

Text *Philemon 1:8-9* . . .though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.

The Two Faces of Faith: Command v Love

Paul's definition of faith is powerful: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1-3) Faith makes us strong, but it also makes us vulnerable. Being vulnerable is not bad, but it should make us cautious. This is particularly true when our faith is linked to commands.

Faith and command: Sometimes we are the ones doing the linking. We may not use the word command, but that may well be the reality if we should listen to our own words. "My faith tells me that you are wrong." Or, "Those of us who are among the faithful know that. . ." Fill in the blank with your favorite belief that you are placing on others to obey. This is the weaponization of faith. It is commanding obedience based on the faith that you hold. It may work with our children, if only for a time, but it is a sure way to destroy interpersonal relationships among adults. When I fall off the wagon of rationality, my wife brings me back to reality by saying "I thought that you were a political scientist, who made you a professor of theology?" That is usually enough to stop my pontificating. Pope Munro has a really short lifespan! When as individuals we use our faith as the basis for issuing commands, we are falling short of living our faith, but we are harming only our immediate victims.

When organized "others" weaponize their faith, they tend to do much more harm. For the last several years the Episcopal Church has been particularly concerned about Christian Nationalism. On the surface, what is there to object to? We certainly all love both Christ and our country. It is only when they are put together that the resulting Christian Nationalism becomes a threat to both our religion and our country.

A threat to our religion because it is usually based on a view of the *Bible* as inerrant. As it is currently used biblical inerrancy means that the *Bible* is without error or contradictions. In practice believers in biblical inerrancy tend to emphasize the Old Testament with its' focus on law, obedience, the exclusiveness of God's relationships to humankind and literalness. This results in religious

organizations that are very judgmental and moralistic, certain that their faith-based view is not only the only one, but the only one that should be tolerated. They command obedience to their world and religious view.

This is combined with a view of nationalism that identifies the U.S. as an exceptional country immune from international law and destined to lead all other countries to either our view of the world order or to subservience to us. "It is God's will", becomes the ultimate rationale for every public policy. Since God is eternal and always right, it makes all dissenters anti-god and deserving of correction or elimination. One's country is not the biblical "golden calf". We love our country, but we worship God.

It becomes pretty obvious why our founding fathers erected a wall between church and state. The founders came from differing religious and non-religious backgrounds and knew first-hand how impossible it would be to create a unified, but pluralistic, country if religion directly determined national policy. Paul's advice in Colossians (2:8) is well taken: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy."

Faith and love: Let us not forget Paul's positive message: "I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love." Goodbye Old Testament, hello Jesus and His message of love. There are still problems to be solved, directions to be given, orders to be heard, even discipline to be applied – but all on the basis of love. Paul is a practical person, both lawyer and tent maker. He tells us what love is:

"Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (*1 Corinthians 13:4-7*)

We often find it difficult to apply love-based decision making to the church. All of us know how much more difficult it is to apply it to civil society. And yet, we must. Faith creates duty. It is to duty we must respond. Whether by command or by love the choice is ours. Amen