

Epiphany 3 (MP-2) (2020)

Now please don't take this as an endorsement. I do not do *pub* reviews from the pulpit. That would not be good form.

With that disclaimer, I want begin this morning by calling to your attention a certain pub in Charleston, South Carolina, more specifically its trade slogan:

**“We separate Church and State.”**

You may well be thinking this is a political statement. It is not. It is a geographic one. For you see, this pub is located at the intersection of Church and State streets!

Clever and memorable, yes. But, what about ‘separation of church and state’ in the more conventional sense of the phrase? Is such a separation a good thing or a bad thing?

Before going any further, let me interject a closely related mantra that is often brandished about:

**“A free Church in a free State.”**

Positively stated what is meant by both is that the State mustn't dictate what the Church teaches and how she goes about her business, while the Church mustn't get unnecessarily involved with those duties assigned to the State.

Surely, a noble and wise concept!

But, there is a danger lurking in the shadows. That danger is that the wall will get built so high that there is no creative play between the two institutions.

When this happens, when faith is banished from the public sector, 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 handed a free card. She is left to operate without a canon of objective truth or meaningful critique.

For quite some time now, we in this country have been on this trajectory and are now reaping the consequence. These include violence, discord, incivility and the breakdown of the home and society at large. ///

How might we get the balance right?

As I approach this question, let me begin by bringing to your attention two passages of Scripture, both of which I believe are instructive in this matter.

The first is 1 Timothy 2: verses 1 and 2. Here St. Paul writes:

**“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.”**

The second is today’s Old Testament reading where we find Moses giving directions concerning the duties of judges in Israel.

Taking these two passages together (along with others in the Bible) I think there are some definite things we say on this subject of Church and State.

First, **both institutions are God-ordained and have specific roles.**

The Church is that institution Jesus Himself established at His First Coming. It is the new, reconstituted Israel of God.

Its members are all those who have given their allegiance to Jesus as Saviour and Lord and who have been baptised. Its mission is:

-- To announce Jesus and to make disciples of all nations;

-- To lead God’s people in right worship and to instruct them how to live as productive members of the Lord’s family; and finally

-- To be signposts in the present of the coming Kingdom of God. To reflect the light of Christ into the all the dark places of life, including – I would want to suggest – the halls of government.

Let me pause here and ask: Are you doing that? Am I? Is the room – the world – a brighter place because you and I are in it? Think. Pray Act.

Returning to my main thought, if the Church has specific duties, so has the State. What are they?

Well, one is to maintain order in society, an order that promotes human flourishing, including the free exercise of religion.

St. Paul's phrase for this is **“that we might lead quiet and peaceable lives”**.

And so, the first thing we can say about Church and State is that both are God-ordained and each has a specific role to play in the world.

The second is: **God is not just interested in ‘religious things’**.

The instructions we find in today's Old Testament reading should give the lie to any such view.

Here, God, speaking through Moses, decrees that that judges are not to take bribes, are to protect the weak and are to show no partiality.

Interestingly enough, we also find here instruction concerning an appeals process. What does a judge do when a case is too difficult for him? Moses sets forth a procedure.

None of what he says in this passage is specifically ‘religious’.

I would want to say that a god who is interested only in those things we call religious is not much of a god.

Someone has said: **Either He is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all!**  
That's right! ///

So far, we have seen:

Both Church and State are institutions instituted of God, each having distinct roles.

And, that God is interested in more than ‘religious’ things.

But, there is a third we should consider. That is: **Jesus’ believing people have a part play in both Church and State.**

In the passage from 1 Timothy, Paul instructs Christians to pray for those in authority. At the time, these were not Christian kings and magistrates, but pagan persons.

Pagan or not, Paul instructs the Church to pray for them. How come? How should they be viewed?

They are to be viewed as God’s ministers. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they serve under God’s sovereignty and are answerable to Him.

What might our prayer be for them?

Well, that they will do their job and do it well . . . that they will maintain conditions which allows the Church to do her job.

In Paul’s day, there was not much else Christians could do but to pray, but thankfully that is not so with us. We are still charged with praying, but there are other things we can do as well.

One of our members here at St. Luke’s has a bumper sticker on her car saying: **I am a Christian, and I vote!**

Well, good for her.

We all should be doing what that bumper sticker says and more.

If you think about it, Christian values – loving your neighbour and all that – are in fact human values. So, make your voice heard! Exercise the liberty you have while you have it.

Josiah Gilbert Holland, an American novelist and poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sets our thinking on the right path in a little piece entitled “God give us men.”

If he were writing today, no doubt he would add “women”. But, let me read it to you just as he wrote it:

GOD, give us men! A time like  
this demands  
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and  
ready hands;  
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;  
Men who possess opinions and a will;  
Men who have honour; men who will not lie;

Men who can stand before a demagogue  
And damn his treacherous flatteries  
without winking!  
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live  
above the fog  
In public duty, and in private thinking;  
For while the rabble, with their  
thumb-worn creeds,  
Their large professions and their little deeds,  
Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,  
Wrong rules the land and waiting  
Justice sleeps.

His words still stand. Christians need to be engaged people . . . people engaged in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, *yes* . . . people engaged in training those of their own households in the things of God, *yes* . . . people engaged in setting a good example in the community, *yes* . . . people engaged in hands-on caring for the need, *yes* . . . people not afraid to speak out against injustice and wrong, *yes* . . . people who bring the light of Christ to the courthouse, the state house and the ends of the earth, *yes, yes, yes!*

Is “Separation of Church and State” a good thing?

I would want to answer, yes and no. As in all areas of life, a wise balance is called for.

In light of the Scriptures at which we have looked this morning, I will leave you to work out what that wise balance might look like.

In closing:

Don't linger too long at the intersection of Church and State, looking this way and that. Rather, resolve to be light, shining your light in which ever direction it is needed.