

Sermon: Give to God things that are God's

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, October 18, 2026)

Quebec's Bill-21, an Act respecting the laicity (or secularism) of the State, is currently facing a major constitutional challenge at the Supreme Court of Canada. First passed in June of 2019, the Bill bans public sector employees in positions of authority—including teachers, police officers, and judges—from wearing religious symbols at work. The Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government, which was recently defeated in Quebec's general election, presented the bill as a reasonable compromise, as a culmination of a longstanding debate about secularism in Quebec.

However, it generated outrage right away from civil rights groups and religious organizations, as the law clearly violates freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and equality rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Bill also disproportionately disadvantages Muslim minorities, restricting them from participating fully in public sector employment.

Knowing that it would be challenged in courts, the CAQ government wrote into the Bill a novelty—a preemptive invocation of the not-withstanding clause. The not-withstanding clause provides provinces with a sort of legal escape hatch, that is if courts determine a particular piece of legislation violates the Charter, provinces can decide to invoke the clause and adopt the legislation anyway. The original intention was to only use it in the most extreme situations, and it has a five-year sun-set limit. In Bill-21, that five-year window was supposed to have expired, but it has since been renewed for another five-year (My guess is the sun will never set with Bill-21).

While the pre-emptive invocation of the clause hasn't prevented legal challenges, it has nevertheless allowed Bill-21 to survive them in lower courts. This has embolden not just the Quebec government, but Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario as well, in pre-emptively invoking the not-withstanding clause for a series of legislations covering secularism, language, restriction of rights for trans people, and stopping strike at schools.

The current debate at the Supreme Court is no longer about whether teachers can wear hijabs in the classroom in Quebec, it has become a fight over who gets the final say when deciding basic questions of rights and

freedoms in Canada: courts or elected legislatures. It goes without saying, this has enormous implications for the country as a whole, from coast to coast, for years to come. We see this in the large number of intervenors of this debate—including English Montreal School Board, the World Sikh Organization of Canada, the National Council of Canadian Muslims, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Attorney General of Canada, and various provincial governments, just to name a few. All in all, 51 groups and individuals have obtained intervenor status with the Supreme Court in the debate over Bill 21.

I would note that our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, is not one of them, nor is the Canadian Council of Churches, the umbrella organization covering all Christian denominations in Canada. Which prompts the question of ‘why not?’ Why wouldn’t the PCC intervene in this debate of a bill that is clearly ill-conceived, harmful and unjust? Shouldn’t all Christians have the right, the obligation to call on the State to be righteous and just?

In our Scripture reading this morning, we come to this phrase, uttered by Jesus no less, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) This phrase, on the first glance, seems to suggest a separation of the sphere of the Church and of the State. The separation of Church and State, as a concept was first conceived by the founding fathers of the U.S. Constitution, as a way by which religious minorities would be protected from excessive state interference. It is often misunderstood, even till this day, as that religion has no business in the affairs of the state.

The debate between Jesus and the religious authorities of his days, came out of the Pharisees, going out of their ways to entrap Jesus in his words. They and the Herodians came to Jesus, flattered him first by saying, in verse 16, “*Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality.*”

First, I must say this strange alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians is quite unusual, for they did not get along at all. No, let me rephrase that: they hated each others’ guts. This really is a most unnatural alliance, born out of ‘the enemy of my enemy is now my friend’ situation.

The entrapment they laid was simple and brilliant, “*Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*” (v.17) The question puts Jesus in a no win situation. No matter how he answers, he will get into

trouble. If he says yes, pay taxes to Caesar, it would likely displease the average Jewish people, and certainly the more zealous types who wouldn't mind taking up arms against the Roman Empire. Presumably a few of Jesus' own disciples would be counted among those. However, if he says no, do not pay taxes to Caesar. Then it would be reported to the Roman authority as a seditious statement from a unruly and uncredited rabbi/prophet, who maybe fanning the flames of discontent against imperial rule.

But, Jesus knew they were up to no good. So upon demonstrating the engraving on a silver piece, which clearly showed the face of Caesar, he concluded with the statement, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." To such a clear and cleaver response, the Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads, embarrassed yet again.

The meaning of this response is not in dispute—taxes were paid in Roman coins bearing the image of Caesar, thus belonging to Caesar. And give to God what belongs to God. The question that I have, that we should all be asking is this: What exactly is God's? What belongs to God?

Well, everything I suppose. Especially in light of the creation account in Genesis, particularly in 1:27, "*So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*" As well as in 2:7, "*And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*" We can say that we, that is the humanity and the earth and all the cosmos are all God's creation, God's magnificent work. We are all God's; we belong to God.

Seeing in such light, our civic duty, our politics are only a small part of the totality that is us. Yet, we the faithful Christians are guided by our faith, to protect the weak, to help our neighbours, and to give voice to the voiceless. With compassion and tolerance, we gather those at the margin to the centre, and show them that they are part of God's creation, they are good and precious before the Father in Heaven.

Seeing in such light, faithful Christian have a duty to speak up, to intervene in the current debate of Bill 21, not against the use of non-withstanding clause, which is really a Canadian constitutional oddity, but against the entire enterprise of Quebec's brand of secularism which utilizes its state authorities to repeatedly trample on the rights of religious and linguistic minorities within that province. We are all part of God's

creation. In the image of God we are created. We belong to God; all things belong to God, even authorities and powers and principalities.

Tucked in the Appendix E of the Book of Forms, the guiding principles of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, is this little known, little discussed document called “Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation”. It is part of our subordinate standards, along with the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Living Faith (Foi Vivante), which in the layman’s term means we believe it to be true enough, subordinate only to that of the Holy Scripture. I call this document little known and little discussed because it is dated to 1955 (back some 70 years ago). Other than occasionally invoked during ordination vows, this document is hardly mentioned, which is a shame, because it outlines perfectly the relationship between Church and State.

The document first declares the lordship of Jesus Christ in both Church and State. It defines the functions of the Church, which is to serve Christ in the administration of the word, the sacraments, and life of faith enriched by love. It outlines the function of the State, which is to administer Christ’s justice and benevolence by promoting the well-being of all its citizens. I won’t go into all the details of this short document, but will simply read the last two paragraph as conclusion to this sermon:

“During the present age, while the Lordship of Christ is not yet openly disclosed nor perfectly acknowledged, men are beset by sin in every private and public relation. Our existence in this world is continually threatened by anxiety, covetousness, imperfect justice, and proneness to corruption. The Civil State and the Church are constantly in need of reformation by the Word of God. Wherefore it behooves all civil and ecclesiastical persons to seek the grace of Christ without which they cannot rightly know or do his will.”

“The Lordship of Christ, in the midst of the evil and sorrow of this present world, must be discerned by faith, with the full assurance of our hope in Him. He is coming again for the healing of the nations and the perfecting of the Church. In that day when he reveals the New Jerusalem, his sovereign dominion over the universe will be made openly visible to all, causing every knee to bow and every tongue to confess that JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, to the glory of God the Father.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**