

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Acts 4: 13-21; 5:16-18,27-29 pg 121 NT

¹³ Now when [the religious leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴ When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶ They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." ¹⁸ So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." ²¹ After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened.

Acts 5: 16-18, 27-29 Once more, 16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed. ¹⁷ Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, ¹⁸ arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison....²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, ^[a] yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ^[b] Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...**Thanks be to God**

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Jeremiah 7:1-7 pg 707 OT

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message: "'Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³This is what he LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!"⁵If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. **This is word of the Lord.**

Thanks be to God.

Common but not Biblical Wisdom Pt 4
“Separation of Church and State”

I loved every moment of it. From the flight in over the Potomac River with a view of the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, to the cab ride from Reagan National to our hotel on Thomas Circle, to the National Mall surrounded by the Smithsonian and the war memorials. I loved walking by all the marble buildings with their Roman columns...National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Department of Justice, the Internal Revenue Service, the National Post Office. Mike and I were privileged to be able to worship at the inspiring National Cathedral, the National City Christian Church and the Metropolitan AME church. We saw Fredric Douglas', Charles H. Wesley's and Gwen Eifel's pews at the AME church. We walked through Lafayette Square at night and were able to view the White House, beautifully lit against the dark sky. It was my second time to tour Washington DC, the city created by us, “We the people”, and it was thrilling. I found myself at times simply overcome with gratitude to God who has overseen this nation through shining times and dark times and to our forefathers and mothers who sacrificed so much to establish and guard our freedoms.

These freedoms for which so many of our forefathers and mothers died include liberty and justice for all. Liberty and justice...this means first that the conscience of every person is free. Every person is free to think as they want and to openly express those thoughts without fear of reprisal. This basic liberty of free belief and expression is a value so great that the state, the government itself, promises not to violate or lessen it...but in fact, to protect it. “*It is a freedom,*” says John Buchanan, “*which emerged from one of the most remarkable decisions that America's founders ever made, namely to NOT establish a national religion to which everyone, in some way, must subscribe.*”¹ All authority was recognized as being derived from and subordinate to God, and all people were free to believe as they wanted and to express their belief as their conscience directed.

¹ John Buchanan. *Sermon, “Sweet Land of Liberty”* <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/070311.html> (accessed 6-28-18).

This was new. Since the 3rd c, when Constantine declared Christianity to be the empire's religion, states had imposed their religion upon all their people. And it'd also been the norm that rulers claimed divine right to rule regardless that their frailties led them to declare edicts which took precedence over everything including God's word. They often used their state's religion as a means to oppress others, politically & economically, even to justify war. It was common for state-sanctioned churches to become puppets of the government.

So, it is a remarkable thing that...on July 1st, 242 years ago, when John Adams rose to describe their vision of a "new nation, a new time", when Thomas Jefferson went to his desk to write, and when, on July 4th, 56 delegates lined up to sign the Declaration of Independence...it is a remarkable thing that they were creating a government which guaranteed among other things, freedom of religion. They had experienced tyrannical state religions before, and many were Deists. They didn't want a government which interfered with or forced them into a specific religion.² They pledged their fortunes, their sacred honor and their lives to guarantee such a government.

This guarantee is described, of course, in the 1st Amendment of the Constitution... "*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.*" This is often referred to as "separation of church and state" although the exact phrase is obviously NOT in the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights. (It comes from a personal letter written by Thomas Jefferson to Danbury Baptists in 1802.)³ Neither is this phrase found in the Bible, although the underpinnings for it certainly are.

The OT prophets like Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, consistently expressed themselves, speaking God's truth to the powerful, wealthy and elite. Jeremiah, in fact, railed at the Temple's

² Anon. "Biblical Basis for Separation of Church and State." <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/278/biblical-basis-for-the-separation-of-church-and-state>. (accessed 6/28/18).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptists_in_the_history_of_separation_of_church_and_state. (accessed 6/28/18).

GATE for proper treatment of people of GOD. And 600 yrs later, Jesus made clear that while we need be obedient citizens, our ultimate authority IS God. The state leaders need not head the church. "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*, he said." (Mk 12:17) Radically, he also turned over the tables of the money changers, worked on the Sabbath, touched lepers, and ate with sinners. Ultimately, Jesus was accused of sedition and crucified on a Roman cross! And Peter and John? Peter and John kept healing and preaching openly despite they're being repeatedly arrested, flogged, jailed and ordered to stop. They said to the leaders, "*We must obey God rather than any human authority*". As Will Willimon says, "*Unfortunately for those leaders, trying to keep spirit-filled apostles quiet was like trying to hold back a breaking wave.*"⁴ No, the words, "*separation of church and state*" are not in the Bible although the seeds for the founding fathers' conception of the idea certainly are!

Like the other common but not Biblical phrases we've been considering these last several weeks, this phrase is often misunderstood and misused. Often it is believed to suggest that the Church has no place in politics. NO, quite the opposite. The 1st Amendment was written to protect citizens from the interference of government into religion but not to keep people from living out their faiths in the national conversation.

This is very important for us Christian Americans to remember, for we believe that we belong not to ourselves but to Christ, and we are commissioned to be informed by his gospel in all aspects of our living. For instance, while we can be grateful, grateful for the prohibition of forced prayer in schools to God, to Allah, to Ishvara or some other faith's Supreme Being (for Christianity is not the only religion that might otherwise be state-sanctioned), we CAN, we are free in America, to respectfully and quietly pray to Jesus as individuals in any and all public places including schools, restaurants, work places, or football games. We can and need do that. As Christians living out our faith, we can and need also to march, protest, lobby, write, speak up, and act in big and small ways to affect how our country's resources are spent, how we relate

⁴ Will Willimon. Interpretation: Acts. (Atlanta:JKP; 2011), 49.

to other nations, how we educate our young, care for our sick, our elderly, our poor, or how we relate to the stranger in our midst. And as Christian Americans we can and need to vote as well, our vote being informed by what we most deeply believe, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, to vote. You and I need mark our X for a candidate or a platform on Nov 7th which best fits what we know to be the gospel message. But what we need NOT do is fit the gospel to a candidate or platform and reject IT if it does not fit. This error places the candidate or platform in a position for our lives as the superior authority, as in a state church. In such a politically and emotionally charged culture as we have now, this is hard to do. I know. But we need ask for strength to mentally discard our politics as we study and pray. Discard them. Leave them at the door. And listen only to the Spirit speaking. We then need live every day per that direction, first as Christians, not first as Democrats, Republicans or Independents. It's what Abraham Lincoln, a man of great faith, meant when he appealed to "*the better angels of our nature.*"⁵ During the darkest, most dangerous time in our nation's history, he did that. Yes, the 1st Amendment of the Constitution allows us, and our Lord requires us, to let the Gospel inform our living, all aspects of it. Like Jeremiah, like Peter and John, "*we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.*"

Friends, I believe that that vision of a "new nation, a new time" which was glimpsed by our founding fathers has been realized, and I still feel a thrill when I see millions of Americans exercising the core value of separation of church and state...when we are extending a helping hand to the weak, the suffering, the poor and voiceless, when we are making great efforts to steward our rich resources responsibly, when we are speaking civilly against divisive rhetoric, horrific injustices, and stifling ideology, when we are kind to each other and attempt to understand each other and forgive each other, and when we serve with such passion to make America and other people's countries better places. **This is the biblical wisdom. (repeat)**

So, while not in DC, but in Belton, TX Mike and I will, like you, be **celebrating, celebrating** our nation's independence on Wednesday. We'll be flying the flag high, eating hamburgers and watermelon, and watching the parades, especially the marching bands. We'll, like you, be

⁵Quote from Abe Lincoln's 1st inaugural address. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln%27s_first_inaugural_address (accessed 6/28/18).

thanking our soldiers, applauding civil servants, and waving a sparkler or two. And we'll be saying a prayer to God to heal, to forgive, to unify, to direct and bless our land for ever and ever. Our prayer? Your prayer? May it be: *Our father's God to thee. Author of liberty, to thee we sing. Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light; Protect us by Thy might, Great God, our King.*⁶ Amen.

⁶<https://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/songs/patriotic/my-country-tis-of-thee/index.htm> (accessed 6/28/18).