

Senator Robert Morgan
North Carolina District Council of
the Assemblies of God
Charlotte, North Carolina
May 7, 1980

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

First, I would like to say how glad I am to serve the people in a free country where the precepts of government are basically the principles of Christianity. It is comforting to know that the concerns of our government in many ways parallel the teachings of Jesus--ministering to the sick, the needy, the poor, the mentally ill, and other unfortunate people.

Christ did not restrict his ministry to a select group but reached out to anyone, regardless of class or nationality, who came to him and had faith. He did not draw distinctions, for he was as likely to respond to a Pharisee as to a Roman soldier, to a prostitute as to a woman of virute.

This lesson of tolerance, the good works, the warning about casting the first stone, have served me both in my legal and in my political careers. What Jesus understood, it seems to me, is that it is all too easy to become self-satisfied both in one's religion and in one's life. He often pointed to the Scribes and Pharisees who paraded with great show but who were often hypocrites.

The seeds of tolerance fell onto barren ground in the years after Jesus was crucified, for the Church of Rome demanded uniformity and persecuted those who dissented. Centuries later, our country was founded as a haven from the persecution that many Christians endured in England and in Europe. Whether it was the Protestant deviation from the Catholic Church, the Puritan disagreements with the Anglican Church, or the Baptist refusal to go along with infant sprinkling in Calvinist Switzerland, the established state church made life miserable for dissenters.

When our present system of government was established, our founding fathers wisely divided the state from the church. They did this not because they were infidels but because they paid close attention to the lessons of history. Indeed, most of the founding fathers were religious men, leaders in their churches as well as in their government. They understood that it was one thing to have the convictions that religion teaches and something else to confuse religion and politics. A look at the documents that were drawn at the origin of our government reveals a close tie with God. Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence spoke of "nature's God," he noted that all men were created equal and that "they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," and he concluded with the powerful lines: "And for the support of this Declaration with a firm reliance

on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred honor.

Yet in the Constitution, a purely political document, the founding fathers were careful to open government to men of all religions. In Article VI, the Constitution demands that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office of public Trust under the United States."

I mention this separation of church and state at the outset because I want to develop a line of reasoning that shows the wisdom of the provision. And, I chose as my text for this address the line from Mark 12:17: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Now, I would like to go back to the beginning of Christianity and review what happened when state and church became mixed. The early Christians were very simple in their beliefs. The lessons of Christ were immediate; many of the first church members had known Jesus and were guided by his personal example.

The early Christian Church spread its word rapidly. St. Paul, of course, traveled throughout the Roman Empire risking death and persecution. He founded the first church

in Rome. Ultimately, this grew into the Church of Rome. Eventually, this formal church insisted that there be a more formal worship, more ritual, and finally usurped the right of the individual to interpret the scriptures. While the early Christians were content to ascribe to the fundamentals of Christ, the formal church insisted on its ritual and pagentry. The spirit of independence lingered on, however, and in the Reformation dissenters again turned more and more to individual interpretation of the scriptures and a simplified form of worship.

Significantly, the invention of the printing press in the 15th century spurred the spread of dissent. The revolution inspired by Gutenberg's movable type has in many ways been central to the development of education and the spread of literacy.

Independent belief ultimately led to suffering, persecution, and sometimes to death--martyrdom. Let me stress that every group that gained state power harassed those who differed and persecuted dissenters. Let me mention just a few incidents.

Early Baptist dissenters in Europe often fled to England, but the established Anglican Church did not welcome them either. David Benedict in his book, A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World, recorded that a commission was issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury

in 1538 to "proceed against baptists and burn their books; and on the 16th of November in the same year, a royal proclamation was issued against them, and instructions went to the justices throughout England, directing them to see that the laws against the baptists were duly executed. Several were burnt to death in Smithfield, and of those who fled to foreign parts it is recorded that some were martyred. Brandt writes thus, in his history of the Reformation: "In the year 1539, thirty-one baptists, that fled from England, were put to death at Delft, in Holland; the men were beheaded, and the women drowned."

Protestants in Switzerland under John Calvin also demanded strict adherence to their beliefs. There were many people imprisoned and prosecuted there.

There were many other incidents of persecution in Europe. Eventually, in order to escape this state persecution, many refugees found their way to America, and the Puritans set up the colony of Massachusetts. Instead of tolerating other sects that moved there, the Puritans also demanded conformity. Roger Williams was expelled from the colony and established the first Baptist Church in the American colonies. The Quakers, however, were not so easily dealt with. They went to Massachusetts and preached their beliefs. They were threatened and ultimately many of them died for their beliefs.

Nearly every colony has its tales of religious persecution, as the established church sought confirmity and the dissenters were punished. The state and the religion were so intimately connected that no tolerance seemed possible.

The American Revolution set any number of forces into motion. The Revolution encouraged freedom on many levels, and one of these was in religion. The founding fathers, as I pointed out earlier, separated church from state.

One of the most noble expressions of this came in January 1786. This was the culmination of the fight in Virginia to end the established church. In 1777, during the Revolution, the liberals in the state succeeded in repealing the statutes requiring church attendance and universal support of the established church, but not until 1779 did the church become disestablished.

Even this did not satisfy Thomas Jefferson, who prepared a bill for absolute religious freedom and equality. Jefferson characterized his struggle for complete separation "the severest contest in which I have ever been engaged," and not until 1786 did this bill pass.

Thus, wrote James Madison, "in Virginia was extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind." Jefferson, of course, regarded this as one of his three memorable contributions to history.

I should also point out that states were left to their own devices to solve the problems of separation of religion and government on that level. Ultimately, thank goodness, all states opted to keep them separate and apart.

At the same time, the Christian beliefs of the founding fathers were obvious. That they separated religion from the state only proves that they were students of history, that they had learned from the heritage of the people who fled to America that once a religion gained power over the people it was likely to force itself on the remainder of the people. This country at its founding showed a maturity and an understanding of history. Even as we meet here, Christians in Russia, Baptists in Spain, and other denominations around the world find themselves persecuted for their beliefs.

At the same time that religion and state are separated in this country, we have a religious tradition that can be seen in everything from the motto on our coins, "In God We Trust," to our pledge of allegiance to the flag, to the fact that the President and other officers are sworn on a Bible. This reiterates that as much as we like to keep the state and the church apart, we nevertheless are likely to support candidates for office who are religious.

What I have tried to do by reviewing our early history is to point out the problems that have developed throughout history whenever church and state were united. Invariably, the dissenting minority was persecuted. Invariably, those in power concluded they were divinely inspired to the exclusion of all others and that to dissent was to commit heresy. Our founding fathers wisely avoided bequeathing us this tradition of intolerance. And we must be careful in our day not to yield to any voice which would preach intolerance and attempt to establish the church as a political instrument.

I, like you, am concerned about the problems in our society that need correcting. And as a politician and a Christian, I often turn to my religious beliefs in seeking solutions to problems. But I would not contend for one moment that because I have sought religious guidance and searched my heart, that others in good conscience should not disagree with me. I would not contend for one moment that because I feel I am led by moral and religious precepts that those who disagree are, therefore, immoral or irreligious. We all should have the right to follow the dictates of our consciences without being branded as heretics.

I want to make it clear that I'm not saying that we shouldn't apply our religious principles, or the principles of Christianity as we seek to find solutions to present day

problems. We certainly should. But what I am saying is that on matters upon which reasonable persons may differ, religion and church should not be used as justifications for dogmatic political positions propounded from the pulpit or condemnation of those who disagree.

Just as Gutenberg changed history with movable type, progress in the communications media is changing the way we worship. Through radio and television, the word can be sent into every home, and now even shut-ins and the elderly can share in a meaningful worship service. And there are great continuing media ministries.

But with every invention, there is the possibility of abuse. Demagoguery from the pulpit, I think you would agree, is not different from demagoguery on the campaign trail, on the floor of a legislative body, or on the street corner. If anything, it is worse to clothe oneself in self-righteousness or invoke the name of Christ or his church in an appeal to passions, prejudices, and irrationality.

We all know that fundraising by direct mail or through the media has become a science in our day and is equally effective in religion as in politics. It is probably far easier to fill the collection plate by television than by appeal in person to

your own congregation. Millions of dollars flow into media ministries each week, and, I hasten to add, I am sure much is spent wisely. But we should be vigilant and do what we can to insure that such funds, often from the widow's purse, are not used to advocate political beliefs, promote intolerance, and chill public debate by those claiming, as against all others, to be divinely guided.

The fact is that I happen to agree on many of the issues raised by these groups. Yet, I think that most of us would agree that the issues which appear to concern them are probably secular and not patently "religious," as they would have us believe and, in addition, matters upon which reasonable people in good conscience could disagree. On issues of conscience where reasonable people may disagree, I think that there is presently a critical need for tolerance, not condemnation, for rational public debate, not unreasoning pressures. And if we turn to the New Testament we find that it was Christ who in his day, time after time pleaded for tolerance and preached reason. Jesus chastised the Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites who tried to force their morality on all, who made a show of their praying and proclaimed their self-righteousness. And when a mob wanted to stone a prostitute he said that the person who was without sin should cast the first stone. He praised a "good Samaritan." He healed a Roman soldier's daughter. He called a taxcollector

dispsied by his neighbors, down from a tree and found in him some good. At every turn we find that Jesus tried to find good in people that society had scorned. He raised questions about the value of all people, and he condemned hatred and taught tolerance through example.

Suppose a "Christian Party" did win political power in this country and that religion and government became one. Suppose that those who did not agree with certain doctrines or issues, who did not measure up to a Morality Scale, could not gain election. Would our problems be solved? Would the politicians elected on a Morality Platform be any more capable of carrying out their promises than those elected on political issues? If a state morality should prevail, what would become of the dissenters? And if those who gained power should meet defeat, what would become of them? I think that the history of religious persecutions shows the answers to those questions. And that is why I think we must be constantly vigilant on the matter of separation of church and state.

The miracle of our form of government is that our Revolution evolved to a certain point, and after a great debate over the merits of our Constitution, we adopted it. We still live with it after almost two centuries. In a large measure we have learned from history. As George Santayana wrote, those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them.

So I am asking you, has the fertile ground that nourished tolerance and diversity and separation of church and state turned barren? Have we run the cycle of other governments? Are we getting closer to forsaking the wisdom of our founding fathers by mixing matters of conscience and matters of politics? I hope and pray not.

As we review the intolerance that led us to this land, and as we reflect on the current danger signals that could lead to a mixture of church and state, I urge you to cling to the simple traditions of our nation. There could never be, because of our basic beliefs, any union of church and state. In our modern world, however, there are temptations that border on establishing a national morality code. We are a nation of many religions composed of many nationalities. Our strength resides in our diversity--and in our tolerance. In matters on which reasonable people might disagree, a state dogma would be a violation of our basic religious and political beliefs.

Finally, allow me to quote from a historian who studied one of the most persecuted faiths, the Baptists. George W. Paschal wrote a half century ago, "The cardinal principles of the Baptists are also repugnant to the idea of a state church or to any union of church and state, since in matters religious every individual is responsible to God alone, and with this relationship the state has no right to meddle."