

“Church and State: The Odd Couple”
Matthew 16:21-26, 20:25-28, 26:52; Romans 13:1-7
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By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Biblical Texts

In our first reading from Matthew, Jesus reveals to his followers that his way, and the way of following him, is different than the ways of the world all around them. **Read Matthew 16:21-26**

In the second reading from Matthew we see Jesus once again reminding his followers that his way and the way of following him is different than the ways of the world. **Read Matthew 20:25-28**

And in the final reading from Matthew, Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane and swords are drawn. Once again Jesus points out his different way. **Read Matthew 26:52**

II. Video Introduction

(Show video clip from 2007 CNN special, “God’s Warriors,” Part III- Christian Warriors, on interview with Rev. Dr. Greg Boyd, Woodland Hills Church, St. Paul, MN.)

The clip is from the 2007 CNN special, “God’s Warriors.” It is a report of the rise of religious fundamentalism in rightwing politics.

In this brief clip we see Christiane Amanpour’s interview of Rev. Dr. Greg Boyd, senior pastor of a large evangelical church in St. Paul, MN. Greg Boyd got his Master’s of Divinity degree from Yale, and a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Before founding Woodland Hills Church he taught theology for 16 years.

Greg Boyd is called a heretic by some on the evangelical right because he dared to speak up to say:

The kingdom of God is not the kingdom of the world;
Christians cannot fuse together the cross and fighter jets;
Christian nationalism is idolatry.

Are such words heretical.....or faithful and prophetic? We are entering the election season. Christian faith is in the political mix. These are important questions to ask. What about church and state.....what about Christian faith and politics?

III. Theological Reflection

My friend Dr. Ira Flamborg leads a discussion group at Whispering Oaks. Ira told me that when he agreed to lead the group he was told, "You can talk about anything except religion, politics and sex. Don't talk about those things. It just gets people all riled up." Ira told me he replied, "Those are the things I know most about. So that's what we'll talk about." And so they do.

Religion, politics and sex.....we'll leave sex for another day. Today we'll briefly talk about religion and politics. Christian faithfulness in our world requires us to do some deep thinking about church and state....faith and politics. We need something more than political "sound bytes," bumper sticker theology, and Christian rally slogans. What I want to share are three basic ideas that we need to get right:

- 1-The church is not the state
- 2-The church respects the state
- 3-The church is the conscience of the state

These are foundational understandings, within our Presbyterian, theological heritage. They also give plenty of room for discussion, interpretation, and various views and political positions.

A. The Church is Not the State.

I think we know this.....but just like Jesus' followers in Matthew, we need to be reminded again and again and again. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24)....."Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mt. 20:26)....."The son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28)....."Put your sword back in its place; for all who take up their sword will die by the sword" (Mt. 26:52). That is the way of Jesus. That is not the way of the state. The way of the state is power over, swords and fighter jets. The way of Jesus is service, love and a cross. And when we get that confused we get a type of Christian Taliban; a particular, Christian religious view enforced by the power of the state. It is not a good thing, and never has been.

The church is not the state. The way of Jesus, the kingdom of God, works differently than the way of the state, the kingdom of the world. In the way of the state power is used to coerce obedience and control behavior. It is used by those who believe they have the right to wield it. In the way of Christ love is the power that draws people to God and new life.....it is the way of service, and suffering if need be. Jesus knew and saw that the kingdom of God would never come by the power of the state. He saw that power corrupted those who tried to use it. There were lots of political-religious movements in Jesus' day. He said, "No," to them all. Rather Jesus believed that evil and darkness would only be truly overcome one choice at a time; when we

choose love and service.....loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Therefore, the real enemies are not Democrats, or Republicans, or CEOs, or Wall Street bankers, or gay rights activists, or those who protest against gay rights, or those who are pro-choice or pro-life. The real enemy is the kingdom of darkness that tempts people to use power to remake the world.....in their own image.

The church is not the state. The difference has gotten a little fuzzy in the last 30 years (as there have been numerous periods in history when the difference has gotten fuzzy). In a recent example Texas Governor Rick Perry hosted a national prayer event about a month ago (which was attended by 30,000 people, and broadcast nationwide on cable and the internet). One week later he announced his bid as the Republican candidate for president. The prayer event was sponsored by conservative religious organizations, and rightly protested by a few who saw the church/state danger. Anytime the Bible and prayer are used as political tools, it is a warning. The church is not the state. But.....

B. The Church Respects the State

The state, the kingdom of the world, has an important part to play in civilization. In this world the state has the responsibility to uphold justice, protect human rights, and enforce a basic code of ethical behavior. It is a good and necessary thing. The recent civil revolts in Egypt, Libya, and Syria demonstrate the failure of those states to do what was needed. Properly functioning states are a gift from God for the good ordering of society. In John Calvin's 16th C Geneva, amidst all the chaos of that time, Calvin understood God's call to civil government as the most important call, as it directly affects the most people. In a world where Christians struggle to follow Jesus as Lord, and greed, will to power, and violence shape many sinful choices, the state and its diligent use of power are important.

In Romans 13 Paul reminds Christians that the church respects the state. Christians are to obey the laws of the state....be good citizens. The just order of society matters. And that shouldn't be a problem for Christians, as following Jesus means you act justly, tell the truth, do good, seek peace, and pay your taxes. And even though Paul would spend time in Roman jails for false charges brought against him for his Christian faith, he never doubted the importance of the state and civil order. As long as the state doesn't demand ultimate allegiance, and require actions and beliefs contrary to the kingdom of God, the church respects the state. Followers of Jesus proclaim "Jesus is Lord," and obey the laws of the state.

And this brings us to the third point.....

C. The Church is the Conscience of the State

Jeanne and I enjoyed a week up at the Chautauqua Institute this summer. It feels like a week of fine arts overdose; ballet, theatre, symphony, opera and lectures throughout the day. Each day begins with a chapel service in the 5000 seat amphitheater. The chapel speaker for our week was Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy. I had never heard of Rev. Gaddy before, but I should have. He's written numerous books, is regularly on television and radio, is the pastor for preaching and worship at Northminster Church in Monroe, Louisiana, and is the president for the Interfaith Alliance (an organization that monitors healthy church/state relationships). During our week at Chautauqua Rev. Gaddy did a good job preaching about the importance of the arts at a type of language in life and faith.

The following week I was surprised to hear the name of Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy again. This time it was on radio. He was one of eleven clergy arrested in Washington, DC, for their prayer and protests in the Capital Rotunda. As the House and Senate debated debit-limit legislation, Rev. Gaddy joined other clergy in the Capital for prayer against actions and budget cuts that would further hurt the poor and powerless. When these clergy refused to disperse, they were arrested. Rev. Gaddy's comment afterward outside the Capital was, "It's time for people of faith and good will to speak up, and it's time for some politicians in Washington to grow up." The church is the conscience of the state.

When the church and state become fused together the church is corrupted by the power of the state, and the church loses its prophetic voice to the state. Over the past 30 years the only social agenda we regularly hear about has to do with abortion, sex and marriage. Those are ethical issues, but as Rev. Gaddy reminds us, there are other ethical issues about which Christians need to "speak up." After the "housing bubble burst," the scandals on Wall Street, and the recession, where's the voice about greed (something scripture addresses regularly)? And what about care of creation...what about being green.....what about an ethic of Christian stewardship of this planet? After years of warnings about pollution, cancers, and global warming, we're still "fiddling around." And the care of our state with Marcellus shale drilling is an issue of Christian ethics. There is a way in Pennsylvania to balance jobs, the interests of business, and care for the environment. And what about torture? Since 9/11 there has been clear evidence of the US government's support of torture. In fact on the front page of today's Sharon Herald there's a story about the link between our CIA and Libya, where terrorists suspects were tortured "for us." Where's the Christian outcry over that? And what about the growing darkness of human trafficking.....the growing disparity of incomes between the few at the top and the shrinking middle class.....and a real pro-life agenda that would include the issues of poverty, healthcare, and jobs? A healthy

state needs the conscience of the whole church, not just the religious right. And a healthy church needs to regain its full voice and “speak up.”

IV. Conclusion

The church is not the state.....the church respects the state.....the church is the conscience of the state.....for some reason as I was thinking about a healthy relationship of church and state I had this crazy image of “The Odd Couple.” I’m not familiar with the mid-60’s Neil Simon play. But I do remember watching and the laughing at the 70’s television show starring Jack Klugman as Oscar, and Tony Randall as Felix. In the story, neurotic, neat freak, photographer Felix is thrown out of the house by his wife because he drove her crazy, and moves in with his friend Oscar. Oscar is a messy sportswriter, and about as opposite of Felix as imaginable. Like oil and water, Oscar and Felix do not mix.... will never be the same....and sparks often fly between them. But they are bound together in a type of relationship.....and in a strange way, care for each other.....and respect each other. The results are explosive, humorous, and sometimes heartfelt. Indeed, they are the “odd couple.”

The church is not the state.....the church respects the state..... the church is the conscience of the state.....”pick up your cross and follow me”.....”whoever wishes to be great will serve”.....”put your sword back in its place”.....”be subject to governing authorities”.....”it’s time for people of faith and good will to speak up”.....church and state, it is an “odd couple” type of relationship. Anything less is disobedient to Christ. Anything more is idolatry.