

## PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 7

The early 1500s were a turbulent time in Europe, as several thinkers and the people following them were challenging the Roman Catholic Church. At this time the Church was both the religious and the civil authority of communities. It was a dangerous time, as both opponents and defenders of the Church resorted mostly to violence in the conflict. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli were the most famous of the Protestant "Reformers," largely because their connections with political leaders helped them survive, as their lives were usually in danger.

Michael Sattler was a German priest, who, as part of his priestly duties, was also a tax collector in his community. Everyone was baptized as a baby, so the Church had a census record of the entire community. There were a group of persons who chose not to baptize their children, citing in their understanding of the Bible, baptism was meant to be a free choice of the believer. This had obvious implications for their taxes, so the government took notice. Their opponents called them Anabaptists ("re"-baptizers). Michael decided to leave the priesthood (around 1525) and joined with this group, which immediately put his life in danger, along with Margaretha, who became his wife.

In 1527, Michael wrote for the group what is called the Schleitheim Confession. It laid out seven points, based on their reading of the Bible:

Baptism – is only for believers, not for children and not to be forced.

Ban (excommunication) – after 3 offenses, persons are banned from the community (but free to go elsewhere).

Communion – is open only to members, and it is an act of remembrance of the Last Supper, and not the actual body and blood of Christ as the Catholics taught.

Separation from evil – there should be no fellowship with the earthly world and therefore no association with those who live in contradiction to the commands of God. This meant no associations with civic organizations, and other Catholic, Protestant, or pagan groups.

Pastors – are to be supported by the church but must be held to high accountability.

Sword (nonviolence) – violence is never acceptable, and a Christian should never pass judgment in worldly disputes or be involved in military service.

Oaths – No oaths are to be taken, so no involvement in most legal and "worldly" agreements.

Later that year, Michael was arrested, tried by a Catholic court, convicted, tortured and killed. But his document inspired the group that continues primarily as the Mennonites and the Amish but also influenced other Reformed movements, including Quakers, Baptists, United Brethren, and others who caught the idea of a separation of church and state.

So back to my earlier question: **Was Jesus' model of voluntary servitude and self-denial simply meant for (A) an ancient day and a slave society, or is it meant for (B) all Christian living, whether slave or free?** The majority of Christians in the 1500-1700s would likely have answered A, but now a growing number of groups (who did not agree on many things) would answer B, including many of the founders of the United States.

Our particular tradition (the Methodists, Evangelical Association, and the United Brethren) has elements of both of these perspectives: John and Charles Wesley (Methodists) came out of the Church of England, which left the Roman Catholic Church, but still was closely connected with the civil society;

Albright (Evangelical) was a Lutheran; Otterbein and Boehm (United Brethren) were from the Reformed tradition and the Mennonite church. In America, these movements flourished independently of the state, though for the most part, people in our tradition have been engaged with the civil society, being regular voters, serving in the military, and serving in political offices.

So perhaps we have a clearer sense of how we got to where we are. Christians have moved from a place where they had no political power, to some political power, to all of the political power. This kind of history is not unique to Christianity; other religions in other areas have a similar pattern. Many today like to say that “most wars and atrocities are due to religion;” but that statement appears to be inaccurate; the Anabaptists did not cause their persecution, nor did the early Christian church. A more accurate statement would be that “the rulers and perpetrators of wars and violence usually claimed a religious justification for their actions.” The issue is not religion; it is power politics.

This is what the third of the ten commandments (by our Protestant numbering) is really about:

*“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses His name.”*  
(Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11, NRSV)

As a child, I was taught that this commandment was just about using God’s name as a careless swear word, and for a child that is probably the only way it would have made sense to me. But since the commandments were addressed to adults, it has more to do with using the Lord’s name in testifying (as we typically do in court, and as the Anabaptists objected) or declaring that our cause, our war or conquest is doing the Lord’s work (such as when Pope Urban II called for a crusade in the year 1095). Notice that when Jesus speaks about oaths in Matthew 5:33-37 and later in Matthew 23:16-22, the context appears to be that in legal proceedings people are using the name of God (or holy things) to confuse or deceive people. For me, it is a tragedy that so many people have learned of Jesus along with the use of deception, pressure, force, or violence. I suspect that it is opposite of what Jesus intended.

*“Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”*

(Matthew 11:28-30, NRSV)

As one raised in a politically active American family, I still have some resistance to the idea of stepping completely away from political involvement, but I see that this area is fraught with danger, and I suspect that for most of us it is sin. I firmly believe that our own denomination’s use of power politics (and many other churches and denominations are guilty of this) is a sin for which we must repent.

We are in the world, but we must proceed cautiously and prayerfully wherever we are in a position where we can exercise some form of control over others. For me, I pray for always a servant’s heart, as His heart is for me and all of you.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.