When church and state are separate, the church can provide the moral norms.

The Election Sermon: Sample and Symbol

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On May 2, 1638, the Reverend Thomas Shepard preached before the assembled magistrates of Massachusetts. It was the day for the annual organization of the provincial government under governor, assistants, and the deputies elected from the several towns. All officers of government, together with a company of the freemen, clergy, and laity, gathered together in a place of worship before government adjourned to the legislative hall, that the community might consecrate a time to a gala spectacle of faith and freedom met under God to celebrate the blessings of government and ponder its meaning. The practice, which began in 1634 (though Shepard’s sermon is the earliest extant), became generally common in New England and survived beyond the middle of the nineteenth century. It was a peculiar and characteristic contribution to public life as envisioned by the earliest settlers on the New England coast.

Thomas Shepard himself deserves a word. He, with John Harvard, was among the approximately one hundred Cambridge men who emigrated to New England in the first ten or a dozen years after its settlement. He was founder and first pastor of the Church at Newtowne, officially renamed Cambridge on the very day of this sermon by the General Court which attended the preaching. He was an active founder of Harvard. It is said that the site was chosen partly on account of the presence there of Shepard. Cotton Mather in the Magnalia calls Shepard the “Pastor Evangelicus.” Jonathan Edwards in his Treatise on the Religious Affections finds more than half his quotations in the works
of Shepard. “This liberty [wrote Shepard] hath been taken to be and thankfully received of God.” We have an association with Shepard, unknown to his contemporaries. His descendant in the sixth generation was John Adams, an architect of our national independence, ambassador abroad, and President of the United States.

The Election Sermon enshrines a basic concept of Christianity. It was a feature of the thought of the Reformers, namely that the Word of God has a normative authority for both faith and practice, thought and conduct. The Reformers emphasized this in the centrality which they gave to the pulpit, ideally and architecturally; in the eminence which they assigned it both spiritually and in the height which it occupied above the pews. It all spoke the importance of the ministry of the Word as well as of the Sacraments.

It is well to recall that this emphasis was not forgotten by the Church of Rome. The Council of Trent which rebutted some of the grand particularities of faith as expressed by the Reformers, also curbed the vicious practice of pluralities, absenteeism among bishops from their sees, and the general lapse that custom had brought about in the ministry of the Church. And as recently as 1920 the Encyclical “Spiritus Paraclitus” of Pope Benedict XV has these words: “Our one desire for all the Church’s children is that, being saturated with the Bible, they may arrive at the all-surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ.” Earlier in the message are the words: “None can fail to see what profit and sweet tranquility must result in well-disposed souls from such devout reading of the Bible. Whoever come to it in piety, faith and humility and with a determination to make progress in it, will assuredly find therein and will eat the ‘bread that comes down from heaven’ (John 6:50).” The Reformation marches on.

In 1695 the Reverend Increase Mather wrote: “Had the sees of England, fourscore years ago, been filled with such Arch-Bishops, and Bishops, as those which King William (whom God grant long to live and to reign) has preferred to Episcopal dignity, there had never been a New-England.” Had Pope Julius II been moved to write as did Benedict XV . . . . Possibly Mather was over-sanguine.

It is a happy circumstance that Thomas Shepard chose for the text of his Election Day Sermon these words of Holy Writ: “Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou and reign over us” (Judges 9:14). It embodies the essence of the continual threat to bodies politic to miss the olive, the fig, and the vine and get the scratches and hot fire of the bramble. Shepard had a case in point that spring day in 1638. The preceding August had seen the departure of a young man who had been hastily elected governor for one year. As the Reverend William Hubbard of Ipswich, Harvard Class of 1642, testified: It brought many clouds and threatening storms for both ecclesiastical and civil order. The freemen took great offense at Henry Vane’s management and after his departure made an order that no man who had not resided in the colony for a year was to be eligible for the office of governor. Henry Vane Senior was a Privy Councillor of King Charles I and entertained a very dim view of New England. Young Harry, back from France, and converted to a deeper view of life, had cut off his curls and wanted to go out to New England. King Charles encouraged him, in fact ordered his father to give his consent. Young Vane’s enthusiastic espousal of the radical mood in Massachusetts failed to win enough friends or influence the right people, so Vane returned to England where he took a leading-role in the great affairs of the next twenty five years. He died by the axe
on Tower Hill in 1662 after Charles II was safely on the throne of his father.

One priceless sentence which shines out from this old sermon ought to be remembered. It is a distillation of sound words which becomes timeless and of constant usefulness. Shepard said, "When laws rule, men do not." That is the gist of safe government in 1638 or 1959. Edward Hyde, Lord Clarendon, stood shoulder to shoulder with Hampden and Pym in the Parliament until Parliament enacted its own permanent perpetuation. Most of the details of government as constructed by the delegates first to the Continental Congress, and later to the Constitutional Convention, reflect the events which transpired in England between 1640 and 1660. Reading Clarendon’s History of the Rebellion, one can check with a pencil on the margin, point by point, the devices incorporated in our fundamental documents from exigencies of misrule which occurred across the ocean more than a century before.

“When laws rule, men do not.” The great defense against encroachment on life, liberty, and property has been the written law. To be sure there are “strict constructionists” and “loose constructionists,” but both are dedicated to an interpretation of the written word, and are not simply political or economic philosophers turned adrift on a sea of speculation.

Undoubtedly philosophy does influence legal opinion, and the history of the courts is, in a real sense, the history of the pressures of the electorate, but the principle of checks and balances offers a mechanism of reflection which forbids the effects of a mood to affect the lives of millions before time has been allowed for suitable formulation, enactment, and judicial review. Even constitutional amendment is possible, and was so provided at the beginning, but by a particular procedure which of itself slows the change, and alerts the whole people to the particular matter which is in agitation. “When laws rule, men do not.” Bodies ecclesiastic as well as bodies politic do well to remember this: “When laws rule, men do not.” The whole goal of Christians, some who were reformers long before the Reformation, some who did not actually come over into the Reformed Church but remained in the Unreformed Church and helped influence the Council of Trent in certain steps of reform, and some who were out-and-out reformers, separated or thrust out of the Old Church—all had as an end of their endeavors the desire to bring the Church to a closer parallel with the Scriptures in matters spiritual and formal. It was and is a constitutional movement. Moreover the number of these people is far higher than is realized. They are present in every communion of Christians. The first effort of a new group is to explain its foundation on the Bible even as in Rome the dome of St. Peter’s is decorated by the words of Scripture.

Now all communions too often succumb to the temptation to give up the olive, the fig, and the vine for the thorny bramble. One can think of so many instances. There were the violent quarrels in the Old Church, involving one who bore the name of the present Pope, John XXIII. There have been reckless adventures like the effort to force Presbyterianism on England, and compel Charles II to sign the Solemn League and Covenant. New England caused one man to muse sadly on his leaving “my lords the bishops for my lords the brethren.” No group, not even a group of Christians seems to be entirely safe from excess, given absolute power to act.

Most of the damage could be avoided if these groups were content with less glory of conquest. The best alternative to many a bad move would be just no move at all.
One of the bitterest (and bloody too) controversies in seventeenth-century Britain concerned “things indifferent in themselves”—certain postures of the body, garments on the ministering clergyman, and set forms of worship. One side refused *in toto* (inconsistent with the conviction that the matter was indifferent) and the other side insisted *à outrance* (also inconsistent with the stipulation that the matters were indifferent). If one party had remembered the dispensation given to Naaman’s servant, to bow betimes in the House of Rimmon, and the other side had closed the charitable eye on some omissions hard to accept by a weak conscience, lives would have been saved, families made happy, and Christians would have been seen living together in concord, as both sides prayed that Christians should.

The Election Sermons were samples of Scriptural applications to current social, political, and economic needs. Lord Acton said of Constantine that he seized upon Christianity and tried “to make the Church serve as a gilded crutch for absolutism.” Modern ecclesiastical bodies often unwisely yearn to do the same thing. Churchmen as well as politicians want to achieve a kind of absolutism which is most destructive to both faith and practice. The Election Sermons were a vastly wiser method. There was no pressure behind them beyond the wisdom of the utterance coupled with the dignity of the speaker. The magistrates walked out of the place of worship to their public duties, just as worshippers leave the sanctuary week by week to enter upon their vocations. They have their consciences stirred, their minds informed, and then take up the duties involved in their calling.

That is the way to keep the church out of politics and politics out of the church.