



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

Religious liberty in America has long been the province of Baptists and Congregationalists. Since before the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the ensuing Revolutionary War, Baptist leaders have been fighting for the freedom of conscience for all persons, not just for Baptists, and continue to do so to this very day. "The Report from the Capital", the Baptist Joint Committee's (BJC) newsletter – copies of which can be found in the reading rack in Fellowship Hall – documents the current Church-State issues.

Very often, many 'church people' seem to be supportive of actions that blur the line of separation between Church and State and object to rulings that maintain that separation. Having the coercion of government support for so many years, as in school-sponsored prayer and Bible reading, may have felt comfortable – at least to children of Christian families. Even though it wasn't a practice in all public schools, it did give the false illusion in those schools that included them in their opening exercises that it had always been that way and, therefore, always should be that way. (Some like to say that since schools-sponsored prayer has been stopped, morality has plummeted. That's a topic for another day.)

I was shocked, actually, when the issue of birth control and employer-sponsored health insurance within a few days morphed into a freedom of conscience and Church-State separation issue. Why was I shocked? Historically, those freedoms applied to freedom *of* religious bodies to practice as they see fit without governmental interference or "support", and freedom *from* the imposition of any religious beliefs or traditions. Baptists have been quite sensitive to these concepts mainly because, in our early years, we suffered from both abuses.

I've engaged some of my Roman Catholic colleagues in conversation on this issue, mostly listening to what they have to say, but also giving them a different perspective on the issue. Believe me, I do not fault them for having their beliefs and sticking to them. I don't agree with their view, but that's not at all the point. They have the freedom to teach what they believe and to do so without interference.

What I wonder about is the impact the position taken by several Roman Catholic bishops could have on the many non-Catholics who are employed in the secular businesses owned and operated by the Catholic Church. Many, if not most, of those employees are non-Catholic. We all know of American Baptists who are, or have been, employed by Catholic-owned hospitals. They work there because of their profession, not because they embrace Roman Catholic doctrines. Yet the position the bishops are taking would, in effect, subjugate those American Baptists to Roman Catholic doctrine.

On the other hand, they are being asked to pay for insurance coverage that would provide a service that goes against their teachings. This is not a simple matter. And I'm not sure how to think about it, even though it seems there may be a hint of political posturing going on since similar birth control requirements have existed in the laws of sixteen states and there has been no objection to those laws.

One of my Southern Baptist friends, who believes it is sinful to consume alcoholic beverages, is a building contractor. He was speculating what it would take to deny insurance coverage to an employee that developed health problems or sustained injuries stemming from the consumption of alcohol. He concluded that it was more important that his employee be healthy than it was for his employee to be ruled by his personal belief system. Now, I don't know if this is identical to the birth control issue, but I believe it's in the same ball park.

Perhaps the answer is that Roman Catholic employees not be eligible for such benefits but all others should be. And maybe not. This is one of those times I'm glad I'm not one that has to decide this matter. On the one hand, I can see the religious freedom objection to providing coverage that goes totally against your own beliefs and teachings. On the other hand, I can see the religious freedoms of the employees being violated by having someone else's beliefs imposed upon them. The difference in views may be rooted in the differences in religious structures. Catholicism system is a top-down, hierarchical, authoritarian system and ours is a free-church, soul-competency system – both of which are man-made, by the way.

Why am I bringing this up, especially when I have reached no conclusion? Regardless of what some might say, living according to one's beliefs is not simply having a strong will. Having a strong will is more about the person with the strong will than it is about God. Their dogged sense of certainty can easily squeeze the Holy Spirit completely out of the picture.

Living out kingdom values is rarely a matter of black-and-white decisions. It can be difficult and messy. And when we allow our human-made systems to get in the way, it can be more than messy. It can become emotionally violent.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud