

Every culture passes laws to govern how people live in that time and place. Usually they are based on the morals or religious beliefs of that culture. And we have seen how quickly such laws are quickly changed as morals or attitudes change. Abortion was legal, now it isn't. Marijuana and sports gambling were illegal, now they are legal. Marriage was a man and a woman, now it is more than that. Daily we wrestle with how faith and culture intersect, and which will have more influence in our decisions and actions.

Sometimes the law includes accommodations for religious beliefs. For instance, when the draft was the law of the land, exemptions were made for conscientious objections and people could choose a different public service. Sometimes there is no accommodation as when the owners of a bakery were ordered to pay damages because they were unwilling to create a wedding cake that conflicted with their convictions of faith.

What is the Church to do when government policy is at odds with Christian beliefs? Or society's norms change and demand that Church be sensitive enough to change its beliefs to match? And how do we justify that some Christians have views very different than others, and yet all claim that Scripture and faith is what guides their morality and living?

Actually, the church versus state debate often isn't even the real issue. A case in point is our Gospel, where the question regarding taxes was merely a setup. The goal of the question was to trap Jesus. Either he supported Rome or he didn't! Either he supported the temple or he didn't! Either way, someone would be angry enough to seek for him to be killed!

When Jesus was asked about whether or not it was proper for Jews to pay taxes to Rome, what do you think about his answer? *"Give God what is his! Give Caesar what is his!"* Was he dodging the question or making a point? The questioners figured if Jesus said "pay taxes" Jewish leaders would be angry. If he said, "don't pay," Rome would arrest him for treason. Either way they figured they had him trapped.

But he turned the tables saying: "before you can split the pie, you need to decide whose pie it is!" Or, *"I won't play your game" but ask what is there that truly does not belong to God?"* In the Creed we confess God is the Maker and Owner of all that exists. So, doesn't that already answer the question about whose pie we are trying to control how we slice? How should we answer Jesus words about "giving earthly rulers what they own and give God what He owns?" What about sayings such as, "it's my body! It's my country! It's my time!"

To be honest what really is ours and what is God's? How would our arguments and demands change if we admitted it's God's body, God's country, God's time." Would that not change our answers? Our tendency is to segment and build barriers God never intended.

A life of faith has no way to differentiate what belongs to God or culture as everything is colored by faith! The Good News is God never separates himself from us! In other words, He rejected sin's separation. While our "Caesars" today expect to be treated like

gods God's love is so great he treated himself like us! (What else were a manger and a tomb all about, after all?)

Satan claims every part of life is under his control. (Remember his audacious offers to Jesus in the wilderness temptation?) And yet, Jesus showed who was in control when from the emptiness of the tomb he restored life to God's care. All Creation belongs to God alone!

Isn't the question: "Why can't there be prayers in school" today's equivalent of the Pharisees *tax question*? Why would people of faith not be willing and able to pray whenever and wherever? Isn't a demand for science classes to teach the Bible asking "Caesar to teach the faith?" What would we want if the country became predominantly Muslim or atheist? What would we want the government to teach then? Why abdicate our responsibilities to teach faith, hope, and love at home and demand the government should dictate its definition of ethical love?

Why swallow the bait? Who sets our schedules; the world or God? Who will I support with time, treasure and talent? Is life about me, or does my living reflect God's value in my life? Why give anyone else the control of my life of faith? We shouldn't be wearing face masks because a governor orders it, but because of our respect for the health of all and a witness to our care for each other.

As part of living in any culture we are bound to the laws of that culture. We can dissent or we can affirm, and we have to be willing to accept the consequences of whatever we feel faith is calling us to be.

Martin Luther squared off against the power of the Pope, because faith compelled him to do no less. Because of his Christian faith, Martin Luther King was willing to be arrested for breaking the law. He accepted the world's judgement for living out the Gospel of Jesus in a hate-filled world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sentenced to death for opposing the Nazi occupiers of his native journey and their attempt to exterminate Jews.

Just as Jesus looked at the Roman coin in his day, take time to look at our lives today and ask WHOSE "image" is stamped on your life? Your gifts? Your opportunities? (Is it the mark of Caesar or the sign of a cross?) To ask is it God's or Caesar's is already to submit to Caesar. In Christ, we can do better than that! For Christian the issue is always one of faithful response. Because every thing is a gift of God, then we should treat every thing and every one as a gift of God.

How's that for a new perspective? And isn't that the point Jesus made? The state or public opinion might not base decisions on such a foundation, but if we do, then we have no choice but to live by faith, even if that brings earthly condemnation, loss, or penalty. What is God's is God's. What belongs to the world belongs to the world.

In other words, HOW will God's gifts (every blessed one of them) be used in daily worship, witness, and servant love? No more questions. No more confusion. Simply and daily, in all that we do, touch, give glory to God!

For people of faith, living is only and always about giving God HIS due!