

Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 8, No. 4: 4 February 2007

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CAN YOU SEPARATE GOD FROM STATE?

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 11

Extracts:

Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the East Gate of the Lord's house, ...and there *at the door of the gate were twenty-five men, among whom I saw... princes of the people*, and He said to me: "Son of man, these are *the men who devise iniquity and give wicked counsel in this city... Therefore... you shall know that I am the Lord; for you have not walked in My statutes, nor executed My judgments, but have done according to the customs of the Gentiles which are around you*" [Ezek. 11: 1, 2,4,12]

In 2002, a California physician, Michael Newdon, filed a lawsuit because he did not want his second-grade daughter to be forced to listen to the American Pledge that contains the words, "under God."¹ In a 2-1 ruling, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals agreed that inserting those two words in the national pledge violated the separation of church and state as enshrined in the First Amendment. Almost immediately, President Bush and all members of Congress condemned the ruling and openly recited the pledge in defiance. The matter went to the US Supreme Court [Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdon]. On 14 June 2004, the judges by 5-3 majority overturned the lower court ruling on a technical point that Newdon, being not the legal custodian, having not married his daughter's mother, had no legal standing to sue. So, the matter has remained unresolved and some atheists' groups have vowed to take up the issue again.

The doctrine of separation of church and state is to prevent the state from adopting one faith as the national religion in a pluralistic society. Increasingly, however, there is an attempt, especially in the Western world, to exclude God from public life. You cannot pray in nor even bring the Bible to public schools. An Alabama Chief Justice, Roy Moore, has lost his job for refusing to take down the Ten Commandments from his court. Does separation of church and state include removing God from public space? Is it an attempt to accommodate all faiths or there is something deeper than we can see? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Story based on the following sources: Rob Boston, "One Nation Kept in Suspense," www.au.org/site/News2, July/August 2004; The Associated Press, "Judges surprised by furor over Pledge decision," www.freedomforum.org, and Hendrik Hertzberg, "Two Little Words," www.newyorker.com of 2002-07-15

1. L'État c'est Moi (*I am the State*)

An absolutist French king, Louis XIV (1638- 1715)², is credited with declaring emphatically, “I am the state!” In other words, you cannot separate the king from his kingdom. The king’s assertion comes from the doctrine that rulers derive their authority from God “for there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” [**Rom. 13: 1**]. Over time, as kings and religious leaders misapplied their “divine right” over state matters, elected representatives of the people (parliaments) took over and legally removed control of the state away from unelected rulers, whether they were kings or clerics. Since the French Revolution (1789), the monarchy has been abolished there. The trend has been copied all over the world in the sense that, even where there are still monarchies (as in England, Japan, the Netherlands or African states), they are symbolic and ceremonial.

Having “defeated” the monarchs, state authorities have taken a step further by legalizing the separation of church and state. That is, the state should not adopt a national religion for all its citizens. People should have the option to worship whatever they believe in and in whatever way. So, in a country where you have Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians and animists, no single one should impose (by legislation) its faith on the rest of society. On the surface, that looks fair enough because most of them believe in God, no matter how defined. However, we now see a trend where some groups want to remove God *completely* from the public domain. Is that synonymous with separation of church and state? Before we attempt to answer that question, let us examine the situation in Israel in the days of the prophet Ezekiel.

2. The people of God took God out of state matters!

Our story continues from last week’s lesson where the Spirit of God took Ezekiel from Babylon to Jerusalem in a trance and showed him what His chosen people were doing there. In today’s study, God brought the prophet to the East Gate of the temple and showed him twenty-five men among whom were “princes of the people” [**Ezek. 11: 1**]. In a kingdom that Judah was at the time, princes were an integral part of the state’s administration. For example, during the reign of King Jehoshaphat, it was the princes (also called leaders) that he sent along with the Levites “to teach in the cities of Judah” and “they had the Book of the Law of the Lord with them; they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people” [**2 Chron. 17: 7-9**]. As a result of their work, “the fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands that were around Judah, so that they did not make war against Jehoshaphat” [v. 10].

The state authorities (represented by princes shown to Ezekiel) were far from teaching God’s word and precepts. Instead, they devised “iniquity and [gave]

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_XIV_of_France

wicked counsel” in Jerusalem [Ezek. 11; 2]. Instead of a message of hope and trust in God, they taught their distraught people, “the time is not near to build houses; this city is the cauldron, and we are the meat” [v. 3]. Instead of being the light to the Gentile nations around them, they lived according to their customs [v. 12]. Bearing in mind that such Gentile nations were idol worshippers, the then state of Judah had forsaken the true God to follow the worshippers of idols! They had thus separated God from state matters. He was no longer relevant to their needs for survival and security. Their fellow citizens had been taken to exile and where was the guarantee that the remnants were not going to be destroyed? If they could not beat the invaders, why not join the idol worshippers around them who did not appear to share the suffering of the Jews?

When we acquiesce to any practice or position that contradicts the word of God, we are joining those who want Him excluded from our public life. For example, you cannot claim to be a believer and vote for measures that go against God’s commandments. When you have the privilege to hold a position of public trust and you do things that compromise fear of the Lord, you are excluding God from your office. *It is not everything that is legally acceptable that is morally right.* Look around you and convince yourself that you have not kept God out of your home, office, business or church!

3. Why do people want God out of secular matters?

In spite of glaring evidence from the Scriptures that we cannot exclude God from secular matters without attracting His judgment [2 Chron. 7: 14], the trend is in the opposite direction. Why do people want God out of their lives? The following, among others, can explain the phenomenon:

a) *It may be for political or material gains*

Many people may not be against God *per se*. In fact, they may be believers in “good standing” among their congregations. However, if they stand to gain from the movement, materially or politically, they will publicly support it. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) champion most of the lawsuits to remove God from state institutions. Do you think all their members are atheists? Of course not! For example, AU's membership includes Christians, Jews, Buddhists, people with no religious affiliation and others, Democrats, Republicans and independents.³ The fact is that such organizations are well-funded, apart from the status they enjoy for fighting for the underdog in American society.

Before the theory of evolution gained ground from the 19th Century, scientists had had no problem with faith in God. That is why highly

³ ‘About AU,’ <http://www.au.org/site/PageServer?pagename=aboutau>

respected scientists like Isaac Newton (1642- 1727) were great men of faith. For example, in late editions of his scientific works, Newton expressed a strong sense of God's providential role in nature.⁴ However, evolution is founded on atheism. As long as God is accepted in public life, modern scientists who do not believe in God (and they are in the majority and occupy positions of power and prestige in town and gown) feel threatened. God has to be “dethroned” for their “kingdom” to be established!

The fighters on the other side may also be doing it for political reasons or material gains. For example, the Republicans and religious groups tend to champion family values. Yet, some of their members (or their family members) have recently been forced to resign from Congress or face embarrassing press interviews for perverse sexual conduct. Therefore, they may be using the controversy mainly to win the votes of the so-called Bible-belt states of America. Also, when all the Congress men and women came out in June 2002 to protest against a court ruling to remove “under God” from the national pledge, it was not necessarily because they loved God more; rather, they might have had an eye on the mid-term elections in November 2002. In Nigeria, the biggest thieves of state funds, according to the evidence provided by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), are the political leaders who invoke the name of God the most!

b) *To lower the moral bar*

Where there are no rules based on God's word, there will be multiple standards for judging morality and they will keep changing, depending on popular culture. Since God does not change, His laws have not and will never do! People who are bent on mischief are not comfortable with that.

We are passing through an era in human history, especially in the so-called “civilized” world, where people are “filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, ... deceit [and] evil-mindedness,” people who are “inventors of evil things, ... untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving [and] unmerciful” [Rom. 1: 28-32]. The only way for such perverts to thrive is to take God out of state matters. For example, some time ago, a well-known openly gay musician, Elton John, was reported to have said that if he had his way, he would pass a law to ban religion because the church had dared to condemn homosexuality! He is not alone to think that way.

c) *Jesus is actually the target!*

⁴ Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences, “Isaac Newton's Life,” <http://www.newton.cam.ac.uk/newtlife.html>

Most religions are quite comfortable with the word, ‘God.’ Therefore, the majority of people will not care whether you retain ‘God’ in public documents. However, only Christians believe in a triune God, made up of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, agitators for change are pressing harder for fear that allowing that name makes the use of the name of Jesus (God the Son) in public prayers inevitable. That is why they do not mind the teaching of the Koran or even magic or witchcraft in public schools. The Bible is a different matter!

Jesus is the difference between Christianity and other faiths. On account of His name, Christians are perceived as too audacious, too “judgmental” and too “far right.” He is the only way to God whom He calls Father. He is the one who will soon return to judge the world. Therefore, to allow people access to Him through the Bible in public places is unfair competition, especially in countries with a strong Christian tradition. In other words, the agitation to separate God from state is a script from Satan to make war on those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12: 17]. Does it then surprise you that atheists are in the forefront in the fight to exclude God from public life?

4. But can you take away the land from the land owner?

According to Scriptures, “The earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness; the world *and those that dwell therein*” [Ps. 24: 1]. Each day, when we say the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” [Matt. 6: 10]. So, who are we to take land from its Creator? Who are we to use man-made laws and values to exclude God from state matters that bother on justice, morality and salvation? Why should you not fear God “who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” [Matt. 10: 28]?

God made that point when He reminded the people of Judah (through the prophet Ezekiel) that their ordeal was because they had not walked in His statutes nor executed His judgments [Ezek. 11: 12]. If they continued that way, if their hearts continued to follow their desire for “detestable things and abominations,” He would “recompense their deeds on their own heads” [v. 21]. However, for the remnant (in exile), God promised that He would one day restore them to the land of Israel, give them one heart and put a new spirit within them “and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh,” and they would be His people and He, their God [vv. 14-20]. The prophecy was fulfilled with the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, which adopted the Star of David as its national flag! What that story teaches us is that we cannot separate God from state if we hope to succeed as a nation (or collection of people).

If you doubt God’s ability to demonstrate His importance in state matters, ask Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon when the children of Israel were in exile. His pride was likened to that of Lucifer that God flushed out of heaven on account

of his rebellion [Is. 14: 12-14; Rev. 12: 7-10]. The king made an image of gold and commanded all (including the Hebrew exiles) to bow down and worship it. Whoever refused to do so was to be bound and cast into a burning fiery furnace [Dan. 3: 1-7]. On account of their faith in God, three young Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, refused to worship the idol. They were cast into the fire but nothing happened to them nor their clothes! The king then knew that he could not exclude God from governance. Therefore, he decreed that, from thenceforth, “any people, nation or language which speaks amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; *because there is no other God who can deliver like this*” [vv. 19-29].

Every nation has its spiritual anchor. For example, Pharaoh relied on the power of his magicians [Ex. 7: 11-12] and the Philistines trusted their idol, Dagon [1 Sam. 5: 2]. The Greeks in Athens relied on a multiplicity of idols [Acts 17: 16]. Yet, none of them could withstand the power of the living God!

5. Conclusion: There is hardly an atheist when the plane is crashing!

People living in societies that are battling with economic hardships or social unrest have enough pressures to make them call on and rely upon the true and living God both at state and individual levels. For example, in Uganda, President Museveni himself led the people to seek God’s face in order to deal with the scourge of HIV-AIDS. Today, the pandemic is remitting at a fast rate. However, those who have enjoyed so much political freedom and security can afford to think that they no longer need God. In Christian Europe, for example, church attendance has reportedly dropped to less than 5% of the population, and they are now converting cathedrals into beer parlours, museums and, at best, mosques! In America, religious fervour reportedly went up soon after the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001. Now that there have been no such attacks since then, the activists have resumed their quest to exclude God from the public space. Who knows? Their next target may be to remove “In God we trust” from US dollar bills! As the saying goes, there is hardly an atheist when a plane is about to crash! According to Erica Jong, “Take your life in your own hands and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.”⁵

The Kingdom of God will soon reside permanently with us when Jesus, the Judge of the world, returns, and “there shall *by no means* enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” [Rev. 21: 27].

Can you separate God from state? Try!

⁵ www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Erica_Jong