

The Things of God: Presidents, Protests, and the Church

Matthew 22:15-22

Mark Schloneger

October 18, 2020

*Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap [Jesus] in his words.
They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.
“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
You aren’t swayed by others,
because you pay no attention to who they are.
Tell us then, what is your opinion?
Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”*

*But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said,
“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?
Show me the coin used for paying the tax.”
They brought him a denarius, and he asked them,
“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”*

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

*Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s,
and to God what is God’s.”*

*When they heard this, they were amazed.
So they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22, NIV)*

I don’t know how I came into possession of this book,
this particular copy of *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.
I know it was before I became a member of Berkey,
but, beyond that, I know nothing of how this book wound up on my bookshelf,
who gave it or returned it to me, or when.

I say all of this because this particular Confession of Faith is special.
It’s special because it has been inscribed with a rating of each of the twenty-four articles.
On the title page, the reader who made these inscriptions
was kind enough to give me the key to the rating system.

“The Articles are rated 1-10,” it says, with one being . . . “worthless!”
A ten rating is described as being “inarguably foundational”,
“not subject to negotiation.”

There’s one ten rating.
That’s on the article entitled “Salvation.”
The article on God gets an eight, Jesus a nine, the Holy Spirit a seven.
Virtually all the others come with notations beside their ratings --
like “extraneous”, “shrug/yawn”, “who cares?”, “minutae”, and “not essential”.

Based on this rating system,
the sermon that I’m about to preach is “worthless!”

and full of “insignificant details!”
That’s because Article 23, “The Church’s Relation to Government and Society,”
received a one rating along with that notation.
You know, you may think it’s hard to listen to a worthless sermon full of insignificant details –
but just think how hard it is preparing one.
You’re welcome.

Of course, I don’t believe the Church’s relationship to government is a worthless topic.
At least in some ways, Jesus wound up on a Roman cross
because his life and teachings were a threat to the Roman Empire.
But I mention what is written on this copy
because it represents a sort of dualism that is often found in our churches
when we talk about how we should relate to government.
We often move between two extremes.
I think the first is represented in the ratings and notations in this book:
an over-spiritualization which trivializes or deems insignificant
our lives in our bodies and social issues, including how they are affected by state power.
In this view, churches should stay out of national politics altogether (“No politics in the pulpit!”).
We’re concerned about salvation and people’s souls, they say.
In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr.
called out this tendency in white churches.
In the midst of racial and economic injustice, he wrote,
“[they] commit themselves to completely other worldly religion,
which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul,
between the sacred and the secular.”¹

But the second extreme of this dualism is just as insidious and just as empty:
an over-materialization that trivializes or deems insignificant
the power of God that has been poured out upon the Church through the Holy Spirit.
Real power in this world – the power to save, to transform, to change,
ultimately rests on the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus --
not in positions of political parties or presidents on social issues
and not in the outcome of elections.

Somehow, we as Christians need a better imagination when it comes to politics.

“Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”
That’s what Jesus was asked.
Now, to be clear, when the Pharisees and the Herodians asked Jesus this question,
they were not reflecting the sort of dualism that I just described.
But when it comes to politics, to our relationship to the state,
Jesus’ answer to their question can help us in our temptations and questions.
For the times in which we’re living,
I think this is a topic that is particularly *worthwhile* and *significant*.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” *Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project*, The Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 16, 1963). [https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230016/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf].

But first, let's properly locate ourselves before this text from Matthew 22. First-century Palestine was a colonized satellite of Roman imperial power. It was controlled by and ruled by Rome.

And so, imagine, when issues arose relating to how
the colonized people of Israel should relate to the colonizer,
you can understand why political and religious feelings ran hot.

This question was right at the top of people's minds in first-century Israel: Should the people of God give its tax money to and thus support
a pagan state and its emperor worship,
a state that exercised its military power to rule over the people of Israel
and the land that God had promised them?

The revolutionary-minded among them – the Zealots – said absolutely not. Some of them refused the tax, they left their towns, and they became guerilla fighters. They violently targeted both the Roman colonizers and their fellow Jews who supported Rome. By so doing, of course, they became an enemy target of the Imperial Roman Empire.²

Others among them were more pragmatic. They were the culturally sophisticated, the realists. The less trouble we Jews caused the Romans, they thought,
the easier it would be for everyone.
By so doing, of course, they became an enemy target of the Zealots.

Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

Do you see the trap that the Pharisees and Herodians carefully and ingeniously set up for Jesus? If he answered "no", as they expected,

well, the Roman militias and their spears would deal with him.

But if he answered "yes", no matter.

No one could support a man who was a revolutionary
when it came to turning the tables on his own people in the temple
but who became a sheeple when it came to opposing Rome.
The Zealots and their daggers would deal with him.

Regardless of how he answered, they must have thought,
hasta la vista, Jesus, and take your teachings with you.

Now, Jesus knew they were trying to trick him, of course,
so he asked them to show him the coin
that was specifically minted to pay the tax.

They brought that coin to him, a silver denarius,
with the image of Tiberius Caesar on one side,
and his mother Livia on the other.

Around the circumference of the coin were these words,
"Tiberius Caesar, worshipful son of the divine Augustus."

Of course, those words were idolatrous to all Jews, including Jesus,
but in asking the Pharisees to show him the coin,

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Vol. 2; "The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI), 397-98.

he exposed the hypocrisy behind their question.
He wasn't the one carrying the coin to pay the tax, his questioners were.³

*But Jesus asked,
"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"*

"Caesar's," they replied.

*Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's,
and to God what is God's."*

In other words, the coin wasn't theirs to begin with.

Jesus does not say "give to Caesar",

as if they were paying homage to him or giving him a gift out of their own resources.

No, he said, "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's."

Give it back.

Rome minted this particular coin so people could pay the tax,

you have it, Caesar wants it, so give it back.

Don't draw the line on doing something that wasn't even yours to begin with.

When Caesar asks for Caesar's things to do the rightful things of Caesar,

by all means, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.

But give back to God what is God's.

The coin bore the image of Caesar,

but, as all Jews knew, human beings bear the image of God.

When the state asks for things that belong to God --

our total commitment, our unconditional obedience, our unwavering allegiance --
that's the line to draw.

But we have to properly locate ourselves.

The greatest threat to our identity as Christians, as Mennonites,

in the United States right now?

It's not oppression; it's not persecution; it's seduction.

A seduction that promises an easier way than Jesus,

a smoother road than discipleship,

a less costly toll than the cross.

A seduction that pledges riches and security and healing.

A seduction that asks us to vote and to act to advance our own interests

rather than to address the needs of our neighbors.

A seduction that desires our bodies, minds and souls,

saying "seek ye first the country under God and its powerfulness",

either by supporting it or protesting against it.

A seduction that invites us to either commit ourselves to an other-worldly religion

that abandons the cause of economic and racial justice

or a so this-worldly religion that it abandons the power

that gives meaning to economic and racial justice.

³ Ibid., 398.

When Jesus said to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's
and to God what is God's,
he was not advocating a middle-of-the-road,
can't-we-all-get-along, your-truth-may-not-be-my-truth
type of unity.

No, Jesus was telling his questioners and all disciples
to practice politics with passion --
his passion, an embodied passion, a loving passion that led to his death.
Loving enemies, giving to the poor, offering hospitality to the stranger,
welcoming the immigrant, seeking justice for the oppressed, healing the sick,
honoring the sanctity and dignity of life in those who are invisible, ignored, or abandoned.
These are the things of God.

Look, our votes matter.
The outcomes of elections have life or death consequences for many people.
In my mind, I think how Jesus answered the question about taxes could also apply to voting.
The United States grants us the right to vote, our country asks for it from time to time,
and so we should give it.

But we as Christians cast our votes not to advance your interests
but to magnify the interests and the voices of those who are often ignored,
those who can't vote, and those whose right to vote has been taken away.
As Christians, maybe we should think about our votes as simply proxies for the powerless.

But, in the end, we need to remember that only our votes are counted and not our reasons.
Voting is a very, very vague way to speak truth to power.
Our votes, and even if we choose not to vote, do not speak very clearly.

As Christians, we can't allow our votes to be a substitute for our bodies.
In Christ, God's word has become flesh.
It is embodied.
And because of that, our votes alone can never satisfy the commandment
to love our God and to love our neighbors.

"We believe that the church is God's holy nation," Article 23 begins,
"called to give full allegiance to Christ its head
and to witness to all nations about God's saving love.
The church is the spiritual, social, and political body that gives
its allegiance to God alone.
As citizen's of God's kingdom, we trust in the power of God's love for our defense."
[. . .] The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ,
made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God's glory."

"We witness to the nations by being that "city on a hill"
which demonstrates the way of Christ.
We also witness by being ambassadors for Christ,

calling the nations . . . to move toward justice, peace, and compassion for all people.
In so doing, we seek the welfare of the city to which God has sent us.”⁴

The power to bring about lasting change in this world is not found in the changing whims
of parties vying for power.

It is found in the power of God --

the power that rose Jesus from the dead,

the power that is at large and loose in the body of Christ,

the power that is found in our bodies walking together,

carrying the cross on our common journey through the valley of the shadow of death.

Besides your vote, how are you, how are we,

going to embody our politics with the passion of Jesus?

⁴ “Article 23: The Church’s Relation to Government and Society,” *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press: Scottdale, PA), 1995.