

# The Detroit News

July 26, 2003

Faith and Policy

Federal grants erode independence of churches

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The Bush administration has reversed a ban on federal grants for renovations to “actively used” historic churches and other religious sites. The first grant, worth \$317,000, goes for window repairs to the Old North Church in Boston. Although Old North still has a small congregation of Episcopal worshippers, who could object to its preservation?

Still, long-term dangers may reside in innocent beginnings. The new policy could end up compromising the independence of churches and unnecessarily entangle the affairs of religion with the affairs of state. This is the wisdom of history.

In 313, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan that ended persecutions of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. For the first time, Christians enjoyed legal protection and the freedom to worship. His action represented a huge step forward for religious tolerance.

However, in line with the practice of the ancient world, Constantine used his power and the state’s money to favor those who practiced Christianity. He gave elaborate gifts to churches and funded their construction and renovation, and these efforts transformed the faith itself. It was the first step on a long path whereby the church acquired temporal power and favors from rulers.

But Constantine’s sword is doubled edged.

His successors were not so kind to Christians, and by then the church had lost some degree of its early independence. The faith became the target of reprisals by emperors and non-Christians. Thus began centuries of struggles for who would control the reins of power to bring about certain religious results.

Today, Christians often feel themselves treated poorly’ by the public realm. They believe they experience discrimination at the hands of an aggressively secular culture. For this reason, the Bush administration’s efforts to use federal policy to help Christian churches (permitting religious bodies to receive a range of grants, supporting school vouchers and the like) have been widely welcome.

However, government power does not know where to draw the line, particularly in democratic societies where everyone has a voice in how tax dollars are used. In modern times, we still see the effects in Europe, where churches are treated as national landmarks more than religious houses, where religious schools are often that in name only, and where one’s religious identity is seen more as a legal designation rather than a choice of the heart.

The Bush administration’s faith-based initiative is well intended, no doubt, but it could backfire. A first clue comes with the regulations governing the distribution of federal housing aid, which can go to build

religious centers so long as the primary mission is the distribution of social services. An institution suddenly faces an incentive to offer more purely social compared with religious services in exchange for which they can fund an overall expansion. That is not an incentive any religious organization should face.

In the case of the Old North Church in Boston, a foundation separate from the 280 year-old church will administer the grant and provide matching funds. But one can easily imagine how a proliferation of grant seeking foundations could end up dictating to churches how they must teach politically correct doctrines or even mandate the style of religious art.

The only way to ensure that churches are truly untouched by the discriminating powers of the state is to keep them financially independent from the secular power. In this country, religion thrives in part because the state does not involve itself in the affairs of faith. That is the core genius underlying the constitutional framework, and it remains a model for the world.

In Matthew 22:21, Jesus said to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s.” The spirit of His comment is violated when the realms of church and state are mixed, even in seemingly small ways. The Bush administration policy raises the prospect of grave harm down the road

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