

# The Christian's Relation to the State

by Dr. Gerald L. Priest

Baptists have historically advocated separation of church and state. When James I demanded conformity to an episcopal state-controlled church, Thomas Helwys expressed what most Baptists believed: "In all earthly things the king's power is to be submitted unto; and in heavenly or spiritual things...to submit...to God." Scripture commands obedience to human ordinances, but that does not mean Christians are to obey the government in matters of worship. As Roger Williams put it in 1644, "God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be inacted and inforced in any civil state," for the simple reason that faith cannot be coerced; it is the nature of government to be coercive. Faith is a matter voluntarily rendered to God, not the state.

Baptist history is virtually synonymous with the struggle for religious freedom based upon the clearly articulated principle of our Lord in Matt 22:21: "Render...unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." Baptists have not wanted to surrender their freedom of worship to secular government. Christ's answer to the trick question of the Pharisees and Herodians justifies that position. He indicated that God had determined the separation of powers. This meant that (1) God himself makes a distinction between the church and the state as two entirely different institutions. Their nature and roles are clearly delineated. (2) Duties to government are distinct from duties to the church. Conflict results when those duties are confused. And (3) a Christian can be in subjection to God and government at the same time.

Such Scriptures as Rom 13:1-7 and 1 Pet 2:13-16 further elaborate the responsibilities of human government and the Christian's obligations to it. Briefly, government's primary duties are to protect the welfare of its citizens, praise well-doers, and punish evil-doers. Christians are to submit to government in two basic areas: heeding its leaders, and paying it taxes. Christians are to obey their magistrates (Titus 3:1). Adherence to fire codes and asbestos removal may be burdens, but ones we ought to bear. Even in cases where the believer finds it impossible to obey the demands of government and be true to God, he or she should still exhibit a submissive spirit (Rom 13:1; Dan 1:8). The early Christians were a model of peaceful resignation under persecution, not vengeful retaliation. As painful as it may be, Christians must also pay their taxes. The word "render" in Matt 22:21 and Rom 13:7 has the idea of "giving back," that is, payment for value received or expected. If Christ, who owned the wealth of the world, paid tribute to Caesar, so must we.

The Romans 13 passage instructs Christians to submit to government for four reasons: because (1) it is ordained of God (vv. 1-2); (2) it is for our welfare (v. 4); (3) we will be punished if we do not (vv. 2-3; cf. 1 Pet 2:14); and (4) it is a matter of scruple (v. 5). As Edward Hiscox advises, "Christian men are to be good and law-abiding citizens,...in all things not contrary to conscience and the word of God."

What should Christians do when the state is irresponsible, even to the point of imposing ungodly ordinances? When such a conflict occurs, we must obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). This does not permit Christians to disobey the law by bombing abortion clinics, but God's law does require that they refuse to abort a baby if the state demands it.

We may derive several additional applications from these instructions, which are amply illustrated throughout Scripture and church history. First, we Christians should never use our freedom in Christ as an excuse to disobey government (1 Pet 2:16). Secondly, we should have a respect for the office of the ruler and pray for him (1 Pet 2:17; 1 Tim 2:1–4). Also, obedience to government does not prevent exercise of non-violent means afforded us for redress. Paul had the right of appeal and frequently used it (Acts 16:35–40; 22:25–29). Likewise, obedience to God does not automatically preclude participation in government. Nor does it mean that we should remain silent against wickedness in society. Christians function as salt in the wounds of ungodly behavior and should seek to restrain its influence. Finally, believers need to beware the government that befriends the church. The gifts of Constantine in the fourth century came with a high price tag: control by the state and mortgage of ecclesiastical freedom.