

This morning we finish the current sermon series on the Baptist Faith and Message. In working on this sermon I came upon an unusual website called Atheists for Jesus. The author explains that he is not a believer in any god. He is an atheist. He does not believe in Jesus as the Son of God. He does not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. What he likes is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But he has diluted the teaching of Jesus down to a simple message of love and peace to all people. He ignores everything else Jesus taught. He also denies that the teachings of the apostles are from Jesus through the Holy Spirit. His approach is a common reaction to Jesus by non-Christians.

Another common reaction is to see Jesus as some kind of revolutionary figure. They misconstrue Jesus' teachings to say that Jesus was against the established authorities of that day. This too is a mistake as the following examples show.

**Jesus did not advocate revolt against the Law of Moses.**

**Matthew 5:17 (NIV)** "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

**Jesus did not advocate revolt against the religious authorities.**

**Matthew 23:2-3 (NIV)** "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.

**Jesus did not advocate revolt against Roman taxes or rule.**

**Matthew 22:21 (NIV)** "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Jesus did not teach rebellion against the established authorities. Through His apostles Jesus teaches us to obey the government and gives us good reasons for doing so.

**Romans 13:1-7 (NIV)** Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

In this passage we are taught that government authorities are the servants of God. Paul wrote this while having first hand knowledge of the cruelty and crookedness of many government officials. We re-read the story of Jesus' birth each year at Christmas. That includes the part where Herod slaughtered all the male Jewish babies, 2 years old and younger, in the vicinity of Bethlehem. That is the horrible part of the Christmas story. We usually just read over it without stopping to think about it. But think about it. This was murder. Many families lost a child at the hands of Roman soldiers. And there was nothing they could do about it.

This is the kind of rulers the Romans were. And yet God makes no distinction here between good and bad governments. The Romans 13 passage makes it perfectly clear that human authorities are part of God's plan and believers are commanded to obey them.

Never-the-less, we believe that the authority of the government is not absolute. There are limits to this authority when it comes to religious faith. This last of the 1963 articles of the Baptist Faith and Message speaks to these limits.

#### **XVII. Religious Liberty**

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

*Gen. 1:27; Gen. 2:7; Matt. 6:6-7, 24; Matt. 16:26; Matt. 22:21; John 8:36; Acts 4:19-20; Rom. 6:1-2; 13:1-7; Gal. 5:1,13; Phil. 3:20; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; James 4:12; 1 Peter 2:12-17; 1 Peter 3:11-17; 1 Peter 4:12-19;*

I want to speak to some of the points made in this article.

#### ***The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work.***

We do not seek government money or other resources to do the work of religious education or preaching the Gospel.

#### ***The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends.***

The real power for spreading the Gospel is God. The Holy Spirit speaks to the heart of people to convince them the Gospel is true. He also provides any other resources we need to get out the good news. No government help is needed. The Bible shows God to be very capable of calling out His people for special duty and equipping them for the work to which He has called them. We see this in Noah, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Paul, and Ananias. God equipped them without any government help.

***The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion.***

No government in America levies taxes on its citizens for the purpose of supporting any religious group. But that was not always the case as we examine a bit of church history this morning.

**For much of Christian history the church and state were joined in a partnership called Christendom.** I am using the term Christendom to refer to the period of history when Christianity was the only legal religion within the Roman empire. This was from 380 AD into the 1500's. As such the church and government authorities worked together, for the most part, for the good of both the church and the state. Church buildings were often built with tax money levied by the government. Church authorities worked with state authorities to keep citizens law-abiding.

When the Reformation began the original reformers had no intention of starting new forms of Christianity. Instead, they sought to reform the established church. It was only when that proved to be impossible, that some broke off to form new Christian movements or denominations. But even these reformers, like Luther and Calvin, did not hold to the separation of church and state. They had never heard of that concept. It was foreign to them. So they forced all citizens under their authority to adopt their form of Christianity. Lutheranism became the forced church in much of Germany. Calvin enforced his brand of Christianity in Geneva. The king of England enforced his brand of Christianity in England.

**There was a small group of Anabaptists in Germany who dared to think that they should be free to reject both the Roman church and Lutheran church without any interference by those groups or the government.** For such a view, they were persecuted by both Catholics and Lutherans. Eventually, they found a part of Germany to relocate to where they could have freedom of religion.

In the next century, some of the Separatists in England had to do the same, moving their families to Holland. Some of these became the first Baptists. And they believed in the separation of church and state. Some of these traveled to the American colonies hoping to find a place of religious freedom. But there was hardly any religious freedom in the original colonies.

For example, **When the English king granted Virginia a royal charter in 1624, the Church of England, the Anglican Church, became the established church of this colony.** Tax monies were used to support the Anglican clergy and church. Preachers of other religious groups were required to obtain a license in order to preach. Those who refused, such as the Baptist preacher, Jeremiah Moore, risked imprisonment and fines. In the decade before the American Revolution this persecution grew.

In May 1776, the colonies were called upon to draft new constitutions to govern the states they would become. James Madison, a representative to the Virginia House of Delegates, submitted a bill to change the Virginia constitution from one that granted only "tolerance" of non-Anglican religious groups to one that recognized no one religious group. Many of the non-Anglican groups in Virginia lobbied for that change.

Then in 1779, Thomas Jefferson, another delegate to the Virginia Legislature, submitted the **Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom**. This act would create a

separation of church and state in Virginia. Many other delegates opposed this bill, including Patrick Henry. He believed that religion was essential to cultivating moral citizens and that without state support religion would simply wither away. So, in 1784, Henry submitted a bill that would impose a tax to support churches, but would allow each citizen to designate which church their taxes would go to support.

To counter this, and to defeat Henry's bill, Madison wrote an argument against any state-supported religion, titled "**Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments**". In it he made 15 well argued points for defeating Patrick Henry's bill. Madison's argument won the day and Patrick Henry's bill was defeated. Madison then reintroduced Jefferson's bill which was passed in 1786. It is interesting to note that of the things Jefferson wanted to be remembered for, one of them was NOT that he served as president of the United States. He asked three things to be on his tombstone. He wrote the declaration of Independence. He established the University of Virginia, and he authored the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom.

Helping in this effort was a Baptist minister from Connecticut by the name of John Leland. Leland traveled to Virginia in 1775 to help Madison and Jefferson with this effort. He wrote, "**Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise, let men be free.**" --John Leland

Leland became a pivotal supporter of James Madison and helped win Baptist support for Madison's election the first Congress, where Madison drafted what would become the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

In 1791, Leland moved back to New England, where the Congregational Church still maintained its place as the established, preferred church in both Massachusetts and Connecticut. Leland fought to end religious establishment in both states and saw Connecticut end establishment in 1818 and Massachusetts in 1833.

That is enough history lesson. Southern Baptists believe that every authority on earth is under God's authority and subject to it. That means there are limits to any human authority. For example, when confronted by the religious authorities and told to stop preaching the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles of Jesus answered...

**Acts 4:19-20 (NIV)** Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Jesus had commanded them to tell the good news of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' authority, and command, is above any human authority to be silent about Jesus. God is the ultimate authority. Every human authority is subject to God's higher authority.

But it is important also to notice from this account that civil disobedience occurs here only because the conscience of these men rested directly on a clear command from Jesus. **We cannot just choose to disobey any law we don't like.**

In addition, we are to see the part that the government plays in getting out the good news of Jesus. Paul instructs the Christians at Ephesus in I Timothy 2:1-2 to pray for their governmental leaders.

**1 Timothy 2:1-2 (NIV)** I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

To the extent that we can do so, we should bring our voices to bear on government leaders for the continued separation of church and state. The first amendment to the constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

This means, in part, that the government is not to prefer any one religion over another. The government is not in the religion business. The government is not in the business of any one religion.

But you, Christian, **Pray for your government leaders**. Our continued religious rights depend on them upholding these rights. They are being pushed to put some rights over other rights, even to modifying the rights of religious believers in America. So pray, pray for your government leaders.

Our religious freedom plays a key part in how we are able to share the good news today. It is about freedom to do evangelism.

### Invitation

You have religious freedom. You are free, in America, to believe or not. You are free, before God, to trust in Jesus or not. But be warned, there will be a consequence for rejecting Jesus. There is a Day of Judgment coming when God will make you answer for your resistance to His will. I urge you today to repent of your sin and receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.