

## The Story of an Idea

Matthew 22:15-22

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

July 4, 2021

I want to tell you a story of an idea, an idea that has historically been the backbone of Baptist thinking about church and state, an idea that is one of the most powerful notions that undergird American democracy. It is a story rooted in the teachings of Jesus, hence it is a story appropriate for worship on July 4.

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'*

In the summer of 1995 I went to Regents Park College, Oxford University on a sabbatical. When you are on sabbatical, you are supposed to have a project to work on. I didn't have one. When I arrived, I was under pressure to come up with something to show for my time away from the church.

A day or so after arriving, I was given a tour of the archives of the College, which houses books from as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At one point, the archivist took a small book from the shelf and asked if the name Thomas Helwys rang a bell. I said that it did. I lied. It would have been more truthful if I had said, Maybe a distant bell, a tiny tinkle. She politely reminded me that though John Smith is credited with starting the first English-speaking Baptist church, Thomas Helwys founded the first Baptist church on English soil, in a part of London called Spitalfield.

And she said he wrote a book, the one she was holding in her hand, a book with the foreboding title, A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity. In that book he defended the highly controversial (at the time) notion of what was called liberty of conscience, but which we refer to as religious liberty. It was, the archivist said, the first book in English on the subject. It had been reprinted once, in 1935. But it had never been reprinted in a new edition.

The lights came on – I had a project: to produce a new edition of Helwys' book which I did.

There were only four first editions left – two in Regents Park's archives and one in the Bodleian Library, which serves all the colleges of Oxford with its 13 million books, and another, the whereabouts of which I don't recall. The archivist sold me a reprint for ten pounds. That is where I learned the story of the idea.

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Thomas Helwys was a layman, trained at the school that claimed Francis Bacon and William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, among their alums. Helwys was a

Separatist. Unlike the Puritans who were intent on purifying, reforming the Church of England, Separatists believed that it was beyond reformation. Believers should separate from the established church, hence the name. That was a dangerous idea to advocate, church and state being one. Helwys and several hundred others of like mind were living in exile in Amsterdam. That is where he wrote his book, advancing his controversial ideas.

For example, at a time when the liberal idea was toleration – that government allows or grants permission to minority views -- Helwys said that it was not up to government to tolerate or not to tolerate. *“Men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it.”* Religious matters were simply none of government’s business.

At a time when it was customary for the religion of the people to be determined by the religion of the monarch, Helwys declared that people *“should choose for themselves their religion, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgement seat of God to answer for themselves.”*

At a time when anti-Catholic sentiment was high, Helwys extended the right to choose one’s religion to those of the *“Romish religion.”* *“For we do freely profess that our lord the king has no more power over their consciences than over ours, and that is none at all.”*

Even more stunning, and more controversial, Helwys said that liberty of conscience is a human right, applying to all people, whatever their beliefs. *“Let them be heretics, Turks (Muslims), Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”*

I remind you that this was in 1612. Shakespeare was nearing the end of his career. To give you an idea how radical that last statement was, consider the following.

Regarding heretics – They actually had them in those days. Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman were burned at the stake for being heretics the year Helwys published his book.

Regarding Muslims -- When the Koran was published in England thirty-five years later, the House of Commons ordered the press ceased and the printer arrested.

Regarding Jews – There weren’t any in England in Helwys’ day, not legally anyway. Jews had been banned from England 325 years earlier. The ban was finally lifted forty years after Helwys’ book was published. Thomas Helwys was speaking up for the religious liberty of people who were not even allowed to live in the country at the time.

It was a dangerous book, especially for the author, and a dangerous idea as well.

His book finished, Thomas Helwys made three critical decisions. First, he decided to return to England. Under the circumstances, not a good idea. Second, he decided to publish his book – under his own name. An even worse idea. Third, he decided to send a copy of the first edition to the king with a note inside the front cover. A really bad idea. The note read in part:

*Hear O King and despise not the counsel of the poor and let their complaints come before you. The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them . . . .*

*God save the king, Spittalfield near London, Thomas Helwys*

We don't know whether King James received the book. and if he received it, if he read it. What we know is that Helwys was arrested and imprisoned in Newgate Prison in London and that four years later his wife was referred to in a legal document as his "widow." It is widely assumed that the book and the note sealed his fate.

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In the chapter in which Helwys makes his case for religious liberty he quotes various scriptures; the one he keeps coming back to is our text, the confrontation between Jesus and an odd coalition of Pharisees and Herodians.

The Pharisees we know from reading the Gospels. The Herodians do not appear in the Gospels. Evidently, they were supporters of the family of the late Herod the Great; one of Herod's sons was ruling in Galilee at the time.

The question put to Jesus – "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?*" – sounds innocent enough. The answer seems to be self-evident: of course, it is lawful to pay your taxes. But Jesus immediately recognized that it was a trap. Those were volatile times and the volatility centered around Rome's conquest of Palestine seventy-five years earlier. For some people, paying taxes was a symbol of Rome's hated presence.

Just 25-30 years earlier there had been a tax revolt in Galilee, which is where Jesus was from, led by Judas the Galilean, who proclaimed Palestine a Jewish state, and said its king was God. The Romans disagreed. The revolt came to nothing, and Judas was killed.

Memories of the bloodshed and the division it created in the community must have been fresh on people's minds.

Jesus knew that if he said that Jews should pay taxes to Rome, it would infuriate those who had supported the revolt and who continued to resent the Roman presence. But if he said that Jews should not pay taxes to Rome, because God was king and Jews owed everything to God and nothing to Rome, the Herodians, who had friends in high places, would have been incensed. It was a delicate and dangerous situation.

Jesus famously threaded the needle. He knew that in a difficult debate if you are offered two options, find a third, one that combines elements of the other two. Taking a coin, he asked whose head was on it and what the inscription said. The head was that of Emperor Tiberius and the inscription identified him as the "son of the divine Augustus," which was guaranteed to offend the fiercely monotheistic Jews. Then he said, "*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*" I like to imagine that he flipped the coin back to its owner.

Jesus' response got him off the hook, but it left questions unanswered. He clearly said that Jews should pay taxes to Rome. What else belonged to the state? And what belonged to God? How do decide? What do you do if there is conflict between what you owe to Caesar and what you owe to God? Issues we live with today.

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The takeaway for Thomas Helwys was the fundamental idea that there are some places in people's lives that do not belong to Caesar, places where Caesar has no business going, places that are not and cannot be governed by Caesar. Chief among those places is the relationship between people and God.

That basic insight was put into writing 25 years later on this side of the Atlantic in Roger William's better known The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience. (I am proud to say that Roger Williams was also a Baptist, though only for

about 30 minutes.) One hundred and twenty-five years later, under the influence of Baptists like John Leland, it made its way into the US Bill of Rights.

It was an insight that took institutional form in Baptist life in the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, whose first director was J.M. Dawson, Alice Baird's grandfather, to bring things back to Waco.

It was an idea whose time finally came in America, the first country to enshrine it in its founding documents.

But even in America it is an idea that must be continuously guarded, for there are always forces that would shove it aside in the name of national security. If banning an entire religion as England did by banning Jews for 350 years sounds unthinkable in our time, recall that the president of the United States tried to do the same thing a few years ago. Remember the Muslim ban?

It is an idea that we must put into practice in our own lives and communities, having the courage to stand up for and speak up for the freedom of "heretics, Turks, Jews and whatsoever."

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The week before my sabbatical ended, I went to the Bodleian Library to take a look at its first edition of Helwys' book. I gave to the librarian a card with the name of the book I wanted and waited for him to return. Momentarily, he came back and plopped the 400-year-old book down on the counter as if it were a dime novel. I took it to a carrel, opened it to the title page, and stared at it for a moment. The book I was holding in my hands was the very book Thomas Helwys sent to King James. There was the note in Helwys' own handwriting -- "*The king is a mortal man and not God and therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his people*"—words that may have got the author killed, words that voiced an idea whose time has come.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.