

Sermon- A Nation to Bless All Nations

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:4-17

Sunday, March 15, 2020

I have preached 6 sermons on the Confessions of the Mennonite Church and today we are going to take a last dip into the Confessions for the immediate future. The last time I preached, I had talked about Peace, Justice and Non-Resistance as it relates to being a witness to Christ. This world will tell you that the answer to a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. Jesus presented the world with a radical message, and the message is that the answer to a bad guy with a gun is a Jesus disciple who is capable of doing something to bless the bad guy with a gun, without reflexively thinking of self first. This is an extraordinary ask, isn't it? But if Jesus has offered his disciples the extraordinary offer of the Holy Spirit power and presence, then should he not expect extraordinary things from his disciples who are carrying extraordinary power? Think about that.

Today, we are going to scale up from the level of the individual disciple and talk about the church as a whole. And the topic we are going to deal with is the proper relationship between the church and the state laid out in Article 23.

To do that properly we are going to look first at the definition of a state. I will define state as the "governing authority of a territorial nation". Couple things to note there. The state is a sovereign nation defined by a geographic area. So there is a ruling authority within a given territory. So a place with a ruling authority is a "state".

Let's look for a second at the definition of "church". Church is a "community of Jesus disciples who are called out of this world, to give their higher allegiance to the exaltation and mission of Jesus Christ". These are my words just to get us oriented. Let's look at how Article 23 defines "church". Article 23 says this,

The church is the spiritual, social, and political body that gives its allegiance to God alone. It goes on to say [As citizens of God's kingdom,² we trust in the power of God's love for our defense.] The church knows no geographical boundaries [and needs no violence for its protection]. Article 23 also says this. The **only** Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation,³ called to witness to God's glory.

There are some interesting declarations being made here about the church and state in Article 23. Let me point those out to you. Firstly, Article 23 calls the church a “nation”. Secondly, it is a nation made up of people from every tribe and nation on earth. Thirdly, but of most importance is the fact that the church of Jesus Christ is the only Christian nation, and it is called to be a “witness of the glory of God”. I also want to point out that it says the church is a spiritual, social and political body. Now I am sure that the words spiritual and social will not surprise anybody but the word “political” might. I don’t have too much time to unpack this, but I will say this. By definition, “political” relates to the ideas that a group of people may have that relates to governance. The church is a group of people. So surely this group of people will have ideas related to governance just as any other group of people might have ideas as it relates to governance.

The church is a kind of nation in itself.

Look at what 1 Peter 2:9, about the church, ***“for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests,^[a] a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light”.***

The state and church are two very different kinds of entities. But to understand these two even better, let’s look and one more thing about them, their purpose. It is kind of like this. If an alien were to try and study a “spoon”, it could take measurements and analyze it’s shape, but all that would be literally surface level information, till they were able to see someone use a spoon. Then suddenly, they would really be able to

understand what a spoon is, right? So let's look at what Article 23 says is the purpose of the state and the church. About the state Article 23 says this,

*In contrast to the church, governing authorities of the world have been instituted by God for maintaining order in societies. Such governments and other human institutions as servants of God are called to act justly and provide order.*⁴ So the state is there, to provide order in a geographic region, while the church is to glorify God and give the world a hint of what it would like to be ruled by Christ himself.

Let us delve a little deeper into the purpose of nation states why looking at the broader Bible perspective.

As you know the Bible says that all humans are sinful, have gone their own way and before they become Christ followers are essentially, selfish, self-centered and even "enemies of God". So when you have a given geographical area with a bunch of people who want to do their own thing, the potential for evil and anarchy is so great that if left like that, you will have hell on earth in every nation. So what is God doing to contain this incredible evil potential? God localizes power in an individual or group of individuals who govern a particular territory. That way even if they act in the most selfish and cruel way, the amount of evil they do, is at the end of the day, much less than the total amount of evil that will happen in that territory if there was a free for all and no governing authority. Article 23 puts it like this.

"Territorial nations and their governments are limited in their ability to fulfill the will of God because of their reliance on violence, at least as a last resort, and because of their tendency to try to set themselves up in the place of God. However, a government that acts with relative justice and provides order is better than anarchy or an unjust, oppressive government."

Essentially what the Bible and article 23 is saying, that is easy to see even mathematically is that “one Saddam Hussein” is better than millions of small Saddam Husseins. One leader with power no matter how evil is better than everybody having power because that way there will be less evil overall. It is not a very flattering reality, but it is what you get when you connect the dots between Romans 3:23 ***“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”*** and our passage 1 Peter 2:13,14 ***“For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state,¹⁴ or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right.”***

So you have the nation state meant to minimize evil and you have the church meant to glorify God.

Now the question we have to explore is, what should the relationship between the church and state be.

I want to give you a quick historical perspective where the different kinds of church state relationships occurred.

One possibility is when the church is superior to the state. In Europe in the Middle Ages for example this was the case and Emperors would bow down to the Pope. Later, in history you will find instances where the church and state functioned in parallel. The Anglican church is an example of this where the queen or king of England is head of both the UK government and the Anglican church. In many parts of the world, the church is persecuted by the State. In the United States we have an interesting arrangement called the “separation of church and state”. In this view you have two areas of influence and the idea is that each entity keeps the other at arm’s length, where each function independent of the authority of the other. This separation can be friendly or it can be hostile. I will not go into more of this but you can look it up if you

are interested. But I laid out four views for you. The church can be either superior, inferior, equal or separate to the state.

With that historical background, the question is, what is the Mennonite view of the relationship between church and state. That is what Article 23 answers and that is what we will drill down into. Let me quote for you this section from Article 23.

“Before the fourth century, about the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, most Christians thought of themselves as God's nation, made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers, living among the nations, yet strangers among them (1 Peter 2:11-17; Hebrews 11:13-16). When Christianity became the state religion, the emperor came to be seen as the protector of the faith (even by violence). Church membership was no longer voluntary. Mission efforts were primarily directed toward people outside the empire. Even now, in places where Christianity is no longer the state religion, the government is often seen as the defender of religion, and the church is expected to support government policies.

We believe that Christ is Lord over all of life. Church and state are separate and often competing structures vying for our loyalty. We understand that governments can preserve order and that we owe honor to people in government. But our "fear" belongs to God alone (1 Peter 2:17). When the demands of the government conflict with the demands of Christ, Christians are to "obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

(1)

So when you look at article 23, the first principle it establishes is, give to government what is due to government, but fear is due to God alone. So if government asks you to do something that is against what the Bible says you should do, for example, bowing

down to the flag, or taking up arms, then let your fear of God override any fear of state you may have and do not compromise what God wants you to do.

(2)

The second thing that article 23 is saying is, the state might offer to protect the church. But in lieu of that protection, it might ask the church to support the state. For example, the state might say if you say something negative about some state policy then your tax exempt benefits could be taken away or you might be dragged to court. If the church is so scared of its tax exempt status being taken away or being dragged to court, so that the church starts to look the other way when something the state is doing is not right then that is not right by God. What article 23 is saying is that the church should always speak the truth to power and not expect any favors or protection that also require going against the will of God.

I want to quote another section of Article 23 and it goes like this.

“But like all such institutions, nations tend to demand total allegiance. They then become idolatrous and rebellious against the will of God.⁵ Even at its best, a government cannot act completely according to the justice of God because no nation, except the church, confesses Christ's rule as its foundation.”

What this quote is saying is that we have to remember that nations even though the rulers get their power from God, that does not stop them from acting idolatrous. Because ultimately there is no earthly nation that claims to be founded on the rule of Christ. Every nation represents earthly power and earthly power will get corrupt at some point and we have to be very mindful of it.

Given this propensity for the state to get idolatrous and even rebellious against the will of God, what is the church to do in that situation?

Let me quote another section of Article 23 than addresses this . It says,

“God has one will for all people: salvation and incorporation into the people of God.”

A little later it states,

“Christians may often witness to the state, asking it to act according to higher values or to standards which, while less than what God expects of the church, may bring the state closer to doing the will of God. Christians are responsible to witness to governments not only because of their citizenship in a particular country, but also in order to reflect Christ's compassion for all people and to proclaim Christ's lordship over all human institutions.”

In other words, the relationship between the church and state should be the church witnessing to the state. Just like we witness to any other people group. Think about Jesus' witness to Pontius Pilot or King Herod or Apostle Paul's witness to King Agrippa in Acts 26.

The Mennonite church's view of the relationship between church and state is not that the church should be over the state or under it or even at arm's length from it but that it should be a witness to it as you would witness to any human institution or mission field. The fact is, Christ is Lord of all but those not in Christ are not going to recognize it. But we who are in Christ have this incredible role to show compassion and love to those not in Christ and seek to make disciples from every people group and human institution there is including the government.

The question then remains, how do we witness to the government?

Here again Article 23 gives us some guidance. It says, it is ok to participate in government but while you participate, you have to ask yourself these questions, and I quote

“Will this participation in the government or in other institutions of society enable us to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation? Or will such participation violate our commitment to the way of Christ and compromise our loyalty to Christ? We ask these questions when we confront issues of military service, office holding, government employment, voting, taxes, participating in the economic system, using the secular courts, pledging allegiance, using flags, public and private schooling, and seeking to influence legislation.”

Do you see the process here? No matter which institution or people group we engage with, the question we should always be asking is, how our engagement with that entity honors our commitment and loyalty to Christ. When it comes to our government, there are special issues it raises. Each individual relationship with the government may be different: some may be working in it, some may have policy roles in it and some may be regular citizens. But no matter who you are, everyone of us has some engagement with the government and so we should always be asking ourselves how our faith and loyalty to Christ is being witnessed to in our engagement with the government of our land.

Remember many years ago God had called a man called Abraham to leave his native land and follow Him and that he would make Abraham and his wife Sarah parents of a great nation that would bless all the nations of the world. That nation was instituted in the time of Moses but it was only able to live out its calling at the birth of the church. Now you are citizens of a Holy Nation, a nation that knows no boundaries, a nation made up of people from every tribe and nation state, a nation called to bless every nation on earth. So go be that blessing. Let us pray.