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Separation of Church and State vs. Separation of Faith and State

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We hear all the time that there must be separation of church and state. There is a particularly big hue and cry from people who want to eliminate all vestiges of religion from the public square. But the way these people use this term is a subterfuge. It doesn't mean what they say it means. And that is not all. The fact of the matter is, the idea of removing religion from the public square is impossible. What is being advocated by the use of this phrase is not really the removal of religion from the public square. Rather, it is the exchange of one set of religious values for another.

The True Meaning of "Separation of Church and State"

Contrary to the assertion of the anti-Christian zealots who are trying to push Christians out of the public square, the concept of "separation of church and state" is not in the Constitution. In fact, it is not in the law in any place in the U.S. The term itself was the offshoot of a phrase Thomas Jefferson used in a letter he wrote in 1801 to the Danbury Baptist Association in Danbury, Connecticut. Jefferson was, in this letter, responding to a communication from the Association expressing concern that religious freedom was not adequately protected in their state constitution.

The reason for the concern of the Danbury Baptists was that it was not uncommon during that period of history for there to be an official state sponsored church. This was the tradition which existed in Europe, and many of the settlers from Europe were satisfied to bring that tradition to a new American government. The Connecticut Baptists did not want the government to have any

influence over the free exercise of religion, so they petitioned Jefferson to make sure freedom of religion was protected. As we know, this protection was inserted into the U.S. Constitution in the 1st Amendment.

What modern secularists have tried to do is take the concept and turn it on its head. The law was designed to keep government from prescribing religious practice for the citizenry, not to keep citizens from expressing their faith in the public square.

The ideas which have led to the effort to reverse the American approach originated in Europe. This concept emerged initially in France and Spain as their Constitutions favored a "secularist" approach which viewed the concept of "separation" as being a way to keep religious notions from influencing the operation of the state. As such, secular (atheistic) beliefs became dominant. This point of view was picked up by American secularists who have been working to insert this interpretation into American law.

The bottom line is, the concept of "separation of church and state" does not mean what modern secularists claim – and it has no place in American law. In fact, what they deem it to mean is a literal impossibility. In their effort to try and scrub religious values from American society, they are not working to keep the state from establishing a state church. That is not even in the conversation. What they are trying to do is prevent Christian values from having any place in the development and implementation of laws. In its place, they want to substitute a different set of values. This is a very different thing than what the 1st Amendment even addressed.

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The Concept of "Separation of Faith and State"

What the secularists are really proposing is not the separation of church and state, but the separation of faith and state – to a degree. Actually the only faith they want to separate from the state is the Christian faith. As it turns out, it is the values of the Christian faith which formed the basis for American society at its founding. Such concepts as the rule of law, freedom of conscience, the value of life, free enterprise, ethical behavior, and private ownership of property are all values which emerged from the teachings of the Christian faith. When secularists put forth their version of separation, what they really mean is they want to replace those Christian values with relativism in law, political correctness, a low value of life, economic redistribution, ethics based on relativism, and public ownership of property. What is not said is that this point of view is just as much based on a faith foundation as the one they are trying to replace.

The truth is, the values of the secularists are not "non-religious." They emerge directly out of a naturalistic worldview – which is a faith position. There is no empirical basis for secular values. As such, they represent a religious point of view. The question then becomes, "Why should the values of a secular religion replace the values of a theistic one?"

At this point, we must point out that no one is talking about creating a theocracy. I don't know of anyone who wants to take a sectarian set of rules and make them the law of the land. That would, by default, create a state church – the very thing the founders were determined to prevent. The real issue at hand revolves around which set of values will hold prominence in the public square.

By their unthoughtful assertions, many people seem to believe that it is possible for there to be a values free public sector. But that is simply not true. There will be some set of values which dominate society. And whatever that set of values turns out to be, they will be based on a faith foundation. Individuals don't check their personal beliefs and morality at the door when they enter public service. They bring them in and act in their public life based on those beliefs. If they believe in a high value of life, they work to promote that. If they believe in a low value of life, they work to promote that point of view. If they believe in free enterprise, they actively advance policies which promote free enterprise. If they believe in economic redistribution, they work toward that goal. And the list could go on. The point is, no matter what "beliefs" people bring to the table, they work to promote those "beliefs." In other words, they live out their faith life in their public service. It is impossible for human beings to do otherwise.

How Christians Should Respond

So the bottom line is, "separation of church and state," as promoted by secularists, is a bogus argument. No one is proposing that the government establish a state church." Additionally, the argument that promoting Christian values (not sectarian rules) in the public square is wrong because it entangles church and state is also bogus. Promoting Christian values in the public square no more a violation of the "separation of church and state" than promoting secular values.

Since some set of values will dominate culture, the real question at hand is, "Which values should that be?" Should it be values which promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or values which promote death, bondage and public ownership of property?

In the end, the citizenry must make that decision. But the decision should not be made based on the use of

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oppressive laws to push one set of values out of the public square. It should be made in an environment where the majority is able to truly express its will.

In modern American culture, every effort is being made to portray Christian values as "religious" and secular values as "neutral." That is simply not true. They are both faith based values systems. So, how should Christians respond to this situation? Let's look at several suggestions.

1. Understand the Playing Field

First, we cannot push back against that which we do not understand. The first thing Christians must do is to make an effort to truly understand the faith nature of secularism and expose the deception. A secular approach to operating government is simply not value neutral. It expresses a particular value system which is based on a faith foundation. With this understanding, it becomes possible to expose the hypocrisy of those who say they are trying to keep "religion" out of the public square. Until this is made plain, it will be very difficult to push back.

2. Remember we are Stewards of God

In American culture, the rulers of the land are the citizens. The representatives we elect and those who work in other areas of government are not our rulers. Rather, they are our proxies. As individual Christians, we are responsible before God to accept our stewardship responsibility in the political arena. And that stewardship responsibility is to manage those who represent us. We are responsible before God to do what we can to promote his will and his ways in our culture. An important part of that is to influence the political system.

3. Act as God Leads

The work of a steward involves acting. Different people are called by

God to do that in different ways, but we all have some responsibility in that arena. We must discern God's leading on how to act, then do the work. At the very least, every Christian citizen should vote. In the system of government God has placed us in, that is the very least we can do. But there are many other possibilities, as well. Some will be led to make this a full-time enterprise by, for instance, running for office, promoting policy in some particular area, working in the government bureaucracy, or promoting the election of particular candidates. Others may feel led to do some of these things part time or to act completely as civilians. This work can be done by petitioning one's representatives, diligently praying for elected officials, or directly engaging them with the gospel. Every believer needs to discern God's leading and act.

Contrary to the beliefs of some Christians, separation of church and state is not a legitimate point of view when it is used to advocate the expulsion of Christian values from public life. In fact, it is totally illegitimate and Christians should push back against that thinking. First, they should do it by simply educating those who are misinformed about the meaning of the idea of "separation of church and state." But there is something even more important that needs to be expressed. God really is an objectively real person who can be known in an objectively real personal relationship. Believers need to take every opportunity, even when educating people, to share Christ with those who don't understand because they don't know him.

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