

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Summer 1986 No. 21

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

LETTER FROM AMERICA – THE ORIGIN AND RESULTS OF DISESTABLISHMENT

By E. A. Powell

It has become apparent from reading the *Church Times* and other publications from England that disestablishment of the Church of England is a burning issue. Those in favour of disestablishment think that it will breed new life and a new spirit in an otherwise tottering institution. These persons point to the experience of the United States, somehow sensing that separation of church and state in the States is the reason for the large number of persons that can be found in a place of worship on any given Sunday and the evangelistic enterprises that flourish here. But being on this side of the Atlantic I wonder if this ‘new spirit’ is really the spirit of Christ and whether disestablishment is any thing but a disease.

Origin of Disestablishment

What few Englishmen or Americans realize is that disestablishment was not an issue at the time of the American revolution or the framing of the United States Constitution and later the Bill of Rights. The first article of our constitution prohibits the Federal or Central government from establishing or recognizing one church over another but did not prohibit the state from maintaining their own established churches. In fact, it was the radical deists, such as Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin and Unitarians such as John and Sam Adams, who promoted the idea of disestablishment. The orthodox Christians, men like Patrick Henry and George Washington, were opposed to such radical measures. Washington’s views were that public confession ought to be followed by public support, words that the great English statesman Sir Robert Peel would later reiterate when it was proposed that the test acts be repealed.

The radicals eventually achieved their first goal when in 1848 Massachusetts became the last state in the Union to disestablish its church. This, however, did not mean separation of religion and state and it was still considered by all persons of any knowledge that the United States was still a Christian nation and ruled by Christian precepts. In fact, the United States Supreme Court, in ruling against the polygamy practices of the Mormon Church in the Utah territory, expressly stated that, although the United States had no established church, it was nevertheless a Christian nation and hence the Mormons had to conform to Christian practices as required by the Congress of the United States.

Results of Disestablishment

What disestablishment eventually did was provide for equal recognition of all religions before the bar of public opinion. After all, if no church should be recognized as an established institution neither could the moral laws that should govern both church and state be recognized as binding upon the state. This means that the state must not recognize any religious precepts over another and this has brought us to our present state of dark despair in this country. What we have here is, not separation of church and state, but separation of religion and state. All religions and their moral laws are equal before the law and all must conform themselves to the laws of the state. Hence, there cannot be any prayer in public schools, no manger scenes in public parks or other public spaces, no prayers by a public official recognizing Christ unless He is put into the same category as other religious figures, no argument from a Biblical point of view in a legislative hell on such issues as abortion, and on and on.

Worse than all this, however, is the fact that such equality of all religions in an irreligious

environment promotes the growth of cults and other anti-christian groups. In California alone there are over 22 recognised cults that have the same status (tax-exemption, etc.) as those who claim to be orthodox Christians. On any given Sunday 56% of the people in this country can be found in a place of worship but how many are really Christian no pollster has been able to determine.

I know of one preacher who has served under both established and disestablished systems and, although the established churches have a great many problems he thinks that the disestablished churches are in far worse condition. They separate the Christian faith from the public area and promote the most base elements in society. Instead of eliminating problems disestablishment radically compounds them by eventually divorcing religion and the state which must eventually lead to the destruction of the Christian moral foundation upon which the state must rest if man is to live in a free society.

E. A. Powell is a lay preacher and vestryman of Trinity Reformed Episcopal Church, North Hollywood.