

“Balancing God and Caesar”
(sermon given 4/11/10 by Scott Jansen)
Acts 5:27-32

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[Prayer for Illumination] Faithful God, you have loved us and sought what is best for us, always. Send your Spirit upon us now, that we may hear your Good News for this morning. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray... Amen.

After Jesus died, and after Pentecost, the disciples regrouped... and started to proclaim what they had experienced. The story of their ministry is told in the Acts of the Apostles. Of course, their ministry was somewhat disturbing to the existing power structure in Jerusalem. So, rather early in their ministry, they were arrested by the Temple police and reprimanded. But they defied the police and kept on preaching, and so, they were arrested a second time. That's where this morning's reading begins. Listen now, for God's word for you....

When they had brought the disciples, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood... on us."

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.... The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

A few months ago, I received a letter from one of the guys in the Men's Forum, asking about a possible discussion topic. He wanted to know what the Bible has to say about patriotism—how should a good Christian relate to the issue of patriotism, according to

the Bible.... The Men's Forum really doesn't hold anything back in terms of tackling tough issues. That's what happens when a bunch of men get together away from the civilizing effect of women....

Anyway, what Biblical stories about Christian patriotism leap into your mind?????????

I told him that it was really quite simple. A Christian is loyal to God. Period. When we say that Jesus is our Lord, we mean that Jesus is our boss, our king, our ruler. That means all of our loyalty, all of our devotion, goes to Jesus. We don't hold some loyalty back in reserve for being partly loyal to some other organization. If a country is doing things that we feel called by God to support, then we support the country—in the name of God. If a country is doing things we feel called by God to challenge, then we challenge the country—in the name of God. But, see, it does not work in the other direction—a Christian would never say, "I'm going to challenge God's will and defy God's will—in the name of my country." No. There isn't any question of divided loyalties for a Christian. God said, you shall have no other God beside me—that's the first commandment. Nothing can get propped up beside God as if there were some competition for our loyalties....

I went on to explain that the early Christians had no loyalty to the Roman Empire whatsoever. Many of them were killed because they would not serve in the Roman army.... And Biblical descriptions of the Roman Empire fall into two categories: either it was blasphemous, or it was demonic. In either case, there really wasn't any question about patriotism in the Bible....

At least, that's what I said three months ago. But in this last week, I've been meditating on this passage from Acts, where Peter says, "We must obey God, rather than any human authority." And, as I have been meditating on this text, I have changed my mind. It really is not as simple as I made it out to be.

And to understand the complexity, we have to journey in our minds back in time and put ourselves in the shoes of Peter. Peter had been raised a Jew. He was a part of the nation of Israel. He believed in the laws that Moses laid down in establishing Israel. In his little speech before the Sanhedrin, he refers to Jesus as the Savior of Israel. And he says that the God of OUR ancestors raised Jesus up from the dead. So, clearly, Peter felt some powerful loyalty to Israel.

And what was a good Jew supposed to do back then. A simple fisherman was supposed to obey God's will by following the laws of

Moses. But how was an illiterate fisherman supposed to understand the laws of Moses? Well, God had set up a system for such folks. God appointed Aaron as the Chief Priest, and declared that Aaron's sons, those from the tribe of Levi, would be Chief Priests forever. Forever.....

And the Chief Priest was supposed to tell the simple fishermen of Israel what was God's will, and the fishermen were supposed to obey. Period.... So imagine what the Chief Priest of the Sanhedrin would have thought upon hearing Peter say, "we must obey God rather than any human authority.".....

He'd probably say something like, "Hello.... Clueless fisherman.... It's my job to tell simpletons like you exactly how you are supposed to obey God's will. And God gave me this job.".....

Imagine the laughter in the council when Peter said that. Wouldn't the councilmen agree, most wholeheartedly, that "We must obey God, rather than any human authority?????????"

The more fundamental question is, "How does one obey God?"???? The Councilmen who had Peter flogged for disobeying the Chief Priest certainly felt that they were obeying God—that's what Moses had prescribed for such disobedience. It's not as if the Sanhedrin was opposed to "obeying God...."

As we read on Maunder Thursday, the Jews had a very mixed reaction to Jesus. The chief priests wanted to arrest him when there was no crowd around, because they feared the crowd. In other words, many Jews supported Jesus, defended Jesus, loved Jesus. But the Jews in the highest seats of authority, those who were most committed to the traditions of Moses, they wanted to arrest Jesus.

Why? Because Jesus was challenging the most fundamental premise there is within religion—how does one know what is God's will? Peter mentions this in his answer to the Sanhedrin, when he says that those who truly obey God... have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Jews had always said, if you want to know God's will, consult the books of Moses. And if you have any uncertainties, consult the chief priests who were established by Moses. But Peter and the Christians were saying, no—if you want to know God's will, consult the Holy Spirit within you....

That was a radical shift... not easily digested..... Why did it take over three centuries for the Christian Church to agree on what would be included in the New Testament????? Because the earliest

Christians were opposed to the notion that you can find God's will from a book. For three centuries, the Christian Church had no Bible. There was no final authoritative literature to consult. Disputes were decided by the movements of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit spoke to someone in a dream and said that circumcision was no longer important to God, well, the authority of the Holy Spirit trumped any authoritative scripture.

The authority of the Holy Spirit was the real wedge issue that separated early Christians from their Jewish ancestors.... Yet, in some ways, modern Christians have become very Jewish—we often assign more authority to the Bible than to the Holy Spirit. So, how did we get to such a place???

Well, I can't recount all of Church history today, but let me give you one little snippet. Marcion became the most influential Christian of the Second Century. But Marcion said that Christians should denounce the Hebrew Bible entirely—that we should be ruled completely by the Holy Spirit and not grant any credence to the traditions prior to Jesus....

What would you think about that???? As I say, he was extremely influential, and it took a whole century to finally overcome Marcionism. But you can just imagine the problems a Church might have when anyone can stand up on any given day of the week and say, “I think we should reverse our course entirely, because the Holy Spirit has revealed something new to me.”.....

Of course, the Holy Spirit was actively guiding the early Christians, and they had some rules on how to test the spirits—“by their fruits shall you know them;” “if it leads to more love for God and for one another, then it must be from the Spirit,” etc.... But, still, things were just a little too fluid, a little too uncertain, when the Spirit was the only authority within the Church. Little by little, the letters of Paul, and the gospels, and some other writings, were seen as holding a kind of alternative authority that could anchor the blowing winds of the Spirit. And gradually, oh, so gradually, the Bible was raised in prominence to become a kind of check and balance for the authority of the Spirit....

So where does that leave us???? How do we attempt to obey the will of God? Surely we must obey God rather than any human authority, but is it all so simple? Do not the laws of the nation offer a kind of check and balance to the person who has a dream and believes that the Holy Spirit has revealed something new to me????

What if I ate some bad guacamole or something and had a little temporary insanity and I felt that the Holy Spirit was advising me to do something violent? Wouldn't my more sane, more settled mind want there to be laws of the nation that would restrain my temporary insanity?????

Well, Calvin believed that God's Spirit worked through those who were called to govern a nation, so that the laws written by the rulers were a reflection of God's will—at least to some degree. Not always perfectly. But Calvin advised us to obey the laws of the land, precisely because the rulers had received their authority from the Spirit of God....

Of course, John Knox, and all those Scottish Presbyterians in the Revolutionary War, disagreed with Calvin on this point.... Maybe Scottish folks are just plain disagreeable.... But you can see how...., it's really not so simple. Is loyalty to one's country always in competition with loyalty to God, or can it also be concurrent with loyalty to God????? Should we agree with everything our government decrees? What exactly does "patriotism" mean????

On Christmas Day, a devout Christian named Robert Park crossed from China into North Korea to try to bring international awareness to the oppression of Christians in North Korea. He was arrested, and after a few months, he denounced his own efforts, saying that he had been led astray by false reports in the Western media. While Park was in jail, a second devout Christian, named Aijalon Mahli Gomes crossed into North Korea. Last week, Gomes was sentenced to eight years of hard labor. He said, before he crossed the border, that he had to obey God rather than any human authority.

Both Mr. Park and Mr. Gomes felt, when they crossed, that they were obeying God. Of course, the human authorities would have told them that such an action was illegal. But the question is, were they right in assessing God's will according to the Holy Spirit, or would they have been better off assuming, like Calvin, that God's will was reflected in the laws of the land?????

One might argue that, if these young men had more Christian humility, they might be more sceptical of their own perceptions of the Holy Spirit, since perceptions are sometimes clouded by human bias.... Or, one might argue that they were indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit, and they were right to defy the governments.

Which argument do you buy? And what does this say about those who cross our border illegally? I don't really know. But that's why I'm saying, obeying God, or obeying a country—well, it's just not such a simple matter.....

I do believe that the Spirit of God has some authority and that we must obey the leadings of the Spirit. That's why we have a jazz Sunday—because we believe that God's Spirit branches out in new realms and is not bound to the cultures or traditions of the past. But, nevertheless, can you imagine what worship would be like if anyone here, at any time, was allowed to just stand up and pop a cd into a boombox and play any song during worship that they felt the Holy Spirit wanted us to hear???? Can you imagine the chaos???

Don't you think the wisdom of the ages, the wisdom of the gathered body, needs to push back a little against the apparent blowings of the Holy Spirit?????

We should obey God's Spirit. Yes. We should never deliberately violate God's will just to satisfy some human authority. However..., we also need to be humble in discerning God's Spirit, and ask ourselves just how likely it is that God is revealing something entirely unique to just one person. In other words, the traditions of the Bible, the traditions of the Church, the traditions of the nations—these also reflect the movements of God's Spirit.

And so, we struggle to balance the authorities.... May God grant us sufficient boldness to speak, AND sufficient humility to listen.

Amen.