

CHAPTER 1

The Separation of Church and State

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.

(Titus 3:1-2)

How Do Christians Decide What Is Right and Wrong?

How do you begin to develop your positions on important moral issues? Most people do not spend hours reading over the various ethical debates. We do not usually do our own research.

Confronting the Controversies

Typically, our personal experience; the convictions of others we trust who study the issues; the beliefs of our parents and others who have influenced our lives; and what we read in magazines or hear and see on television, radio, and in the movies help shape our views. Many of us simply do not have strong opinions on various issues. We often know what we *do not* believe, however; and those negative reactions are based in part on how little we like the purveyors of those views.

But for us who call ourselves Christians, our views, positions, and beliefs should all spring from our understanding of *the will of God*. Christians seek, above all, to know and do the will of God. Ultimately, nothing matters more than this. God has created us, has a plan for us; and we believe we will be held accountable for how we respond to God's will. We consider ourselves citizens of God's kingdom first, even before our national citizenship; and we strive to live so as to bring God's reign to the whole world. When we invite Jesus to be Lord in our lives, we invite him to be our sovereign or ruler. We agree to live by his commands and teachings. And we pledge to seek to do his will.

As we struggle to understand God's will in our lives, we know that God does in fact care about all of the issues we will address in this book and the people who face them. Can anyone who is a believer truly think that God does not care what we think regarding criminal justice and the death penalty? Or euthanasia? Or how homosexuality is looked at and how homosexuals are treated?

Some people have suggested that these are merely "secular" issues. But though we make distinctions between what is sacred and what is secular, *God* does not. The Bible says, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, / the world, and those

who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). For God, all issues, all circumstances, and all people are a part of God’s domain. Separating the sacred from the secular is creating a false dichotomy.

**Wesley’s “Quadrilateral”:
Four Tools for Discerning God’s Will**

So then, if God does care about these issues and we as Christians long to know the heart of God, where will we go to discover God’s will? How can we discern the convictions God would have us hold and work toward? John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of Methodism, offered four tools for discerning God’s will. In our time we call this the Wesleyan “Quadrilateral” (quadrilateral means “four sided”). These four principles will be the tools we will use in this book as we consider the issues before us.

1. *Scripture*: The Bible is the primary means for learning God’s will; we study the Scriptures prayerfully, looking for precepts, principles, and direct commandments as they relate to the issues at hand. The Bible is our map, our guide, our “owner’s manual.” But the Bible can be difficult to interpret. It was written in a time when circumstances were very different from ours; and sometimes, confusing us further, the writers express perspectives that seem to conflict with each other. But, remarkably, most often the Bible speaks to us with one voice about what God expects of our lives. To help the Bible speak to us more clearly, we also turn to the Christian tradition.

2. *Tradition*: Along with the Scriptures, we look for guidance to the teachings and beliefs of the church as expressed

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by Christians in all ages. The Christian tradition includes writings about theology and doctrine, prayers and liturgies, the writings of councils, and the wisdom gained throughout Christian history. Tradition, for those who are United Methodists like myself, also includes *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Resolutions* of The United Methodist Church, as well as John Wesley's writings. As United Methodists, we may not always agree with our denomination's official positions; but we must, at the very least, take them seriously in forming and shaping our understanding of God's will. God speaks through thoughtful church leaders through the ages.

3. *Experience*: The experience Wesley refers to is not simply a collection of events and happenings, which may not always present a reliable picture to go by, but our experience of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. We experience the Holy Spirit in worship, in the fellowship of other believers, and in our work and testimony for God's kingdom in the world. In other words, we believe that God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit's witness, discerned through prayer and confirmed by our experience with the community of disciples.

4. *Reason*: Wesley believed that God gave us the ability to apply reason to our interpretation of God's will. Reason by itself can be manipulated and lead us in the wrong direction—it is obviously possible to make a “reasonable” argument on either side of an issue—but reason can be used along with the other three tools and be constrained by them.

These are the basic principles and tools that we will use in these discussions; and I would encourage you to use them

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every day as you seek to discover God’s will for your life, to see all aspects of your life through the eyes of faith. They can help us view all issues through the eyes of faith. Our task is to be informed, to understand the issues, and to seek God’s direction for us. Regardless of how you come out on a given issue, my hope is that you will seek God’s will and long to bring your convictions in line with your faith, so that in all things Jesus Christ may be Lord in your life. Through our study of these topics, I hope that we all grow in our faith and that together we can work toward a more just society.

What Is the Role of Individual Christians and the Church in Influencing Culture?

When we speak about moral issues and the separation of church and state, we must talk about culture because culture offers an even more significant reflection of our values than does the government. The main conflict in our country is not over liberal or conservative governments or Republican or Democratic leadership. Political parties and elected officials are merely a reflection of the culture that shapes them.

What is culture? *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” Culture includes the dominant worldview of the people living within it: How do they look at the world? How do they make decisions? What are their foundational beliefs and values? How do the people spend their time, and how do they entertain themselves? From the “culture”—the common values, beliefs, ideals, and worldview—come the arts, humanities, laws, and the “state.”

Culture is like wet cement; it will be shaped by *something*. Individual Christians and communities of faith can and should

play a role in shaping the culture. Though we live in a society in which a vast majority of people claim to be Christians, our culture has become increasingly influenced by non-Christian values and ideals. Too often, on important issues, the vast majority of churches and Christians are silent, allowing those on the more vocal and often more radical edges of the theological and sociological spectrum to define the debate and the culture for us. More often we have capitulated to the news media and to Hollywood, allowing them to become the dominant forces in shaping our culture.

The hopeful news is that our culture can, of course, be influenced and shaped by the beliefs and practice of genuine, thoughtful, and committed Christians. We believe that the values of our culture matter to God; and because they matter to God, we are expected to seek to understand God's will and pursue it. As Christians, our role is to think through these issues, to live our lives according to our beliefs even when they run counter to the culture around us, to bear witness to the truth as we understand it in the marketplace of ideas, and to make a plausible case for our values and ideals.

Since culture is shaped by our beliefs, which, in turn, are shaped by what we put into our minds and hearts, it is crucial for Christians first to commit ourselves to growing in the faith. Christians are meant to be shaped by the spiritual disciplines, including Scripture reading and prayer, worship and the sacraments, study and Christian fellowship.

It is not easy to resist the influences that are so pervasive in our culture and that are competing with the church for our attention. Children left to choose without guidance often watch television programs that depict values that conflict with what they learn at home or in church. They may be caught up in the struggles of TV's teenagers or attractive young adults who do not

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operate from a Christian worldview. They may watch shows that are saturated with gratuitous violence and focus on careless sexual activity, and their cultural values and morals are formed in this atmosphere. The culture wars are being fought over what we are willing to allow our children to see, to read, and to listen to.

H. Richard Niebuhr was one of the great Christian ethicists of the last century. In a book that remains a classic introduction for many students of Christian ethics, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), Niebuhr seeks to look at the biblical relationship between Christians and the culture. He summarizes five different models: Christ against culture; Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture *in paradox*; and finally, Christ *the transformer* of culture.

Each model has some biblical support to commend it to us; but it is the last, Christ the transformer of culture, that seems most exciting and most compelling to me. The concept that Christ, working through his people, can be the transformer of culture strikes at the heart of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13-16 where Jesus tells us that we, his followers, are to be salt and light. Salt transforms the physical properties of that which it touches. It brings out the goodness in food and is used as a preservative that keeps meats from spoiling. It is essential for life, and it has certain healing properties. Jesus had all of this and more in mind when he challenged his followers to be salt. Imagine the impact that the church—and we as individual Christians—might have on our culture if we were truly being the salt of the earth! What would this look like? And what of light? We are called to be light for the world—a city set upon a hill that cannot be hidden. A flashlight illuminates the right path through the woods on a dark night, showing the potential pitfalls along the way. A lighthouse offers guidance and warning to keep ships from cer-

tain peril. A night-light brings comfort to my daughter as she goes to sleep each night. Daylight allows us to see the world as it really is. There seems to be no shortage of dark places in our world—where the blind seem to lead the blind, or where people live in fear, or where human beings are in constant danger of shipwreck. How important that there should be beacons of light, showing compassion, care, and a purposeful and illuminated life for others to see.

The church and individual Christians, at their best, have often played a tremendous role in shaping the culture, and in turn in shaping the state. The church, at its best, has championed the causes that recognize the value and worth of human beings. It has pursued freedom in the face of slavery, the right of all persons to earn a living wage, and the provision of equal access to education and the vote. In addition, the church has expressed concern and created programs for children, the low-income family, and the physically and spiritually ill. Although the United States is not officially a “Christian nation” and has always rejected the formation of an official state religion, it has been heavily influenced by Christianity and Christian virtues and worldviews. Those characteristics that we are most proud of in our nation’s past were, in large part, the result of people of faith seeking to be salt and light—seeking to shape and transform their culture and world.

The church’s influence is never accomplished easily. Nor is there ever complete success. But each situation involves Christians struggling to distinguish right from wrong and seeking to nudge the culture closer to the foundation of our worldview. For this task we find our source of strength in the Holy Spirit, in our beliefs, and in the support of the community of faith. But to engage adequately in this calling to be transforming agents in our culture, we must have absolute clarity about the relationship between the church and the state.

The Relationship Between the Church and the State: The Constitution

Let us first consider the constitutional issues that are the primary source of much consternation on the part of some Christians.

The first mention of God or religion in the Constitution is found in Article Six, where we read the following: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” This prohibition does not prevent voters from choosing candidates on the basis of religion, but it does mean that a particular religious perspective cannot be a state-mandated prerequisite for holding any public office. An atheist, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Satanist can all legally hold office in this country; no one can be disqualified by the state because of his or her religious affiliation or lack thereof.

Individual voters are, however, allowed to ask questions about and to know a candidate’s religious persuasion; and this information can and should be a factor in determining whom we vote into public office. Why? Because a person’s religion shapes everything else about that individual; it shapes his or her worldview, ethics, the criteria used for decision-making, personal philosophy, hopes, dreams, values, and personal integrity. Given the choice between two equally competent persons, I would vote for the person of faith over the one without faith. Churches are not permitted to endorse particular candidates; this regulation is not a matter of constitutional law but is implemented through IRS rules governing tax-exempt groups.

Having noted that faith is important in choosing elected officials, we should acknowledge that a candidate’s faith is not the only qualification we need to consider as informed voters.

Not all persons who are faithful Christians necessarily have the skills and experience to hold office. The best candidate for office must have competence, experience, personal integrity, keen intelligence, a good heart, a talent for relating to people, the ability to communicate, and a host of other qualifications. The best candidate may not be a Christian. Furthermore, some politicians have become quite adept at using the church by putting on the pretense of having a deep faith (a faith that seems to disappear once the candidate is elected to office)—all of which points to the challenge of actually knowing how genuine a candidate's faith truly is. Yet I still maintain that if two candidates are equally qualified, I would choose the candidate who will seek to do what is right in all circumstances, especially because he or she sees public service as an opportunity to serve God as well as neighbor.

The second and more critical section of the Constitution when it comes to the relationship between church and state is the First Amendment to the Constitution, which reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

The religious issue was the very first item in a list of the most important and valued rights of the people of this new republic. This amendment is fairly simple; its purpose is to make clear that the United States would not follow the model of the European states where the established state church had a powerful influence over the government. Our founders wanted to ensure that no one church would receive the endorsement of the nation. No one sect would have power over the others. The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock were coming to a new