

Jesus and Religious Liberty
T. David Gordon Ph.D.

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’
He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Psalm 2:2-4

Introduction and Definition:

The Center for Vision and Values has asked me to address religious liberty from a New Testament perspective, which is entirely too large a task for one paper, so I have chosen to address religious liberty from the teachings of Jesus. Even to do this, however, requires three introductory qualifications.

First, to discuss “religious liberty” intelligently, one must distinguish *moral* liberty from *political* liberty. Morally, one is not free to dis-believe in God any more than one is morally free to dis-believe in arithmetic. As morally accountable beings, we are never *morally* entitled to believe any error of any sort. God created our knowing faculties as a means of discovering the reality He created, and we are never *morally* free to mis-understand that created order.¹ And we are surely not *morally* free to deny that God is the Maker of all things. The entire Bible is written from a thoroughly theistic point of view, in which all of creation reflects its Creator; every single thing in the universe is God’s creature that points to Him just as every one of Rembrandt’s paintings points to him. We are no more morally free to deny God than to deny Rembrandt; indeed, we are *less* morally free to deny God than to deny Rembrandt. So the Scriptures never

¹ I am profoundly indebted here to the late James Henley Thornwell, whose *Discourses on Truth* were first given as public lectures at the College of South Carolina in 1851, though they were not printed until 1855. Today they are reprinted in volume two of the four-volume *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*. Thornwell said, “Hence has arisen the dogma that we are not responsible for our opinions.... This, however, is not the doctrine of the Scriptures. They represent the domain of morality as extending to the whole nature of man (477).” Later in the same discourse he said, “We have no more right to deceive ourselves than to deceive our neighbors.... Few are sensible of the close alliance which subsists between partiality to error and duplicity and fraud in conduct. They are shoots from the same stock, fruits of the same tree. He that lies to his own understanding, or, what amounts to the same thing, does not deliberately propose to himself *truth* as the end of all his investigations, will not scruple at deceit with his neighbours (487).”

teach “religious liberty” in the *moral* sense of the term. What we *theists* mean, then, when we discuss “religious liberty” is *political* religious liberty, that the State is not authorized to promote (or demote) religion, nor is it authorized to prohibit or prevent its proper exercise. When theists say that a man “is entitled to his opinion,” we mean that he is “*politically* entitled to his opinion;” we do not mean that he is *morally* entitled to his opinion. For theists, our acts of knowing are morally accountable acts; we are accountable for the opinions we hold and for how we arrived at them (e.g. biased or unbiased, open-minded or close-minded, reasonable or unreasonable, judicious or injudicious, etc.).

Indeed, not only are acts of knowing moral acts; they are perhaps the *supremely* moral acts, because there is such a close relationship between sin and deception; virtually every sin is an attempt to deceive someone, whether God, neighbor, or self. So intellectual honesty may be foundational to all moral integrity, as Thornwell said,

The moral and intellectual natures of man are so intimately connected, their mutual dependence so nicely adjusted, their action and reaction so perfect and complete, that confusion of understanding is always accompanied with corresponding lubricity of principle; and he whose perceptions of truth are not remarkable for clearness and precision will most surely be distinguished by an equal obscurity in his conceptions of rectitude.²

It is extremely important, therefore, from the outset of the discussion to keep in mind a theistic understanding of “religious liberty.” As theists, we do not defend *any* erroneous understanding of *anything*; so we surely do not defend erroneous understandings of God or of His worship. We do not believe in *morally* religious liberty; we believe in *politically* religious liberty.

A second qualification is this: Jesus did not address, and indeed *could* not have addressed, the relationship of civil government to his church, because his assembly/church did not even meet until Pentecost. There was no church/assembly of Jesus Christ until it was constituted as

² Thornwell, *Writings*, 2:481.

such at Pentecost. On one occasion, Jesus spoke of the future, when he pledged, “I *will* build my assembly/church” (Matt. 16:18),³ but he said nothing there about the relationship of that yet-to-be constituted assembly to the civil magistrate.

Third, to my knowledge, Jesus never even expressly addressed what we would call the doctrine of political religious liberty. The Jews of his day were constantly fighting against the tendency to Hellenize, and were constantly agitating to continue to preserve their own ancient monotheism in a polytheistic Roman culture. The Roman empire afforded roughly the same religious “liberty” as had the Alexandrian Empire before: Individuals could believe in virtually whatever deities they wished (and offer sacrifices to them), provided that they were loyal to the Empire and the Emperor. Jesus, in other words, never sat in a room in Philadelphia with representatives from thirteen colonies to decide what kind of government they would frame for a new republic, and what rights ought to be guaranteed by the Constitution thereof. Most of his public life was “under the radar,” as it were, as he instructed fellow Jews who were in a decidedly political minority within the Roman empire.

Jesus did, however, address a number of matters that *pertain* to the question of political religious liberty: He addressed practicing piety before humans (rather than before God); most of

³ Some believe he also spoke of his church in Matthew 18:17, where he said, ‘If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (εἰπὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ),’ but such a translation fails to understand that ἐκκλησία merely means “assembly,” and can be used for an assembly of any sort (though especially public assemblies). In all likelihood at Matt. 18:17, the term referred to the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews in Jerusalem. There is a fairly thorough discussion of this question in George Gillespie’s *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming* (1646), (1998; repr., Barryville, VA: Hess). 187ff. The full range of interpretive options considered by commissioners to the Westminster Assembly is found in William M. Hetherington’s *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (original, 1843), (1991; repr., Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press Editions) 200-249. Of some interest is the fact that the Erastians argued that the “assembly” of Matthew 18 was not religious or ecclesiastical at all (but civil). In Acts 19, it is employed even to describe a rather unruly mob: “So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel....Now some cried out one thing, some another, for *the assembly* (ἡ ἐκκλησία συγκεχυμένη) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together (Acts 19:29, 32).” The town clerk later restored order, and said, ‘If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled *in the regular assembly* (ἐν τῇ ἐννόμῳ ἐκκλησίᾳ, vv. 38-39).’ Here it is a reference to the “courts” and “proconsuls” who settle things in a lawful or regular assembly.

his teaching fell somewhere under the umbrella of his proclamation that the Kingdom of God—a Kingdom that judges and relativizes all other rule—was imminent; and he addressed rulers in general and the unfair taxes they often burden people with. To these four pertinent matters we turn our attention.

1. Jesus condemned practicing piety “before men.”

One significant part of the Sermon on the Mount appears at Matthew 6:1-18. The introductory verse anticipates and introduces the next 17 verses: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people *in order to be seen by them*, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” In the following instructions, Jesus discussed three basic religious duties: almsgiving (2-4), prayer (5-15), and fasting (16-18). In each case, his instruction consisted of both a negative and a positive: What not to do and what to do:

Negative

Thus (“Ὅταν, but ESV gets the sense), when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, *that they may be praised by others*.

And when you pray (Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε), you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, *that they may be seen by others*.

“And when you fast (“Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε), do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces *that their fasting may be seen by others*.

Positive

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, *so that your giving may be in secret*. And your Father *who sees in secret* will reward you.

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray *to your Father who is in secret*. *And your Father who sees in secret* will reward you.

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting *may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret*. *And your Father who sees in secret* will reward you.

Observe, then, that when Jesus discussed these three very basic religious acts, the contrast in each case was the same, the contrast between practicing one's piety for the approval of men, or practicing one's piety for the approval of God. Note, even, that the Father is referred to as "in heaven" twice, "who is in secret" twice, and "who sees in secret" thrice; five of the seven references to the Father use the word "secret," because it is in "secret" that we meet the God "who sees in secret." We cannot, at this moment, barge into heaven, to meet God there; but we can move into "secret," and there meet the God "who sees in secret."

Not surprisingly, then, toward the end of his earthly ministry, when Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees who had been his most persistent opponents, he denounced them for being the mirror opposite of what he commanded: "They do all their deeds to be seen *by others*. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called *rabbi by others* (Matt. 23:5-7)."

The religious profundity of Jesus's teaching on this matter could occupy the entirety of a pious life. For our purposes, however, we can easily conclude one pertinent reality: True religion, while it may have a corporate component, such as assembling for worship, also has a private component, where what is done is done "in secret" before the God "who sees in secret." That is, the sincerest and purist piety is *unobserved* by others, and therefore, *unrewarded* by others; whereas the worst piety is that which is done in order to be observed by others. "Truly, they have their reward." True piety, therefore, not only *need* not be aided by government; it *cannot* be aided by government, because, in its fundamental integrity, it is "secret," and done *not* to be observed (or rewarded) by others. Religious acts of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting should not only not be *rewarded* by government, they should not even be *observed* by government (Take *that*, NSA!). Their "secret" nature makes them non-public by definition. Rightly ordered governments would respect this and make no inquiry into those private religious practices that are done "in secret."⁴

⁴ I am still somewhat perplexed as to why the churches did not object to the laws passed during the Clinton administration that required churches to supply receipts for charitable giving. Having some deacon-accountant keep a record of our giving hardly seems consistent with the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing, and churches should have resisted, arguing that the "due exercise" of religion was compromised by this requirement.

2. The kingdom of God relativizes all earthly dominions.

Despite the many debates that take place in New Testament scholarship, there is one matter that has enjoyed unanimity since such scholarship existed, and that is this: That the central feature of Jesus's proclamation was that the kingdom of God was imminent: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 4:17).'" Indeed, *kingdom* appears 118 times in the gospels (52 are "kingdom of God," and 31 are "kingdom of heaven"),⁵ whereas *love* appears only 65 times, *mercy*, 23 times, *justice*, eight times; etc. Eighty-three of these 111 uses refer expressly to the "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God," and on at least 10 other occasions, the same reality is spoken of through the briefer expression, "the kingdom," as at Matthew 4:23. Only six verses after saying that Jesus "began to preach (κηρύσσειν), saying...the kingdom of heaven is at hand," Matthew said, "And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming (κηρύσσων) the gospel of *the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction among the people." Jesus, in other words, was not talking about the kingdom of David, the kingdom of Solomon, or of Herod or of Augustus or Tiberius. Indeed, he was not talking about any human reign at all; he was talking about a divine reign, a divine rule, God's kingdom, contrasted with all earthly rule. As we shall see from a cursory glance of the Old Testament history and teaching that informed Jesus; none of these human kingdoms was God's.

As John Bright reminded us more than half a century ago, one of the curious things about Jesus's discussion of the kingdom is that he never bothered to define it, nor did anyone ask him to do so, because they all already knew what he was talking about:

⁵ Most scholars agree that the expressions "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" have the same referent; they refer to the same reality. Out of sensitivity to some first-century Jews who believed God's name was so holy that it could not be spoken, "kingdom of heaven" was an acceptable euphemism for "kingdom of God." But the terms referred to the same reality.

But for all his repeated mention of the Kingdom of God, Jesus never once paused to define it. Nor did any hearer ever interrupt him to ask, ‘Master, what do these words “Kingdom of God,” which you use so often, mean?’ On the contrary, Jesus used the term as if assured it would be understood, and indeed it was. The Kingdom of God lay within the vocabulary of every Jew. It was something they understood and longed for desperately. To us, on the contrary, it is a strange term....⁶

The Israelites were not longing desperately for yet another failed monarch, such as Saul, David (“a man of blood”), Solomon, or Rehoboam. The later literature of the Old Testament often looked back to the *pre-monarchical* time of Israel as the ideal time, when God sovereignly led her through the wilderness and conquered the Canaanites, all without a standing army or a standing monarchy. Indeed, when the Israelites attempted to make Gideon king after his military victory, he understood God’s ways and refused: ‘I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you (Judges 8:23).’ And later, when they asked Samuel to appoint a king for them, both Samuel and Yahweh regarded the request as an utter rejection of God’s rule:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, ‘Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.’ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’ And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have *rejected me from being king* over them (1 Sam. 8:4-7).’

In light of God’s care and preservation without a standing monarch or army, the demand to have a standing monarchy was nothing less than a rejection of God as their Ruler, and both Samuel and God viewed the matter that way.

For this reason, in the Old Testament (and, later, in the New), all human governments are routinely regarded as being opposed to God and His reign, and Israel should never have asked for an earthly king in the first place. The very expression “kingdom of God,” therefore, refers to an ideal reign, a reign *unlike* the flawed earthly experiments in governing. Students of the Psalms

⁶ Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 17-18.

now believe that the first two psalms are designed to introduce the psalter as a whole. The first psalm addresses humans individually (“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked. . .”), but the second psalm addresses human wickedness in its corporate expression: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision (Psalm 2:2-4).” In the Old Testament, all human governments (“the kings of the earth”) are regarded as rebellious insurrectionists against God’s reign; and the pious (such as Gideon and Samuel) resisted such earthly rule over God’s people, since Israel was intended to be a true theocracy, in which God alone would reign.

So when Jesus announced the imminence of the “kingdom of God,” he did not need to explain himself. As John Bright rightly reminded us, his hearers knew perfectly well that he was referring to something qualitatively different from the various human governments in or around Israel, that he was referring to nothing less than God’s qualitatively different reign, a reign in which God’s grace, love, and wisdom win our loyalty without any threat of coercion. Jesus, therefore, did not introduce the idea of the difference between human kingdoms and God’s kingdom; he merely *assumed* the difference that had already been established by the Old Testament scriptures. He did not separate “church and state”; he merely re-iterated that human rule and divine rule had always been different things in the Old Testament. John Bright put it this way:

Here [in Judges] we see the clans maintaining a precarious existence, surrounded by foes but without government, central authority, or state organization of any sort. In times of danger there would arise a hero, one upon whom the spirit of Yahweh rushed (Judg. 3:10; 14:6) called a judge. He would rally the surrounding clans and deal with the foe. While his victories no doubt gained him prestige, he was in no sense a king. His authority was neither absolute over all Israel nor permanent; in no case was it hereditary. . . . He had no

standing army, no court, no administrative machinery whatever.... The idea of monarchy was constantly rejected. This is illustrated in the words with which stout Gideon spurned a crown: 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you (Judg. 8:23).'⁷

The "kingdom of God," therefore, relativizes and even pronounces judgment on all human rule, because for God's people to have desired to have been governed by anyone other than Himself was impious and rebellious. The "kings of the earth," therefore, are not neutral entities in either the Old Testament or the New (e.g. in Revelation); they are the corporate, organized, political expression of human rebellion against God. This is not to say that some civil government is not necessary to restrain human wickedness (Genesis 9, Romans 13), but to say that whenever such governments, ostensibly designed to suppress wickedness, are in the hands of those who are themselves wicked, such governments are, at best, a necessary evil, and are surely never equated biblically with the government of God until the Eschaton; only then will it be said that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15)."

For our purposes, the important thing to take away is this: Whatever Jesus meant by his kingdom or God's kingdom was surely *not* a reference to any human civil government:

Jesus answered [Pilate], 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting (ἡγωνίζοντο), that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.' Then Pilate said to him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth (John 18:36-37).'

Jesus' detractors attempted to represent him as seditious, as someone who was attempting to establish a kingdom that would rival that of the Roman Emperor: 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king (Luke 23:2; cf. also John 19:12,' and the blasphemy of the Jews in John 19:15,

⁷ Bright, *Kingdom*, 31-32.

where, in their rage against Jesus, they actually said, ‘We have no king but Caesar’). Ironically, there was an element of truth in their claim of sedition; but not because Jesus intended to establish a competing *political* entity, but because he intended to bring in a divine reign that trumped *all* human reign, not merely that of Tiberius. His reign would put all human reign “in its place,” as it were, as comparatively insignificant at best, and as contemptible at worst. Surely he would never identify his “kingdom” with any earthly kingdom, nor give any jurisdiction over it to such rebellious kingdoms. So if he and his apostles later designate his church/assembly as his “kingdom,”⁸ then surely that kingdom is (and must remain) free from the jurisdiction of the “kings of the earth.”

3. Jesus’ general statement about rulers is that they ordinarily abuse their authority.

Jesus shared the typically cynical view most have had regarding rulers. We have a little saying in our culture today:

Question: How can you tell if a politician is lying?

Answer: His lips are moving.

We are not the first to have such a cynical view of rulers. It was a commonplace in the Old Testament that both the pagan rulers and Israel’s own rulers made their lives miserable: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision (Psalm 2:2-4).” In His incarnate state, Jesus no longer sat in the heavens; but his opinion, once held in heaven, was the same on earth: “The Lord holds them in derision.” When we examine those passages in which Jesus made general statements about the exercise of political authority, we discover that his view,

⁸ As at, e.g. Rom. 14:7; 1 Cor. 4:20; 6:9-10; Col. 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thes. 2:12).

though coded and hidden somewhat (as a matter of expedience), was essentially negative. At best, civil government was and is a necessary evil, necessary to restrain murderers and robbers, but exercised by individuals who are themselves malicious and covetous. “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know (οἶδατε) that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (κατακυριεύουσιν), and their great ones exercise authority over (κατεξουσιάζουσιν) them. It shall not be so among you. (Matt. 20:25-26)’” In the two previous verses, Jesus rebuked the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) for their desire to be seated by him in his coming reign: “He said to them, ‘You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.’ And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.” Effectively, what the sons of Zebedee were requesting was to rule the way the rulers of the Gentiles and their great ones do, but Jesus said, ‘It shall *not* be so among you.’

Rhetorically, Jesus employed “you know” skillfully. Whenever one employs this verb, it prefaces a commonplace, an idea that no one would dispute. So Jesus asserted as an incontrovertible fact that his disciples *knew* that the rulers of the Gentiles abused their authority: ‘You *know* that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.’ This is nearly as negative a statement as the statement of Lord Acton to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Jacques Ellul observed this about Jesus’s statement: “Note that he makes no distinction or reservation. All national rulers, no matter what the nation or the political regime, lord it over their subjects.... Here again power is called into question. Power corrupts.”⁹

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 61-62. Earlier in the same volume Ellul had called attention to the third temptation: “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me (Mat. 4:8-9).’” Satan claimed, at least, to have “all the kingdoms of the world,” and authority to give

The verb translated “lord it over them” (κατακυριεύω) appears only here (and the parallel in Mark) and in two other places in the New Testament. In Acts 19:16, we find this: “And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and *overpowered* (κατακυριεύσας) them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” Note then that the same verb employed to describe the demonic spirit’s “overpowering” of others is the kind of overpowering that Jesus attributed to rulers. Similarly, the verb appears at 1Pet. 5:3: “...not *domineering* (μηδ’ ὡς κατακυριεύοντες) over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Here also it is a negative term: Peter’s warning to the shepherds not to lord it over those whom they serve. The second verb (κατεξουσιάζω), translated too neutrally as “exercise authority over,” appears only here in the NT, and not at all in the Greek Old Testament, the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, or the Greek fathers.¹⁰ It is extremely rare, but contextually, joined to the other verb, and to Jesus’ rebuke of the sons of Zebedee, it almost surely means something like “abuse authority” or “tyrannize.” We would safely conclude, therefore, that Jesus would not have left the well-being of His Kingdom into the hands of people about whom he spoke so disparagingly.

them to Jesus. Ellul claimed that “all” earthly authority was/is the arena of the evil one, as the apostle John said, ‘We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19).’ As Ellul said, “Those who hold political power receive it from him and depend upon him.... This fact is no less important than the fact that Jesus rejects the devil’s author. Jesus does not say to the devil: It is not true. You do not have power over kingdoms and states. He does not dispute this claim (58).” Ellul’s position appears to be extreme to many, but it is less extreme than the classic Anabaptist position. Ellul never says that it is unlawful, per se, for a Christian to be involved in the military or in governance; he (merely) says that the arena itself is dangerous and loathsome. I am inclined to agree with him, but I do not think the Scriptures are as clear on the matter as I would like.

¹⁰ Indeed, Walter Baur, William F. Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich observe that it is “scarcely to be found” even “in secular Greek” of the period; yet they acknowledge that it can mean “tyrannize.” Cf. their *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University Press, 1957), 422.

4. Specific: Taxes

Jesus addressed tax-paying twice; once he addressed the half-shekel temple tax (required nowhere by the law of Moses), and once he addressed paying taxes to Caesar. In each case, Jesus' opponents were attempting to entrap him, to get him to make a statement that could be construed as seditious of either Jewish or Roman authority. Such a setting is important, because, in the ethos of the time, the skill of cleverly avoiding/evading such traps was highly admired, and the Gospel writers recorded Jesus' replies in such situations to highlight his cleverness in turning accusations/entrapments inside out. Note, for example, elsewhere in the Gospels, when someone tried to trick/trap him with a question, Jesus would reply, 'And I will ask you a question (Matt. 21:24; Mark 11:29; Luke 6:9; 20:3).' There was a kind of verbal sword-play here, where the more clever would triumph verbally, over the less clever. Interpretively, then, when we read such texts, we cannot read them as Jesus' candid answer to a mere candid question, such as a humble disciple might ask; we must read them for what they were: a clever way of extricating himself from a trap. That is, we cannot read these passages "flat," as it were, as a catechism answer to a catechism question. We must read them—if we desire to understand them—in their original rhetorical circumstance of parry-and-thrust, as a clever way of evading/avoiding the attempt of enemies to entrap Jesus.

A. The Temple Tax

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.' And they were greatly distressed. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the tax?' He said, 'Yes.' And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?' And when he said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself (Matt. 17:22-27).'

The context of this passage is very important. The event occurs late in his ministry, when the hostility to Jesus had reached the point that he had just said, ‘The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him (v. 22).’ Immediately following this is the issue of paying the temple tax, and astute hearers of this story on the first occasion would have wondered whether the issue of the temple tax would be the issue that causes the Son of man to be delivered into the hands of men: Will Jesus be delivered over to the hands of men *because* of what he said about the temple tax?

While this passage actually deals with a Jewish temple tax, and is, therefore, not expressly pertinent to the issue of the state, his reply was in terms of “the kings of the earth (οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς),” which may be a reflection of Psalm 2:2-3: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together (οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες συνήχθησαν), against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’” If so, Jesus was likening the Jewish collectors of the temple tax to the rebellious “kings of the earth” who resist God’s reign in Psalm 2:2. The expression appears in the New Testament only nine times: here, at Acts 4:25-26, where Peter and John quote Psalm 2, and then seven times in the book of Revelation, in each case of which “the kings of the earth” are brought before God’s judgment for their resistance to His reign (Rev. 6:15; 7:2, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:19; 21:24).

In Acts 4, for instance, Peter and John had been hauled before the Sanhedrin to give account for their preaching (and healing), and were ordered not to preach any more, but were released because the authorities feared the crowds. Peter and John understood what took place to be a fulfilling of Psalm 2:

And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed (Acts 4:21-26).”’

Observe that Peter and John had been called before the *Jewish* leaders, not Gentiles: “...rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family (Acts 4:5-6).” Yet they understood this meeting of *Jewish* leaders to fulfill what Psalm 2:2 referred to as “the kings of the earth.” When Jewish leaders/rulers are designated by the OT term that referred to *Gentile* rulers, this is an expression of contempt and judgment: Jews are acting like rebellious Gentiles. It is even possible that Peter recalled Jesus using this very expression regarding those who took the temple tax, and understood that they were in cahoots with this same group (“high priest...all who were of the high-priestly family”). If so, Peter understood that when Jewish leaders resisted the reign of God in Christ (and in his apostles), they could truthfully be designated by the same expression, “kings of the earth,” that was employed in the OT to designate the unruly *Gentile* nations and rulers who resisted God’s reign. In requiring a tax that the Mosaic law did not require, the temple leaders were displaying the same contempt for God and his ways as did the rebellious heathen nations of Psalm 2:2. Once again, as it were, people in power abuse it and resist God’s reign by it.

After likening the *Jewish* temple officials to the *Gentile* “kings of the earth,” Jesus asked about whether such kings tax their own sons or the sons of others, and Peter rightly replied that they taxed *others*, to which Jesus replied, ‘Then the sons are free,’ a coded way of saying that the

collectors of the temple tax had no rightful authority to collect the tax; and that God's true "sons" were "free"/exempt from any ethical or religious duty to pay it. Nonetheless, to avoid giving offense, Jesus would make a provision, which he did miraculously by having Peter catch a fish (the first fish he caught) with a coin in its mouth/belly, and to give the entire thing—one half for Jesus and one half for Peter—to the extorters.

There is even more irony (if not outright contempt) than may overtly appear here. The "mouth" in which Peter would find the coin was an integral part of the digestive system. In chapter 15, Matthew had recorded Jesus' statement about it not being what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles. In the explanation, Jesus said, 'Do you not see that whatever goes into the *mouth* passes into the *stomach* and is *expelled* (Matt. 15:17-18)?' That is, the "mouth...stomach...is expelled" regards the digestive system from stem to stern, as it were. Certainly, much of what comes "out of the mouth" defiles, and Jesus suggests that when malicious speech comes "out of the mouth," it is just as defiling as "what is expelled," a not-too-subtle reference to excrement, because malicious speech is more disgusting than biological waste. So, the entire digestive system is regarded as a biological necessity, that is, nonetheless, a little unsavory or unpleasant: Food transubstantiates into excrement. So when Jesus told Peter to take the coin from the fish's mouth, he was referring to the coin as—how shall we put it—incipient fish excrement. And Jesus told Peter, effectively, to take the defiled, incipient fish excrement and give it to those extorters at the temple. Hardly a ringing endorsement of tax-paying, when read in this light. It may be expedient, at times, to submit to petty harassment and immoral taxes, but it is also proper to take notice of the harassment and immorality, and to regard each with measured contempt.

Sociologists refer to such language as “coded speech.” People who are in a politically untenable situation often refer to their rulers contemptuously by employing coded speech, speech that the users understand, but their authorities do not. It is a kind of linguistic way of expressing a little rebellion against unjust rule. African-American spirituals were often this way in the 19th century. Slaves could sing “Deep River,” and their owners would think they were reflecting on the Exodus, and/or of their own passing through “Jordan” from this life to the next. The slave-owners might even have flattered themselves that they had “christianized” their slaves to the point that they were singing songs of crossing Jordan as a metaphor for passing from this life to heaven. But “Deep River” (and others like it) were a coded reference to the underground railroad, and especially to the Ohio River, by which they gained access to the Allegheny, then Lake Erie, then freedom in Canada. I argue that many/most of Jesus’ parables were “coded speech,” in which he expressed judgment on rebellious Israel in such a manner that they could not accuse him of such; and I think he did the same thing here. On the surface, he did what the Jewish authorities required by paying the temple tax. But he did so by suggesting that those authorities were like the “kings of the earth” of Psalm 2, and he did so by paying the tax with incipient fish excrement. As Jacques Ellul put it: “He thus turns the matter into a subject of ridicule. That is the point of the miracle. The power which imposes the levy is ridiculous, and he thus performs an absurd miracle to show how unimportant the power is. The miracle displays the complete indifference of Jesus to the king, the temple authorities, etc. Catch a fish—any fish—and you will find the coin in its mouth.”¹¹

While we may be unaccustomed to looking for irony or contempt in Jesus’s enigmatic statements, in this case it is better than the alternative. Surely Jesus was not teaching his disciples that fish would be a regular source of revenue (for his disciples or for the temple), so the story

¹¹ Ellul, *Anarchy*, 64.

cannot be taken as moral or exemplary. There is, indeed, an absurdist quality to the entire story of telling Peter to throw his hook over the side of the boat, promising that the first fish he catches will have a coin in its mouth! This is not a “compassionate” miracle, where someone is healed or delivered from demons; this is just peculiar, and I tend to concur with Ellul that the absurdity is deliberate, an expression of Jesus’s contempt for the various abuses toward which human governments inevitably tend. The “kings of the earth,” in the language of Psalm 2:2, do tend to conspire “against the Lord, and against His anointed.” Jesus’ second encounter with tax-paying would be equally coded, if not more so.

B. “Render unto Caesar”

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s (ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ), and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away (Mat. 22:15-22).

Immediately, we notice that this passage records Jesus’ reply to a deliberate plot to “entangle” him. His answer, that is, is not the neutral, didactic instruction of a master to a disciple, but the sword-play of one who is verbally fencing with his opponents. As was ordinarily the case when his opponents sought to trap him, they began with flattery, in this case a double flattery, designed to make him drop his defenses and regard the conversation as friendly:

‘Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.’ But, of course, they did *not* believe that he taught truthfully, and Jesus did not fall for their pretensions for a minute: “But Jesus, *aware of their malice*, said....” So the true nature of the conversation could not be more

clear: It was the result of a plot to entangle Jesus, and he was “aware of their malice.” From the way Matthew frames the narrative, we should not expect Jesus to give a “straight answer,” as it were, but a cryptic answer, a coded answer, a clever answer, and an answer designed to return the favor, and in fact, entangle his opponents.

Further, this was not the first circumstance in which a Jew from Palestine had to deal with Greco-Roman emperors. During the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BC), Mattathias was one of the significant leaders of the Jewish revolt. And when Mattathias was about to die, he gave a speech to his family, a custom as old as the patriarchs:

‘Now behold, I know that Simeon your brother is wise in counsel; always listen to him; he shall be your father. Judas Maccabeus has been a mighty warrior from his youth; he shall command the army for you and fight the battle against the peoples. You shall rally about you all who observe the law, and avenge the wrong done to your people. *Pay back the Gentiles* in full (ἀνταπόδοτε ἀνταπόδομα τοῖς ἔθνεσιν), and heed what the law commands (1 Mac. 2:65-68).’

N. T. Wright thinks Jesus was echoing Mattathias, using a similar verb, formed from a prepositional prefix on the verb δίδωμι.¹² Just as Mattathias said, effectively, ‘Pay the Gentiles *back* (ἀνταπόδοτε) for what they’ve done, yet be sure to obey Torah,’ so also Jesus employed “coded statement,” in which, on the one hand, the blasphemous and idolatrous coin was to be “paid back” (ἀπόδοτε) to its “rightful” (i.e. pagan, blasphemous, idolatrous) owner, and yet even more importantly was to render to God what is due to God.

The verb translated “render” here (ἀποδίδωμι) is sometimes employed in a neutral manner, as in these instances:

¹² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 503-504.

Matt. 20:8: And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and *pay* them (ἀπόδος αὐτοῖς) their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first;’

Luke 10:35: And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will *repay* you (ἀποδώσω σοι) when I come back.’

But at other times, it has a profoundly judicial character, and it means something like “*pay them back* for what they have done”:

Matt. 12:36: ‘I tell you, on the day of judgment people will *give account* (ἀποδώσουσιν) for every careless word they speak’;

Matt. 16:27: ‘For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will *repay* (ἀποδώσει) each person according to what he has done’;

Matt. 18:34: ‘And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay (ἀποδῶ) all his debt’;

Luke 12:59: ‘I tell you, you will never get out until you have *paid* (ἀποδῶς) the very last penny’;

Rom. 2:5-6: ‘But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will *render* (ἀποδώσει) to each one according to his works’;

2Tim. 4:14: Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will *repay* (ἀποδώσει) him according to his deeds.

Nowhere else in the gospels is ἀποδίδομι translated by the somewhat-neutral “render,” except in the three accounts of this saying. Such a translation is, of course, possible, and it is how Romans

2:6 rightly is translated. But in our context, the overtones of entrapment and judgment suggest that “pay back” may be the better translation.

Further, the Jews who came to test/trick Jesus were carrying a coin, a coin that possibly violated the second commandment regarding images, and that was blasphemous, because of some of the things it affirmed about Caesar as virtually divine. The inscription on the coin read “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus” (*Ti[berivs] Caesar Divi Avg[vsti] F[ilivs] Avgvstvs*). On the back, it read, *Pontifex maximus* (“Highest Priest”).¹³ The inscription was blasphemous to a monotheistic Jew, so no Jew should have owned one; and it had a graven image on it, so again no Jew should have owned it.¹⁴ So Jesus, by making his testers produce the coin, disclosed that they had violated the law’s prohibitions of images and blasphemy by even owning the coin. The fact that they even possessed such a coin meant that they were compromised morally, so that his statement is also one of enigmatic and cryptic *judgment* of them (as his cryptic parables were also judicial in nature) for their attempt to entrap him. N. T. Wright described this coded/cryptic answer this way:

It might be cryptic, but in many political situations coded statements are all that one can offer. I suggest that Jesus deliberately framed his answer in terms that could be heard as such a coded statement, with which he neatly refused the either/or that had been put to him and pointed to his own kingdom-agenda as the radical alternative.... I propose that Jesus’ cryptic saying should be understood as a coded and subversive echo of Mattathias’

¹³ Herman Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student’s Commentary*, trans. Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 410.

¹⁴ Not all interpreters agree that the coin would have been regarded as blasphemous or idolatrous to first-century Jews. H. St J. Hart regards it as mere currency, in his “The Coin of ‘Render Unto Caesar...’: A Note on Some Aspects of Mark 12:13-17; Matt. 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, eds. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, 241-248 (Cambridge: University Press, 1984). Similarly, David Nystrom says, “The title *divi filius* (son of the divine) by which Augustus was worshipped during his lifetime was not a formal title of divinity.” Rather, Nystrom et al. suggest, it means a person especially *favoured* by the divinity. Nystrom et al., “Was There No King But Caesar,” in *Jesus Is Lord; Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, eds. S. McKnight and J. B. Modica, 33 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013). Ridderbos holds a somewhat in-between view: “The emperor’s portrait and inscription must have been a great insult to the Jews’ religious beliefs,” *Matthew*, 410. At a minimum, the coin was a reminder of Roman empire worship and the restricted freedoms permitted to the Jews at this time.

last words... ‘Pay Caesar back what he is owed! Render to Caesar what he deserves!’
The *words Jesus said* would, *prima facie*, have been heard as revolutionary.¹⁵

Caesar probably deserved insurrection, and it would have been justified for the Jews to have revolted (though probably inexpedient, as they learned in A. D. 66-70, especially under Vespasian). The broader concern, however, was and should have been to be concerned to give to God what was owed to God. This broader concern is also disclosed enigmatically by the question about the image on the coin. The answer of Jesus, effectively, was this: “Caesar minted the coin, and his image is on it, so it is rightly his (though not rightly yours, because as Jews you should not own a blasphemous coin or one that has an image on it). But everything else in all creation bears God’s imprint; and so everything else—from the largest elephant to the smallest blade of grass—belongs to Him.” So Jesus employed coded speech here to subvert nearly everything: He subverted those who were attempting to trap him by providing an answer which, on the surface, was entirely innocent; he subverted Caesar also, especially if his use of the verb “render” (*ἀνταπόδοτε*) was intended as an allusion to what Mattathias had said, “It would serve him right if you *did* pay him back!” And it also subverted all—Jew or Greek—who thought appeasing Caesar was more important than appeasing God. Caesar merely rules over one empire that is itself under Satan’s dominion; he is king of the sewer, as it were, so why should we care so much about him? Let him “herd cats” to his heart’s content; why should we care, when the kingdom of God has been entrusted to us?

That is, taken (as it likely is) as coded speech, a clever reply to those who were attempting to trap him, Jesus said far more than what he actually said; overtly, what he said was inoffensive enough; implicitly, though, it was a word of judgment against the kingdoms of this world by the one who was inaugurating the kingdom of God. Jesus did not merely recognize the

¹⁵ Wright, *Jesus and Victory*, 503-504.

distinction between the civil arena and the religious arena, or the difference between state and church; he implied that all earthly power is “borrowed” from the evil one, and cannot be valued as God’s kingdom is valued, since it cannot do what God’s kingdom can do: reverse the curses of Genesis 3. Jesus could not be condemned for treason or sedition; but Caesar would be one day condemned for his treason and sedition against Christ and His kingdom. Similarly, those who attempted to entrap Jesus failed to do so; but when Christ returns, His final judgment will entrap them. When “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15),” the would-be trappers will be trapped, and all Caesars will pay tribute to the Christ, who will reign forever. As those whose citizenship is in that heaven (Phil. 4:20), we regard all earthly citizenship and government with a certain measured contempt.¹⁶

We have considered four aspects of Jesus’ teaching that pertain to political religious liberty: practicing piety before humans; the supreme value of God’s reign/kingdom over all human kingdoms; his general contempt for the abuses toward which human governments inevitably tend; and his specific ambivalence toward taxation (the payment of which we all regard as “taxing”). The kingdom of God needs no help from tainted, sinful, and tyrannous human governments; it only needs “the finger of God (Luke 11:20).” True piety not only does not need the assistance of human government; true piety is unobserved by anyone (government or otherwise). And surely Jesus would not recommend leaving true religion in the hands of “the kings of the earth” who have routinely resisted God’s reign throughout human history (both within Israel and without). The freer true religion and true piety can be from government interference, the better.

¹⁶ Calvin urged the devotional practice of *contemptio mundi*, contempt for the present world and all its fading power and glory, and he may have been onto something. Cf. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of The Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 126-130.