

TALKING POINT #7

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES #5: SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE (LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE)

WHY WOULD WE EMPHASISE ANYTHING ABOUT 'SEPARATION'?

It may seem strange that any Church would emphasise that we are separated from anyone, especially given that Paul tells us that the Church is in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)! Why on earth would we want to separate ourselves from anyone? Isn't that against the very ministry of the Church?

However, of all the distinctively Baptist issues we've covered in this series, it is the combined issues of the "Separation of Church and State" and "Liberty of Conscience" that historically defined Baptists most. So, as we complete our celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the first Baptist Church, it is this most historical of distinctives with which we'll close.

As much as this issue was born out of historical circumstances, though, it is still very relevant to our situation today. We must establish how we are to relate to groups outside our Church and especially the government. We may not live in a country where religion and the State are inextricably linked but many of our missionaries and brothers and sisters around the World still do.

WE'RE ALL A PRODUCT OF OUR PAST

The Baptists first emerged as a group of revolutionary Christians who believed that the Established Church had become corrupt in the 17th Century. Through a series of Acts of Parliament, Royal decrees and Church regulations, local Churches and Christians were bound to practise their faith and beliefs as dictated by higher authorities. This was made especially intolerable since those defining the faith and beliefs were political appointees who showed no spiritual fruit. In particular, many were clearly only interested in their own welfare. Charles I, for example, appointed bishops simply so that he could carry a vote in the House of Lords to raise more money for his army. Those bishops repaid their king's favour by voting his way and preaching his politics and religious views in Churches across England.

Since many Christians were put in a position of having to worship in unacceptable ways and deny what they truly believed, some Nonconformists (as they were known) found that they had to withdraw from the Established Church and form local Churches that were free from State interference. This decision was costly on a number of fronts. It was financially difficult for Nonconformist Churches because the Established Church was supported by State taxes. These new Churches had to raise their own funds. Those who withdrew from the Established Church were ineligible to hold any public office or military rank, which may not sound that significant but for many in that era, these were two ways in which the poor could get ahead. Through the reign of Queen Mary, Nonconformists even risked imprisonment or martyrdom – she wasn't called "Bloody Mary" for nothing!

Over time, many Nonconformists moved to the New World of America and took with them the radical idea that the Church should not interfere in State affairs nor should the State govern the Church. We take this separation for granted in modern democracies and would be shocked if government tried to tell Churches how to practise our faith. Our modern World, though, owes this fundamental doctrine to early Nonconformists, of whom Baptists were a significant group. It was a doctrine that was bought with the blood of martyrs who earned for us the right to have liberty of conscience to practise our faith in a way that we believe is in accordance with Scripture.

BUT IS IT BIBLICAL?

Certainly in the Old Testament, the faith of Israel was directly connected with the nation and government of Israel. The King was expected to maintain, protect and uphold the religious life of the nation. So, some may argue that it is perfectly reasonable for the State and Church to be intertwined. However, when Israelite Kings made poor decisions and brought in foreign gods, the priests and prophets were expected to maintain the true religion, irrespective of the position of the king – take the radical example of Elijah for example!

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In the New Testament, the situation was more like our own today. Christians practised a faith that was not the State religion of either Israel or the Roman Empire. Hence, when Jesus is questioned on the very issue of obedience to the State in Matthew 22:20-21, Jesus replies with his famous words, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." While Christ's words clearly go beyond any simple statement on the relationship between Church and State, He does make it clear that, while all Christians should be good and obedient citizens, we must have the higher duty to God, in whose image we are made and to whom we are ultimately accountable.

In the New Testament epistles, we are told to obey those in government whom God has put over us (1 Peter 2:17; Romans 13:1-7). However, the example of the Apostles in Acts 5:29, who disobeyed the legal authorities because God's commands supersede humanity's rules, also show that the State's authority does not extend as far as to contradict God's laws. Consequently, there will be many State laws that Christians and the Church should obey but if those laws contradict God's, then our duty is to obey God first.

IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of implications of this doctrine. First, the Church is not absolved from obeying the laws of the State, where they do not contradict God's laws. For example, we abide by Child Protection legislation gladly and observe GST legislation. However, if the government were to outlaw evangelism or Church meetings, we would have to disobey because the New Testament clearly commands otherwise.

This doctrine does not ban Christians from participating in political processes. Indeed, Christians should be involved in political discussions, such as when one of the earliest Baptists, Thomas Helwys, wrote to the King on the subject of the Separation of Church and State. However, in doing so, the pulpit should not be used to pursue the cause of particular political candidates or parties. This, obviously, can sometimes be a blurred difference if one candidate stands for a particular issue on which the Bible has clear views.

In the modern context, perhaps, a more relevant issue is not so much the government intervening in Church government and theology but in State-funding of Churches or Church affairs. There is an old Scottish saying, "He who pays the piper calls the tune," and there is a concern that if Churches take money from the government, then ministry may be compromised by the government's wishes. For example, are School chaplains compromised by accepting Federal funding? It is at this point that clarity of the relationship between the Church and any potential supporter must be determined. The same question comes up if Churches partner with businesses in any endeavours.

Forest Lake Baptist Church has benefitted from support from government, such as the City Council's support of the Combined Churches Carols in 2009. However, this does not necessarily contravene the doctrine of Separation of Church and State if the Church maintains independence of ministry within that partnership.

CONCLUSION

The Separation of Church and State is an important doctrine both to Baptist Churches and modern democracies. It was a doctrine that was earned in blood and grounded in Scripture and should continue to be observed in modern Baptist Churches as we seek to maintain the purity of the Church. However, at the same time, Churches and Christians should play their role in political processes and, where appropriate, partner with governments and civil authorities in pursuing common goals.

FURTHER TALKING POINT TOPICS

In 2010, we're going to start a new series of Talking Points on "Living in the Church Community." Let me know if there are any particular topics you'd like covered. Blessings! Mark