

“Pictures on the Poster Board:

Religion and Politics”

Mark 12:13-17; Psalm 2; Amos 5:21-23

(and references to Romans 13 and Revelation 13)

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

It was the early 90s. I was the pastor at Bell Church in Ellwood City. At a clergy association meeting the issue came up about kids’ soccer on Sunday mornings. The pastors were complaining that Ellwood Schools were allowing their different fields to be used by kids’ soccer teams on Sundays. Maybe you can remember when that was a big deal.

And so pastors were complaining that families and kids were missing from church because teams scheduled soccer games and practice when the fields were available, thus Sunday morning. And there was talk about the old “blue laws” when nothing beside church activities could happen on Sundays and Wednesday evenings. After “kicking” the issue around for a while, the clergy association decided they wanted to draft a letter to send to the Ellwood City School Board asking them not to let their fields be used on Sunday mornings.

As the newer pastor in the area, I listened for a while. Then I shared that I grew up in Washington State, and “blue laws” there had been repealed in the mid-60s. So any type of church and state relationship was gone years ago. Instead, families and kids had to choose on Sunday mornings. I then went on to share that I think we were now living in a different time and culture. The “blue laws” and church/state partnerships were over everywhere. So I thought it was best to understand that, help our church families think about Christian faith and church without guilt, and do some creative planning around Sunday mornings.

In the end the clergy association decided to draft the letter to the School Board. The letter was taken to a School Board meeting and read. The School Board thanked the pastor who read the letter and the clergy association for their concern. And the School Board then decided to continue to let their fields be used for soccer on Sunday mornings, letting families and kids choose.

Indeed, it is a different day. And different types of church/state things come up all the time, like Sunday morning soccer. So how do we understand church/state, religion/politics?

II. Texts and Brief Exegesis

It is the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. This country is the great political experiment of freedom and government by democracy. These 250 years seem like a long time to me. But in truth, not so much. Most cultures and countries have a lot longer histories. I’ve been reminded of that when visiting Europe, Egypt and the Middle East.

So at this “young-ish” age of 250, how might we think about faith and politics in America? To wonder about that this morning I’ve decided to take a break from the sermon series in Acts. Rather we’ll take a brief look at a few biblical texts that address the complex issue of religion and politics. And what I would like you to do is to see these texts as different “photographs” of theological reflection at particular times in history. And then we’re going to put the photographs on a type of poster board. And at the end we’ll see how these very different “pictures” help us make some sense of religion and politics today.

The first “photograph” is Psalm 2. It is a royal Psalm. It was used at the coronation of a king. And it was probably also used at different times to encourage a relationship between religion and politics. It would be sung or recited by the high priest at the Temple.

In ancient Israel there was no separation of church and state. The palace was next to the Temple. The king was believed to be chosen by God. And the king was to rule in way that honored God and God’s laws. And so the priests in the Temple supported the king, and the king supported the religion of the Temple.

Furthermore, the king was believed to be a type of intermediary between Israel and God. That’s what it means where the text says, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” Chosen by God, it was believed when the king rules with faithfulness to God, the nation is blessed. And when the king does not, things do not go well for Israel. So that’s the first “photograph”; a tight connection between religion and politics. And God’s ways in a nation bring blessing.

The second “photograph” is from the 8th C prophet Amos. It is a famous text. In it Amos declares God’s judgment against both Temple and king. The problem is corruption. The Temple has gotten “too cozy” with the king. And the king has failed in his rule over Israel. And so when the Temple does not speak truth to power, Amos will. Seduced by the political power of the king and his government, the religious leaders have become “political hacks and lackeys.” It is always the danger when religion gets too close to political power; corruption. Late in life Billy Graham came to recognize that in his own relationship with Richard Nixon.

And as Amos points out, in the eyes of God, religious busyness is no substitute for justice and faithfulness to God’s way of life. Amos “thunders out” God’s categorical rejection of religious festivals and gatherings, the best of sacrifices and offerings, the beauty of music and worship. None of it matters if there are not justice and faithfulness to God’s ethical guidelines in the nation. Today that is a challenging word to small country churches and mega-churches with membership in the 1000’s, and every church in between; justice and ethics matter. So this second “photograph” is about the importance of religion having a voice independent of political power, truth speaking to power, and the importance of justice and God’s ethics in both church and state.

The third “photograph” is Jesus’ answer about paying steep Roman taxes. It’s in Matthew, Mark and Luke. We’ll read the version from Mark 12:13-17.

Read Mark 12:13-17.

So some religious and political leaders who oppose Jesus confront him publicly with a controversial question at the time. And they see the answer as only an “either-or.” Should the Roman taxes be paid, or not? They think if Jesus says “pay the taxes” the crowds will turn against him as

they hated the oppressive Roman rule and taxes. But if Jesus says, “don’t pay the taxes,” he can be arrested by the Romans. And, of course, the question is not asked because they wonder about it. Rather, it is only asked to put Jesus in a hard public spot.

I think Jesus’ answer is brilliant: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mk 12:17) Jesus’ answer is not “either-or.” Rather he recognizes the responsibilities of people to support the state; pay the taxes owed. But even more God’s people are to give the greater parts of their lives and hearts to God. Jesus’ answer neither encourages retreating from societal responsibilities into religion, nor letting political power dictate religious faith. Rather we live out our faith in the real world, respecting political powers, but never believing that political powers are God. We hear the same thing in the Great Commandment a few verses later in Mark: “Love the Lord your God (not the king, or Ceasar, or President) with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mk. 12:25).

And so we have a third “photograph.” It could be summarized as live with Emperor AND God, but your first love is always God and God’s way in the world.

Of course there are more biblical texts and more “photographs.” Let me briefly summarize two important ones. The first is in Romans 13. In that text Paul says: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is not authority except from God.” (Rm. 13:1) In this text Paul recognizes the importance of government in maintaining civil order. Without civil order human communities “go sideways.” And Paul understands that civil order as a gift from God.

The other text is the opposite. In Revelation 13 the Roman government and its Ceasars and called “the Beast” and “666.” They are dark powers used by Satan to attack the Christian community, faith in Jesus Christ, and God’s way in the world.

So what happened between Romans 13 and Revelation 13? What happened between Paul writing to the Romans in 57 CE and the writing of Revelation in 95 CE? What happened was the Roman government’s persecution of Christians and martyrdom.

And so when we put Romans 13 and Revelation 13 together, we see that the state can be a gift that maintains civil order. And it can also be a dark power that stands against God’s way in the world. And so in these two photographs we see that discussions about religion and politics are not simple “bumper stickers.” It is possible for the state to maintain civil order which religion should support. And the state can also become the agent of dark powers and persecute religion. There’s no “one size fits all.” The context matters.

III. Brief Theological Discussion

Over the past month I’ve had the joy of attending a couple high school graduation parties. And at the parties there were photographs on posterboards. The pictures are moments in the graduate’s life over the past 17 or 18 years. Maybe there’s a picture shortly after birth. A picture of a 1st birthday. And maybe another one of learning to ride a bike. And maybe there are pictures of cheerleading or playing on the school basketball team or hanging out with friends or with grandparents. And then one final picture in cap and gown. The point is that these are glimpses of the graduate’s life over time. There’s a type of story being told. And no one thinks that one picture tells

the complete story of the graduate's life. Rather they are all part of that life story, and that story will continue in life after graduation. In short, it's a story that is not done.

I understand the Bible and theology also works like that, including the questions about religion and politics. It would be a lot easier to just look at one text, one scripture, one picture, and say that's how church and state should work. But as we've seen, it's much more complicated than that. Rather it's photographs on a board, scriptures in conversation, which tell a story that is not done. There are more pictures to add, more stories to tell, as we think and live the religion and politics question.

And so, maybe the bottom line is this; ignorance and arrogance and power are a dangerous and foolish combination. There is no one simple answer. There never has been, no matter what those who preach Christian nationalism say today (which, by the way, is neither Christian nor religion, but rather politics wearing a Christian mask). I think the Founders of this country got it right 250 years ago: freedom of religion for all religions, and separation of church and state. And as we look at the "photographs" on the poster board called "the Bible," we realize the politics and religion conversation still goes on, and we are a part of it. And maybe we have already sung the best answer: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" in church and state.