

The Moving Wall

By David Feddes

Let me tell you about an unusual wall. This wall was built to mark a boundary between two different areas, and it served a useful purpose. But then the wall began to do strange things, and it is still doing them. This wall won't stay in the same place; it keeps moving. And it won't remain the same height; it keeps getting higher. It may sound crazy that a wall would do such a thing. But that's exactly what the wall between church and state has been doing: it keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

This wall of separation was first built in the name of religious freedom. The basic idea was that the nation's government must not support or oppose any particular church or interfere with the free exercise of religion. It's not the church's job to run the government, and it's not the government's job to run the church. And so there may be wisdom in having some sort of wall or boundary between the responsibilities of government and the responsibilities of religious institutions.

The trouble is, the wall keeps moving. Government keeps moving the wall outward to include more territory for itself. Government keeps getting bigger and bigger, and it keeps taking on more and more responsibilities in almost every area of life.

What's more, as the wall moves, it keeps getting higher. Originally the wall of separation was supposed to prevent the government from persecuting any religion and from establishing any religious institution as the country's official religion. But lately the wall has grown higher and harder to climb over, so that it now prevents religious and moral influence from entering any sphere of life in which the government is involved.

As the government keeps moving the wall and making it higher, the inevitable result is that as the role of government grows, the role of religion shrinks. What's the government involved in these days? One thing it's doing is what governments throughout history have always done: making and enforcing laws to protect the general welfare. Laws against murder, stealing, pollution, and so forth are vital to the public good. But government has grown far beyond such things.

Growing Government

One area where the wall keeps moving is in government aid to the poor. What used to be a primary task of the church has largely been taken over by the government. As the government has moved the wall, it has also made it as high as possible. If a church runs a program for the poor and accepts government funds, it had better stick with material aid and not talk about God. Those who use government funds for a program must try to look and sound like they're atheists. The wall keeps moving and it keeps getting higher.

Government is also taking over more and more health care, and this involvement of government in medicine has consequences. Hospitals that are run by religious organizations have to be careful not to promote their faith if their hospital is receiving government grants. Clinics which treat addictions often use programs that emphasize God and spirituality, and such programs are far more effective than treatment programs which ignore God, but how can clinics mention God and still get public funds?

Another aspect of the government's involvement in health care is the abortion question. Many states and provinces aren't merely pro-choice; they're pro-abortion.

They don't merely permit abortions; they pay for them with taxpayer money. It's not just a matter of allowing individuals to choose abortion. It's a matter of all taxpayers being forced to help pay for abortion, even if we find abortion horrifying. Government doesn't just ignore religious convictions; it tramples on them.

Some in government would also like to use federal money to pay for researchers to experiment on human embryos and then destroy them. Many Christian citizens view such research as defying God and destroying humans, but those who don't mind destroying embryos think that faith has no business interfering with government-sponsored research. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

What else is the government involved in? Well, it regulates electronic communication, both in radio and television. Canada has laws regarding "balance" in broadcasting and has used these laws to exclude religious groups from owning and operating their own station promoting their own faith. The government won't permit a particular church to run its own network, but the government itself is involved in public broadcasting. Canadian officials have fined opponents of homosexuality and ruled that quoting Bible verses against homosexuality may be hate speech. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

Another area of government involvement is building codes and zoning laws. If a community tries to ban pornography, a court might overrule the community in the name of free expression. But if a person is building a new house, inspectors can require not only safe construction but also light fixtures in closets that don't need them, electrical outlets in places where they won't be used, and a host of other requirements at needless expense. Porn is a protected freedom; building a house the way you want it is not a protected freedom. Sometimes government laws prevent building churches in certain areas of town or prohibit large gatherings of people who might want to worship as a house church. As always, when church and state collide, the church must give way to the government's regulation. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

And there's more, much more. Government provides funding for the arts. If a church were to apply for a government grant to pay for a splendid new stained glass window by a Christian artist, separation of church and state would prevent such funding. But government money has supported some of the most disgusting, immoral, and anti-Christian art exhibits imaginable. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

When it is suggested that the government shouldn't be funding such projects, some artists howl censorship. But it's not censorship at all. The artists can say and do anything they want, but that's not enough to suit them. They don't just want the government to permit their filth; they want government to pay for it. Besides the controversy surrounding outrageous exhibits that received government funding, a more basic question is whether government should be involved in the arts in the first place. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

Another place government has taken over at the expense of religion is the public education system. It's illegal to have public prayers in the classroom or at a football game or at a graduation ceremony. After all, these are government schools, and state and church must remain separate. If you're a teacher, you'd better not pray in your public school classroom. You'd better not quote from the Bible. On the other hand, you may distribute condoms to kids, even if they come from a religious tradition that declares sex outside of marriage to be immoral.

I know a teenage girl who took a driver's education class at a public school where the instructor devoted part of his class time to saying how proud he was of his lesbian sister. It must be hard to slip an advertisement for homosexuality into a class on how to drive a car, but he found a way to do it. If he had used his public school classroom to boast of someone's love for Christ, he would have been in trouble. But praising lesbianism was fine. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

Government budgets keep growing, and as budgets grow, the wall keeps moving. The government not only concerns itself with basic legislation and law enforcement, but it's also deeply involved in banking and commerce, in welfare, in mandatory saving for retirement, in health care, in radio and television, in zoning and city planning, in the arts, in education, and who knows what else. The fact is that government is bigger than ever, and it's involved in more territory than ever. Wherever government goes, meaningful references to God are eliminated. The church has to stay out of everything the government is involved in, and since the government is involved in almost everything, the public role of faith is reduced to almost nothing. The wall keeps moving, and it keeps getting higher.

God and Caesar

You may be wondering whether I have any business talking about these things. After all, I'm a minister. Aren't ministers supposed to talk about things that are "private" and "personal" and "spiritual" and stay out of public affairs? Shouldn't I be offering a few inspirational ideas that help people feel closer to God? Shouldn't I be talking about the Bible instead of talking about politics?

Well, I often do talk about receiving eternal life in Jesus and getting close to God, but it's exactly *because* I teach the Bible that I have to talk about other things as well. The Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Everything! Biblical religion isn't just a warm feeling or a personal belief or a private relationship with God. It affects every part of our lives. If government keeps expanding its scope and keeps insisting on banning religious or moral influence from everything government touches, then it is on a collision course with God's authority. At the heart of the Christian faith is the confession, "Jesus is Lord." Jesus doesn't just claim a private little spot in our hearts; he lays claim to every part of our lives. God is too great to be confined to those few areas of life that government stays out of.

The idea of a wall of separation between church and state has been used to drive Christian faith and biblical principles from any area in which government is involved. And since government is becoming involved in almost everything, faith is allowed to affect almost nothing. Faith is treated as a private feeling that should be kept in a small corner. Before we sit back and accept this, and before we beg the government do even more for us, we need to think harder about the proper role of government and the limits of government.

Jesus was once asked whether it was right to pay taxes to the government. He replied, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Jesus didn't attack all government or say we shouldn't pay taxes. Government has its rightful place in God's plan for humanity. So don't become an anti-government fanatic. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's."

But also be sure to give God what is God's. Give government its due, but don't give it everything. Don't let the moving wall make you think that government has the right and responsibility to take charge of every area of life. And don't let the height of the wall make you think that government is one part of life where God doesn't belong or where his will doesn't matter. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but above all make sure to give God what is God's. Give the Lord your highest love and loyalty. Give him obedience in every aspect of life. When governing authorities promote things that are not in line with God's will, obey God, not man. And where government takes upon itself responsibilities that God hasn't given it at all, work to limit the size and power of government. Caesar is not God.

Government can go wrong in at least two ways. One is by taking action in an area that rightfully belongs to government but taking the wrong action. For example, it is right for a government to have a military and a police force, but it can go terribly wrong by using the military and police to bully and even butcher those who have committed no crime. When government does evil in areas of legitimate authority, the wall is too high, shutting out a moral sense that rulers are under a higher law and must answer to God himself for how they have used their power.

But there's a second way government can go wrong—not by doing evil in a rightful area of responsibility, but by trying to do good in areas that don't belong under government control at all. For example, the Bible clearly gives parents the responsibility for training and educating children. And yet education has become a multi-billion dollar government industry, all in the name of doing good for children. When the government tries to do good in areas that belong to some other institution, such as church or family, the wall has moved too much.

It can be hard to know exactly how God's will applies to a government's legitimate areas of responsibility, and it can be even harder to know whether the government should be involved in a certain area at all. Let's zero in on children and education.

Education Problems

Here's the question. If government-run schools have a problem, is it that the government is using its good and rightful authority in education to do some bad things? Or is it that the government shouldn't control education in the first place?

There's no doubt that government educators are doing some bad things. They teach subjects as though God is not even in the picture. They exclude prayer and Bible reading from the daily instruction of children. Indeed, they not only neglect the Bible but sometimes they blatantly contradict it. Listen to a manual for teachers of first grade students in government schools. The manual says, "Classes should include references to lesbian/gay people in all curricular areas... Challenging sexual myths can begin on the first day of school." That's in a manual for teaching *first graders*!

Nowadays it's okay for teachers to promote what is completely at odds with Christian teaching. But if you're a teacher and you tell your students that the Bible says, "God created man in his own image, male and female he created them," or say the Bible prohibits sex outside of marriage, you could get into big trouble for pushing a religious viewpoint.

A spokesman for the American Civil Liberties Union says that religion can do anything it pleases, except when it involves public funds. He says, "Watering at the public trough means you have to accept public water standards." Very cute—but what does he mean by "public water standards"? No religion, of course: conduct classes as though God does not exist and as though Jesus never lived. That's an odd approach to "public water standards," given the fact that in North America more than 90% of the people believe in God, and more than 80% say that Jesus is God or the Son of God. In a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," where only a tiny minority are agnostic or atheist, what gives the government the right to operate schools that exclude God?

If the government is going to run schools, a case could be made that those schools should encourage religion, since most citizens are at least somewhat religious. But rather than saying government-operated schools should promote religion, I'd like to raise the question whether the government should run schools at all. Maybe the main problem with public schools isn't just a mistake here or there in how government does its job in education; maybe the problem is that education isn't the government's job at all. It is the responsibility of parents. Education rightfully belongs in homes headed by the parents or in schools controlled by parents. Nowhere does the Bible give government the task of training and educating children.

Right now the only way many of us can educate our children in a Christian school or through home schooling is if we first pay taxes for the public school and then dig deeper into our pockets to pay for our children to get the schooling we really want for them. A great many parents do exactly that, and the number is growing every year. But what about those who don't have money to spare once they've paid all their taxes for public education? They may have little choice but to send their children to the public school.

A popular slogan among some in the public education monopoly is, "We oppose using public funds for private schools." That sounds sensible enough—until we remember that public funds are really private funds which the government has taken from private citizens by means of taxes. When the government sets out to "help families," it takes the private funds that belong to us, declares them to be public funds, and then tells us exactly what we can and can't do with that money. You may wonder why taxpayer money should support religious education. But since so many taxpayers are religious, maybe a better question is why does taxpayer money currently support atheist education?

Whose Children Are They?

What's happened in the public schools will happen if government gets involved in daycare. Obviously, if the government provides funding for day care, it has to get the money from somewhere. This means another tax increase, leaving government in control of more money and parents and grandparents in control of even less. The only way they'll see any of that money again is if they send their children to daycare which fits government standards and excludes religion.

Beware when politicians talk about helping families. What usually happens is that the money which once belonged to families ends up in the hands of the government through increased taxes. Then, in the name of separation of church and state, the

government won't give any of this money back to families who want to educate children in Christian truth and Christian morality. In other words, Caesar takes more and more of your money, and he won't allow you to benefit from it unless you do things his way. You'll never see your tax dollars for education again unless you send your children to Caesar's school. When Caesar offers to help, he also takes charge.

It's time to ask ourselves: Should we be giving our children to Caesar or to Jesus? To the government or to God? And should decisions concerning their welfare be controlled by politicians or by parents? If you're a Christian, the answer is clear: Your kids belong to you, and they belong to God. They are not children of the government.

So if you're at all able, send your children to a school that teaches "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," or teach them yourself at home. If Christian schooling or home schooling isn't a possibility in your situation, and you feel you have absolutely no choice but the public school, then be involved in your children's education. Don't let that moving, growing wall keep you out of your child's learning. Don't let it keep the Lord out of your child's thinking. Stay on top of what your kids are learning. Show them what the Bible says about it. And don't be afraid to cause a stir when you see the teaching of anti-Christian values at their school. Your children are yours, not the government's. Make your parental influence count wherever you can.

Meanwhile, before it's too late, we as citizens need to resist any trend which stifles our ability to live out our faith. Let's beware of that moving, growing wall. Let's watch out for anything that makes us more and more children of the government, and less and less children of God who are free to follow where he leads. We need to keep asking: Is the government involved in areas it should stay out of entirely? And if it does have a certain level of involvement in things like day care, education, welfare, health care, economic development, and so forth, does government funding have to mean government control? Does freedom *of* religion have to mean freedom *from* religion?

If the wall between church and state needs to form a boundary of sorts, does it really have to keep moving, constantly giving more territory to the government? And does it have to keep getting higher, separating public policy from the convictions of the huge majority of people who claim to believe in God? That's not even democratic, let alone Christian.

The government must not be allowed to take over the rightful authority of the family and the church. Let's not think that faith is limited to our private opinions and feelings. Biblical religion is at work where the rubber hits the road. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. Jesus is Lord of all. That's why we need the freedom to put our faith into practice, to live every part of life the way Jesus wants us to, and to train our children to do the same. So give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's.

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