

The Bright Burst of American Religious Freedom

This sermon is the third sermon in a series called “What is So Great About the United States?” The other two so far are:

Joh 18:28-40 Political Supremacy (09/05/2004)

1Co 1:10-18 What We Need Now is a Good Man to Lead Us (10/17/2004)

Joh 18:36

To The Village Church, 07/02/2006

Main Idea: The Religious Liberty clause of the First Amendment of the United States facilitates the spread of the gospel, because it helps enforce Jesus’ teaching on the separateness of His Kingdom, so praise God for America and embrace your political role wisely.

Meditation:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America (1789)

The American republic depends upon the answer to two questions: By what ultimate truths ought we to live? And how should these be related to public life? The first question is personal, but has a public dimension because of the connection between beliefs and public virtue. The American answer to the first question is that the government is excluded from giving an answer. The second question, however, is thoroughly public in character, and a public answer is appropriate and necessary to the well-being of this society.

--*The Williamsburg Charter* (1989)

Post-Sermon Song Theme: Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, verses 1,3,4.

Benediction:

May the King Who has died to make men holy bring you the true freedom of citizenship in His realm.

Charge:

Take up your responsibility, as a free citizen of Christ’s Kingdom and as a citizen of the United States, to persuade people’s hearts about what is good.

The Bright Burst of American Religious Freedom?

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I. Citizenship in Two Kingdoms

A. How to celebrate the 4th of July

1. NYC comedian Christian Finnegan on Fireworks: You're really bored by them.
2. Then what do we do on the 4th of July? Specifically, what should Christians do on the 4th of July.
3. At The Village Church, we'll celebrate by reflecting on what it means to be a citizen of the United States of America.

B. Citizens of Two Kingdoms

1. Jesus not criticizing his followers. He was making a statement of fact.
2. Kingdom not of this world: there is distinction between Kingdoms.
3. "Now" means, for the time being, we, as followers of Christ, will always be citizens of two kingdoms. He has chosen not to take us out of this world.
4. Rest of the NT instruction takes this up and calls followers of Jesus to see a responsibility in their lives to BOTH kingdoms.
 - The apostle Paul says to obey your earthly governors.
 - Jesus says, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's..." That is, we have obligations in both kingdoms.
5. This dual citizenship of Christianity has far-reaching implications in how we live our lives. Christians and governments who haven't gotten it have made two errors:
 - Embrace the earthly kingdom as your salvation. Try to make the earthly kingdom into Christ's kingdom.
 - Run away from this world. Just ignore the earthly kingdom. Just dismiss it.
6. But, instead, the NT acknowledges that we are political beings. This is good news for us as New Yorkers. NYC is political.
 - Manhattan trails the nation with one of the lowest rates of volunteer civic participation.
 - But Manhattan is the most politically protesting place in the nation. 60% of Manhattanites say that they have taken part in political protests and this percentage only goes up here in Greenwich Village.
7. As Christians, we want to rebel against NYC in terms of our civic participation. We want to give our lives to serve those around us.

8. But we also want to step right into, and go right along with, NYC in terms of political activism. Because of what Christ sets up here in this passage. Until Christ returns, we are members of this earthly Kingdom. We are political beings. We have a responsibility to engage, in some way, our government.

C. Our Earthly Kingdom's posture in The First Amendment

1. And what do we, here today, find our current earthly kingdom, the USA, saying about religion? We find it in the First Amendment Religious Liberty Clause. Very simple:
 - Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...
2. One clause barring the making of any law "respecting an establishment of religion" and the other barring any law "prohibiting the Free Exercise thereof."
3. And what I invite you to celebrate this long weekend is how, more than any other single provision in the entire Constitution, the Religious Liberty provisions hold the key to American distinctiveness. And the reason to celebrate.
4. I want to give you three fireworks to go "oooooh" about and "Awwwww" about. Three points of how the First Amendment Religious Liberty Clauses give a burst of bright light for us as believers.

II. The Bursts of Brightness in the First Amendment Three Fireworks

A. The First Amendment cultivates this dual citizenship

1. The 1st Amendment actually cultivates this dual citizenship that Jesus taught us. How?
2. The posture and attitude of the US constitution comes pretty close to Joh 18:36.
 - a. The First Amendment prevents the error of equating the two Kingdoms in the first clause. It proclaims a distinction between the country's earthly government and the church.
 - b. And the second clause also acknowledges that a people may belong to two Kingdoms, may have another (higher) loyalty with which the government cannot interfere. The government must allow unrestrained exercise of religion.
 - c. And these two clauses together even show how there is a connection between the two Kingdoms.
3. It forbids either an unwarranted intrusion of someone's religion into public life or an unwarranted exclusion of that one's religion from public life.

B. The First Amendment prevents coercion by the Majority

1. Secondly, The First Amendment prevents coercion by the Majority.
2. A society is only as just and free as it is respectful of this right of religious liberty. If religious liberty is neglected, all civil liberties will suffer.
3. Framers understood the ongoing process of adjustment and mutual give-and-take in a democracy. They saw the need for, not Articles of Faith, but Articles of Peace.
4. Because they saw the ever present danger of majority succumbing to the temptation of coercion in their claims over minds and souls.
5. So how does this go? In the earliest times of USA, a majority of Protestants formed a de facto semi-establishment of one religion in U.S. This was approved of by Protestants and protested by Catholics and Jews. This was the equation of the two Kingdoms. Not good. Christ's Kingdom got watered down.
6. More recently, partly in reaction, constitutional jurisprudence has tended, to move toward the de facto semi-establishment of secularism, which is just as much a religion, with its own faith commitments about the origin, nature and destiny of humankind.

7. And what do we find? Secularists are just as unconcerned about their de facto establishment as the Protestants were. But for the purposes of the proclamation of the gospel, we want neither establishment.

C. Example of current coercion:

1. The example of the Religious clubs in the NYC Public schools (as in NY Times 5/24/2006, Michael Luo). So Christian clubs at various high schools try to have a “Jesus Day” event to invite people to.
 - At Townsend Harris High School, in Flushing, the Christian club was not even allowed to meet on campus until recently. And the principal of Townsend, Thomas Cunningham, still won’t let them have a “Jesus Day” Event.
 - So some of the high schools forbade them to use the word “Jesus” in a poster.
 - These events have nothing to do with the dis-establishment clause. They simply reflect a secular bias of the New York City Board of Education.
 - So, in response to not being able to use the word, “Jesus” on a poster, the students at Bronx High School got around it by putting “JES S” and then saying underneath: “All that’s missing is U.”
2. This coercion stuff happens, but it cannot last forever, because of the First Amendment balance:
 - So now the tide is turning. NYC Board of Ed has recently reversed its policy...
 - So other high schools, and their principals, are much more in line w/ US. constitution: Stuyvesant’s principal, Stanley Teitel, who let the posters go up and gave the kids the cafeteria to do it in, as I’m sure he would the Jewish or Muslim club at Stuyvesant.
 - So, in May, about 100 students gathered in Stuyvesant cafeteria for “Jesus Day.”
3. Other examples of coercion:
 - When folks call any evidence of religious influence on public policy an establishment of religion. That is historically unwarranted, philosophically inconsistent and profoundly undemocratic.
 - The assertion of moral judgments as though they were morally neutral.
4. The First Amendment comes to the rescue. That, is a bright burst of an American fireworks.

D. Religious liberty sustains public virtue

1. Thirdly, the United States constitution understands that liberty needs virtue to survive. And religious liberty sustains public virtue.
2. Even though Thomas Jefferson was not a believer in Christ, though he loved the ethics, in his days as president, the largest church service in the US took place every Sunday in the Capitol Building, supported with government funds (which probably was not right to do), all different denominations preached, and he considered it his duty to attend.
 - One day, a man confronted him on the way to church: Aren't you being a hypocrite?
 - "No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be... Good morning, Sir!"
 - *Williamsburg Charter* (formed by a group of clergy in Virginia on the 200th anniversary of that state's call for religious freedom): "This form of [the United States] government depends upon ultimate beliefs, for otherwise we have no right to the rights by which it thrives, yet rejects any official formulation of them... The republic will stand or fall by the dynamism of its non-established faiths."
3. People today who don't see it like Thomas Jefferson did are forgetting that most dynamic social movements in America, including civil rights, were inspired and shaped by religious motivation.
4. As Christians, if we have the compassion, we have the opportunity to help our earthly kingdom, to be an influence for virtue. If you realize what the First Amendment is giving you, you should be excited, not afraid. That is another burst in brightness over the skies of this country.

III. How to Live as a Christian in the United States of America

Three exhortations from this bright sky.

A. Application #1: Do not form a Christian party

1. Do not form a Christian party. Christians should not form an exclusively Christian political party that seeks to exercise power in the name of Christ. This would again equate the kingdoms, and really subjugate the ultimate Kingdom.
2. And it would be to become Simon Peter, taking out his sword to enforce his political party.
3. So political action by Christians for causes of justice and mercy should be undertaken in concert with nonbelievers who seek the same objectives.
4. Even your vote should not necessarily be swayed simply by a particular candidate's religion. You should be looking for a candidate that will fight for the greatest good as you learn it from your faith.
5. No need to strive for a "Christian America."
 - If you want to see Americans understand Christ's love and experience the excellence of His salvation, that is good.
 - Even if you grieve the trends of society that you see causing grief to many people and you want to see Christian influence on those problems because your compassion demands it, that is good.
 - But, when I speak of a desire for a "Christian America," I mean if you wish to make a majority that can make life comfortable for itself, so that you don't have to take the trouble of translating your convictions into the public square, that is bad. Often, the reason people do this is to create a comfortable life for themselves and their family. But that is an unworthy goal of a follower of Christ. No life at all. It squashes your soul into a box too small for it.
6. Our politics must always recognize that there are two different kingdoms.

B. Application #2: Support Religious Freedom for Others

1. Application #2: Support Religious Freedom for Others.
2. Especially we, as Christians, can uphold the American Constitution as defenders of the rights of all faiths.
3. For our theology teaches us: Not all will come to believe as we do. We naturally want to let people know about the excellence of Christ but it is a matter of the heart, of the conscience.

4. What we have in America is a clear atmosphere. A clear atmosphere for the proclamation of our gospel is an air in which all people have freedom of conscience to believe as they choose.
5. We won't lose in that kind of a situation, friends. Historic Christianity is just too good.
6. It was under the 1st Century Pax Romana that Christianity exploded and changed the world. It is under the modern day "pax romana" of religious freedom that Christianity has a great opportunity to flourish.
7. So this leads us to the good work here of preserving that right for all people, to let all faiths enter vigorously into public life and to exercise such influence as their followers and ideas engender.
8. And so, as a church, we gave today to the Beckett Fund, which does just that.

C. Application #3: Don't let your Christianity be silenced

1. Don't let your Christianity be silenced by a secular majority.
2. *The Williamsburg Charter* (1988):
 - "The American republic depends upon the answer to two questions: By what ultimate truths ought we to live? And how should these be related to public life? ...The American answer to the first question is that the government is excluded from giving an answer. The second question, however, is thoroughly public in character, and a public answer is appropriate and necessary to the well-being of this society."
3. Liberty needs virtue. George Washington, in his "Farewell Address":
 - "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports...let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure (probably thinking of Thomas Jefferson and David Hume), reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."
4. They knew it. Religion must not be excluded from the public square. That is what the second clause of the First Amendment seeks to guarantee.
5. So, if you are loyal to your country, and you should be because your ultimate loyalty to Christ should inspire a subsidiary loyalty to the cultural situation He has placed you in, you will participate in the Republic. Bring your Christianity into the public square.

6. And when you get there, you have a responsibility to translate your private convictions into publicly accessible claims. You need to build the arguments that allow people who don't believe as you do to see why what is good and right is indeed good and right.
7. Someone in our congregation, who has been attempting to do this for many years is Bob Peters, president of Morality in Media. I want to acknowledge his efforts and invite you to talk to him about his work.
8. I don't expect all Christians to agree about how to make the translation from the convictions to the public square. I don't even expect all the Christians in this church to agree. But we do need to appreciate those making the effort.
9. And we do all need to be thinking about what it means to be citizens of this earthly Kingdom.

D. Conclusion: Enjoy the Fireworks of America

1. Celebrate this weekend the glory of God's providence in giving us America to live in.
2. Whether you go to the fireworks or not, be thankful for this your earthly kingdom, and how it aids you in cultivating the dual citizenship our Lord designed for us in this age.
3. "Though this kingdom is not of this world, it is the kingdom the world most needs."
—M.D. Hoge

We will sing "Mine eyes have seen the glory..." which was written by Julia Howe Ward in her bathrobe in 1861 to a popular southern tune, "John Brown". Let's enjoy the words of this now beautiful hymn, understanding that they refer to Christ's Kingdom.