

The things that are God's

The coin bears Caesar's likeness and inscription. What bears God's?

by [David T. Ball](#) in the [November 11, 1998](#) issue

Though I grew up during the civil unrest and cultural change that marked the '60s and '70s, my middle-American, middle-class, mainstream-Christian upbringing still led me to assume that patriotism and Christian discipleship were highly compatible, mutually reinforcing commitments. They seemed two sides of the same coin--the coin that represented the most important values I was assimilating in middle school and high school.

Last summer I celebrated the Fourth of July on Saturday, teaching my children, nieces and nephews to stand for the flag when it went by in the annual parade. The next day, I preached at a Baptist church. I was an enthusiastic patriot one day, a committed disciple the next. Nothing, it seemed, had changed.

My background and weekend experiences may seem so common as to be unworthy of further reflection. But over the centuries, people have rarely been able to be both patriots and committed Christians. Early Christians were persecuted, we recall. They could be asked to swear an oath of loyalty to the Roman emperor and punished if they refused to do so. To express allegiance to an emperor who claimed to be divine, however, betrayed their monotheistic beliefs. They had to choose between patriotism and discipleship.

The persecution of Christians, often by other Christians, was all too common in the following centuries. Indeed, many early American colonists came seeking refuge from it. In an effort to ensure that our new nation would remain a safe haven for people of faith, Thomas Jefferson spoke of the need for a "wall of separation" between church and state. Unfortunately, this very good idea that the two institutions be kept separate has been taken to mean that our Christian discipleship and our patriotism are also to be lived out separately. We tend to view our civil and religious obligations and commitments as coexisting in separate spheres or, worse

yet, in tidy boxes.

Theologians, biblical scholars and preachers have reinforced this view by the way they interpret the "Render to Caesar" passage in the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-27; Luke 20:20-26). Jesus' snappy rejoinder to the question about paying taxes--"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"--is often taken to mean that patriotism and discipleship have separate claims on our lives, and that there is no relationship between the two. This interpretation is mistaken. The key to a proper understanding of the passage lies in Jesus' use of the coin in the verses that intervene between the initial question posed to him and his eventual reply.

Jesus' questioners ask, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" Jesus does not answer right away. Instead, he counters with the question, "Why are you putting me to the test?" He then requests, "Bring me a denarius and let me see it." When Jesus receives the coin he asks a second counterquestion: "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" The questioners answer, "Caesar's." Now Jesus responds to the original question, but more in the form of a rejoinder: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

What, then, are the "things that are God's," in light of Jesus' reference to the denarius? If coins are "things that are Caesar's" because they bear Caesar's "likeness and inscription," we must ask, What bears God's likeness and inscription? Surely those are things that must be rendered to God.

Of course, the things that bear God's likeness are not "things" at all. It is human beings who bear God's likeness, who are created in God's image. And we also bear God's inscription, for God's law is written between our eyes, that it may be in our mouth (Exod. 13:9). Jesus' saying means, then, that while we may be obligated to pay taxes, such duties are encompassed within the larger obligation to render our very lives, our whole selves, to God.

The relationship between patriotism and discipleship is not, then, entirely harmonious (my adolescent "two sides of the same coin" understanding). But neither can we say that the two spheres do not overlap. Rather, our discipleship obligations trump those of our patriotism. Jesus calls us to live first and foremost as disciples, rendering ourselves to God and fulfilling civil obligations within that context.

What kind of connection would Jesus have seen between patriotism and discipleship for Christians living in the U.S. in the final years of the second millennium? We can take a cue from his attitude toward his own national holiday, the Jewish Passover, a celebration of Israel's liberation from slavery. Jesus and his disciples celebrated Passover in Jerusalem during the final days of his life. During the holiday meal, he began to speak about events to come, about his impending suffering and death. He spoke of the symbolism of the bread and wine on the table. While celebrating Passover, Jesus also transformed it. The question for us, then, is how we will transform civic holidays into something meaningful to us as disciples.

"Religion and the Founding of the American Republic," a Library of Congress exhibit currently touring the U.S., demonstrates a striking contrast between our founders' rich, multifaceted understanding of what it means to be an American and our own. The primary emphasis in current celebrations of the Fourth of July is on our pride in being Americans, just as the primary emphasis of our foreign policy is on our national interest. But in the exhibit, pride and national interest are far less apparent than are the founders' concerns about our shortcomings as a nation. Motivated by this concern, early presidents periodically declared a national day of fasting and repentance. Our early leaders strove to bring the nation's course into line with God's purposes.

Those early days of fasting and repentance eventually evolved into our Thanksgiving holiday. Today, at Thanksgiving Christians do remember to give thanks. How little we attend, however, to the holiday's origins in reflection on national shortcomings and on ways to live more faithfully.

National holidays like the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving can continue to be days for pride and thanksgiving, but they need to include some soul searching about the challenges that face us, and about how we as Christian disciples and patriots might respond to those challenges. Let us emulate the deeper piety of our founders and reflect on what God is calling our nation to do, this day, this year, in the new millennium. Let us ask whether we are living up to our calling as a nation, or whether we are instead only building up our sense of pride by pursuing our limited national interests.