

The Church In The State

U.S. CONST. amend. I

July 5, 2009

I.

This weekend we celebrate our nation's independence. Flags wave, bands play, and we gather with ice cream, fried chicken, watermelon, and fireworks. People from different cultures and national origins come together to recognize our heritage of freedom.

And we also are called to remember the men and women who gave their lives to preserve our freedoms. The nation's history confirms that we are the land of the free because we also are the home of the brave.

Last week I mentioned my belief that evil and injustice in the world have been tempered over the centuries by the godly precepts of Jesus' teachings. The world has become less barbaric and more civilized. I said that things are getting better as God's kingdom comes nearer.

Today, however, I would like to address a troubling aspect of that progress. It is the secular world's resistance to the things of God, advocated by frequently well-meaning people in the name of the freedom and equality we celebrate today, that actually imposes burdens on our faith that never were intended by our nation's founders.

II.

Let's go back to January 23, 1996. An ordinary day. Rev. Joe Wright, Pastor of the Central Christian Church in Wichita, opened a 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 prayer caused some controversy. And you also might imagine by now that today's sermon will be a little different. Perhaps you will indulge me because for Susan and me this is our third anniversary with you St. Thomas. I preached my first sermon right here three years ago today. So today, instead of talking about the readings, I want to talk about our church, and our country, and how there is both cause for concern and reason for hope

III.

What is the role of the church in society? What are the time-honored values with which Rev. Wright challenged those Kansas state senators? We probably can say that politicians today are

more willing to talk about faith and religion. But have you noticed that it's usually about their own faith and religion, not 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.

And when I think about the church and conflict I'm reminded of the story of the old hermit who lived in the mountains. There was no one else for miles around. Then one day some hikers came across his place and saw him sitting on his porch. They also noticed two other buildings nearby, and asked what they were. The old fellow said, "Well, this one's my house, the one on the left is where I go to church, and the one on the right is where I used to go to church."

Sometimes arguments about the church can seem as trivial as the distinction that old hermit made about two of his buildings. But the issue of separation of church and state is far from trivial. It's a simple statement, but what does it really mean? And because we are a church we can ask that question.

Certainly its meaning has evolved in recent decades. And many people, including myself, believe those changes have distorted its original purpose to such an extent that the issue now is driven more by political agendas than by what our nation's founders intended.

We can begin by recognizing that the words "separation of church and state" are 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 in the law.

But if you look, you would find that the religion clause of the First Amendment says only that "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That's it. Two very simple parts. Sixteen words. Congress shall not establish religion, and Congress shall not prohibit its free exercise. That's what it says.

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

And some background is appropriate. Thomas Jefferson was a great patriot. He wrote the Declaration of Independence we celebrate today. But he did not write the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. He was America's Ambassador to France at the time and did not participate in any drafting or debate. James Madison was the principal author of both documents.

Even so, it all goes back to a letter from Jefferson to a Baptist Association in Connecticut in 1802, thirteen years after the Bill of Rights was written. The Baptists expressed concern that if the right of the people to freely exercise their religious beliefs was based upon a grant by the government, it also meant that the government had power to change its mind and regulate religion.

The Baptists, however, believed that freedom of religion was a natural right given by God, not the government. Therefore they thought that the Bill of Rights should not even mention religion because it could be the crack in the door that later could 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. This was merely Jefferson's private opinion, expressed as a metaphor, more than a decade after the debates were over. Jefferson had never used the phrase before in his writings and never used it again. If he had, historians and researchers would have found it, and we would know about it.

The purpose of our nation's founders was not to require separation of church and state, but to prevent the government from supporting a state religion, such as the Church of England. They also did not want public officials to be required to belong to the church, another English practice. And they basically believed the government should not impose religious standards in private life.

There is nothing, however, to suggest that the First Amendment was intended to prohibit public religious expression. Think about this. Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. What if someone had offered a prayer at the graduation ceremony of that first graduating class? Would Jefferson have said the prayer was unconstitutional? What if someone wanted to put a manger scene on university grounds at Christmas? Would Jefferson have said it was not lawful?

I believe he would have endorsed them. And in fact, that's the way it actually was for over one hundred fifty years. God and government peacefully coexisted, and the term "separation of church and state" simply was not part of the public dialogue. Then, in 1947, the U.S. Supreme Court quoted Jefferson's letter about separation of church and state and the floodgates opened.

And we know what happened. God gradually was kicked out of the public square. From the founding of our nation until 1947, the Supreme Court used term separation of church and state in only one case, and even then it was in the context of preserving peace and social order; not religious expression. In the last sixty years, however, the courts have used it thousands of times, frequently to support outcomes that neither Jefferson nor his colleagues would have intended.

IV.

What does this mean for the church? Just as some people claim the Constitution should be flexible, there also are those who view the Bible the same way. They believe the church also must follow and mirror trends in society if it is to be relevant. Beginning next Wednesday in Anaheim, California, and continuing for nine days, the Episcopal Church will hold its General Convention. Many different theological perspectives will be presented. We will see what happens.

And what do we believe about these important issues? Should our understandings of Scripture change in accordance with the tides of public opinion? Or is the Bible the Word of God revealed to us through the Holy Spirit?

As a lawyer for many years I believed the courts should interpret the Constitution in accordance with the intent of the nation's founders. As a priest I feel the same way about the Bible. 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 God's Word will be compromised.

But there is cause for optimism. The Supreme Court in a few 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 secular state. And, for example, in 2005 a Federal Appeals Court said that "The First Amendment does not demand a wall of separation between church and state."

And there are priests and pastors throughout America who proclaim biblical truth. There are bishops, such as we have here in Mississippi, who believe and apply God's word in their lives, work, and ministries

So, on this Fourth of July weekend, we can be hopeful about America and the church. There is hope that God will return to a rightful place in the community, and not just be relegated to our homes and church buildings. There is hope the church will stand on God's word. And there will continue to be hope as long as we remember the basic principles on which our nation and the church were founded.

One of those basic principles was articulated by George Washington in his farewell address, and it was echoed by presidents and political leaders until recent times when secularism became more dominant. He said, "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 [also] should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness." *Amen.*