

“What Is the Emperor’s and What Is God’s?”

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Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Politicians are famous for not answering questions they don’t like. They either deflect the question or say something which sounds like an answer but really isn’t when you think about it. But by the time you’re done thinking, they’ve gone on to something else. Jesus’ response this morning to the Pharisees’ question could be a model for the contemporary politician. It has been quoted for centuries, but if you look closely at it, it leaves one with more questions than answers. Jesus has been asked (and he knows he’s being set up) whether it is lawful for the religious minority of Jews to pay taxes to someone whose authority, for Jews, is possibly questionable. The Pharisees are trying to trap him into either placing the authority of the emperor higher than that of God (a religious heresy) or denying the authority of the emperor (a civil treason). Jesus sidesteps the question by saying, give to the emperor what he is owed and to God what God is owed. But this is a non-answer because Jesus does not tell his questioners *what* is owed to the emperor and what to God. Do we really know anything more about the content of that “what” as a result of Jesus’ answer?

And the question he faced is one we face today as Christians who live under two authorities as well: the authority of the state in which we are citizens, and the authority of God, who is ruler of the universe. Of course Christians begin any analysis of how to reconcile these two authorities with the moral imperative to do all in their power to help those in need. We are primarily obligated by our *religious convictions* (and not by *legal obligations*) to do justice: to feed the hungry, care for the sick, aid the poor, and so forth. Fortunately, given our national history, doing justice as citizens compelled by law often parallels doing justice as a matter of religious obligation. As we consider our stewardship commitments for the coming year, we need to understand more fully the link between our religious moral imperatives and our social obligations as citizens.

In an earlier time, almost all the work of feeding the hungry, and caring for widows and orphans, belonged in private hands, through individual donations and charitable gifts. (Ancient Israel was somewhat of an exception since, as a nation explicitly committed to doing God’s will through its covenant commitments, the nation wrote into its social laws obligations to take care of the poor, and when the nation failed to do so, it would routinely be castigated by the prophets of social justice). But in early Christian times the members of the Church were a distinct minority and had virtually no control over the formation and implementation of social laws. That is why the tax-collector was such an onerous figure: he represented the authority of an alien government raising taxes from people who were virtually unrepresented in the government (a situation that was quite similar to that in the American colonies in the 18th century that led to revolution by the unrepresented tax payers).

Today, of course, we are part and parcel of a society that many, erroneously, would like to think of as a Christian nation. This

fact has enormous implications for our understanding of stewardship. When the poor depend solely upon private charity, drawn from the stewardship obligations of private citizens, stewardship will have a particular form. When the poor depend upon aid provided by law through public taxation and social policies, stewardship has a different form. I believe that we cannot afford the luxury of thinking of our stewardship solely in terms of what we give to our church or other private organizations. We must think more systemically or globally about stewardship because of the way in which our resources currently reach those in need through other than private means. We must think in terms of what forms of aid or help to others are the most effective and efficient in addressing their needs. If those forms include agencies and organizations that are governmentally funded and administered, and they are effective in reaching those they are designed to help, then part of our stewardship obligation must be to find ways to empower those agencies and organizations to do their work as efficiently and thoroughly as possible. In this sense, support for fair taxation and the effective use of those taxes is a form of stewardship.

But this is not to suggest that stewardship is completed when the government or the society as a whole is doing its work in the most effective way possible. There are always going to be vast areas of our common life that can only be reached primarily through the private acts of generous individuals or philanthropic groups. And it is here that stewardship for and through the Church becomes vital. There are many things that can be done best, more humanely, compassionately, and sensitively, through private organizations such as the Church. The spiritual foundations and the education of moral responsibility are best provided through the Church, and without both of these, no amount of public justice will be sufficient to feed all that makes us fully human. We cannot be satisfied solely with a justice-machine that cranks out justice impersonally or mechanically. We must, without slighting the demands of social justice one iota, also empower the spiritual and moral dimensions of our personal and corporate lives, and that empowerment begins with communities, such as the Church, which are built on spiritual and moral foundations.

What is the emperor's (or today we would say what is the state's) and what is God's are not completely divorced from each other. We cannot retreat behind the virtues of private charity and feel that our stewardship obligations have been met solely by giving to the Church. On the other hand, we cannot simply pay our taxes and feel that we have done all that God expects of us. Without the community of the Church there is nothing to provide us the moral and spiritual foundation that will sustain us in our public duties: without our public duties, the Church becomes a false retreat from the demands of justice in the world. We, as members of both church and state, must learn how to blend our commitments to each. We must feed ourselves spiritually before we can become good stewards in feeding others: therefore both the church and the state have a right to call upon our abilities to give. In the end it is the effective meeting of the needs of those who need feeding, both materially and spiritually, that should determine the appropriate form of giving. And as those needs change and the means to address them evolve, we must remain open to new and different ways of responding to God's call to be good stewards of all the resources that God has so graciously bestowed upon us. A church that feeds only itself is a mockery of the gospel: a society that neglects the spiritual and moral resources which feed the delivery of justice will eventually see its justice dry up and go hungry. Genuine stewardship will look after both the spiritual resources and the social instruments for doing justice in the world. Only by continuing to examine how stewardship works in the real world will we be able to determine the answer to Jesus' riddle: to know what is the emperor's and what is God's.