

## The Christian and Civil Government (6<sup>th</sup>)

(Our study today is a break from our previous studies of this subject. It is an overview of the difficulties involved in seeking to draw the line of demarcation between that which belongs to Caesar and that which belongs to God.)

When Jesus said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s,” He set forth that there is a realm or territory that has boundaries of authority that belongs to Caesar (civil government) that differs from the kingdom or dominion of God. As previously stated in other podcasts, whatever those differences are, the Christian is obligated to “obey God rather than men,” Acts 5:29, and that the kingdom of God (or Christ) “is not of this world,” John 18:36. Equally, though the Christian is not of this world, he lives in it, John 17:14-16. The God under consideration is not a generic god of undetermined nature or being. He is Jehovah, the I AM of Exodus 3:14-15, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The things of Caesar (civil government) included rules, regulations, and laws different from those of other nations. Though there may be some laws of Caesar that are adopted by various countries today, the overall structure of modern nations are different from those of Rome, but at the time of Christ, Israel was under the government and rule of Rome or Caesar. Nevertheless, Caesar or Rome stands as a representation of civil government.

Another important consideration included in our study is that Christ established His congregation here on earth in the environment of the Roman government in a pluralistic society at a time when Caesar was established by the government as an object of worship. It was in this milieu or setting that the Lord gave His commission to preach the gospel in all the world, Matthew 28:18-20. Therefore, the ministry of the congregation of the Lord or of individual Christians is in no way antagonistic or threatening to civil government. Christianity as taught and practiced in the Scriptures aids and strengthens society. Sadly, there are many religions that profess to be Christian when in reality they are not, but we do not have time to address that whole issue.

The incident as recorded in Matthew 22:15-22 is not limited to that of the Christian and Caesar (civil government). Neither is it limited to the distinction between the kingdom of God and civil government (Caesar). Jesus was not answering disciples or believers, nor was He speaking to a congregation of the Lord, He was speaking to unbelievers, to wicked Pharisees who were trying to “entangle him in *his* talk.” Therefore, the principles involved with rendering to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and rendering to God those things that belong to Him involve all men—both the believer and the unbeliever. The believer (as previously mentioned) has insights that the unbeliever may not have or does not apply to him: to obey God above man and the kingdom of Christ not being of this world. Therefore, living in a pluralist society composed of believers and unbelievers, including a multiplicity religions, and combined with many who either question the validity of a god or deny the existence of any god, much less the one true and living God (Jehovah), one can see the complexity of creating civil laws applicable and just for all.

Recently, professing Christians posted and/liked the following on social media: “America needs to shut down all Mosques and ban Islam.” Another post presented by a professing Christian was as follows: “Upholding the Constitution means keeping government out of the church, not the church out of the government.” Oddly, both posts were posted by men professing to be Baptist. Our Baptist forefathers who fought for religious liberty in the United States (men like Isaac Backus, John Leland, and others) would be astounded, but the Protestant forefathers would have no problem accepting these statements according to their confessions of faith and historical practices. However, the answers to the conflicting beliefs of religious liberty (not merely religious freedom) and obedience to civil government in a pluralistic society are not simple. (Technically, religious freedom is more binding than religious liberty, but that involves another study.) For the Christian, either the theocratic covenant as established in the Old Testament is

continued in the New Testament or there is a new covenant established on better promises in the New Testament, Hebrews 8:6-13. In either case, does this mean that the Christian is to work to establish civil government and laws according to the Scriptures? If so, what covenant is to be used as the foundation for civil government? If neither, then how are we to explain the clear teaching of the Lord when He said that the civil rulers are ordained ministers of God; and furthermore, to resist such rulers is resisting the ordinance of God? See Romans 13:1-7.

If religious liberty is a fundamental right, does this liberty extend to all religions or is it limited to only some. If it extends to all then no individual is to be suppressed or denied his right to believe (or not believe) whatever he deems proper in society according to his conscious so long as he does not violate the laws of the land. However, if he steals, kills, vandalizes, or violates any law of the land he is to receive a just punishment for the crime committed, even unto death. See Acts 25:11. If religious liberty or limited freedom is only granted to a few, the government is obligated to establish the guidelines and boundaries of what is to be believed and practiced in the country, state, province, county, parish, or city. Therefore, religious liberty is either granted to all or it is not. If not, which religion is to be established, protected, and maintained by the government? If we assert that the Christian religion is to be established and guarded by the government, the question quickly arises as to which "Christian" religion: Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and the list could be expanded to the thousands of different groups that are classified as being Christian. If Baptist is the ideal religion then the question likewise is raised as to which branch of the Baptist is to be established by the government. The Protestant confessions affirm that the civil government is to make sure that "the truth is to be kept pure." This in itself forces the government to ascertain what is truth. This would include the truth about salvation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, etc. (the list is endless) and restrict that which is erroneous. Either civil government is to support and guard religious liberty and the freedom/liberty of conscious regarding religion for everyone or not. Then what about those countries that deny the authority of an eternal God (atheistic) or those governments that impose their brand of religion on the citizens? Is the Christian to go there and impose his brand of Christianity on such a country with the purpose of changing the government? Obviously, for time sake, we cannot answer all of these questions and many other related questions in this study. We will try to cover some of these questions in a broad way, but for a more indebt study I would suggest volumes 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the writings of John Owen, though I do not share all of his conclusions; or, better for a concise and more recent study regarding religious freedom in the United States of America, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* by Charles F. James with *The Presbyterian Church and Religious Liberty in Virginia* by William Wirt Henry as published collectively by Sprinkle Publications in 2007. Our purpose is to seek to establish the boundaries for the individual Christian as well as for the congregation of the Lord and their role as they live within the world regardless of the particular government in which they dwell. As previously stated all mankind (the believer and the unbeliever) is responsible to render unto Caesar (civil government) that which belongs to it and to render unto God that which belongs to Him.

As we stated at the beginning, the whole subject matter we are discussing is complicated and is often clouded when man seeks to impose civil government into the affairs of religion. Likewise, when congregations and religious denominations strive to include their religious ideologies into civil government it causes (and often forces) the government to set guidelines and establish principles that define valid religions or congregations. One example is the governmental status for freedom of taxation for congregations and/or religious denominations under the 501c3 ruling of the Internal Revenue Service in the United States of America. On the surface this may seem innocent, but under such ruling the government either grants or denies a congregation or denomination as being valid or not to receive freedom of taxation. In effect, in this case the government is making a judgment as to the validity or not of the religious organization. Only God has the authority to make this judgment and not civil government.

The contrast between civil government and of religion, particularly the Christian religion, may be summarized by quoting John Owen.

All political government in the world consists in the exercise of principles of natural right, and their just application to times, ages, people, occasions, and occurrences. Whilst this is done, government is acted regularly to its proper end; where this is missed, it fails. These things God hath left unto the prudence of men and their consent; wherein they cannot for the most part fail, unless they are absolutely given up unto unbridled lusts; and the things wherein they may fail are always convenient or in convenient, good and useful or hurtful and destructive; not always, yea, very seldom directly and in themselves morally good or evil. In such things men's ease and profit, not their consciences, are concerned. In the worship of God things are quiet otherwise. It is not convenience or inconvenience, advantage or disadvantage, as to the things of this life, but merely good or evil, in reference to the pleasing of God and to eternity, that is in question." *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-1853; rep., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967) volume 13, p. 476.

Much more could be added to this discussion, but I trust this small overview might give some insight to the complexity and complication to the overall topic as man seeks to find the balance. For the Christian, while he lives in the world of a pluralistic society, he is guided and directed by the Word of the Lord. However, our time is up for today and in our next broadcast, the Lord willing, we will return to our overview of the confessions and the references given.