

WHOSE IMAGE IS ON THE ON THE COIN?

BY GREG ALBRECHT



UNHOLY ALLIANCE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

The popularity and following of *the outsider* threatened all the establishment and its institutions held near and dear. They were losing control of the people—all the polls demonstrated that his market share of public support was growing. He came from some obscure and remote place far outside the Jerusalem beltway. He didn't have tradition and custom behind him like the power brokers in Jerusalem did, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The people loved this populist *outsider*.

It almost seemed like *the outsider* had come from another dimension—no one had mentored him and no big donors or influential cronies supported him. He didn't think like the movers and shakers

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did, he didn't act like they did, and he didn't talk like they did. But so far, all their efforts to discredit him had failed. They had thrown mud and muck, but it didn't stick.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. They decided to force his hand, so

that he would have to give one of two answers and either answer would spell the end of his popularity and better yet, probably the end of his life. The trap they devised was a perfect "catch 22" dilemma—

no matter how *the outsider* responded, one way or the other, he would be history.

As his political and religious opponents prepared for their ambush, they could already visualize headlines in the *Jerusalem Post* the next day. They would ask Jesus if the

"THIS ENGRAVING—WHO DOES IT LOOK LIKE? AND WHOSE NAME IS ON IT?" THEY SAID, "CAESAR."

"THEN GIVE CAESAR WHAT IS HIS, AND GIVE GOD WHAT IS HIS." THE PHARISEES WERE SPEECHLESS. THEY WENT OFF SHAKING THEIR HEADS.—*Matthew 22:15-22, The Message, translated by Eugene Peterson*

Jews should pay taxes to Rome. If he said "yes" then the headline above the story would be something like: "Turncoat Traitor Supports Paying Taxes to Rome." If that's how Jesus responded to their trap, then his answer would be the straw that broke his back. His popular support would evaporate and in no time they could find a way to get rid of him once and for all.

If Jesus said "no" then they imagined a headline something like: "Jewish Teacher Tells Rome to Take a Hike." If Jesus encouraged Jews not to pay taxes to Rome then Rome would quickly take action. The occupying military

powers of Rome would not put up with insurrection, so if the Pharisees could trap Jesus in a way that made him look like a rabble rouser, Rome would waste no time in executing him.

It was politics and religion as usual. But Jesus 1) avoided the trap, 2) exposed their dirty tricks and 3) called their bluff:

That's when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So tell us honestly. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They handed him a silver piece.

"This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?"

They said, "Caesar."

"Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his."

The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads (Matthew 22:15-22, The Message, translated by Eugene Peterson).

Strange Bedfellows: Religion and Politics

There's another presidential election just around the corner. The air waves are filled with acrimonious recriminations. Each party continues to do its best to expose the candidate of the

embarrassing behavior, and thus catapulting your candidate into the lead. The dirty business of politics can make for strange bedfellows.

Politics and institutionalized religion never change. They are filled with scams, abuse and corruption. They were in the time of Jesus. The Pharisees, an influential religious authority at that time, were disturbed about Jesus' popularity. Believing "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"—an adage that was old even then—the



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other party—to make them look weak and dishonest. In the best traditions of muck-raking, politicians from both sides are doing whatever it takes to make the other side look bad. It's all about finding weaknesses and, even better, uncovering some heretofore unknown

Pharisees and the Herodians, bitter enemies, snuggled up for a short term dalliance.

The Pharisees deeply resented the Roman taxes levied by Caesar on religious grounds, while the Herodians supported the Roman taxes on political grounds, because Herod owed



THE KINGDOM OF GOD PREACHED BY JESUS WOULD SPELL THE END OF BOTH RELIGION AND POLITICS—SO RELIGION AND POLITICS JUMPED INTO BED IN AN EFFORT TO ERADICATE JESUS AND HIS KINGDOM. IT'S STILL THE SAME TODAY.

So the televised debate started, as the Pharisees and the Herodians thought they might mislead and deceive Jesus as to their motivation by praising him with four truthful compliments. Even though these traits of Jesus were the mirror opposite of their own traits and tactics, they praised him, saying: *1) you have integrity, 2) you teach the way of God accurately, 3) you are indifferent to public opinion, and 4) you don't pander to your students, followers and/or supporters.*

No doubt they thought these statements might help soften him up so they could catch him off guard with the ambush they had prepared, but as they always did, they seriously underestimated Jesus. Jesus had two responses to their trick question: *1) Give Caesar what is his, and 2) Give God what is his.*

Jesus' statement on politics: **Jesus didn't jump into bed with the government.** Jesus simply called attention to the fact that the currency they were using was the currency of the empire. The portrait on the currency was that of the Caesar. Totalitarian occupying armies further subjugated the people they had conquered by placing the likeness of their ruler on the currency the conquered people would use. The economy of the conqueror was imposed on the subjects as a continual reminder that they were slaves, not free.

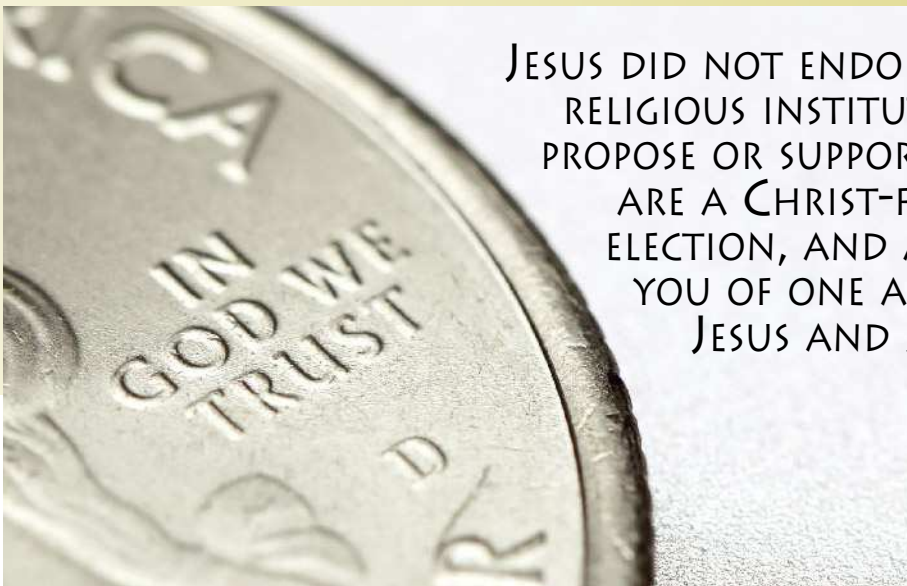
Without lauding the political

or military machinery of Rome Jesus simply said that since the money was produced by Caesar, then he had a right to ask for some of it back. Jesus didn't urge his followers to vote for Caesar, to join a political action committee or canvas neighborhoods in support of Caesar. Jesus did not defer to the oppression, injustice and tyranny of government. Jesus did not say that he supported all of the ways in which Caesar used the money he minted and circulated and the economy he kept afloat. After all, Jesus had a kingdom of his own, which was and is "from another place" (John 18:36). Jesus simply said that the money belonged to Caesar in the first place and it was his right to ask for some of it back in the form of taxes.

Jesus' statement on religion: **Jesus didn't jump into bed with religion.** Nothing in Jesus' response to this trick question posed by his enemies (or any of his comments elsewhere in the Four Gospels) could be remotely interpreted as to giving his absolute support to the business of religion. He simply said "Give God what is his." In this exchange in Matthew 22 Jesus did not directly comment about the way in which religious authorities used money which people gave to them, thinking they were giving money to God. If you have any doubt whatsoever as to what Jesus felt about the big

TOTALITARIAN OCCUPYING ARMIES... BY PLACING THE LIKENESS OF THEIR RULER ON THE CURRENCY THE CONQUERED PEOPLE WOULD USE... A CONTINUAL REMINDER THAT THEY WERE SLAVES, NOT FREE.

his authority to Rome. But most of all, **the Herodians and the Pharisees hated Jesus.** Jesus was drawing great crowds, and he was against both the political power structure believed in by the Herodians and the religious power structure of the Pharisees. The kingdom of God preached by Jesus would spell the end of both religion and politics—so religion and politics jumped into bed in an effort to eradicate Jesus and his kingdom. It's still the same today.



JESUS DID NOT ENDORSE POLITICAL PARTIES OR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS. JESUS DID NOT PROPOSE OR SUPPORT LEGISLATION... IF YOU ARE A CHRIST-FOLLOWER, THEN THIS ELECTION, AND ALL ELECTIONS, REMIND YOU OF ONE AND ONLY ONE THING— JESUS AND JESUS ALONE IS LORD.

business of authoritarian religion, read my book, *Rejecting Religion—Embracing Grace*, which is an exposition of the next chapter in Matthew (Matthew 23).

Fast Forward to November 2016...

If you are a citizen of these United States, and a registered voter, you have four choices this November: 1) Vote Republican, 2) Vote Democrat, 3) Vote for individuals and concerns you feel deeply about, regardless of party label, or 4) Don't vote at all.

Which one would Jesus favor? He did not nor does he

tell us...we have our own choices to make. Any one of the four options above might be better or worse, but no one option is holy and righteous.

Jesus did not endorse political parties or religious institutions. Jesus did not propose or support legislation. He never attempted to change the government.

When people expected Jesus to become politically aligned or to advance the cause of his kingdom in the ways they were accustomed, he retreated. He cared for people in need, but he did not make their predicament a political cause.

Regardless of where you live

and the color and size of your earthly passport, if you are a Christ-follower, then this election, and all elections, remind you of one and only one thing—Jesus and Jesus alone is Lord.

The really sad and pathetic thing is when Christ-followers unreservedly jump into bed with either the kingdom of a government or a particular political candidate, or with a particular denomination or spiritual leader, thinking that God is glorified in such alliances and allegiances.

Jesus alone is Lord. There is only one kingdom and that kingdom is given to us by the grace of God. The kingdom of God is "from another place." The kingdom of God is our spiritual country and our ultimate destination. All else is but rubbish. □

GOLD MEDAL WINNER!

Award-winning author and *CWR Magazine* Editor-in-Chief, Brad Jersak, will be speaking at two conferences this summer. Both of these conferences are an opportunity to hear and meet authors speak about the biblical declaration of God's relentless love and plan to reconcile all His creation—making all things new by the blood of Jesus Christ. A time to develop new friendships and galvanize the growing community of Christians embracing the forgotten gospel. **Order Brad's book at www.ptm.org/christlike**



"Light of the World"

Word of Grace Annual Conference—July 25-28, 2016

Location: The Father's House, 2649 E. Mulberry St., Fort Collins, CO

Speakers: Brad Jersak, C. Baxter Kruger, Caleb Miller, Mike Miller, Wm. Paul Young

"Forgotten Gospel Conference"

Aug. 5-7, 2016—Location: The Sanctuary, 3101 W. 31st Ave., Denver, CO

Speakers: Brad Jersak, Peter Hiatt, Robin Parry, Wm. Paul Young