

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Why Antidisestablishmentarianism is Still a Mouthful¹

Daniel 3.13-18; Mark 12.13-17

Russ Dean, November 25, 2007

Since at least 1923 the word has been listed as the longest, or one of the longest, words in the English language. Most folks know it, if they know it at all, only for this reason.² But “antidisestablishmentarianism” isn’t just for a philologist’s grandiloquent lexicon; its etymological pedigree appertains to the matter at hand. (I wrote that sentence just for Barry Burke!³ And, if you need a translation for that last sentence [as I needed a dictionary to write it – this is what I said!]: antidisestablishmentarianism isn’t just a big word for people who love big words; the history of this 11-syllable term really is relevant to today’s topic of religious freedom.) Let me try to explain – in much simpler terms!

An “established church” is a state church. The Church of England, for example, has been, virtually since its sixth-century beginning, the established church of that nation. As such, it still receives official support and funding and protection and priority from the government. It is part of the official establishment of the state. In its long history, however, there have been almost

¹ I made this comment before the sermon began: Dr. Frank Tupper is on the theology faculty at Wake Forest Divinity School. Several years ago he visited Myers Park Baptist Church and was disappointed in the sermon which was not academically or intellectually challenging enough for his liking. On his way out the door, he snipped at Dr. Steve Shoemaker (a long time friend), “I didn’t come here to hear a ‘sweet Jesus sermon,’” to which, Dr. Shoemaker replied, “I wasn’t preaching to you today, Frank!” In recalling this story to me, Dr. Tupper, a friend and former professor of mine, said, “I learned something that day that I should have known – not every sermon is for every day, and not every day is for every sermon.” Today’s sermon is not a “sweet Jesus sermon,” but it is not above you. When I shared the title with my family over the Thanksgiving holiday, one niece quickly replied, “That would make me want to go to sleep right off the bat!” I remind you that my use of “big words” almost always comes a little tongue-in-cheek and with a twinkle in my eye, so thanks for humoring me, again. And, I hope you will stay with me, for I believe this is an important topic for our church and nation, and that it is important for true Baptists to remember our heritage so we can continue to pursue the religious freedom which was the inspiration of our founding.

² I read this information on several different word-related websites.

³ Barry is an attorney in our congregation who loves my use of interesting words and word etymologies in sermons.

constant efforts to disestablish the English Church. In reaction to one such movement in the nineteenth-century, antidisestablishmentarianism was born. I don't know why those who defended the established church didn't call themselves "establishmentarians" – I guess it's just more fun to be against something (and, antidisestablishmentarianism, is a lot more fun to say!)

Antidisestablishmentarianism, the word and the movement, was born in the nineteenth century. We Baptists have our beginnings much earlier – but out of the same church/state controversy. In the early seventeenth century when the Puritans (so called because they wanted to purify the Church of England) were unable to create a structure free of governmental control (to disestablish the church), they fled to Amsterdam seeking religious freedom. Some in that Amsterdam group made further demands, and separated into a smaller group called Separatists. And from that band an even more radical dissent came, and the dissenters of the dissenters of the dissenters created a church, finally free, fully free, from governmental and ecclesiastical (church hierarchical) control. The first Baptist church was born in 1609 – a result of this intrinsic, inseparable belief that only a truly disestablished church, can provide a free environment, and only in freedom – only in true freedom – can true faith to be born in the hearts of men and women.

True Baptists have never waived from this belief. Never.

Speaking to thousands in an address appropriately delivered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol on May 16, 1920, George W. Truett, then pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, offered what might be the definitive statement of this principle. "Religious liberty, he said, is "the supreme contribution of the new world to the old... the chiefest contribution that

America has thus far made to civilization.”⁴ To bolster his case, Truett cited the imminent John Locke, who said, “The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.”

Religious liberty has been our founding cry from day one. Again, from Dr. Truett:

Never, anywhere, in any clime, has a true Baptist been willing, for one minute, for the union of church and state, never for a moment. Every state church on the earth is a spiritual tyranny. And just as long as there is left upon this earth any state church, in any land, the task of Baptists will that long remain unfinished. Their cry has been and is and must ever be this: Let Caesar’s dues be paid / To Caesar and his throne; / But consciences and souls were made / To be the Lord’s alone.

It was Thomas Jefferson, writing to the Danbury, Connecticut, Baptist Association, who first used the phrase “separation of church and state,” that has been so important to the religious climate of this country ever since. The Baptists of Connecticut wrote to their newly elected president, complaining that their rights were being abrogated by the officials in their state.

“...what religious privileges we enjoy,” they wrote, “(as a minor part of the state) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights; and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen.”

These true Baptists believed that the right to worship freely, which includes the right to worship not at all, was not a “favor” to be granted by any official, but an “inalienable right,” as given by God, and defined by the constitution of this country. The president agreed:

I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.

The issue had been defined by the first amendment to the constitution, which is sometimes called the “first freedom”: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment

⁴ This speech is often quoted by Baptists, for the purpose for which I used it today. It is available on any number of websites, and can be found by use of any search engine.

of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."⁵ Jefferson simply reminded the Baptists that the constitution stood in their defense – the state and the church, though inseparably connected by the lives of people of faith, should ever and always be separated in the official practice of both the state and the church.

Thus endeth the history and political science lesson for today.

But think not that this lesson is unimportant to you. For there are people in this country who would gladly destroy this first freedom. And some of them are actively working to do so. These are “good people,” people who believe they are serving God and loving this nation, by working to “bring God back into the schools,” to “defend traditional values,” and my personal favorite, to “take this country back for God.” But what is really at work in this very popular, very wide-spread, and very easy-to-affirm movement, is a movement to establish the Christian Church as the Church of America. Of course, in the minds of many of the proponents of this movement this nation was founded as a “Christian nation,” so they see their work as re-establishing the priority of the Christian church. It’s really a new movement of antidisestablishmentarianism.

The separation of church and state is a difficult issue. Especially for Baptists. It is a difficult issue because it is so much easier to spout off what I call “easy preach-isms.” For example, it’s easy to say “God and country” in a sound bite. It’s much more difficult to teach people the value that Baptists have always placed in freedom. Because true freedom always allows the other person to think and believe and act. So this great nation is a nation that has sentenced itself to a lifetime of frustration and the difficult conversations that always will come

⁵ I am fully aware that the first amendment also grants other freedoms, but only the first two phrases were relevant for today’s sermon. (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”)

when there is no Monarch telling us what we must do. Freedom will always create the subtleties and ironies and frustrations that are revealed in our justice system and in our decision making, which leads to the sometimes ridiculous excesses we read about in the daily news. We see this in a movement of “political correctness” – but would we really have it any other way? And how could it be any other way if we truly value our freedom and all that this implies?

We are Christian. Don’t we want Christian values espoused by our leaders? (Careful. Think before you answer.) The easy answer is, “of course.” So many churches work to get out the vote to elect “Christians” to office. But the right answer (which this time happens to be the Baptist answer), is that we want leaders who will defend the constitution as public officials, elected to server a diverse people in a nation founded on freedom of and for and from religion. I am glad for my elected officials to be people of faith (as a person of faith, I hope they are) – but I vote not so my representatives can express their faith, but can uphold the constitution. (This is the right answer, but it’s a hard slogan to put on a political bumper sticker, isn’t it!?)

We do acknowledge and respect the religious basis for much of that unwritten code which became the written law of the land through the constitution. The easy response is that our nation was founded on those laws, so we are, therefore, a “Christian nation.”⁶ But the right answer is that the unwritten law, which expressed itself in Jewish and Christian scripture, is a law that transcends religions.⁷ This nation is founded on the belief that this law, which can only

⁶ It occurred to me while I was preaching, though I did not say this, that the more appropriate response to this logic is that America should be a “Jewish Nation.” The laws cited by those claiming to rewrite our history, are Jewish laws which have been adopted by Christians. (And the argument that our founding fathers were “Christian,” is specious – making them all sound as if they were Baptist Sunday School teachers. A careful reading of history makes clear that though most of our founders were men of deep thought on all matters, including spiritual matters, on the whole they were anything but traditional in their “Christian” opinions.)

⁷ This universal law is expressed in the Christian conviction of love as a “*more excellent way*,” which is “*kind... not boastful or arrogant... which does not insist on its own way... rejoices in truth... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...*” (1 Corinthians 12.31; 13.4-7). It is expressed in the “golden rule,” “*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*” (Matthew 7.12), and in that law which Jesus said was a summary of all others, the “greatest law:” “*You shall love the Lord your God*

be expressed in freedom, gives inalienable rights to all people: Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist. But if you want people to believe and understand that, you need longer than a 30-second commercial advertisement.

It is easy to get on the band wagon. Who doesn't want to defend so called "traditional values" like family and faith? I certainly do. What person of faith doesn't defend the right of people of faith to pray? I certainly do. But we must be careful students. We must listen to the argument. We must know our history. We must know what we are really defending and why. It is ironic that Baptists, who, on the whole, have always been "conservative" in theological terms should be defending a position which can be framed as wanting to take God out of our schools. But do you understand what is really at hand? No Baptist who ever lived would have your right to pray denied. Not one single one. But as a matter of theological and constitutional principle, true Baptists are among the staunchest defenders of the (so-called) "secularization" of the public schools. Why? Because public schools are just that – public. They are institutions of learning, funded by... the state. If you want your childrens' teachers to pray before class begins, by all means, you have that right. Enroll them in a Christian school. But Baptists will insist that you do not have that right in a school that is funded by public tax dollars. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." Though the influence may be subtle, though teachers may not be trying to proselytize in their praying or to evangelize through subtle manipulation, do you not see that giving credence to one religious form of worship (and that is what prayer is) over another, is to "respect the establishment" of one

with all your heart... soul... mind... strength... and love your neighbor as yourself?" (Mark 12.29) Greatest of all it is expressed in that "law" which is the life and example of Jesus Christ. At the heart of all faiths are the common admonitions to love God and love neighbor, and when "Christians" use their particular interpretations of their scripture/law to exclude the other, to prove the priority of their hold on truth, they misunderstand the depth of Jesus' teaching, and God's unconditional love. Human freedom is the divine law which transcends all religions.

religion over another? Worst of all, people of faith have made of prayer a political football, to be manipulated for partisan gain, when prayer is an essential issue of faith.

I wonder what is the real issue causing so many Baptists to change course in this, our founding belief? (So many Baptists today are on the other side of this argument together.) It seems to me that lurking deep behind the loud and pious protests may be a startling, but simple lack of faith. You see, if you fear, even subconsciously, that your religion is not strong enough to stand in an environment of freedom, you must not think very much of your religion. And if you think your religion needs the backing of any government for its stability and strength, then you have belied your trust in faith and have shown which force you really believe to be the stronger. George W. Truett said in that famous address, “Christ’s religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree that it is thus supported is a millstone hanged about its neck.” Our children do not need the government to put prayer back in school in order to defend God. If we want our children to learn the value of faith, we do not need the government. I do not want the government teaching my children to pray. All our children need is to hear their mothers and fathers offer a blessing before a meal, their teachers and deacons and pastors praying in their Sunday school classes and in the sanctuary.

Jesus said, “*render to Caesar...*” I think the current debate over Church and State issues displays the sad fact that many people of supposed faith have really given over their trust in God to reliance on government. We want our culture and our government to keep Sabbath for us. We want our culture and our government to provide protection for us. We want our culture and our government to defend Christian values for us. It will never be. It will never be that any government, whether supposedly “Christian” or not, will defend the values of Jesus. For Jesus’

values always lead to a life of self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-serving love. These values may just call us to take up our own cross. And no government will ever defend this.⁸

Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego had rendered to their Caesar, but then they faced a choice. You see, Jesus did not say Government and God are equal, nor that they are deserving of equal respect by people of faith.⁹ These Hebrews knew this well, and their faith stands the test of time as a testimony to the priority of God in this precarious dual citizenship which is our life.¹⁰ At some point, we, too, may have to choose between God and government, in ways small or great. When faced with the greatest test of all, these three stood with their faith. “*We believe our God will save us...*” And then they uttered the three most powerful words of faith in the entire Bible: “...*but if not...*” Even if God does not save us, we will not turn to Caesar for our protection.

This is the meaning of the separation of Church and State.

Ultimately, if we want the State to be our security, what is our faith? Because of this, ironically, antidisestablishmentarianism, which is a mouthful, will always be too little to say. The word of faith is much easier to literally speak, but it may cost our lives to live truly free.

For freedom, Christ has set us free (Galatians 5.1).

May it be so!

⁸ I don't mean that no government will defend my right to give my own life (my government does give that protection to me as an individual). I mean that no government will, itself, adopt Jesus' values. In most cases, perhaps all, the government, whether supposedly Christian or not, ends up contradicting the values for which Jesus died. In fact, it was the government that executed Jesus! State and Church (if it is true to Jesus' claims) will always be at odds.

⁹ This is the point that is troubling for American Christians, who have been raised in the protection of a largely-yet-nominally “Christian” environment. As someone put the matter, we were raised so we didn't know whether we were being “good Christians” or “good Americans.” (And anyone who cannot see what is wrong with that is the product of the “civil religion” which masquerades for the faith of Jesus.)

¹⁰ “...*but our citizenship is in heaven...*” Philippians 3.20.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Teach us, O God, we who receive considerable good at the hands of the government of this nation, what it means to be a person of faith, what it means to pray with the Psalmist, “*God is our refuge and strength. God is our very present help in trouble*” (Psalm 46.1). Teach us faith. Make us free. Amen.