Sunday, July 4, 1982
ANOTHER LOOK AT CHURCH AND STATE
I Timothy 2:1-6

Two-hundred and six years ago, Representatives from the 13 states, meeting in General Congress, on this date, July 4, unanimously approved the Declaration of Independence.

This Declaration directly implies that there is one God who creates and rules over all creation. It also states that we human beings are given by God, certain rights, and names some of them — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Thus, from the beginning in this country, there has been among us an officially recognized "theism" or belief in God. In addition to the Declaration of Independence, this belief in a Supreme Being is acknowledge in the constitutions of most states, in the official utterances of national leaders and in the pledge of allegiance to our flag. Even on our coins and paper money we have the inscription, "In God We Trust."

Furthermore, in recent years, two very different presidents, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower, thought it appropriate to lead the nation in prayer when they addressed the nation. In one decision of the Supreme Court, written by Justice William O. Douglas, he said, "We are a religious people, and our institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."

At the same time, our Constitution in the first amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

A study of history shows that the intent of this amendment was not to put religion or the churches at a disadvantage, nor was its intent to declare that we live in a totally secular society.

The intent was that the state or government should not support one religion over another and that the government could not require religious practice or devotion. The government is to be neutral as between the great religious traditions. But this is not to say that we are a secular state. Nor is it to say that religion is not relevant to the affairs of state or to politics. I mention this because some people always seem to mistakenly assume that the first amendment to the constitution means that religion and politics don't mix. Some like to go on and give the impression that God has nothing to do with public life and that religion is purely a private matter.

People like this tend to separate or divide life into separate compartments like TIME magazine divides its news into departments -National Affairs, World Affairs, Education, Religion, Medicine, Education, The Arts, and so on. But we know that life is not that way. What we do in one area always affects what we do somewhere else, and religion is to be related to all of life.

Incidentally, it should be noted that the world "separation" as regards church and state is not in the constitution. And sometimes where we use the term "separation of Church and state," it's unfortunate, because the writers of the Constitution never meant that there should be a wall between the two. They meant, as I said earlier, that the State should not play favorites and support one kind of religion over another. It also means that there is to be no official United States religion and that the state cannot require religious devotion.

Again, I emphasize that it does not mean that the church or individual Christians, for followers of some other religion should not take part in politics.

A little history might be helpful here — particularly our Congregational History in this country.

First of all, remember that religion was responsible for the founding of more colonies in this country than any other single factor. To be sure there were other factors as well.

Remember too, that the first Congregational people came here from England by way of Holland because they advocated a plan of church government which they thought to be found in the Scriptures, namely, the absolute independence of each congregation of believers. They were totally opposed to the concept of the established Church of England with its hierarchy and control from the top.

These were the people who fled to Holland, and then in 1620, sailed away on the Mayflower to begin the first Puritan Colony in America. These people were known as the Radical Puritans or the Separatists because they believe there could be no accommodation with the Church of England.

Later many of the more moderate Puritans also came to this country from England. It is said that some twenty to thirty thousand of England's strongest and most intelligent citizens left that country between the years of 1628 and 1642, to make their homes in the New England across the sea.

Many other religious groups also came to this country during this period as well — Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Dutch Reformed and also people who had been members of the established church as well.

The people who came on the Mayflower were supposed to have gone to Virginia and it is said that contrary winds and inaccurate navigations charts were most probably the reasons for the miscalculation of the captain which brought the Pilgrims to New England rather than to Virginia.

The colony grew slowly, but it is important to note that the heart and center of the Pilgrim Colony at Plymouth was the church. And later too, at the center of each village or town was the church meeting house. Throughout the whole period of the colonies, the meeting house was not only the place of worship, but it was likewise the social center for every New England Community. It was also the meeting housing for political discussion and all kinds of political meetings.

Religious diversity came to be the dorm in the colonies as more and more people of different backgrounds came to this country.

In addition to the church being the center of the community, a second fact also emerged particularly as the 13 colonies began thinking about independence from England. One church historian puts it this way, "It has been said that no church in the American Colonies had so large an influence in the Way for Independence as had the Congregational. Its ministry had been most influential in public affairs from the beginning."

Thus, two facts in our own congregational history illustrate a new kind of relationship for church and state. 1. First, the church was used as a meeting house for all kinds of community affairs

including politics. 2. Second, the church and particularly its leadership was active and influential in public affairs.

The point is the religion and politics or church and state do mix in certain ways, and in other ways do not mix.

It's not against the constitution or the Christian religion for Christians or churches to be involved in politics. Whether or not it's always the best thing to do is another matter. Similarly, it doesn't violate any constitutional principle for political meetings to be held in the church building. It has nothing to do with the first amendment. Again, it might not be wise in today's world for a particular congregation to take sides in a partisan election by supporting one political party or its candidate over another simply because churches are made up of people with a wide variety of political loyalties.

It's also not against any constitutional principle for a church or church agency to oppose or support a certain governmental policy. Such opposition or support has nothing at all to do with the first amendment which prohibits the state from establishing a religion.

If a particular denomination or church group does take a stand on a political issue, then it needs to be careful that it does not imply that everyone has to agree with that stand or else one is not a Christian.

For example, a church might take a stand against capital punishment or for decreased defense spending. The church has every right to do so under our constitution, but that church or group should not then imply that all other positions on these issues are not Christian.

Similarly, it would probably be a violation of the first amendment of the constitution to write certain religious practices into law. For example, suppose the Seventh Day Adventists tried to get a law passed which said that all people, no matter what their religious membership, had to worship on Saturdays.

In 1864, the opposite of this was tried. The National Reform Association was organized in Xenia, Ohio. It was committed, among other things, to enacting a religious amendment to the constitution. In 1888, with the backing of the Association, Senator H.W. Blair, introduced a national Sunday law into congress. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches supported the move for a proper Sunday observance of the Sunday rest day. During the closing decade of the century, Sunday laws in various States were strictly enforced. As a result, scores of Seventh Day Adventists were jailed in the South as local authorities south out Sabbath breakers. Fortunately, the amendment to the U.S. Constitution was never passed. But it's an example of how not to mix church and state or religion and politics.

We are a pluralistic nation with many kinds of people with a variety of religious backgrounds. To try to establish one brand or interpretation of religion as the official one or to write one kind of religious practice or belief into law always leads to persecution and loss for freedom.

Fortunately, Article 6, of the U.S. Constitution says, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Church and State will always interact in our kind of society and as Christians we recognize the need for the state, for government of some kind. We also appreciate the kind of freedoms our government guarantees, and we are thankful there is no one established religion.

As the same time, Christians are free to criticize the government and to help make the government as just as possible. Justice after all is a form of love. We Christians should know that the government or the state is made for human beings, not human beings for the state.

Also, as Christians we recognize the temptation to make the state or nation a kind of God. That's a natural human tendency which must always be resisted. LOVE OF Country is proper and desired. That's good patriotism. Nationalism, however, is the kind of belief that says our country can do no wrong or ever make a mistake and that we are better and more favored by God than any other nation.

We in this nation on this fourth of July are facing some difficult issues, but this is not new. AS we face these issues, Christians will have honest disagreements — that's the way our government works.

As Christians, one thing we can all do together is to pray for our country and our leaders, not only on this day but always. Amen.