

Death and Taxes

Intending to entrap him, some of Jesus' detractors pose to him the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Answer yes, and he may discredit himself with the many Jews who chafe under Roman occupation. Answer no, and the Roman authorities may take him for a rebel or subversive. Following a brief exchange with his interlocutors, with connotations too rich to explore here, Jesus answers with a subtlety lost on most interpreters: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Conventional interpreters take this to be a declaration of parallel and non-conflicting claims. Caesar rightly has claims upon his subjects, and these should be met. God commands another sphere of human activity and loyalty, and God's claims should also be met.

In fact, Jesus does not spell out what things belong to Caesar or what to God. However, his Jewish audience would have understood that all things rightly belong to God. The claims of Caesar, if valid at all, must be judged as subordinate to the claims of God.

One could make a very compelling case for tax resistance based on this word from Jesus. Indeed, throughout history some Christians have been opposed to state taxation. Nonetheless, I find it impossible to make an absolute case against paying taxes. But I find it reasonable to make a case against paying taxes that support those expenditures of the state that seem opposed to any conceivable divine purpose.

Sadly, there's little consensus about which expenditures those are. I think it would be just and right to withhold taxes that support most military ventures, though I've never had the courage of my convictions on this score. I'm aware, however, that the worshipper in the next row, or in the congregation down the road, may think that paying taxes to fund most abortions is wrong. Maybe we're both right!

Anyway, I have no problem, morally speaking, in paying taxes to fund social and human services, including education, job training, Head Start, day care, low-cost housing, occupational safety, environmental protections, food stamps, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. I hate paying taxes that will be used for oppressing and killing people, and recognize that I am quite possibly wrong in doing so.

The linkage of "death and taxes" in our day is quite different from what Benjamin Franklin had in mind. How very tragic.

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