

Separation of Church and State?

In this series of articles we're looking at a portion of the scriptural instruction on the role of the civil government that was brought back to the forefront of the teaching of the Church during the Protestant Reformation. Last time I called attention to the seriousness of the sin of outright rebellion against legitimate authority of any kind, whether in the home, workplace, church or in the civil government. Let's narrow our focus now to the civil government. We'll be looking at this important topic primarily from Romans 13:1-7. Let's look now at verse 1:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are established by God.” At minimum, this verse teaches the clear need for order in society (see also 1 Peter 2:13-17). Is Paul, then, teaching unquestioned obedience to authority? At this point some of my careful readers may be thinking of the words of Peter and the apostles in Acts 5:29 when they were charged by the Jewish authorities not to speak to the people about Jesus and the resurrection. Their reply: “We must obey God rather than men.” Clearly there is a principle in scripture that teaches that—if we're required by legitimate authorities to do something that God says is wrong in his word or if we're forbidden to do something that God says is right—“we must obey God rather than men.”

During the time of the Protestant Reformation a debate arose as to what the relationship should be between the church and the civil government (state). One primary view was the unity of church and state. This view stated that the differences between church and state are minimal or non-existent. The Reformers clearly saw the problems with encroachment by the government into the responsibilities of the church as well as the church of that day having control over political territories. This type of thing happened, for example, in the middle ages when the church could, and did, sanction war (e.g., the Crusades). In this view, then, the church is subsumed under the government and vice versa.

Another view that arose during the time of the Reformation is the view of the separation of church and state. In certain Anabaptist groups, Christians were not permitted to be involved in the government at all because they believed it would be seen as a compromise of their commitment to Christ. They couldn't serve in the military or have anything to do with the government which was seen as evil. This view is still around today with groups who believe that Christians are only and always to be passive and cannot participate in war or in political office for any reason. In contrast to this, John Calvin recognized service in political office as entirely agreeable to scripture. He even referred to civil rulers as “vicars of God.” In our day the phrase, “separation of church and state” gets a lot of press, but what it generally means now is that, if Christians are involved in the government, they must leave their religious

beliefs out of their policy making. Many believe that there should be an entire separation of the government from God! This teaching is clearly unbiblical.

Lastly, another primary view during the time of the Reformation taught—in agreement with scripture—that both the church and the government are ordained by God. Although the state is not to be confused with the church, God is Sovereign over both. The Reformers believed that it was the duty of the state to restrain and punish evil and to enact wholesome laws designed for promoting peace, the general welfare of the people, protection from harm including, protection for the church. The church is to be allowed free and unfettered worship, proclamation of the word and carrying out of all of the sacred duties assigned to her and ordained by God. The Reformers also taught, from scripture, that it's the duty of Christians to pray for magistrates, honor them, obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their God-ordained authority.

This brings us back to our text: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities....” The word translated “subject” is a word that means to subordinate oneself or to obey someone. The word in the Greek original was used in the context of the military and it means “to rank under” or “to line up under” in the case of a subordinate to someone in legitimate authority. In summary, as long as those in God-ordained authority are not asking us to go against the teaching of scripture, we're to gladly and willingly obey.

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