

Guest Editorial: The separation of church and state goes both ways

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Years ago, I was facing a major life decision and my dad said, “Remember, all that glitters is not gold.” William Shakespeare offered this nugget (pun intended) of truth as a reminder to watch for counterfeits because outward appearances can be deceiving.

I’m concerned that many Christians, even pastors, are choosing glitter over gold, by embracing a false representation of the true power of God and a parody of his kingdom and how it advances in the world.

This is nothing new. When Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God’s law, the people of Israel grew impatient. They wanted something they could touch, see and build for themselves, something that felt like real power. They needed a leader who would step up and fulfill their dreams to make their own god. Aaron acquiesced, collected their gold, melted it down, and formed the golden calf.

The people rejoiced, danced around it, sang songs and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). It looked impressive, it glittered and gave them a sense of control. But it wasn’t real. It was nothing but a lifeless idol, a substitute for the living God.

When confronted by Moses, the truth was revealed. Their golden calf had no power, no presence, and could offer no salvation. A collective group of people chose a leader to help make it happen. They gave generously to it, sincerely celebrated it, only to realize it was a false representation of something so much better. It was not only a distortion of true worship but a

mockery of the real thing.

“Christians” or disciples?

Dallas Willard noted that it’s possible to self-identify as a “Christian” and not be a disciple of Jesus. The word Christian shows up three times in the New Testament while the word *disciple* appears 269 times.

Jesus *only* called disciples. The word, “Christian” has been hijacked and redefined, often by leaders, influencers and politicians, who have taken on the label and often not exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit.

God alone knows the human heart, but Jesus said there would be signs. Many Christians act as if the ends justify the means. In the kingdom of God, the means are *always* tied to the ends. The actions of God are tied to the heart of God. In a desire to accomplish the “ends,” we lose our prophetic witness when our “ends” don’t match up with the “means,” the way of Jesus and his kingdom.

A mock kingdom or the real thing?

My concern is the building of an idol that’s not true gold. Worldly power makes us feel like we’re in control, even safe and powerful, but it’s an imposter.

When the church tries to act like the state, it always leads to a false witness. If the state tries to act like the church, it leads to a false kingdom. Jesus was clear before Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight...” (John 18:36). His kingdom does not come through worldly force.

Back to core Baptist distinctives

I am Baptist because I believe in the authority of the Bible. I believe that Jesus was perfect theology embodied and that Scripture applied looks exactly like him.

I believe in the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of all believers, our two ordinances, individual soul liberty, saved membership, our two offices (with nuanced differences in various churches), and the separation of church and state.

I know many will disagree with my application of the last one and I understand why, but in this far-to-limited space to write or converse about it, I want to lay out some foundational principles that I hope will guide deeper conversations about two current issues. I offer my own humble opinion, trusting in the soul competency of each of my brothers and sisters.

I will not be endorsing any candidates from our pulpit

I come back to our core tenets of soul competency and the priesthood of every believer. I will preach about the kind of leaders we should want to serve us, but my members are free to vote as they will.

I will encourage a posture of submission to the authorities (Romans 13) while at times, if necessary, proclaim that “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). I will embrace my right to speak truth to power, according to the Scriptures, regardless of what partisan side they’re on.

Endorsing candidates will likely backfire and be used against us to lobby for the taxation of churches. Doing so would only create more division within our churches. Once the politician does something unbiblical (likely),

I would be left having endorsed him or her.

I will continue to endorse Jesus as our only (already elected) king and preach that our allegiance belongs to him alone.

The state does not need to act like the church

When the state tries to be the church, it becomes a parody of the true kingdom. His kingdom advances through his people in every domain of culture in every nation on earth. For the state to try to force a particular religion, even Christianity, on the people in a liberal democracy, it presents an imposter of the real thing.

I love and seek to obey the Ten Commandments. But as one commentator noted, to a watching world, mandating they be put on the walls of public-school classrooms feels like a dog marking its territory.

Christ rules over everything and in the hearts of his followers. Forcing one's belief on another is contrary to the gospel and the nature of biblical faith. We lose our prophetic witness when we try to force our beliefs on others.

I've talked with several attorneys who agree that the mandate seems like a direct violation of the historical interpretation of the Establishment Clause, which prevents the government from establishing, sponsoring, or endorsing *any* religion.

The very first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." That's explicit. There's only one God, and we are to obey him alone. Let's pray for our Christian teachers and administrators who live out the gospel daily. We don't need a secularist or non-Christian explaining to our kids what it means to worship him.

The church does not need to act like the state

Earthly kingdoms often are built on power, conquest, and the pursuit of earthly desires. King Jesus taught us that his kingdom comes through humility, service and love. It does not rely on worldly power.

The church is now one of the few places left where people can find refuge from the division in our culture. The church should be the place where everyone can come together with different ideas and partisan opinions and be one under Christ. His church transcends all temporal governments and institutions.

Like our Baptist forerunners we must fight for freedom and against the oppression of any religion. We don't need the five pillars of Islam, the five-fold path of Buddhism, or some secular creed on the walls of our public schools either.

I praise God we live in a representative democracy, and it's why I'm calling all Baptists to do what we've historically done: Let's fight for the freedom of religion and keep the state from promoting any religion.

If we think we've gained a foothold for the gospel by force, we can be certain that it's not the kingdom of God that has come. It's a golden calf. All that glitters is not gold.

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