

Church and State: Thoughts from an American Christian

Pastor Joe Fuiten, July 1, 2001

Today, the Church is celebrating American independence. America is a wonderful country and I make no bones about being proud to be an American. I've been to many parts of the world. While every part of it has its own kind of beauty and charm, there is no place like home.

As a church, we are celebrating the great diversity we have within this country and within this congregation. A very high percentage of our people here are foreign born. Some of us are American citizens by birth and others by choice. Still others are here somewhat temporarily.

As Christian Americans, we are citizens of heaven first of all. Then we are citizens of America. We have an obligation to think about America through a Christian mind. This is not hard to do since all but 12 of our 270 Founders were Christians.

Personally, I think it is time to rethink our relationship with the government. First of all, **the concept of separation of Church and State may exist only on paper.** It certainly does not seem to have much positive impact. In almost everything that happens the State is telling the Church what to do. We have to get a license from the State to conduct a marriage ceremony in our church. In order to bury people we need a permit from the government. Just to do the work of a funeral home, we need a license from the government. Every one of our schools teachers must be licensed by the state. When it comes to our land, they tax us on it. Then they tell us if we can build a church or school on it. That takes a special permit. We applied for that permit almost three years ago and still they have not granted it to us, so we can't build a school building to educate our children until they tell us we can. When we build that building, they will tax us heavily, around \$600,000 dollars worth, for the privilege of constructing the building. We will save the State \$10.4 million dollars next year and the thanks we get is a tax bill to construct the next building. It is the markup of the Beast. They will tell us how high it can be, how much of the land we can cover with the building. They will tell us how many plants and of what variety to plant around the building. Every single purchase we make as a church, they tax us. We cannot buy or sell with the markup of the beast.

In the rural areas, they might let us build if we roll over and pay the extortion they demand. The Growth Management Act is now the Gospel and the Gospel's Growth is to be managed.

Even the legal definition of the words "separation" and "establishment of religion" are determined exclusively by the government, without input from the church.

When they talk about separation of church and state, I'm thinking they don't know what they are talking about. We are not separate. They regulate and control us at every turn.

As Christians, we recognize that government has its legitimate role to play just as we have our role. Even when the State exceeds its divine role, there are still three divine institutions; the home, the church, and the State. The hostility of the State to religion has sent us down a road that I am not sure has been all that helpful. We have reacted to all

this, but maybe not too wisely. Someone has observed that India is the most religious of nations, while the Swedes are the most secular. In that formulation, America is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. Things need to change, but I think it might be time to think some fresh thoughts on this subject.

First, there should be universal Christian involvement in the affairs of State. We should vote and we should get involved. I would like to ask everyone who is listening to me to write your name, email address, and State Legislative District number on a piece of paper and get it to me. This is especially for those of you who listen by way of the media. I would like to hear from you so I can get you involved in making Washington State a better place to live for all of us. Our group, called Washington Evangelicals for Responsible Government (WERG) is making a difference in Washington but we need your financial support and your participation.

Second, we need people to hear the call of God to serve God through government service. As part of our patriotic service you will hear Jay Fawcett speak. He is one who feels called by God to make a difference through government.

Third, we need to bring the strength of government to bear in encouraging the universal biblical values. There are a surprising number of ways to get that done.

About 60 of our young people just got back from Miami, Florida where they were working with Rich Wilkerson's church. There they have a part-time medical clinic with strong funding from the government. We have a day camp here with about 70 kids. In Miami, they have a contract with the government to provide day camp for 150 kids. It's a strong ministry to their city paid for by the government. We have a food bank that serves lots of people. In Miami, they have a food bank where the largest amount of food is provided by "Farm Share" a government program. Organizations like United Way supplement what the government and church are doing. They have figured out how to partner effectively with the government to provide ministries to the people. Government wants certain things done. They have discovered that Churches are excellent providers of those services.

Pastor Thor comes from Norway. There the Assemblies of God have formed a partnership with the government. When an Assemblies of God missionary goes out from Norway, the government is part of their team. In Peru, they build orphanages and schools with government money. One missionary that Thor visited, in her first term, built a bridge to connect the two parts of the village after the previous bridge had been out for several years. In her next term, she built a power plant to supply electricity for the whole area. Image the clout that AG missionary had in the area by doing that kind of work.

In the Scandinavian countries, the Assemblies of God regularly works with the government with good results.

Many people know the positive work of Missionary Mark and Huldah Buntain. Even though they are Northwest District Missionaries, and a part of our church missions team, they also work with governmental agencies. Mark came from Edmonton, Alberta Canada. His father had pastored that great church where our new children's Pastor is coming from. It is the Central Pentecostal Tabernacle. In Mark's work in Calcutta, he obtained the support of the Provincial government of Alberta. On a least two occasions that I know of, the government gave large grants to the mission work in Calcutta.

Some people do not know the history of Washington State. They might not know, because it is not in the new Washington State History books, that the US federal

government gave \$10,000 to the Methodist Missionaries who came to this area to help them convert the Indians to Christianity.

In Cambodia, near where we built our hospital some years ago, there is an orphanage next door to a public high school. About a year and a half ago, the Cambodia government gave that public High School to the Assemblies of God with virtually no strings attached. Given the incredible success Cedar Park Christian School is having, that is what the State of Washington ought to do. They ought to give us the money and say, here, you do it. For 207 years there were no public schools in America. We did it all. You never know, it might happen again.

My point in all this is that Evangelical Christians need to think more like Christians. I worry that we take our cues more from the Republican Party than we do from the Gospel.

Starting this fall, I would like to take a more cooperative posture with government. If the government is going to be the overgrown gorilla that it is, I would like to find ways of making it work for us instead of always against us. Other people have figured it out. Maybe we can too.

God has a plan for each part. The home has its duties, the church has ours, and the government has theirs. In God's economy, each segment supports and nurtures the others. When all three work together, things work out well for all the people.