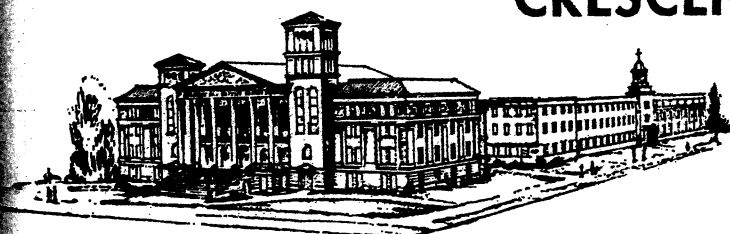


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"CHURCH AND STATE - 1961"



Sunday Morning, April 9, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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In the last year, the relation of church and state has become an issue of national significance. It played a decisive role in the last presidential election, and at this moment is the basis of a crucial battle in Congress. By common consent, it is an exceedingly complex matter, for it involves the interests of many groups and represents a fundamental clash of political and religious philosophies. Unfortunately, the discussion of it has often degenerated into a purely sectarian fight, and more heat than light has been produced. This morning, I want to avoid that pitfall, and try to address myself to what seems to be the underlying issue. Of course, no one sermon could begin to include all the ramifications of the subject, but since it is so timely and crucial to American church life, let us examine the basic issue of church-state relations in 1961.

Underneath the present controversy lies what the theologians would call "an ecclesiological question"; that is, what methods should the church use to accomplish her purpose? We are faced here with "a dilemma of means". How should the church approach her task? What resources should she utilize in fulfilling her role as "the body of Christ?"

Now in seeking an answer to this question, we should remember that the Founder of the church faced this very same dilemma at the inception of His work. Therefore, we are not without precedent in the matter, but have a definite experience to give us guidance.

Most scholars agree that at the time of His baptism, Jesus came to a full blown consciousness of His Messianic role. The "silent years" in Nazareth had grounded Him in the traditions of His people, and toward the end there must have been a growing realization of who He was. However, as He came up out of the water and saw the dove descending and heard the Voice saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased", the clear conviction of Messiahship was His. He was God's Chosen One, the Instrument by which the Kingdom would be established. But right "on the heels" of this overwhelming certainty came the inevitable question of means: how would He do this? This is the problem that goes with every vision - how do you translate it into fact? Those who "dream dreams" are left with the task of finding a way to make them come true, and no sooner had Jesus received His commission than He faced this dilemma.

It is in this connection that His temptation experience must be understood. All three of the Synoptic Gospels picture Jesus as moving immediately from the height of revelation to the lonely depths of temptation. These were not general, arbitrary temptations - they were vitally related to His Messianic task. This is a highly dramatized version of the struggle that went on within Jesus' soul as to how He would fulfill His mission.

Three suggestions were made to Him by the Tempter, and each of them were tried and tested powers of motivation. Jesus wanted to get men to do something; He wanted to evoke a certain response from the human heart, and here were three proven "persuaders". The first was materialism - turn stones into food and satisfy men's physical needs. Since this is one of life's great problems, solve it and men will surely follow. The second temptation was sensationalism - jump off the pinnacle and excite people's emotions. Men are always attracted by the unusual, and if you get their attention by some stupendous feat, then you can lead them where you will. The third temptation was government - use the power of legislative coercion to organize men and discipline their actions. If men could be properly regimented, the realization of the Kingdom would become actual. Make no mistake about it, these were real temptations. They were tantalizing possibilities; they gave the appearance of being quite "realistic" in this kind of world. And with each one our Lord had to struggle with all his strength. But in the end He rejected all three. He knew that means and ends had to be "cut from the same cloth", and that you could not evoke a truly religious response by irreligious means. The bribery of material benefits, the excitement of emotion, the coercion of government - none of these could call men into loving obedience to the Heavenly Father. Therefore, He chose the pathway of truth and love; He took as His example the Suffering Servant of Isaiah; He would bear witness to the Truth, love men to the end, and endure every hardship that all might see for themselves what God is like and would have them to be.

The choice of our Lord is clear, and in this decision He set the pattern for all work in His name. But as one reads the pages of church history, it is obvious that the servants of Christ have not always followed in His footsteps. For some of the very tools that He Himself rejected have been utilized in His name. At times the church has appealed to men on purely material grounds. At times she has resorted to the spectacular, and tried to sweep men into the Kingdom by awe and wonder. But perhaps, the most common endeavor of all has been an alliance with government - using the power of state to further the cause of Christ. It is this latter compromise that interests us specifically this morning.

In its beginnings, the church was so small and insignificant that she had no influence with the state. As it grew stronger, the church actually opposed the state, and for her witness had to suffer persecution. For the first 300 years after Christ there was no official relation, but with the conversion of Emperor Constantine, things took a radical turn. Church and state joined forces, and from that time forward the two were intertwined in a multitude of ways. I do not have time even to trace the broad outlines of this development. Suffice it to say that at some times the state dominated the church; at other times the church dominated the state. Both used the other to accomplish their work. As a result, the state levied taxes to support the church and passed laws to enforce certain tenets of orthodoxy and morality. And the church used its spiritual power to effect the purposes of the state. In varying fashion this pattern prevailed for some 1300 years. Then, with the discovery of this country, came a noble new experiment. Reverting back to the original relationship, the ideal was advanced for a free church in a free state. The two were to respect each other in their given spheres, but there would be no organic connection between the two. This was a radical break with what had come to be the pattern in the "old world", and called for a new approach in the work of the church. Now she must rely solely on the truth of her message and the power of her love. Her main function became to witness to God's truth with no attempt at external coer-

cion. Again, she must support her work from her own resources. For the freedom to proclaim what she would, she must provide the means. To invert the old adage: "He who calls the tune must pay the piper." This concept was not immediately accepted, even in this new land of independence, and it was not until 1833 - scarcely more than 100 years ago that the dream became actual and a wall of separation was clearly established between church and state. In this atmosphere, the church - paying her own way and free to proclaim her Gospel - has flourished as never before.

But today the question is once again raised - will we continue the pattern of a free church in a free state, or will we revert back to some kind of mutual alimient of the two? I do not mean the issue has suddenly arisen, for there has always been agitation and attempted compromise at this point. However, today, in the present demands before Congress a basic crisis is upon us, and the principle is being threatened as never before.

What shall we do? I return again to the decision of our Lord there in the wilderness. He refused all external resources, and based everything on proclaiming the Truth and calling for a voluntary response. And we must keep this same independence.

Quite obviously the present crisis stems from a simple economic fact: the church has undertaken more than she can finance. As the institutional side of the church has mushroomed - schools, hospitals, orphanages - the pressure for resources has increased. And instead of stimulating her own support or curtailing certain facets of her program, she turns to the power of government to meet the need. Now we usually single out the Roman Church as the prime offender, and her present position is clear for all to see. But let us not forget that we Protestants are tempted in the same direction. Even among Baptists, with our rich heritage of religious freedom, there is increasing pressure to "tap the federal till" like all the rest. Therefore, this is not a sectarian finger-pointing. I am saying to everyone what I deem to be a basic principle.

We must not, because of the very nature of the church and in the interest of her witness, give in to the merger of church and state. When the church has to turn to involuntary support to survive, she is already in the first stages of death. If she cannot raise support by the inherent truth of her position, then why should she force the unconvinced to do so? I will defend the right of any church to undertake any program that she may choose - establish school systems, build hospitals, or anything. But let each church pay her own way. This means tailoring what one does by what one is able to do. This approach is based on elemental justice. He who makes the decisions should provide the means for carrying them out. If I want to send my child to a private school, I have a perfect right to do it. But since it is my decision and my child receives the benefit, I should not expect someone else to help me pay for it. For every special privilege there must be a price, and it is only fair that he who voluntarily exercises a privilege should pay for it.

Not only is this basic fair play, it leaves the church's witness unfettered. If we tax the unbeliever against his will, it will weaken the church's chances of winning his free response to the Gospel. The utter sterility of most state supported churches proves that for "a mess of pottage" the church forfeits the atmosphere in which she can accomplish her God-given task.

Therefore, the very nature of the church cries out against any federal aid. In order to give integrity to our message, we must not accept this expedient compromise. This is one of the most significant issues of today, and yet I am afraid we will sell out the real principle for immediate gain. Frankly, I am not too optimistic, for the whole world is drifting to the left and sacrificing individual freedom for collective security. More and more we evade our problems and pass them on to a higher level. Yet the very nature of the church is at stake here, and I urge you to consider the ultimate implication of today's struggle.

Am I irreverent to say that today the church stands on a high mountain? Beside us stands the Tempter. We are reminded of our institutional needs: our competitive denominational differences are stirred up. He points to Washington with the seemingly inexhaustible resource of government revenue. All of this is offered to us, if we will only forget this "nonsense" about church and state. Many centuries ago our Lord heard the same Tempter, viewed the same possibility, and to it He said: "No."

What the church will answer in 1961 remains to be seen.