

Our Godly Heritage

U.S. CONST. amend. I

July 6, 2008

I.

On January 23, 1996, Rev. Joe Wright, Pastor of the Central Christian Church in Wichita opened the session of the Kansas State Senate with a prayer. The senators might have been expecting the usual generalities, but they got something else. Here is part of what he said.

"Heavenly Father we ask Your forgiveness. We know Your Word says, "Woe on those who call evil good," but that's exactly what we have done and we confess that:

- We have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word and called it pluralism.
- We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery.
- We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation.
- We have killed our unborn and called it choice.
- We have neglected to discipline our children and called it self-expression.
- We have abused power and called it political savvy.
- We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition.
- We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.
- We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Search us, O God, know our hearts today, cleanse us from every sin and set us free in the Name of Your Son, the Living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."

As you might imagine, that little prayer caused some controversy. And you also might imagine by now that today's sermon will be somewhat different. Rather than preach on the readings as I usually do, I would like to talk about our church, and our country, and how there is both cause for concern and reason for hope.

Today is an especially appropriate time to do that, for two reasons. First, it's the Fourth of July weekend when we are called to remember the freedoms that define us as a nation. Second, for Susan and me this is our second anniversary at St. Thomas. I preached my first sermon right here two years ago today, and so perhaps you will indulge me if I stray from my usual approach.

II.

What is the role of the church in society? Political candidates are talking more about faith and religion. But have you noticed something? Their comments usually are about their own faith and religion, not about religion and society. That would get them into tricky waters made especially dangerous by the undercurrent of separation of church and state that lurks beneath.

Separation of church and state. It's a simple statement, but what does it really mean? Certainly its meaning has evolved in recent decades. And many people, including myself, believe those changes have distorted the purpose of the founders of this nation to such an extent that the issue now is being driven more by political agendas than by what those founders intended.

There are several examples, and one is right here in Mississippi. In 1994 the legislature enacted a law about voluntary student-led prayer in public schools. The statute basically confirmed some of the well-understood practices that had been accepted for years without discrimination in the state's schools. The federal court, however, struck down virtually the entire statute and declared it unconstitutional as a violation of the principle of separation of church and state.

Is that what the framers of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights intended? It seems clear that today's understanding of separation of church and state is markedly different from its original purpose. Two hundred years ago people were concerned about the government trying to influence people to belong to a particular church. They wanted to avoid the situation they left behind in England with a state religion. They wanted to be free to make their own choices about faith in their lives, free from government requirements and government prohibitions.

But what do we have? Now the U. S. Supreme Court believes it is separating government from religion by regulating it with an intricate series of tests of what is and is not permissible. And that's exactly what the founding fathers wanted to prevent. Crèches or other nativity scenes are banned from public property. Rights of students to pray in school are severely circumscribed. A college cannot put a cross on its chapel. Schools and organizations must have a constitutional lawyer just to advise them about how they can work with God. Examples could go on and on.

III.

Well, guess what? The term "separation of church and state" using those words, or even a close approximation of those words, is nowhere in the Constitution or Bill of Rights. A lot of people think otherwise. In a survey that was part of the 1991 Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights sixty-nine percent of the people thought the words were there. They thought that "separation of church and state" actually was written into the constitution.

But if you look at the Constitution and the First Amendment, it only says that "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That's it. Two very simple parts. Congress shall not establish religion, and Congress shall not prohibit its free exercise. There is nothing more. And although the First Amendment later was made applicable to the states, its language remains unchanged.

So, what is the source of this extra-constitutional idea? The answer is that it came from Thomas Jefferson, but not under the circumstances you might think.

And some background is appropriate here. Thomas Jefferson was a great patriot. He wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. But he did not write the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. He was America's Ambassador to France and was out of the country during the Constitutional Convention, and was not even a delegate to the later Convention that debated and ratified the Bill of Rights. History credits James Madison with being principal author of both documents.

Nevertheless, it all goes back to a letter from Jefferson to a Baptist Association in Connecticut. The Baptists wrote to Jefferson when he became President several years after the constitutional debates were over. And they merely expressed concern that the Bill of Rights purported to grant the free exercise of religion when they believed that it was a natural right already given by God, not the government. Thus, they believed that the Bill of Rights should not even mention religion because it could be the crack in the door that would allow the government to control it.

Jefferson replied that they should not worry because the "wall of separation between church and state" would protect the natural rights about which they were so concerned. So we see that the contemporary understanding of separation of church and state completely takes Jefferson's words out of their original context. Jefferson's intent was to prevent governmental establishment of a single national denomination, and had nothing to do with public religious expression. And Jefferson never used the phrase again. If he had, we would know about it.

And that's the way it went for over one hundred fifty years. God and government peacefully coexisted. And then, in 1947, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black in the *Everson* case wrote the fateful words. He quoted Jefferson and said that "the First Amendment has erected a wall [of separation] between the church and state [that] must be kept high and impregnable."

And from that point on we know what happened. God gradually was kicked out of the public square. In the first one hundred fifty years of the federal judicial system the term separation of church and state was used once, which was by the Supreme Court in 1878 in the context of peace and social order. In the last fifty years, it has been used over three thousand times, frequently to support outcomes that none of the founders of the nation, including Jefferson, would have intended.

And in saying this I don't want to be dogmatic about what their intent was. There could be reasonable differences on that. I do want to be clear, however, about what their intent was not. And it was not what we have today.

But even though history in the last fifty years has demonstrated the marginalization of religion in public life, there is hope. The Supreme Court itself in some recent decisions has given us flashes on the horizon, so to speak, that it is moving away from its earlier trend of converting America into a completely secular state.

There is hope in the lower federal courts, as well. In 2005 a Federal Appeals Court said that "The First Amendment does not demand a wall of separation between church and state." I mentioned earlier that political candidates are talking about faith and religion, even if it is their own. That certainly is better than the silence we had in the past. And it is becoming more clear from studies, surveys, and actual experience that religious and moral values are important in raising children, building stronger families, and maintaining social order.

IV.

And that's fine for society. But what about the church? There still are elements within the church, in its broad sense, that regard the Bible as a historical document with some good ideas, but also consider it to be basically advisory. And there are those in the church who believe that the church must follow and mirror trends in society if it is to remain relevant.

Many people, including myself, do not believe those are sound propositions. The Bible is the Word of God revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. Granted, the Spirit certainly could impart new revelations that are responsive to contemporary situations. But the important distinction is that it would be done through the Holy Spirit and not by those promoting their own agendas.

And we also are called to ground our doctrines in Scripture, which does not change. If the church continually adapts its doctrine to accommodate the diminishing morality of society, it eventually will forfeit its role as a leader in society and the Word will be corrupted.

But there is hope. For the first time in decades there are growing numbers of parishes and priests throughout America who are turning the tide. And there are bishops, such as we have here in Mississippi, who believe and apply God's word in their lives, work, and ministries.

V.

So, on this Fourth of July weekend, there is hope for America and for the church. There is hope that God will return to a rightful place in the community, and not be relegated to our homes and church buildings. There is hope the church will stand for Scriptural truth. And there will continue to be hope as long as we remember the basic principles on which our nation and the church was founded.

One of those basic principles was clearly articulated by George Washington in his farewell address, and consistently has been echoed by presidents and political leaders until early in the twentieth century. He said that "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness." *Amen.*