Christian Witness in a Secular Nation

Matthew 5:1-16

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*You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine* Mt. 5:14, 16

We are to think this Fourth of July of the church’s place in American society and how we are to occupy that place as Christians.

There are at least four approaches to our subject that are currently popular among American Christians. Three of the four are wrong. Only the fourth has biblical and theological legitimacy.

My work with you this morning is to guide your thinking by naming each of the four, pointing to the errors of the three, and showing how the fourth can be put into practice.

*Entanglement*

One approach has the church operating out of a position of entanglement with the state. It doesn’t seek to entangle church and state in a way that is neither faithful nor helpful but that is the result.

My example of the entanglement comes from a recent article in *The Christian Century*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The article describes a new publication of the Bible that is to be released in September. Its title is the *God Bless America Bible*. It is to feature the American flag on its cover, and its pages will include, along with the Old and New Testaments, both the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The *God Bless America Bible* is advertised as “the ultimate American Bible” and “the perfect heirloom [for] anyone that loves America.” And, strangely, it comes with a 100% guarantee.

You can see for yourself, I think, that this *God Bless America Bible* blurs a line that ought to be sharp. It is one thing – and quite a good thing at that – to be a Christian and an American patriot, but it is quite another to so entangle the two that it is difficult if not impossible to see where the one stops and the other begins. Is the *God Bless America Bible* and the thinking behind it a flag-draped Bible or a Bible-draped flag? Either way it lends itself to the view that God is uniquely, preferentially, and uncritically close to and a promoter of the United States. It reveres both God and country, but gives country a slight edge because it uses scripture and the things of faith to promote the United States as if it were the kingdom divine.

The First Commandment applies. “You shall have no other gods before [the Lord]” (Ex. 20:3). Much as we love our country, we should never treat it as if it were divine and worthy of worship that rightly belongs to God alone. Scripture does not support the entanglement of church and state.

*Entitlement*

A second approach to the relationship between church and state, an approach that is also wrong, has the church operating out of a position of entitlement. Whereas entanglement baptizes the United States as the religiously ideal, entitlement elevates the Christian church to a place of preference in the United States. It feeds on the mistaken idea that America was founded as a Christian nation.

Christians certainly settled here and were among the first Europeans to these shores. Numbers of them came to what they called the New World for distinctly religions reasons. True as that is, it does not mean America was founded to be a distinctly Christian nation. The Framers who shaped our form of government and who envisioned our society and public life were quite clear that the United States was to be secular in form while making allowances for religious practices and influences of all kinds. The Constitution mentions God not at all. The Declaration says nothing about Jesus or the particularities of Christianity. The Bill of Rights makes it quite clear that no law is to be enacted establishing one religion to a place of preferential status over another. The church has a place in American society, to be sure, but not an elevated place from which it is entitled by government or national history to command any kind of seniority.

Scripture does not support the entanglement of church and state and our national framework does not permit the entitlement of the church in the state.

*Escape*

A third approach to the relationship between church and state, an approach that is also wrong, has the church operating out of a position of escape. This approach may be more common among us than the other two I have mentioned thus far. We may not expect religion to be a prop for the state as in the way of entanglement; we may not expect the state to be a prop for the church as in the way of entitlement; but there may live among us a desire that the church keep away from matters of the state. This is the position of escape. It is the idea that the church should steer clear of politics and the controversial issues of the day.

The late John Stott, a conservative British pastor, teacher, and prolific writer, compared the church, when it keeps itself separate from the social issues of the day, to Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands of responsibility at the trial of Jesus (Mt.27:24).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Those who take this approach hold to the idea of the sovereignty of God in theory – it is their creed – but in practice they carve out segments of contemporary life where God has no jurisdiction. They limit the authority of God. That is the practical effect of saying that the church can talk about *a, b,* and *c,* but not *d, e,* or *f.*

There was once a televised baseball game that for the sake of the broadcast had second base umpire, the late Darryl Cousins, wearing a microphone. There came a play at second, an attempted steal. The runner beat the throw and slid in safely. But his momentum carried him off the bag ever so slightly. The fielder tagged him and Cousins called him out. “I beat the throw,” complained the runner. “You were off the bag,” responded Cousins. “But you can overlook it, can’t you? I beat the throw.” “I can’t overlook it! That’s what I’m out here for!”

That is just the position of the church. Instead of plays at second there are social issues full of wrongs. And there are people who want the church to overlook what’s going on. The church should say to them, “I can’t overlook it! That’s what I’m out here for!” The way of escape from controversy is without biblical or theological merit.

*Engagement*

This brings us to the fourth approach to the relationship between church and state. It has the church operating in society from a position of engagement with society. It is a way of critical involvement. It sees that the Lord has given the church a missionary mandate. It hears from scripture that we are sent by God into the world to be some positive influence. That missionary mandate appears as early as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in which he says, “You are the light of the world . . . . let your light shine.”

We have a light to shine into the context in which we live. The context includes the evils around us, the perplexities that baffle us, and all the struggles of contemporary life. The light we are to shine glows with the values of the gospel. Some of those values appear the Beatitudes of Jesus which open the Sermon on the Mount. The church’s role in society is to proactively work to illumine the culture around us with the truth we know in and through these values we hold dear.

Take, for example, “Blessed are the meek” (Mt. 5:5). We cannot hold a value like that and remain true to Christ while keeping silent about the ways power is worshiped in America these days. Numbers of those on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., seem to me to have abandoned any idea of public service for the common good. They have taken up instead a lust for power and their main aim is no longer service to the country but the quest either to gain or to keep power. Both sides of the aisle in both the House and the Senate, as well as those waiting in the wings, seem more interested in the strategies of a political calculus than in legislation that will get anything done for the good of the American people. The church, in its missionary mandate from Christ to witness to the values of the gospel, should do all it can to condemn this lust for power and advance the cause of the humility that can actually accomplish something.

Or again, take for example the beatitude “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9). The only way to be a peacemaker is to be a listener who learns of the life conditions of another. Today there is a hue and cry against something that gets labeled Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory, as I understand it, challenges the dominant narrative in the telling of U.S. history and names the real experience of people, white and black as well as red, brown, and yellow, who have been the underclass in America with an experience and history different from that of the well-to-do and powerful. The critics of Critical Race Theory call it un-American and a re-writing of American history. But Critical Race Theory doesn’t re-write American history. It recognizes there are many American histories. There is the storyline of the great men – let us say George Washington. Simultaneously, there is also the storyline of the Mt. Vernon slaves. Both are real histories. Both are American histories. Critical Race Theory wants both stories uplifted. Meanwhile however, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas has signed into law a bill that restricts mentioning racism when teaching about current events and U.S. history.[[3]](#footnote-3) That is a silencing of one history for the sake of another; it is discounting one set of real experiences for the sake of safeguarding another. Peacemakers – witnesses to Christian truth - shine a gospel light on this discussion and say there can be no peace where one side will not be heard and the other side will not confront its mistakes.

The legitimately biblical and theological role of the church in society is to be engaged as a witness to the gospel values we hold, shining their light in the hope of influencing our secular nation in a positive way. To use a loaded term much in vogue these days, the task of the church is to be “woke.” What does it mean to be “woke?” To be “woke” is to be alert to injustice, to be uncomfortable with injustice, and to take the side of justice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Not all who are “woke” are Christian – and not all forms of “wokefulness” are Christian - but “wokefulness” – being alert to injustice, uncomfortable with injustice, and actively taking the side of justice - is the life of Christian engagement. It is in part what Jesus meant when he said, “You are the light of the world . . . . let your light shine.”

1. Peter W. Marty, “An American Bible?”, *The Christian Century*, June 30, 2021, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Stott, *Involvement,* Vol. I (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984, 1985), p. 34. I owe my use of the term *escape* and, later, my use of the term *engagement*, to Stott. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isabella Zou, “What is critical race theory? Explaining the discipline that Texas’ governor wants to ‘abolish’,” *The Texas Tribune*, June 22, 2021, [www.texastribune.org/2021/06/22/texas-critical-race-theory-explained/](http://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/22/texas-critical-race-theory-explained/). Accessed June 30, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. “What does ‘Woke’ Mean?” [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com); “Woke” [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com); and “Woke-Wikipedia” <https://en.wikipedia.org>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)