

PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Politics and Religion as Usual



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The popularity and following of the outsider threatened the establishment, and the institutions and traditions it held near and dear. The market share of the outsider's public support was growing.

He came from an 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 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. These

muck-rakers had thrown mud and muck, but it didn't stick.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. They decided to force his hand. The trap they devised was a perfect "catch 22" dilemma—no matter how *the outsider* responded, 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 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

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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 big-business religion of that day 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

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went off shaking their heads
(Matthew 22:15-22, *The Message*).

Strange Bedfellows

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 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 uncovering some heretofore unknown 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 Pharisees and the Herodians, bitter enemies, snuggled up for a short term dalliance.

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 a "one-night stand," joining forces to eradicate Jesus and his kingdom. It's still the same today.

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' 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 or politics.

Fast Forward to November 2024...

If you are a citizen of the 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 more holy or 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) reminds you of one and only one thing—Jesus and Jesus alone is Lord.

The really sad and pathetic thing is when Christless religion unreservedly jumps 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.

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. □

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