

Toward a Biblical Account of the Origins of Church and State

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ABSTRACT

Giving close attention to the Bible's account of the origins of church and state yields insight into their purpose and aids Christians in understanding their proper relationship, the nature of their authority, and how we ought to live under the administration of each.

INTRODUCTION

In Mark 12:13–17, we find one of Jesus' numerous confrontations with the religious leaders of his day (cf. Matt. 22:15–32; Luke 20:20–38). This confrontation united the Herodians and the Pharisees against Jesus; these were strange bedfellows, as one group was in cahoots with the established state power of the day, and the other was opposed to it on religious grounds. Nevertheless, they had a common enemy in Jesus, and they set out together to entrap him.

In Mark 12:14, the religious leaders confront Jesus with this question:

Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not? (Mark 12:14, ESV)

Particularly noteworthy is the use of the word "lawful" in the religious leaders' question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" From one perspective, paying taxes to Caesar most certainly was lawful, because Roman law required it. But what should become immediately obvious is that their question presupposes another standard of lawfulness, one that stands over Caesar and his laws. And Jesus' opponents think they have him skewered on the horns of a dilemma. Either way he answers, he will upset the people. If Jesus answers yes, that it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, he will lose those who hate the ruling Romans and their coercive taxes: "Do you know, Jesus, what that money is funding!?" But if he answers no, he could be framed as an insurrectionist.

This setup makes Jesus' reply all the more ingenious. Instead of answering yes or no, Jesus asks them to bring him a denarius, a coin of Roman minting. When brought, Jesus holds the coin up and asks,

Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him. (Mark 12:16–17)

THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S AND THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S

In our quest for a biblical account of church and state, why begin with Mark 12? What many have rightly seen in Jesus' answer is a basic framework for thinking about the relationship between the church and the state.¹ Particularly, what Jesus provides is warrant for making a distinction between "things that

¹ Commenting on the parallel passage in Matt 22:15–32, Davies and Allison write, "Many have found our passage in harmony with the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms: life has two spheres, the sacred and the secular, each with its own demands." W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 217.

are Caesar's" and "things that are God's." Of course, as many biblical scholars have pointed out, even in Jesus' question, when he refers to Caesar's "likeness" or "image," there is an implicit affirmation that even "the things are Caesar's" ultimately belong to God.² It is, in fact, God's image that Caesar bears, even as the coin bears Caesar's likeness.

Even so, in Jesus' answer we find a basic structure for what theologians have come to refer to by various names: church and state, two kingdoms, the spiritual and temporal estates, etc. And it is this structure based in Mark 12 that I want to utilize in my attempt to push forward the conversation on the proper relationship between Church and State.

To frame the question, how does the Bible account for what things rightfully belong to the state, and what things rightfully belong to the church? To get at an answer, I suggest we pay attention to origins, for in the study of origins we not only find design, but purpose.

THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF THE STATE

Let us begin with the biblical origins of the State. The clearest text in the Bible on a properly Christian accounting of the state is Romans 13. In this text, Paul seems to have in mind Jesus' teaching on the Temple tax when he commands Christians to "be subject to the governing authorities" and to pay taxes in Romans 13:1–7. But, as Paul does often in his letters, he doesn't just give the church a command. He also provides theological reasoning behind the command.

In Romans 13:1, Paul tells the church: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Why? Because, as Paul says, "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." In this text, Paul commands the church to be subject to the state, which means to render to the state those things that properly belong to the authority of the

2 Cf. Edwards: "That ultimate authority resided with God is clearly implied in Jesus' use of the word 'image' (v. 16 in Greek), which is the same word used in Gen 1:26 of humanity's creation in God's image. If coins bear Caesar's image, then they belong to Caesar. But humanity, which bears God's image, belongs to God!" James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 364.

state. But Paul also makes explicit the point Jesus made implicitly in Mark 12. That is, all governing authorities exist under divine authority. They too have their origin in God — even the ones that fail to acknowledge it, including the Roman government of Paul’s day.

Paul continues in Romans 13:

Therefore 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. (Romans 13:2–4)

This is not the place to examine the biblical exceptions to submitting to governing authorities, except to acknowledge that there are exceptions, such as in Acts 5:20 where the apostles disobey the rulers’ command to stop preaching the gospel and instead declare, “we must obey God rather than men.”

But in these verses in Romans 13, Paul makes plain the origin of the state. Fundamentally, state authority flows from God. Paul follows up this assertion with the purpose of the State. According to this passage, the state exists: 1) to be a “terror” to bad conduct; 2) to approve what is good; 3) to be “God’s servant” for the good of the people; 4) and to bear not the “sword” in vain, but as “an avenger of God’s wrath against wrongdoers.”

We could summarize the state’s purpose as the apostle Peter does in 1 Peter 2:14: the state’s purpose is “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” To carry out this purpose, according to Romans 13:4, Paul says the state bears the “sword,” which we could define as the power of physical coercion and punishment — even to the point of death.³ Where does this

³ Against those who would argue that reference to “the sword” in Rom 13:4 does not include divine authorization of the state

“sword” come from? Is it pulled from a stone, or distributed by a Lady of the lake? Is it a literal sword? Of course, the answer to these questions is no.

Christian tradition has tended to see the power of the sword in Romans 13 as a metaphor for the real power and authority given by God to mankind in the form of human government, and specifically, the delegated governing power that can be traced back to Genesis 9 in the immediate aftermath of God’s judgment against rampant sin in the global flood.

THE SWORD AND THE STATE

In Genesis 9, God enters into a covenant with Noah and his descendants, which includes all of humanity, and the rest of creation. This covenant seems to be, in part, a republication of God’s original covenant with Adam, as God reiterates the creation mandate he gave to mankind in Genesis 1:28; 9:1; and 9:7. In the Noahic covenant, God promises never to judge the world again by water and gives humanity the sign of the rainbow. But then God gives Noah and his descendants an additional provision for the purpose of restraining sin so that it will not increase again unchecked like it did in the days before the flood.

In Genesis 9:5–6, God speaks to Noah and his descendants (note, these are all plural second person pronouns):

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast
I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a
reckoning for the life of man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for
God made man in his own image.

In this covenant, God delegates to man what heretofore had been solely

to carry out capital punishment against capital crimes, it is difficult to get around the bald fact of what a sword is designed to do. Cf. Schreiner: “The reference instead is to the broader judicial function of the state, particularly its right to deprive of life those who had committed crimes worthy of death.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 684.

divine: namely, the authority to punish sin and evil-doing, even to death. Here is the origin of the power Paul refers to in Romans 13:4 as the “sword,” which God gives to human government for the punishment of those who would do harm against their fellow man. In this charge, we find both the origin and purpose of the state in nuce: It is by God’s establishment, to punish evil-doing.

But there is something else here that is too often overlooked. If one stops reading there in Genesis 9:6, the full force of the Noahic covenant might be missed, which gives context and informs the purpose of the power of the sword. In Genesis 9:1, God tells Noah and his family after they get off the ark to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” just like he told Adam and Eve in the Garden. In other words, in the re-created world, humanity should continue to form families through marriage and procreation. Not insignificantly, right after giving the power of the sword, God again repeats this command in Genesis 9:7: “And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

In this way, the republicized creation mandate for mankind to be fruitful and multiply is part of the Noahic covenant, and it should be considered part of what human governments wield their authority for, to protect. Put another way, if bodily and proprietary harm is the “evil” the state is supposed to punish, what “good” is the state supposed to praise, in Peter’s words? Genesis 9 gives a clue: the state is charged with commending and supporting the “good” of being fruitful, and multiplying, and filling the earth. This is the “good” of familial life, which includes the promotion of natural marriage and family, society’s bedrock institution that underpins the social wellbeing of mankind.

Here is what the power of the sword is meant to protect and promote: the image of God in the life and integrity of human individuals, and the natural family. To summarize, the origin of the state is from God, instituted in Genesis 9 with the power of the sword in order to, as 1 Peter 2:14 says, “punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”

BY WHAT STANDARD?

Now, it is at this point that some raise a valid question. By what standard

does the government punish evil, and reward good, if not Scripture? In other words, who is to say what is good, and what is evil? What if a people and their government begin to call good “evil,” and evil “good,” as the prophet Isaiah warned (Isa. 5:20)? These are legitimate questions, but they must be considered in light of the context of Paul’s instruction in Romans 13.

The Roman government of Paul’s day was not based on Judeo-Christian teaching or Scripture. And yet Paul could still affirm that the state existed to reward the good and to punish evil. How? Because Paul appeals to a common notion of good and evil that he knew resided in every person, including the Roman rulers. In fact, in the book of Romans Paul spends much of the beginning of his letter explaining how everyone is without excuse and accountable because of how God has revealed himself and his attributes in creation in what theologians call general or natural revelation.⁴

There is a natural, built-in stamp of right and wrong, good and evil, in every person that renders all of us without excuse when it comes to moral judgments. It is this natural “law” that Paul can appeal to when he says the Roman government exists to punish evil and reward good. And it is the same natural “law” available to us all in matters of our life together in the city, or polis — in our politics.

Each of us is made in the image of God, Christian or not, and because of this we know what is right in our heart of hearts. Even if we do not acknowledge God and instead suppress the truth, the Bible affirms that we still have a common notion of good and evil. And it is this common revelation of good and evil that the state is charged with enforcing according to Romans 13.

But would it not be better if states were explicitly informed not only by general revelation, but also by special revelation in the Scriptures? And would it not be better if we had Christian rulers, rather than non-Christian rulers? I think most would answer, certainly!

⁴ “Gentiles occasionally abide by the law, indicating thereby that they are aware of moral norms.” Schreiner, *Romans*, 124. Regardless of one’s interpretation of Romans 2:15 — whether or not the “work of the law” “written on their hearts” refers to Gentile Christians or something innate to human nature — the concept of a natural law that is available and knowable to all humanity can be variably rooted in the *imago Dei*, or Christian accounts of the conscience and/or moral philosophy (i.e., Gen 1:27; Psalm 19; Rom 1; C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, etc.).

But this raises a few questions. First, what would those Christian rulers be charged with enforcing? I think the answer based on Genesis 9 and Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 is that they would enforce common notions of good and evil, which, importantly, includes the protection and promotion of marriage and family life. Christians are not libertarians.

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, how do we get Christian leaders? Or to put it another way, how do leaders become Christian? Is it by law? Or through the power of the sword? By no means! As Paul says in Galatians 2:21 “if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

This question brings us to the origin and purpose of the church.

THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH

If the origin of the state is God’s judgment against sin, the origin of the church is God’s promise of salvation, which is found initially in Genesis 3:15 where God promises to send a Seed of the woman to one day come and crush the head of the serpent.⁵ This promise is fulfilled in Christ’s victory over sin and death at his crucifixion and his resurrection.

If the aim of the state is toward the temporal and the social wellbeing of man, the aim of the church is toward his eternal and spiritual wellbeing. As we are not Gnostics, and man is a psycho-somatic unity, these aims are related, but should not be confused. If the state is given the power of the sword for temporal ends, the church is given the power of the Word, and the Keys of the kingdom, for spiritual and eternal ends. In this way, the missions of the state and the church are not opposed, but complementary. But they clearly have two separate origins, two separate purposes, and two separate ends — things that belong to Caesar, and things that belong to God.

This is why, for the church qua the church to reach for the “sword” to do only

⁵ I have been deeply impressed by the biblical and canonical theme of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent through the writing and teaching ministry of Jim Hamilton, whose work on biblical theology can be accessed here: *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

what the Word and Spirit can do — namely, coerce belief — this would be to fail to acknowledge the aims, purposes, and limitations of what God has given in both the church and the state.

Christians are in the world and thus temporally under the governing authority of the state. But our citizenship is also in heaven, in the eternal kingdom. As Jesus famously said, his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

We should pray for those over us, and we should do what we can to encourage governing authorities to rule according to God's revelation — natural and special — to bear not the sword in vain and in service of the flourishing of humanity, which includes the flourishing of marriage and family. This can and should include praying for God to give us Christian rulers.

But the state's sword-rule is not in the service of making nations Christian. It is only by faith and the Word and Spirit that a Christian is made. And it is only through the ordinances Jesus gave to the church — Baptism and the Lord's Supper — that a Christian people is recognized. This is the purpose of the church, as Jesus commissions in Matthew 28: not to discipline all the nation-states, but to make disciples of all the nations.

OVERCOMING BY THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

In his letter to the German nobility, Luther urged them to take up the power of the sword for what he thought was the promotion of "good." Nevertheless, he began with a word of caution that would be good to conclude this essay with:

The first thing that we must do is to consider the matter with great earnestness, and, whatever we attempt, not to trust in our own strength and wisdom alone, even if the power of all the world were ours; for God will not endure that a good work should be begun trusting to our own strength and wisdom.⁶

6 Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate," in *First Principles of the Reformation*, ed. by Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1883), 19.

Why does Luther caution against trusting in human strength and wisdom?

[W]e must remember that in this matter we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of the darkness of this world (Eph. 6:12), who may fill the world with war and bloodshed, but cannot themselves be overcome thereby.⁷

This debate is so much bigger than the struggle for a nation, for our warfare is cosmic in scale. Therefore, as Paul says, let us “take up the whole armor of God” — which includes the Sword of the Spirit — “that we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:13).

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⁷ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 19.