

Separation of State and Neighbor

NOTE: This is longer than usual, but quite important and explains why I support the work of our Justice Team, especially our 24-hour prayer vigil.

During the November 1932 regional leadership elections for the largest Protestant assembly (the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union) in Germany, a nominating group called German Christians won one-third of the votes. This assembly represented approximately 18 million of the 45 million protestants in state churches in Germany at the time. These German Christians were Nazi party members or sympathizers, by and large.

A bit of German church and state history, before the end of WWI, churches were funded by the regional monarchies (i.e., the state). After WWI, in the time of the Weimar Republic (no more monarchies), some reforms were made, but ultimately the church still took government funding for social and education work and their congregants' taxes were used to pay for church administration and day-to-day needs. Yes, the country paid for the operation of most protestant churches, mostly Lutheran, Reformed or Unified churches. In the spring of 1933, Hitler's regime began to synchronize all government agencies—including churches. The Nazi Party created a new, legally unified church called the German Evangelical Church, whose authority now trumped the previous leadership structure, which was not unlike our own UCC polity—representative leadership from the federated churches. On paper, Hitler was in charge of the German churches.

But there was opposition. Some regional and provincial church groups won out against Nazi intrusion into church theology and practice in their regional elections. These are collectively called the Confessing Church. We, through the IKC and Heartland Conferences, are still in relationship with one of these regional bodies today: the Evangelical Church of Westphalia. The Confessing Church, though now in the minority, objected first to the idea that a Führer was the head of the church, instead of Christ, and also objected to the new German order which was antisemitic, pro-Aryan, and generally unaligned with how they thought the universal church of Christ should be. The Confessing Churches were first led by Rev. Martin Niemöller. Niemöller famously penned these words (translated from the German):

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I kept quiet; I wasn't a communist.
When they came for the trade unionists, I kept quiet;
I wasn't a trade unionist.
When they locked up the social democrats, I kept quiet;
I wasn't a social democrat.

When they locked up the Jews, I kept quiet;
I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me, there was no one left to protest.

And here we are in an America that is increasingly becoming a “Christian State” in the legal sense, rather than the demographic sense. But not only America. Just a few days ago, in Ireland, my family and I stumbled upon “March for Jesus,” which is a coalition of conservative, evangelically-minded people. Among their prayers as they took to the stage set up near a Dublin park? For women to want to give up career and return home to family as a sacrifice for their children. For teachers not to talk to children about gender identity or “trans ideology,” or “sinful” gay marriage. For God to reign in Ireland and in the Irish political system. Which God? The one of their understanding or mine or yours? Who gets to decide which version of the God we all claim should rule heaven, earth, and governments?

How history will understand Christian Nationalism in our time is yet to be said. But in a country which has valued the separation of powers since its founding, this trend should cause any citizen pause, at the very least—alarm followed by action at best. But how does a church respond to a rising authoritarian state if they respect this separation of powers? How does our little church in Angola, IN, respond? By what justification do we speak against government action? After all, in all three Gospel accounts, Jesus, when baited by some religious authorities about paying taxes, says we should give unto Caesar (i.e., the government or earthly rulers) what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s. And Paul, in Romans chapter 13, verses 1-2 says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

But that’s about all we get in the New Testament concerning respect for government authorities. The first, the issue of taxes, is not, in my view, an exhortation to honor Caesar, but to avoid a rhetorical trap. Here’s the whole bit from Matthew 22:15-22, emphasis mine.

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ... Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Recall that Jesus was all about using money to give to the poor, support the homeless, protect the naked, visit the imprisoned, and feed everyone, especially the stranger and the enemy, never mind the neighbor!

As to the second point, Paul thought the world was going to end before he died. He was only able to speak about how to deal with the authorities he answered to between the time of his adult decision to follow Christ and his own death—about a 30-year span. Not a ton of leadership to put into context with his new faith in Christ. Plus, he was writing to Rome, the seat of secular authority and likely sympathetic to the power of the state. It's the only place Paul mentions bending to authority; he's much more likely in his writings to talk about faith in Christ and the coming apocalypse.

Instead, what if we stay with Christ's teaching to give unto God what is God's? Let us give God our prayer. Let us give God our acts of Christian kindness. Let us give God our empathy for the foreigner. Let us give God our love of neighbor. If we value our separation from the state apparatus, then we have every right as citizens and every call as Christ followers to take action for our neighbors. It's clear that Christ and Paul both agree that our first concern is for those neighbors in need. Just a few verses earlier in Romans 12:9-21, Paul tells the Romans what a Christ believer should do.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

For this reason our Justice Team and pastors support the upcoming 24-hour vigil of prayer with the "lowly" in mind. We must do first what Christ and Paul call us to do, separating our love of neighbor from any fear that we will tread on the toes of the state. We must take this separation seriously enough to be present to feed, clothe, defend, and hope for and with the marginalized.

With passion for the neighbor and love of Christ,

Pastor Nikki