

Five different lenses for reading "render unto Caesar"

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue



Tiberius on a Denarius. [Some rights reserved](#) by [CNG Coins](#).

It's been widely assumed that a political ethic can be read in Jesus' answer to "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" and that the social location of the conversation can be ignored or considered irrelevant. But only the most interiorized notion of discipleship can be indifferent to the social circumstances in which discipleship is embodied. I want to describe five possible contexts in which this dialogue might be read, and trace how the story may be read with differing emphasis in each one.

*A minority community under an oppressive regime.* This is the original context of the exchange. There are three interlocutors: the Herodians, happy to do the dirty work for the Roman regime and cream off some of the profits while preserving a puppet Jewish presence in positions of power; the Pharisees, more given to pursuing holiness for the Jewish people as a whole and less inclined to disturb the Roman-dominated political status quo; and Jesus, apparently set on transforming both the

political and religious establishment by accepting the titles Son of David and Son of God. Under an oppressive regime, Jesus' answer, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," is ironic: it highlights that in a world where the Roman emperor thinks everything is his, Jesus insists that everything is God's. Nothing can be the emperor's without being first and always God's too. So for Christians to pay taxes is not a grudging, resentful recognition that they have no choice, but a hopeful epiphany of God's sovereignty and a statement that, although the emperor might mean it for evil, God doubtless will mean it for good. Don't let the fear of Caesar obscure the wonder of God.

*A minority community in a "failed" state or in circumstances in which conventional law and order is in abeyance or has broken down.* If we ignore this context, we won't understand how Christian political theology took shape. Contemporary Somalia or Afghanistan, and other places in political chaos, are not easy places to find or express love, joy and peace. In such contexts the irony of Jesus' comments is largely lost: what remains is the conviction that Christians have a stake in and a duty to the state because without a minimum of order few things of value in God's creation can flourish. These are perhaps the only circumstances in which Luther's two kingdoms notion—wherein God functions right-handedly through grace and the church, and left-handedly through law and the state—needs a greater hearing. Don't let rendering to God make you forget Caesar altogether.

*A minority community under a regime that is not oppressing the community but is, the community believes, oppressing other social groups or nations.* This activist view of America sees the federal government through the lens of Guantánamo, the School of the Americas, and truancy from Kyoto. Jesus' words become especially significant if one attempts to calculate the percentage of one's taxes that will be used, say, on nuclear weapons and works out a way of withholding that percentage. This maintains the ironic dimension of Jesus' words by perceiving the majority of one's tax contribution as "giving to God" but assuming that funding nuclear weapons could never be regarded as a gift to God. This approach puts a very high value on keeping a clean individual conscience, but a low value on trusting the organic deliberative role of the state and its officers. Don't let faith in God make you lose all faith in Caesar.

*A nominally majority community with access to a regime that sees itself as having a divine mandate.* This is my understanding of the current American context. The rhetoric of this context, that only a strong America prevents the world from lapsing

into chaos, invites citizens to buy into a divine (or at least salvific) mission that has to be named as idolatry. Here again the ironic note of Jesus' appeal to what is owed to God is vital. Service to America is not identical to service to God. Loyalty to one's place of birth and ties of national belonging are healthy but limited; loyalty to God is absolute. Don't let rendering to Caesar stop you from rendering to God.

*A minority presence in an ordered state, where the state has limited notions of its ability to carry out a noble mission.* It's foolish to think in terms of an ideal state in which to be a Christian, but if a state is well ordered but open to constructive contributions and friendly criticism from Christians and the church, then it seems possible to imagine some of the irony of Jesus' words being withdrawn. Then rendering to Caesar is an aspect of, but by no means a substitute for, rendering to God. When Christians seek the welfare of the present city but also of the city that is to come, taxes are a statement of common humanity and collective trust: a form of ordinary rendition.