



Citizenship & Religious Liberty

SUNDAY

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MARK 12:17, CSB

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The Mission of God and Religious Liberty

BY ANDREW WALKER

Before leaving on his missionary journey to India, William Carey told his friend Andrew Fuller, “I will go down, if you will hold the ropes.” Fuller helped raise the funds that made mission possible. Holding the ropes is an apt metaphor for the relationship between religious liberty and mission: religious liberty facilitates mission by giving space and fostering the ideal conditions for the mission of Christ to continue. The mission of God does not wholly depend on Western ideals of religious liberty inasmuch as it is aided where religious liberty exists.

It would seem that a state limited in its scope makes the enlargement of God’s kingdom more possible. A government that refuses to totalize its jurisdiction and works within its limited confines is acting justly. By refusing to amass power that does not belong to it, it more ably allows for the mission of Christ to succeed. Thus, a limited state is not merely within the province of a much-hackneyed political conservatism but is a faithful steward of the authority that derives from God (Rom. 13:1-7).

Governments that allow religious freedom to prosper, whether consciously or not, are at least indirect participants in the unfolding drama of redemption. One hopes that a government, even a pagan one, “would maintain conditions appropriate for believers leading a specifically godly life in government supported civic-peace.” We should hope all governments provide the conditions where a fruitful Christian life can be lived without political consequence or threat. Advocacy for religious liberty, especially via lobbying and petitioning the government, must be seen as a rope-holding activity that ensures that ministry can occur within a given political community.

To use another metaphor, religious liberty is like brush clearing. Untamed terrain needs to be cleared in order for it to be properly cultivated and brought to order. Religious liberty clears a path so that the work of ministry can go forth. In this sense, religious liberty is a context-specific tool that catalyzes mission. To clear brush for a missionary to function as they ought is to cooperate in the mission of God. All of this activity is directed toward living God-honoring lives in every domain of life and advancing the message of salvation.

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