

CHURCH AND STATE

“rendering to Caesar and God”

Key question

What is the relationship between the church and the secular state?

Key text

Matthew 22:21

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Introduction

There are three general philosophies of church / state relations.

1. **Secularism (state over church)**

- a. Marxism is the most popular (full blown) expression of this philosophy.
- b. **Moral values within secularism**
 1. Moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethical values are situational, needing no theological sanction.
 2. Civil (public) law replaces a personal moral law. The court decides what is permitted and proscribed based on pragmatic considerations only.
 3. To some extent this is also the system adopted in France after the revolution.
- c. **Problems with secularism**
 1. It must repress some basic human (natural law) instincts.
 - a. The (unquestioned) Hippocratic Oath calls for a respect for all human life. But based on what?
 - b. A sense of justice is assumed but not grounded in anything secular.
 2. Secularism’s relativism seems self-defeating
 - a. Moral judgments are impossible in a culture that is radically relative.
 - b. While different cultures may disagree on many values this difference of opinion does not nullify all common norms. International treaties would otherwise be impossible.
 - c. An “ends justifies the means” ethic can create a barbaric culture where capitalism becomes the exploitation of the poor, democracy becomes the manipulation of the weak, and the notion of “common good” is smothered by “personal desire.”
 - d. Any notion of universal human rights becomes difficult to support.

2. **Theocracy (church over state)**

- a. **Mosaic Theocracy** – This was the system of Israel in the Old Testament.
 - b. **Medieval Roman Catholicism** – Medieval Europe saw many examples of the state in service to a particular church (Catholic or Protestant) resulting in bloody religious wars.
 - c. **Shiite Muslim States** – Qur’anic law is imposed upon all society.
 - d. **Puritanism** – Calvin’s Geneva was in essence a church state. **Reconstructionism** or **theonomy** or **dominion theology** (R.J. Rushdoony, Gary North), **Biblionomy** (D.James Kennidy, David Barton) (see apttoteach.org theology file #809)
3. **The American Experiment** (Natural Law over state)
- a. This is the view of Thomas Jefferson and many of the founders of the American Republic.
 - b. **What is the nature of the American Democratic Republic?** – The role of civil government is to 1) establish and maintain peace and order so as to prevent tyranny or anarchy, 2) promote and enforce justice for all, 3) maximize personal freedom while encouraging the common good.

Our culture is built upon three ideas:

1. A Biblical value system held on a deeply personal level as an expression of Natural Law.
2. A Democratic government centered in the people with checks and balances of power.
3. A Capitalistic free enterprise economic system that allows fair competition, civil cooperation, and social compassion.

NOTE: If the spirit is eroded, democracy becomes the manipulation of the foolish by the clever and capitalism becomes the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

c. **How are we as Christians to apply Biblical ethics to the modern world?**

1. Do the challenges of modernity (science, technology, mobility, international economy, global political community, etc.) represent a difference in degree or in kind to the issues addressed by the Biblical writers?
2. If they do represent a difference in kind (or a significant difference in degree) so as to render the N.T. teaching only indirectly applicable, how do we proceed?

	Secularism	Natural Law	Theocracy
<i>Nature of Government</i>	Secular Government	Just Government	Religious Government
<i>Church / State</i>	Separation	Cooperation	Union
<i>Nature of religious freedom</i>	Freedom from all religion	Freedom for all religions	Freedom for one religion
<i>Belief in God</i>	Discouraged	Encouraged	Demanded
<i>Basis for civil law</i>	Human experience	General revelation	Special revelation
<i>Example</i>	Marxist China	Early America	Iran

Adopted from Norman Geisler’s Systematic Theology IV pp 226

A. **In what sense is America a “Christian nation?”**

1. There are four forces that made a contribution to the development of our republic.

- a. **Classic Republican model (structures of civil community)** — This model respects both the necessity of respecting self interest and societal interests. It sees social restraint as necessary for controlling self-interest that may be destructive to community. This is in contrast to both raw self-interest and raw societal interest.
 - b. **Puritan Christian values (moral values as a part of natural law)** — These values include a God-ordained and sanctioned plan centered in a covenant community of individuals and state interests with accountability of conscience before God.
 - c. **Enlightenment ideals (individual human rights)**— Rationalism, Humanism, Pragmatism
 - d. **Pluralism (unity with diversity)** — tolerance of individual differences within a broad framework of common cultural, “rules of engagement.”
2. America was founded as a “**Christian nation**” only in the sense that it:
 - a. Assumed that we live under a sacred canopy - a God-centered universe.
 - b. Assumed a personal and public ethic shaped (roughly) by Biblical moral law.
 - c. Assumed a personal moral accounting of individual conscience before God.
 - d. Assumed a sense of Divine calling and favor.
 - e. Assumed a view of humanity that respected both its dignity and depravity.
 3. America was not an evangelical Christian nation, but rather a nation that held to a very **general Biblical ethic** and worldview.
 - a. It was a secular state with the soul of a saint. It separated the state from the church (any one denomination or sect), but not the state from a generic theism.
 - b. Thomas Jefferson called this sacred canopy “**general religion**” (the general creed that distills values common to all sects, in all religions, from all cultures).
 - c. John Rawls spoke of an “**overlapping consensus**” that was shared by all religions and philosophies.
 - d. The **Free Mason’s** emphasis on Enlightenment Ideals with religious tolerance had a large influence in establishing an **American Civil Religion** that some described as **Progressive Patriotic Protestantism**. Most presidents have been Masons as were many of the founding fathers of America.
 - e. The **Mayflower Compact** with its strong Christian language stands in marked contrast with the American Constitution. This was because the Compact reflected the old worldview that came to America from Europe, a view that the founding fathers of the Revolution deliberately set out to counter.
 - e. When we read the essays and speeches of our eighteenth and nineteenth century forebears, one of the most striking revelations is the extent to which they shared a common moral vocabulary. This vocabulary was drawn from both the Judeo-Christina Biblical tradition and the Greco-Roman classical tradition (America was called “the new Athens.”)
 - f. In 1797 America made a treaty with Tripoli, declaring that “the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This reassurance to Islam was written under Washington’s presidency, and approved by the Senate under John Adams.
 4. America was to be a **civil society** with support from both government and religion.
 - a. Civil society is characterized by – Law and order, Diversity, and Tolerance.

- b. When civil society is weak it can be taken over by either government or religion resulting in **Fanaticism** (intolerance, forced uniformity, and lack of human freedoms). *Civil Society and Fanaticism* by Dominique Colas, Stanford Univ. Press. 1997

B. The nature of the American democratic republic

1. It is two principles held in balanced tension.

E PLURIBUS	UNUM
Diversity	Unity
Enlightenment ideals	Classical & Biblical values
Freedom	Order
Individuality	Community
Personal choice	Common good
Personal rights	Social responsibilities
Man is exalted by self	Man is both sacred & sinful
Man deserves freedom	Man needs restraint
A democracy	A republic
The Constitution	The Bill of Rights

2. **Neither of these two forces can to be allowed to dominate** or eclipse the other.
- America is not to be **E PLURIBUS (Period)** — a radical democracy where everyone is free to do what is right in their own eyes, a tyranny of the masses.
 - Nor is America to be **E PLURIBUS UNUM (IN CHRISTO)** — a theocratic state where unity is “in Christ” or defined by evangelical Christianity.
3. **The preservation of this balance is fragile** and only possible with the cooperation of the great institutions of our nation — the universities, the churches, the courts, and the legislative government.
4. **There is ample evidence for a respect for UNUM in early America.**
- Laws of nature and **nature’s God**. Some examples of “laws of nature” - *incest, sanctity of life and property, marriage, civil order, etc.*
 - The national motto — E PLURIBUS UNUM (in diversity, unity)
 - The language of the U.S. Constitution “...to form a more perfect **union**, ...provide for the **common** defense, promote the **general** welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty ... our **posterity**...”
5. **The loss of balance and its consequences.**
- When E PLURIBUS is exalted at the expense of UNUM (as is the case today) —
 - Idealism tends to result. No compromise of rights is allowed out of respect for diversity.
 - Man concludes that he can exalt himself through political revolution, educational socialization, and psychotherapy — without the unifying influence of transcendent authority.
 - MAN/god — God is optional or a chaplain to humanity.
 - Man both ignores the threat of, and encourages the expression of his dark side — his “selfishness.”

5. The disorder and crisis that results forces the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction toward tyranny or the loss of E PLURIBUS all together.
6. The civilized values retained are borrowed capital from the past. They have no logical root in the prevailing philosophy.
- b. When UNUM is exalted at the expense of E PLURIBUS —
 1. Cynicism tends to result — people feel insignificant and in bondage.
 2. Man loses sight of his exalted dignity.
 3. An elite group of managers wind up dictating society.

C. How separate are church and state? The First Amendment controversy.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

1. **Religious (transcendent authority) not only should, but must, be recognized and respected in the public square of 20th century American life because:**
 - a. **It was the conviction (assumed world and life view) of the framers of the American Republic.**
 1. The physical testimony:
 - a. Written testimony of the founding fathers
 - James Madison, the fourth president, known as “The Father of Our Constitution” made the following statement: “We have staked the whole of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.”
 - Patrick Henry, that patriot and Founding Father of our country said: “It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded not by religionists but by Christians, not on religions but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”
 - b. Official documents of the republic (Bill of Rights)
 - c. Biblical inscriptions on public buildings and monuments
 - As you walk up the steps of the east side of the building which houses the U.S. Supreme Court you can see near the top of the building a row of the world’s law givers and each one is facing one in the middle who is facing forward with a full frontal view... it is Moses and he is holding the Ten Commandments!
 - As you enter the Supreme Court courtroom, the two huge oak doors have two tablets with the Roman numerals I-V and VI-X (The Ten Commandments?) engraved on each lower portion of each door.
 - Directly above the Bench of the Court are two central figures, depicting Majesty of the Law and Power of Government. Between them is a tableau of the Ten Commandments.
 - There are Bible verses etched in stone on numerous Federal Buildings and Monuments in Washington, D.C. At the top of the Washington monument are the Latin words Laus Deo (Praise be to God). When the cornerstone of the Washington Monument was laid on July 4th, 1848 deposited within it were many items including the Holy Bible presented by the Bible Society.

- d. Public policy
 - Blue laws
 - Every session of Congress begins with a prayer by a paid preacher, whose salary has been paid by the taxpayer since 1777.
 - George Washington's inaugural prayer
"Almighty God; We make our earnest prayer that Thou wilt keep the United States in Thy holy protection; that Thou wilt incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government; and entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another and for their fellow citizens of the United states at large. And finally, that Thou wilt most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation. Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."
 - e. **NOTE: N.C Constitution 1836** *"No person who shall deny the being of God, or the truth of the Christian religion shall be capable of holding any office or place of trust or pulpit."*
 - f. Supreme Court briefs (Douglas, 1952 *"our institution presupposes a Supreme Being"*)
 - g. Presidential addresses always make references to God.
 - h. Other data:
2. American legal philosophy is based on a respect for NATURAL LAW. English Common Law, which influenced American legal philosophy borrowed (arguably) from Biblical patterns.
 3. The American model was constructed to reject two extremes - the union of church and state as in England and the radical separation of religion from public life as in France.
 4. Note: It was not until the mid 1800's that notions of "separation" became an issue. (*Separation of Church and State* by Philip Hamburger, Harvard University Press) It was fear by Protestants that Catholics (if elected to public office) would not function independent of Rome that helped fuel the "separation" doctrine.
 5. American CIVIL RELIGION with its recognition of the structure of ultimate reality, was, up until the 20th century, described as **"Progressive Patriotic Protestantism."**
 - a. Accountability to a transcendent authority (a generic God) is a part of the public's expectation.
 - b. A universal moral order exists for the public sphere that is derived from reason, nature, and the Bible.
 - c. History has meaning and is directed by God.
 - d. An eternal perspective (hope) warrants temporal sacrifices.
 - e. A sacred umbrella that is benevolently neutral toward Protestantism's sects, Catholicism, other theistic religions, and some forms of natural religion.
 - f. A glue which mediates the tension between E PLURIBUS and UNUM.
 6. What did the founding fathers believe and value?

- a. Virtually all those involved in the founding enterprise were God-fearing men; many were Calvinistic Protestants. This is however more complex than the left or the right want to admit. The left wants to make them all deists, the right all orthodox Christians. Their writings leave most historians confused on the matter.
 - Fifty-two of the 55 founders of the Constitution were members of the established Christian churches in the colonies.
 - Thomas Jefferson worried that the Courts would overstep their authority and instead of interpreting the law would begin making law an oligarchy - the rule of few over many.
 - The very first Supreme Court Justice, John Jay, said: “*Americans should select and prefer Christians as their rulers.*”
- b. The Founders were generally influenced by a biblical view of man and government. With a sober understanding of the fallenness of man, they devised a system of limited authority with checks and balances.
- c. The Founders understood that fear of God, moral leadership, and a righteous citizenry were necessary for their great experiment to succeed.
- d. They structured a political climate that was encouraging to Christianity and accommodating to religion generally, rather than hostile to it.
- e. Protestant Christianity was the prevailing religious view for the first 150 years of our history.
- f. The Fathers sought to set up a just society, as understood from a Biblical ethical framework, not a Christian theocracy or a new Israel.
- g. They specifically prohibited the establishment of Christianity – or any other faith – as the religion of our nation.

The 1796 Treaty with Tripoli states that the United States was “***not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.***” This was meant to assure Muslims that Islam was not an enemy of the United States. The Founders *believed it and meant* it in the sense that no one religion was wedded to the nation. This treaty was written under the presidency of George Washington and signed under the presidency of John Adams.

The fact that no religious language appears in the Constitution is not accident. It was understood that the government’s authority came from the people not from the church (God) as in England.

b. It still is the conviction of the vast majority of American citizens.

1. The elite in our culture are in general agreement that the more modern a society becomes, the more secular it will be. This notion seems to have everything going for it but the **empirical evidence**.
 - a. 95% believe in God or a Universal Spirit
 - b. 87% pray to God
 - c. 71% believe in life after death
 - d. 70% believe Jesus is God
 - e. 68% have church membership
 - f. 48% have encouraged someone to accept Christ

- g. 40% attend church or synagogue at least once per week
 - h. 40% claim to be born-again Christians
 - i. 38% believe the Bible is the literal Word of God
2. The **media's image** of a secular (religionless) America is largely a wishful myth.
- a. Traditional religious institutions and values in media are absent, put in the context of the 18th century, or ridiculed as manipulative, hypocritical, and/or obstructive to basic freedoms and rights.
 - b. Tolerance is counted as the ultimate virtue and the intolerance of transcendent absolutes as the only absolute. Any notion of moral absolutes is viewed as a threat to freedom. "We are a heard of independent minds marching towards moral oblivion with Frank Sinatra's witless boast on our lips, 'I did it my way.'" Richard John Neuhaus
- c. **It is a practical necessity for democratic capitalism and a public social ethic in a free society.**
- 1. The inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness can be misunderstood. The last phrase did not mean a right to hedonistic pleasure, as many people believe today but the pursuit of goodness or virtue (Aristotle), a life spent ordering our appetites and desires to the truth of who we are, which produces happy individuals and a harmonious society, a society with integrity.

Classical happiness	Modern happiness
Objective	subjective
"to be good"	"to feel good"
Includes suffering	Devoid of suffering
Being fully human	Being destructive of our humanity
Truth	Contentment
Wisdom of mind	Peace of mind

- 2. The social ethical agenda in our public life grows out of our real or sentimental attachment to Judeo-Christian values. Once we abandon the idea that there is a shared understanding of "the good" or even of how the world is constructed, there is little left to curb social and moral chaos but the arbitrary sentiment of the most powerful in society.
- 3. *"We 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 a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."* John Adams
 - a. Our institutions presuppose the existence of a transcendent authority, a supreme being, a God, and are wholly incapable of properly functioning without His influence in our private lives and public expectations.
 - b. Without this spirit:
 - 1. **Capitalism** becomes the exploitation of the economically weak by the economically powerful.
 - 2. **Democracy** becomes an endless litigation of rights and the manipulation of the naive by the clever.

3. **Pluralism** dignifies every kind of divergence as a form of creativity.
- c. Government has a role in legislating general morality.
 1. **Negatively** - Laws serve a moral order by discouraging evil, and specifically by punishing people who do evil things.
 2. **Positively** – Laws (especially tax laws and social customs) can encourage the good.
4. *“Can the liberties of a nation be sure when we remove their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people, that these liberties are the gift of God?”*
Thomas Jefferson
“Our people are losing virtue, that is why we have been losing self-government.”
Michael Novak (If we cannot govern ourselves, we invite others to govern us.)
7. About the time our original thirteen states adopted their new constitution in 1787, Alexander Tyler, a Scottish history professor at the University of Edinburgh, had this to say about the fall of the Athenian Republic some 2,000 years earlier:
“A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government.” “A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury.” “From that moment on, the majority always vote for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.” “The average age of the world’s greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about 200 years.” “During those 200 years, those nations always progressed through the following sequence:
 1. *From bondage to spiritual faith;*
 2. *From spiritual faith to great courage;*
 3. *From courage to liberty;*
 4. *From liberty to abundance;*
 5. *From abundance to complacency;*
 6. *From complacency to apathy;*
 7. *From apathy to dependence;*
 8. *From dependence back into bondage”*
6. **References to God as the source of human rights (in the early documents of our republic) were and are significant in that they place human rights beyond the reach of human government’s power to alter, remove, or marginalize those rights.**
2. The First Amendment makes a distinction between:
 - a. Separation of any one religious sect and the state (a separation which I support), and
 - b. Separation of a transcendent authority in terms of “generic religion” and the state (a separation that I resist).

NOTE: *“The First Amendment was prompted because the “people feared one sect might obtain a preeminence, or two combine together, and establish a religion to which they would compel others to conform.” James Madison*
- c. The same Congress that adopted the First Amendment also adopted the Northwest Ordinance, which reads: *“Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and means of learning shall forever be encouraged.”*

3. It is a fantasy to assume that secularism represents some form of neutral high ground with respect to religious faith.
 - a. The presuppositions underlying secular materialism are faith assumptions every bit as much as those of classic religions.
 - b. If materialistic atheism is to enjoy the same protection under the first amendment as traditional religions (faith systems) then it also must be subject to the same limitations in terms of defining what is orthodox for the public square.
 - c. The fact is we do not have the option of being free from some “faith” system. Secularism is not “faith neutral.” The question is, which religious faith assumptions will we embrace in the public square? “The first amendment . . . does not convert our schools into religious free zones.” *Bill Clinton*
4. I make a clear distinction between historic orthodox Christianity and American civil religion. American civil religion can accommodate orthodox Christianity, but in the final analysis, it is an idolatrous substitute for it. To exclude it, however, from the public square and to suggest that the social order needs no moral basis is idiocy.

D. **The First Amendment and modern thought**

1. In the years between 1875 and 1925 a **great shift** took place in American culture.
 - a. It moved from being a secular state with a recognized religious canopy to a secular state that questioned and abandoned all notions of transcendent authority.
 - b. This shift swept first through the universities and from there to other institutions of culture.
2. **Public education’s** emphasis upon:
 - a. Absolute autonomy of the individual
 - b. Radical relativity of values
 - c. Comprehensive contingency of all phenomena
 - d. Total temporality of all reality
3. **The media’s** distorted image of American life
 - a. Traditional values and ideals are portrayed as outdated and out of place in public life.
 - b. The only public virtue is “tolerance” of everything but “political incorrectness.”
4. **The court’s** interpretation of the first amendment
 - a. Separation of Church and State has come to imply separation of traditional classical religious views from the public square while at the same time supporting secular materialistic worldviews in public life.
 1. **“Free exercise”** is granted only to secular materialistic views in public.
 2. **“Disestablishment”** is applied to traditional classical worldviews only.
 - b. The Supreme Court has evolved in differing directions with respect to its reading of the First Amendment. In most recent years it has respected a compromise between the thinking of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (reflected in the chart below).

	<i>John Adams</i>	<i>Thomas Jefferson</i>
<i>Context</i>	Massachusetts Constitution	Virginia's Constitution
<i>Degree of separation between church and state.</i>	Porous wall of separation - The establishment of one non-sectarian public religion is encouraged.	Solid wall of separation - Religion should be wholly private.
<i>State support</i>	State support (chaplains, tax exemptions, etc) of general religion is needed.	No state support in any form to any religion is permitted.
<i>Rational</i>	The State needs a common religious foundation for its core values.	Any state support tends to limit freedom of private religion.
<i>Symbols</i>	Public religious symbols were appropriate.	No public religious symbols should be permitted.
<i>Extent of free exercise of religion</i>	Religious freedom is tempered by public religious values.	Radical freedom for all religious expressions in private life is permitted.
<i>Extent of disestablishment of religion</i>	A "mild and equitable" establishment of one public religion is necessary.	Disestablishment of all religions is necessary.
<i>Public institutions</i>	They should support general religion.	They should have nothing to do with religion.

- c. Four tenants seemed to have emerged from the courts compromise.
 - a. There is a place for public recognition of religion. Public religion must be as free as private religion.
 - b. Freedom of public religion sometimes requires the support of the state.
 - c. A public religion cannot be a common religion. It must be open to all forms of private religious faith.
 - d. Freedom of public religion also requires freedom from public religion. People cannot be forced to affirm the public display of religion.
- d. It seems clear that the "no establishment" provision of the first amendment should be in the service of the "free exercise" provision. Free exercise is the end, and no establishment is one means in the service of that end. In recent court decisions this order seems to have been reversed.
- e. The First Amendment is seen as protecting the State from religion as opposed to protecting religion from the State.
 - 1. When the Church becomes involved in the public square the cry has been "this is a violation of Church and State."

2. When the State is attempting to interfere with and regulate the Church, the State argues there is no absolute separation of Church and State.
- f. Three tests have been developed to decide the constitutionality of laws that have a religious component:
 1. **The Lemon test:** This was defined in a Supreme Court ruling in 1971. In order to be constitutional, a law must 1) have a secular purpose, and 2) be neutral towards religion - neither hindering nor advancing it, and 3) not result in excessive entanglements between the government and religion.
 2. **The Endorsement Test:** Justice O'Connor created this criteria: a law is unconstitutional if it favors one religion over another in a way that makes some people feel like outsiders and others feel like insiders.
 3. **The Coercion Test:** Justice Kennedy proposed this criteria: a law is constitutional even if it recognizes or accommodates a religion, as long as its demonstration of support does not appear to coerce individuals to support or participate in a religion.
- g. Supreme Court decisions have consistently respected a distinction between teaching about religion and indoctrination in any one religious sect. *McCullum v. Board of Education 1948, Abington v. Schempp 1963, Stone v. Graham 1980*

5. Pluralism

- a. Pluralism is not necessarily:
 1. Monism's denial of our differences. It is rather the recognition that differences deserve a certain recognition and respect.
 2. Relativism's denial of the importance of scientific truth. It maintains normative truth in physical sciences but tends to be relativistic in social values.
- b. Pluralism is the civil engagement of our differences and disagreements about what is most importantly true.
- c. Americans are called to be "citizens of the great republic of humanity at large." George Washington
- d. "Benevolence is the cement of support of Families, of Churches, of States, of Kingdoms, and of the Great Community of mankind. It is the single principle that constitutes and preserves all the peace and harmony, all the beauty and advantage of society." Samuel Cooper

6. Triumphalism closes more doors than it opens.

- a. Triumphalism is a posture (associated with many conservative Christians) that says:
 - What I do is (assumed uncritically to be) God's will and work (fully).
 - My perceptions are God's perceptions (exactly).
 - My motives are not mixed but pure.
 - All who question or oppose me are obstructing the work of God and are evil.
 - I have no room for reflective self-critical analysis of anything other than how I can be more effective in furthering my causes.
 - I have answers - not questions, certainty – not doubts, mandates – not options, declarations – not dialogue.
 - I punctuate all of my statements with exclamation marks not comas, or question marks.
- b. In reality this posture is:
 - Arrogant

- Insensitive
 - Mean spirited
 - Abusive
 - Angry
 - Foolish
 - Embarrassing
- c. But before we marginalize many of those who take a “triumphalist” posture we need to try to see through their cultural B.O. and B.S. and hear what might be some rather profound challenges. Consider the following questions that are raised by many triumphalists.
- Is there meaning to life and death?
 - Is there meaningful public truth in the realm of moral values? Or is there a strict division between science (universal truth) and values (private preferences).
 - Can we dismiss the Scriptural story through historical critical “scholarship” so easily?
 - Are conservative fundamentalists the only people in the cultures war that are: closed-minded, heard hearted, uninformed, and bull headed?
 - What does it mean to be human? Do we differ from other animals simply in degree of evolution or are we distinct in “kind?” Are we simply sophisticated bio-computors?
 - Is the only source of public truth that, which comes from naturalistic (materialistic) science? This assumes that there is no external source or authority to nature.
- d. The need for a liberal learning style.
1. It is possible to be conservative in one’s conclusions while at the same time being liberal (open, reasonable) in one’s learning style.
 2. Classic liberalism (openness, reasonableness) need not be synonymous with culturally liberal moral and political conclusions.
 3. Classic fundamentalism (affirming the tenants of the historic Christian faith) need not to synonymous with cultural fundamentalism which is uncritical, anti-intellectual, angry, arrogant, narrow minded, mean spirited, and foolish.

7. The common good

- a. Identifying the “common good” is linked to the challenge to find the “common ground” in an increasingly pluralistic America.
1. The common good is the benefit people get from participation in a common group.
 2. While ethnic pluralism and ideological pluralism are encouraged in America, world-view pluralism (radically different understandings of ultimate reality) may threaten even the notion of any “common good.”
- b. Generally speaking the **Bill of Rights** suggests that the common good includes:
1. Individual “rights” that are inalienable (self evident, based on natural law) and the endowment of the Creator.
 2. These rights include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
- c. The “**endowment of the Creator**” suggests a world-view that respects transcendent authority and human dignity.
1. While such a world-view is not specifically Christian it is compatible with the Biblical view.

2. The framers of the American system of government (with its balance of powers) respected a view of human nature that included both its dignity and depravity.
3. Belief in God (transcendent authority) was not a prerequisite for participation in the American community but it was an assumption that under girded its institutions, laws, and sense of the common good.
- d. The “**pursuit of happiness**” is about more than private pleasures.
 1. In Christian, and classical terms, the pursuit of happiness was the pursuit of virtue. Virtue, at its highest meant serving one’s fellow citizens, working for the public welfare, furthering the public good.
 2. Virtue was the indispensable means to reconcile the conflicts of individual interest in a common community by restraining self-interest to enable social cooperation.
 3. It was assumed that such virtue would create and sustain an environment that would promote private pleasures for the majority of those who shared in the common community.
- e. The notion of the “common good” has taken a back seat to “personal freedom” in the last several decades.
 1. The tension between “personal rights” (freedom to do whatever pleases us) and “corporate responsibilities” (obligations to serve the welfare of the community) is a part of the nature of American culture.
 2. Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* declared that there is no common good; that it is a fallacy trumped up to enslave the productive geniuses of the world into providing for the poor and the lazy. Her point is that “mutual obligation” stuff robs you of our personal freedom.
 3. Social Darwinism (a discredited philosophy from the Robber Baron era) suggests that animal natural selection also applies to humans. Attempts have been made by social Darwinists to explain altruistic behavior as fundamentally selfish.

E. **How should Christians view their responsibility to Caesar (the state)?**

1. Jesus and the Apostles said little about activist involvement in challenging and changing the political structures of their day. This is not to say that their teaching and example did not call for a particular posture in a secular state. **I Peter** is the letter that most clearly addresses the Christian’s relationship to the state. When you read it you will find that the posture that is advocated is one of showing power through humble submission to injustice rather than seizing of power to reform society. This teaching seems consistent with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 13:24-30 and elsewhere.
2. There is no indication that God has ordained America as the new Israel or as a society with some special covenant with God. America may have been founded, in part, on (general) Biblical principles but it was never **a Christian nation** in the way some have imagined. It has not lost its way from some “good old days” in its past. Some have been naïve in suggesting that we would be OK if we could just turn things around and find America’s Christian foundation again. America started as a spiritual rebel nation. For example, many of us find it hard, from a Christian perspective, to justify the American Revolution along with most of the other wars that America has fought. I am not a pacifist but neither am I blindly patriotic. America has always represented a spirit of independence from everything and anything outside the glorious self. Oh Yes, it has often evoked the name of God and clung to the Law of God as a guide but it (as a nation) has more often used God (in a general sense) rather than really bowed to Jesus as Lord. It has created a civil religion that Jefferson called

“general religion” that enabled each individual to fill in the meaning of “God.” Don’t get me wrong. The blessings that America has experienced have come in large part because it’s balanced view of human dignity and depravity is realistic. To be sure there was a time in our past when American values were more civil with respect to some spheres of life. But we must not be naïve and assume that things in the past were uniformly better. Child labor, slavery, political corruption (on a scale that makes today’s politics look mild), etc. are conveniently forgotten when some muse about a past that looked rosy, but only with the aid of a very selective memory.

3. Human **pride in government** is a Tower of Babel that will fall. God’s great visual aids in history are 1) physical death, 2) the failure of human governments, 3) the deep and universal longings for the Kingdom (justice, peace, happiness, blessing). To the extent that America brings in the values of the Kingdom it gives humans one more reason to marginalize the King. God does not have to curse America. America will self destruct at the hands of its hope in its values, confidence in its power, and arrogance of its place in the world.
4. As a Christian I am a citizen of God’s Kingdom first and foremost. I am an **alien ambassador** to this world (including America). America is my address but not my true home. As an ambassador I respect, serve, and love my country but I am in some real way independent of it as a representative of another land, kingdom, government, and Lord.
5. We are called to **render to Caesar** (government) what belongs to government (Matthew 22:21). In a democracy we owe the state at least three things.
 - a) our voice (both prayer to God, and petition to government,
 - b) our virtue (moral / social responsibility, and civil service), and
 - c) our vote.
6. So how should we vote?
 - a. **Take politics seriously but not too seriously.** It is very hard to know who or what will serve the best interest of loving our neighbor or fulfilling God’s plan. When some say that if we pray for guidance, God will tell us how to vote. It seems rather strange to me that God tells different people so many different things. To conclude that only I get God’s leading right is a hard sell for me. Others who say that God’s will will be done no matter what happens. If that is true, why do ANYTHING AT ALL. Human freedom and decisions are meaningful (not just robotic). I believe that God is present and works MYSTERIOUSLY in our response to all circumstances but I have a hard time with strict determinism.
 - b. **Vote the interests of love for the human race.** This includes your own interests but not only your own. God’s heart goes out to the whole world not just to those in America. What serves the best economic and social interests of Americans may not serve the welfare of the third world’s poor. Foreign policy that is in America’s best interest may not be just for those who have less power.
 - c. **Vote and pray for wise leadership.** Wisdom does not only come from Christian candidates. As far as I can see there has not been a positive correlation between Christian leaders and wisdom in our history. Wisdom includes a realistic world-view and on that score, respect for the Biblical story is important. Wisdom in others is discerned with experience and a close look at their past performance.
 - d. **Don’t vote on the basis of a single issue.** Wisdom is the ability to make the best decision when faced with no perfect options. Legalized abortion is a serious issue for most Christians as it is for me but it is complicated and the wisest leader may not share my

view on this one issue. The same can be said about environmentalism, homosexual marriage, etc. See my web site (apptoteach.org) theology file #404.

- e. **Don't be a purist or a prude.** Politics in a broken world is messy and we are often left with less than ideal choices. When Jesus addressed the issue of divorce in Matthew 19:1-9 he cited the "damage control" vs.8 of Moses Law. Those who insist on having everything perfect before they can support it, often do more harm than good in furthering the practical objectives of Kingdom values.
- f. **Vote for the long-term big picture good of the powerless.** Discrimination on the basis of race, economic status, etc. should be a special concern. Christians should not be libertarians in advocating survival of the fittest but rather give special attention to protecting the dignity and opportunity of the powerless and poor. Note that what might seem to support the needs of the poor in the short term may not serve their interests in the long term. We should not be naïve in assuming that redistribution of wealth is more compassionate than the creation and preservation of opportunity, which affirms the dignity of the poor while allowing them to advance economically. See my web site (apptoteach.org) theology file #821.
- g. **Vote to preserve the human dignity and rights of all persons.** As much as possible, free choices provide the best environment for living out the Christian life. Freedom is not a necessary corollary to Christianity and God can sometimes work powerfully without it but it is a clear vote for respect for the individual. When classes of people are *irrationally* marginalized, God moves to their aid and as His ambassadors, we must also.
- h. **Speak the truth.** It seems that too many civil servants are neither civil nor are they servants. Misrepresentation, character assassination, partial truths, and outright lies are everywhere tolerated and even encouraged in political posturing. Christians should have no part in this game.
- i. **Exercise a ~~little~~, (no, a lot of) humility.** Christians too often deserve the disrespect they get from the secular public because they are not quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19). We are not as wise as we think and there is much that we can learn from the Spirit of God through "general revelation" coming from unlikely sources – our opponents.
- j. **Demonstrate a spirit of Shalom.** We are called to be "peace makers" (Matthew 5:9). Making peace starts with experiencing it (James 4:1-4). Whatever happens, tomorrow will come and go. We will experience change but we will move on and survive. Things will probably not be as bad as we fear and will never be as good as we hope. Speaking of hope. If we are wise we will never place too much hope in government or anything else that can "rust, be lost, or taken away." **I love this country and want the best for it but it makes a lousy Messiah.**

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What is our national motto?
- b. What is a democratic republic?
- c. What were the primary forces that originally shaped the nature of our nation?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

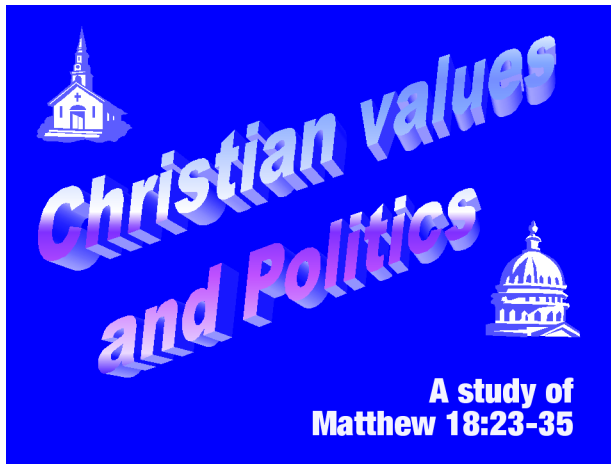
- a. In what sense is America a Christian nation?
- b. How does our national motto relate to tensions in our nation?
- c. How separate are church and state to be in America?
- d. What happens when a healthy tension between public good and individual freedom is ignored?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. What are the limits of church / state relations with respect to values?
- b. What is the role of public education in teaching “Biblical” values?
- c. What role did and should the Bible play in our understanding of law and government?

*Matthew 18:23-35**“Christian Values and Politics”*

Notes from a PowerPoint presentation



“A wise man’s heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man’s heart directs him toward the left.”

Ecclesiastes 10:2

“³⁴ For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles’ feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need.” **Acts 4**

Politics and the Bible

- ✓ **The Bible seldom addresses political issues directly.**
- ✓ **What it does say is unpopular.**
- ✓ **Most of the ethical instruction is addressed to the covenant community’s inner life.**
- ✓ **There are Kingdom principles that have broad implications.**



Matthew 18

“²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. ²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ “And when he had begun to settle {them,} there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents (**several million dollars**).”

Matthew 18

“²⁵ But since he did not have {the means} to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶ The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' ²⁷ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.”

Two tragic political values

1.

People in **low places** tend to **play the victim card.**

2.

People in **high places** tend to **protect their turf.**

The truth about victims

- ✓ People who see themselves as victims seldom get better.
- ✓ We all are victims of something.
- ✓ There are those who have a selfish interest in keeping victimization alive.

The truth about turf protectors

- ✓ The rich and powerful did not get there on their own.
- ✓ The sign of true power and wealth is in how it is used.
- ✓ Those in high places do well to associate with those who are not.

Two challenges from this text

1.

People in **low places** need to **take ownership.**

2.

People in **high places** need to **show compassion.**

A word to those in power

Don't

stand aloof
from the
poor and
vulnerable.

Do

show mercy
to those
who struggle.

✓ **The rich and powerful tend to receive more justice than the poor and vulnerable.**

Proverbs 31:8

[Commandment to kings]

“Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.”

A word to those not in power

Don't

play the victim,
expecting others
to bail you out.

Do

show ownership
of your
situation.

✓ **Affirmative action can backfire.**

Leviticus 19:15

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.”

Political implications

- ✓ **Create incentives for responsibility and compassion.**
- ✓ **Pursue the “common good.”**
- ✓ **See justice as a part of compassion.**
- ✓ **Provide for a “safety net.”**

“For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living.” **2 Thessalonians 3:10-12**

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” **Ephesians 4:31-32**

Political implications

- ✓ **Promote the “right response.”**
- ✓ **Pursue the “common good.”**
- ✓ **Protect the “middle class.”**
- ✓ **Provide a “safety net.”**

A life truth

*The way we remember
our story will effect
our behavior*

Matt.18:28-30

Matthew 18

“²⁸ But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' ³⁰ He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.”

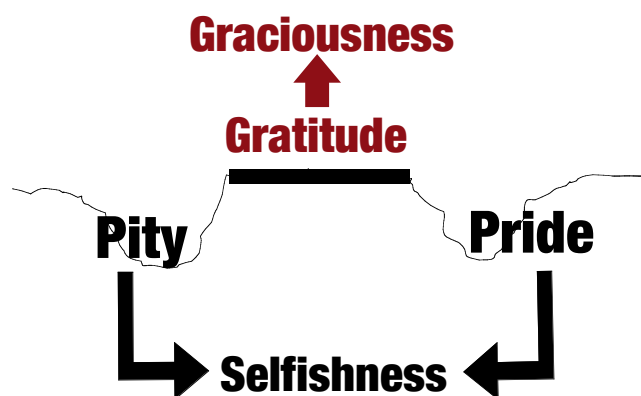
Two tragic ways we recall our story

The Pity Party

“Its just not fair!”

The Pride Parade

“Thank God, I am not like all the others.”



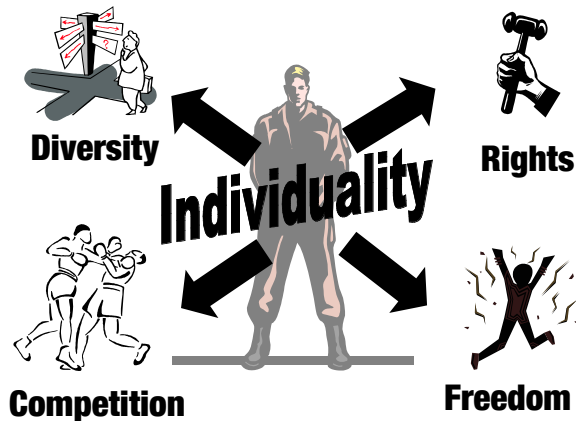
Two challenges from this text

1.
People who are **bitter** need to **count their blessings.**
2.
People who are **proud** need to **remember their support.**

A values reminder



“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” **Ephesians 4:31-32**



Two tragic political values

1.
People are **bitter**.
2.
People are **proud**.

Two insights from this text

1.
Self-talk is key to a gracious walk.
2.
Gratitude kills both the pity party & the pride parade.

Political implications

- ✓ **Renew your mind** - Gratitude kills self pity and pride.
- ✓ **Recognize your sources** - Thankful people are generous.
- ✓ **Repeat the pattern** - Generous people build community.



Matthew 18

"³¹ So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. ³³ 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵ So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Two possible interpretations

God takes back His grace if we Don't share it.

God is an
"Indian giver."

God turns us over to a world that will treat us the way we treat others.

God will discipline us to see our error.

Ecclesiastes 11:1

"Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days."

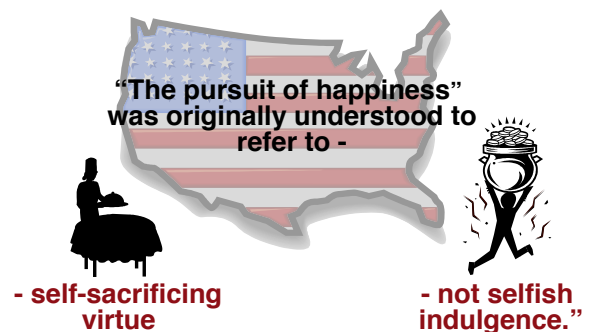
Proverbs 19:17

"He who is gracious to the poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed."

Two tragic political truths

1.
"Civil servants"
too often are neither civil nor servants.

2.
"When elephants fight the grass suffers."

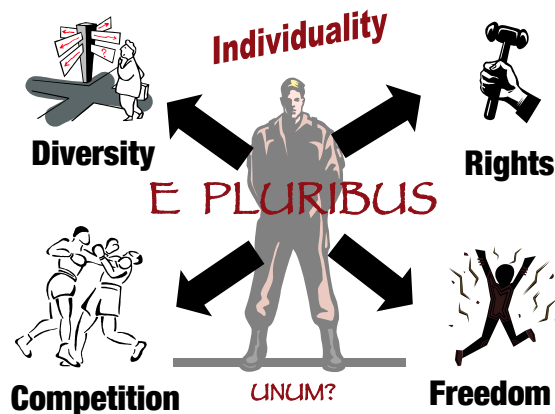
"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"

Without this virtue

Capitalism becomes the exploitation of the economically weak by the economically powerful.

Democracy becomes an endless litigation of rights and the manipulation of the naive by the clever and politically powerful.

Pluralism dignifies every kind of moral divergence as a form of human creativity.



Our national motto

E PLURIBUS UNUM
In diversity unity

Two insights from this text

1.
To chose a life without grace
is to invite a tortured existence.
2.
The way we treat others
tells them how to treat us.

Political implications

- ✓ **Set the pace** - We will be treated the same way we treat others.
- ✓ **Model the system** - Show others how to act.
- ✓ **Get the point** - Don't learn the hard way.

A Christian political creed

1. I will not be a victim nor allow others to see themselves as such.
2. I will view my power and wealth as an opportunity to be compassionate to those less fortunate.
3. I will remember my blessings as a reminder to bless others.
4. I will treat my political opponents the way I want to be treated.