

WHEN SIMPLE ANSWERS DON'T SUFFICE

Should we pay taxes to Caesar? A group of hostile religious leaders once posed this simple question to Jesus, intending to ensnare Him into a likewise simple answer of either "yes" or "no."

Calling for a common silver coin, Jesus responded with a question of His own about that coin. "Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" "Caesar's," they readily acknowledged. And He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

The thunderbolt of understanding struck them with silent amazement at His meaning. Indebtedness, whether it be to Caesar or to God, can be absolved only with the proper "coin of the realm."

But the thought of indebtedness to Caesar grated both pride and contentment with the bitter reality of subservience to Rome. Nevertheless, through Caesar flowed the benefits of Pax Romana, a 200-year period of Roman peace when the Roman alphabet, language, road system and engineering expertise facilitated trade and economy--even for those unwillingly under Caesar's heel.

Don't ask whether you should pay the debt, Jesus advised. Just pay it--but only the proper coinage will suffice. And the Apostle Paul would later admonish that the appropriate currency for discharging indebtedness might not be made of metal. "Give to everyone what you owe them: pay your taxes and import duties, and give respect and honor to all to whom it is due."

Obvious examples of "rendering unto Caesar" rankle us each year as April 15 looms closer. But just this past Sunday we were privileged to accept an offer to participate as a particular group joyfully discharged a measure of their indebtedness with those precious "coins" of honor and respect.

The approach of Independence Day occasioned the 22nd annual God and Country Rally at the First Assembly of God Church in Van Buren (Ark.). Pastor Bobby Johnson extended personal invitations to a broad spectrum of public servants: legislators, judges, mayors, law enforcement officers, fire fighters, and many more. Flag-waving children in festive attire, beloved songs like "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful" and a splendid lunch all honored God and country by recognizing those who serve.

Pastor Johnson's pointed message referenced a quotation often attributed to French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited America in the early 1800s to study democracy. "America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

And a worthy corollary to this thought (as we ponder the implications of Independence Day) might be: "America will cease to be great when her people cease to discharge their debts to those who have sacrificed to make America good."

The fabric of simple answers seldom stretches to fit the shape of a complex world. "How" and "why" simply cover more ground than "yes" and "no."