

Government and Church and State Relations

Purpose

Everyone, whether they acknowledge it or not, comes from a theological tradition. That is, a historical perspective that informs how they follow Christ. We, the members of Grace Church of Santa Rosa, have a common ancestor in the particular baptists of 17th century England. Last week we talked about the first distinctive element of their theology: believer's baptism. Today, we will lay the groundwork for another: the separation of church and state.

This morning, I will argue that government is instituted by God but occupies a separate sphere of authority than the church. I will build a case that we ought to obey the government unless they ask us to sin or make law regulating, limiting, or inhibiting the church. Then, we will cover a few of the key points in church history where the separation of church and state was lost and eventually recovered.

I. Human Government

Definition and Biblical Evidence

Definition. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue offer us the following definition from their work *Biblical Doctrine*: "God is a God of Order, not chaos. Human government is an institution created by God to provide social order in the world."¹

Romans 13:1-7. Biblical evidence for God's creation of human, or civil, government is provided for us in Romans 13:1-7:

¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

1 Peter 2:13-14. From this passage it is clear that God is the one who has instituted human government. Peter reminds us in his epistle that we should "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Pet 2:13-14).

Implications. It is for the Lord's sake that we must submit ourselves to presidents, governors, mayors, police, etc. because it is God who has instituted the government. Now, you may be wondering, "Should we also obey the government under every circumstance?" That is a

¹John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Biblical Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 443. This and the following sections are drawn from this source.

very good point and one that we will examine shortly. First, we consider the implications of the fact that God instituted government. These points are, again, drawn from MacArthur and Mayhue.²

1. God has appointed human government (Rom 13:1-2) as his “servant” (Rom 13:4). Government is part of God’s common goodness to mankind.
2. Since God appointed government, resisting government is resisting God. Those who resist its authority will be judged (Rom 13:2).
3. One purpose of government is “to punish those who do evil” (1 Pet 2:14). Thus, the one in authority is “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4). Government functions as God’s mediator to curb evil.
4. Government has the right to carry out capital punishment: “He does not bear the sword in vain” (Rom 13:4). When Pilate told Jesus that he had the authority to crucify him (Jn 19:10), Jesus did not dispute this, but he did inform Pilate that his authority came from God: “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19:11).
5. Another function of government is to approve and praise those who do good (Rom 13:3; 1 Pet 2:14). Peaceful law-abiding citizens need not fear the authorities. Few governments will harm those who obey their laws; rather, they seek to honor them.
6. Government is a cause for “terror” to those who do bad things (Rom 13:3). Those who break the law must be afraid of the consequent punishment. Even the most godless governments can deter criminal behavior.
7. All people, and especially Christians, are to be “subject” to human government (Rom 13:1, 5; 1 Pet 2:13). The word “subject” was used of a soldier’s absolute obedience to his superior. The one exception arises if obeying a civil command means disobeying a command of God (Ex 1:7; Dan 3:16-18; 6:7, 10). In this case, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).
8. Obeying government eases one’s conscience (Rom 13:5).
9. People are to pay taxes and show respect to governing authorities (Rom 13:7). Jesus affirmed taxation when he said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt 22:21).

Should we always obey? Now that we have laid out those implications, let’s consider if and when we should not obey the government. It is clear from the Scripture that “the authority of the church and the authority of the government belong to two distinct spheres.”³ Let’s take a look at Matthew 22:15-22 to establish this point:

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the

²John MacArthur, ed., *Essential Christian Doctrine: A Handbook on Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 241-242.

³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 893. This source will be drawn on extensively in this subsection.

test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

From this passage we see that Jesus clearly distinguished between the sphere of influence that Caesar inhabited from that which God inhabits. This does not diminish God because, as we saw from Romans 13, he is the one who instituted the human authority. Therefore, all the power is God's. Jesus is telling his listeners that they need to honor both God and their civil government. They should render their tax to Caesar since it is made in his image and likeness and they should render all that they are to God because they are made in his image and likeness. Both Caesar and God make demands upon the Christian and both should be obeyed within their respective spheres of authority.

With this in mind we may declare the following: the civil government always ought to be obeyed except when they ask you to sin or "enforce laws requiring or prohibiting kinds of church doctrine, or abridging the people's freedom to worship as they choose."⁴ In other words, the government should always be obeyed unless they ask you to sin or begin to make laws outside their sphere of delegated authority.

We have a crystal clear example of this lived out in [Acts 5:27-29](#). In this passage, the apostles have just been arrested after having received a command from the high priest and the Sadducees not to preach Christ. The scene unfolded as follows:

²⁷And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.

Peter and the apostles knew that they must obey God and preach the gospel rather than obey the civil government and be quiet. The government was issuing a command that was outside of their sphere of delegated authority and so their commands were ignored. So too for us, if the government asks us to sin, if they mandate that we require or prohibit the teaching of certain doctrines, or if they infringe upon our freedom to worship as we choose, then we have the obligation to disobey the government so that we may obey God.

Should the church rule the government? As noted earlier, Jesus, who was living under a Roman occupation and did not presume that the religious authorities in his day should rule the government. Rather, he noted the distinct spheres of responsibility that each had and asked believers to honor both as institutions of God. *Later on in the history section, I will make another argument that the church should not rule over the government.*

Should the church ever use physical force to carry out its mission?⁵ In other words, should the church "take up the sword" to complete its mission of making disciples? When Jesus

⁴Grudem, 893.

⁵Grudem, 892. This subsection and its outline is drawn from this source.

was speaking to Pontius Pilate after his arrest, he stated plainly that “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting...” (Jn 18:36).

Paul also describes this same truth when he writes to the Corinthians, “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor 10:4).

Here, Paul is not speaking of physical weapons used to coerce or destroy people, he is talking about the spiritual power we have in Christ through the gospel by the Spirit.

Lastly, take for example John 3:16-17. There, Jesus states that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). Grudem states that, “He will one day come again in judgment, at the end of the church age, but during this age it is not the prerogative of the church to use physical force to carry out judgment.”⁶

II. The Church and the State in History

Pre-existing Sacral Environment

When Christians began to flood the Roman empire, there was a pre-existing sacral environment where Roman paganism and emperor worship were the norm. The society was thoroughly pluralistic, Christianity was one religion among many.

The Early Church

An excerpt from the *Epistle to Diognetus* by Mathetes (130 A.D.) relates how Christians are spread throughout the world and therefore in the empire:

To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.⁷

Constantine (272-237 A.D.)

Constantine made Christianity legal in 313 A.D. Prior to that the church had experienced severe persecution. Now, with Christianity legal and the emperor himself being a professing Christian, the relationship between church and state begins to get muddled.

The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.). The Council of Nicea was called by Emperor Constantine himself and was largely presided over by him as well. Constantine saw it as his responsibility not only to rule over the civil aspects of the empire—that is, the government—but also to rule over the church. The results of this union were disastrous.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.)

Augustine argued for the government not only to exercise authority within the church but also to compel, use coercive force, to attain theological unity within the church. He did this by

⁶Grudem, 892.

⁷Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 27.

citing Luke 14:23: “And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’”

Augustine understood the word “compel” here to mean coercive force. He believed that this passage gave a Scriptural basis for the use of coercive force against unbelievers or so-called heretical groups in order that they may be brought back to the catholic faith. For him, schism would be opposed, if need be with arms.⁸

The following are some direct quotes from Augustine:

I hear that you are quoting that which is recorded in the Gospel, that when the seventy followers went back from the Lord they were left to their own choice in this wicked and impious desertion and that He said to the twelve remaining ‘Do you not also want to go?’ But what you fail to say is that at that time the Church was only just beginning to burst forth from the newly planted seed and that the saying had not as yet been fulfilled in her ‘All kings shall fall down before him, all nations shall serve him.’ [Ps 72:11] It is in proportion to the more enlarged fulfillment of this prophecy that the Church now wields greater power—so that she may now not only invite but also compel men to embrace that which is good.⁹

In Short, Verduin writes that the error propagated from this period until the Reformation was that the church had acquired the power to coerce.¹⁰

Charlemagne (748-814 A.D.)

Charlemagne was the King of the Franks (French); King of the Lombards (Italians); Emperor of the Carolingian Empire (much of Modern Germany); and also Emperor of the Romans. He wielded immense influence at this time and was the transitional figure between the old and new conceptions of the Roman Empire. He himself was crowned Emperor of the Romans—a prurunner to the Holy Roman Emperor.

Seeing as Augustine was the architect of the middle ages, it makes sense that Charlemagne, who was greatly influenced by the writings of Augustine, “believed the church and state should be allied as forces in the unification of society.”¹¹ Ferguson writes that,

Charlemagne had Augustine’s *City of God* read to him each night, but he seems to have understood it in terms of using the state to submit the world to the church. The two powers, royal and sacerdotal, were now confused. Not even the bishop of Rome opposed the emerging arrangements; only Alcuin could have, and he was so florid in his style that Charlemagne never got the point.¹²

⁸Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 65.

⁹Augustine of Hippo, *Letter to Donatus*, no. 173. Cited in Verduin, 65-66. Augustine’s work accessed Here: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102173.htm>

¹⁰Verduin, 67.

¹¹Galli and Olsen, 321.

¹²Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 367.

Charlemagne was not afraid to use the power of government and even the sword to enforce unity within the church. In fact, he made it illegal not to have infants baptized on the penalty of death. Ferguson notes,

A capitulary of a council from 781 or 785 concerning Saxony made the baptism of infants under one-year of age obligatory, enforced by the death penalty for hiding a child (the death penalty was common for many offenses). Such legislation made failure to baptize one's child a sign of paganism. As a contemporary observed, "Charlemagne preached with the iron tongue."¹³

Boniface (1294-1303 A.D.)

In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull entitled *Unam Sanctam*. This officially codified the unity of the church and the state in the Holy Roman Empire. This confounding of the two spheres of God given authority became the standard procedure for the Roman Catholic Church.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.), who established the standard from Roman Catholic theology, stated that "The State, through which earthly objectives are reached, must be subordinated to the Church; Church and State are two swords which God has given to Christendom for protection; both these swords however are by Him given to the pope and the temporal sword is then by the pope entrusted to the rulers of the State."¹⁴

Rhegius and the Magisterial Reformers

This view of the unity between the church and the state was adopted by the Magisterial Reformers. Luther, Calvin, and others believed that it was the government's role to enforce the laws of the church. Consider the following quote from Urbanus Rhegius, a Lutheran reformer:

God raises up the magistracy against heretics, faction-makers, and schismatics in the Christian Church in order that Hagar may be flogged by Sarah. The donatists murder men's souls, make them go to eternal death; and then they complain when men punish them with temporal death. Therefore a Christian magistrate must make it his first concern to keep the Christian religion pure... All who know history will know what has been done in this matter by such men as Constantine... Charlemagne and others.¹⁵

Schlatten am Rande (1527)

In the wake of the Reformation an underground group emerged that challenged the unity between the church and the state. In many places they went by the title of Anabaptist. In 1527, they published a manifesto of their beliefs from a place called Schlatten am Rande, Switzerland. Listen to how they describe the relationship between church and state:

The sword is an ordinance of God outside the perfection of Christ; the Princes and Rulers of the world are ordained for the punishment of evil-doers and for putting them to

¹³Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 366.

¹⁴Verduin, 43.

¹⁵Urbanus Rhegius, *Quellen Hesse*, 111. Cited in Verduin, 50.

death. But within the perfection of Christ excommunication is the ultimate in the way of punishment, physical death not being included.¹⁶

Light and the end of the tunnel? It is with this group, the anabaptists, that there begins to be a retrieval of the biblical doctrine of there being a separation between the powers of church and state. However, their view that the government should not bear the sword against heretics or unorthodox believers will be met with sharp criticism along with their view of baptism. Next week we will investigate the lives of these Anabaptists and perhaps even cross the English channel to investigate the emergence of similar ideas among the Puritans amongst a group who will eventually be known as the baptists.

May God show us our blindspots. What becomes clearer and clearer to me as I study these topics is that we all have blind spots in our understanding of the gospel and in our obedience. In the moment, it is often very difficult to recognize our shortcomings—hence why they're called blindspots! Nonetheless, it is part of our duty as Christians to ask God to reveal to us our sins so that we may repent from them. Just as it was not good for the church to bear the sword against those with whom they did agree, so we do much that is not good.

May God give us charity in dealing with history, with ourselves, and with one another. May he give us eyes to see our blind spots and may he give us the grace to repent from them and put on the heart of Christ.

¹⁶Verduin, 57.