded.

Interestingly, enough, when this Apostolic injunction was given, those in authority were pagan, some brutal and desperate men like Nero, Emperor of Rome. Nevertheless, Christians were told to pray for them? Why?

Well, because order is to be preferred to chaos. Even pagan rulers restrain forces that would make society impossible. So, in that sense, even the most ruthless are to be seen as God's minister or servant.

Today, of course, we have opportunities and options that those in the ancient world did not have. Through exercising our right to speak and vote, we can actively work for a society where the Church is free to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the weak and venerable are not forgotten. . . a society where there is creative interplay between Church and State . . . a society that respects and reflects Christians values, which are at the end of the day human values.

In the coming days and weeks, look for ways of doing your part in this operation. Dare to think and speak and do.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favour and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honourable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogancy, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.