

Suffering from Too Much Ceremonial Christianity

The U.S. is beset with what I'll call "ceremonial Christianity."

Before identifying and addressing that concern, a little background as to how I reached that term and concept might be helpful.

Separation of church and state has gotten a bad rap in recent years. It is this ingenious American concept that allows faith to freely flourish and protects the rights of religious minorities.

Those who fail to appreciate religious freedom (based largely on misinformation) or seek some form of government preference for their religion over others - if not a downright dangerous theocracy - often point to formal government references to the divine, such as the inscription of "In God We Trust" on currency.

Pulling in a few quotes from the nation's early leaders - with words like "Sovereign" and "Divine" and "Almighty" - add to their case for a national religion.

However, just a little digging will reveal that nonspecific national references to "God" have been upheld as constitutional based on the legal conclusion that they are merely "ceremonial deism."

That is, these godly references and slogans are vague and nominal.

Perhaps that appeases some people who want a nod toward God from their government.

My own faith orientation is not toward a nondescript, vague deity, however, but toward the God revealed most fully in Jesus Christ.

And all that I ask of my government is equal freedom to believe and worship in my own specific ways - without preference or prevention. Thank God (specific or ceremonial), the First Amendment guarantees such freedom.

Popular opinion suggests that a proposal such as the First Amendment would not

garner much support today among many Christians - although early Baptists were the strongest advocates of religious liberty for all.

Why the change in perspective for many evangelical Christians today? There are a few reasons.

Once persecuted minorities, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers and other much-maligned Christian groups have grown to hold considerable political and economic power.

Concern for persecuted minorities now seems of little interest to many compared to protecting their own positions of influence.

Then there is the fear of growing religious diversity. Other faith traditions are viewed as a threat to cultural dominance. And fear, as well noted, is the tool used by many preachers and politicians to advance their own causes.

Yet there is another factor to consider, if we are honest: There is a lot of "ceremonial Christianity" taking place.

It is the civil religion with which many American evangelicals are most comfortable - blending national ideals with just enough of Jesus to call it Christianity.

Like ceremonial deism, however, ceremonial Christianity is not enough.

We should be less concerned about how our particular faith reinforces our personal preferences or plays out well in the public arena, and more concerned about whether we are actually following the God revealed in Jesus Christ, regardless of the changes and challenges to be faced.

It is staggering what so-called "Christian values" mean to many American evangelicals. They simply do not reflect what Jesus deemed important.

"Ceremonial Christianity" allows for baptizing national allegiance and political ideologies in the language of faith - as if simply calling something "Christian" gives it the endorsement of Jesus.

Most remarkable is how much of Jesus' life and teachings get ignored by those who often claim a high allegiance to Christian Scriptures.

The “ceremonial Christianity” within American evangelicalism is the simple wrapping of faith-filled words around a package of comfortable conclusions. Such mislabeling is confusing and misleading.

Politicians play ceremonial Christians like snare drums - invoking God’s endorsement of whatever sounds soothing to fearful ears.

Someone has rightly said that the difference between a conservative and a liberal Christian is which Scriptures they ignore. Indeed, no one is pure in motive and wholly faithful in grasping and fulfilling the way of Christ.

Yet that confession is the best starting place for our humble attempts to be Christian.

In doing so, we might actually dare to move from a ceremonial faith of our own creation to the daily challenges of following Jesus.

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