

# Separation no Myth

Dr. James Dunn

Let's begin at the very beginning, a very good place to start. Genesis 1:26-27 reminds us that all humankind is made in the "image of God." Whatever that means, it means at least that we are made "able to respond" to God. We are "response able" (see: responsible), and if responsible, then free. Freedom and responsibility cannot exist apart from each other. Every freedom carries a responsibility piggyback. Every free choice implies certain consequences. Every decision bears some duty. The entire scheme of things links freedom and responsibility. It is not always easy or fun, but it is the way that being made in God's image works.

Beyond that, it has appeared to biblical Christians from the very beginning that God chose to allow us, required us, and created us to decide for ourselves about our relationship to God. We are not sure why it is that way, but every wonderful "whosever will" in scripture reminds us that even the Eternal One will not force us into the Heavenly Kingdom. "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve!" Jesus himself watched the rich young ruler go away sorrowful rather than violate his personhood.

Religious freedom is the most personal, most precious, most basic, most seminal, most clearly biblical, most universal, most endangered, and most fundamental freedom of all the freedoms one might have. All other liberties and liberations claimed by

thinking believers come from this basic freedom. Every distinction that separates human beings from dumb things, automations and puppets, is rooted in the religious freedom that is the gift of God.

Thomas Jefferson, no orthodox Christian, understood this and expressed it powerfully: "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time." It is relevant to point to Jefferson because he and others in his crowd tried, for the first time in history, to write into the documents of governance safeguards for that profound freedom. Religious liberty, as we in this country know it, is not rooted in some primitive social contract, nor in enlightenment theory, as important as that is, nor in primal democratic processes, nor in popular religion, nor in some biblical proof text, but in the very person and being of God whom all humankind, in some wonderful and mysterious way, replicates, echoes, spins off, responds to and answers to. We can do no other than admit that all worth, value, dignity, and, yes, even our very humanity is derived from our being made in God's image. We must take value from that creaturely nature; our software demands it; our built-in receivers can only pick up those frequencies.

So, the American experiment in religious freedom has a high, but not unrealistic, view of human beings. James Madison, one of the most influential founders, was in touch with

the frailties, limitations, and sinfulness, if you will, of all mortals. He studied with John Witherspoon at what would become Princeton College, and there he got a heavy dose of Calvinism, including an appreciation of the need for checks and balances, fences, limitations. The separation of church and state was born of this period, this philosophy, this political and practical recognition of the need for a hedge, a guard rail, a means to protect the freedom of religion that had been abused, violated and ignored in the Europe of that day.

Yet, today there are those who do not understand this greatest contribution of the United States to the science of government. Some still act as if the separation of church and state does not exist. Pat Robertson calls it a "myth." Others make odd claims for the principle that would deny the religious nature of all people. Still others act as if the principle were designed only to protect freedom of worship.

Separation of church and state does not require separation of God from government, separation of religion from politics, or separation of Christians (or those of any other religion) from their citizenship. But the separation of church and state is no myth. Church and state have different purposes, different constituencies, different sources of funding and different methods for gaining their goals. It is their distinctive methods of operation that so often causes confusion.

Christians who take the Bible seriously must simply read Romans 13:1-3 to see that scripture affirms the use of force by the

state. One does not need to multiply the passages in Old and New Testaments to demonstrate how often the use of force by the state is seen as proper. But it is never right for the church to coerce in matters of faith. To violate the conscience of any individual in spiritual concerns is a serious offense. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord" is a biblical notion that has not been repealed.

So, when the majority in any particular instance tries to use the offices, influence, image or legal force of the state to advance its religion, then that majority is out of bounds, at least in this country. We have had the good sense through the years to use legislation, court decisions, and the power of public opinion and popular pressure to keep both church and state in line. We understand that when government meddles in religion it always has the touch of mud about it. The Lemon test has offered good guidelines: laws must have a primarily secular purpose (not religious); laws should neither advance nor inhibit religion; and laws should not make for the excessive entanglement of government and religion. We have seen what has happened in other lands when those basic boundaries are ignored or flouted.

One must simply examine the many violations of the spirit of church-state separation to see how easy it is to get in real trouble. When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is endangered. Yet, Supreme Court decisions would allow government to require all citizens to pay taxes for the support of the religious

education of a few. Some would like to insist that our Ten Commandments be posted in public schools, paid for with tax dollars supplied by all citizens, even Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and those with no religion. Others would like to insist upon all public school children hearing or engaging in some sort of "prayer" in their classrooms, making them required participants or captive audiences doing religious exercises whether they want to or not.

Then, there are those controversial issues in which, without government intervention, we believers manage to find ways to confuse the coercive power of the state with what we claim to be spiritual, Christocentric, God-fearing faith. Some church leaders, lay and ordained, plunge their local church (or worse, their denomination) into secular politics thereby secularizing the spiritual, polarizing the congregation, politicizing the theological, and damaging the witness of the church in the world. More commonly, some church people in most denominations bring the nation's flag into the worship center and permit it either to overshadow the Cross or to stand gathering dust until it becomes part of the furniture. Most often the use of the United States' flag in churches falls into misuse by giving it too much or too little attention.

A good many of the problems relating to church-state separation are those we bring upon ourselves by simply not insisting that the church be the church and the state be the state. It has worked well in the history of the Republic. It has been a system that is best for the church and best for the state.

Look at every other nation on the face of the earth. In "Christian" nations with established religion, attendance, giving and involvement do not begin to compare with that in the United States. In Great Britain, with a state church, less than 10% of the population is at worship on any given Sunday. In the United States every weekend about 50% of the people are in church, synagogue or mosque. For religion to be vital it must be voluntary.

It is essential in our participatory democracy for Christians to study, work, keep up, take part in partisan politics (that's where the decisions are made), complain, commend, and to vote. Thomas Jefferson said, "If a people in a Constitutional democracy think that they can be both ignorant and free, they imagine a thing that has never been and that will never be."

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*James Dunn is Visiting Professor of Christianity and Public Policy at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C. and former director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.*

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