

The Anabaptist Vision

The Relationship Between Church and State

by Geoff Volker

How do we begin to sort out the Church/state issue? The logical starting point is the thirteenth chapter of Romans. Here we find the definitive statement concerning the purpose of the state.

The Locus Classicus

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." Romans 13:1-7 (NIV)

What Can We Glean From Romans 13:1-7?

#1 All governmental authorities have been established by God

This scripture assumes that our God is in absolute control of the affairs of this world. No civil authority exists that has not been brought into being by the Lord of heaven and earth. This truth creates havoc with our desire to sift through all of the various authorities and determine for ourselves which ones, if any, are worthy of our submission.

#2 Rebellion against government authorities is rebellion against God

It is easy to confuse the position with the personality. The policeman who pulled me over may have an obnoxious personality, be an habitual liar, a thief, and have bad breath; but this does not interfere with the fact that I went through the red light and broke the law. Therefore, the officer is well within his rights to issue me a citation, and I am obligated biblically to submit to it. If I refuse to obey this particularly unpleasant civil servant, I am rebelling not only against his position of civil authority but against God. Here, it seems rather clear that a corrupt state is just as established by our Sovereign Lord as the good old US of A. It should also be noted that Paul wrote this letter to the believers at Rome while he was under the jurisdiction of the Roman empire--a civil authority not exactly noted for its benevolent judgments

. #3 The government has a right to levy taxes against its citizens

If memory serves me correctly, didn't our forefathers justify, at least to some degree, their revolt against King George and his island empire by appealing to taxation without representation as a heinous crime worthy of revolution? No matter how hard I examine the issue I can't seem to find any way to biblically justify our American Revolutionary War (even though I bleed red, white,

and blue). Romans 13 couldn't seem to be more clear; the government has the right to levy taxes. And you and I are obligated by the Lord to pay them. The issue of unjust versus just taxes is irrelevant.

#4 Believers are bound by Scripture to give honor and respect to those in authority

Our responsibility toward civil authority goes far beyond obedience. We are called not only to obey but also to show respect and honor to those in positions of authority. This notion does seem to stick in our craw. It removes any reason that we might try to use to justify mocking or ridiculing those in authority. We are bound by Scripture to disagree in a respectful fashion that honors the God who placed them in the position of authority.

The Anabaptist Vision

In order to grasp what the Bible teaches concerning the Church/state issue it is helpful to understand the Anabaptist Vision. The Vision is the understanding that the Anabaptist, the stepchildren of the Reformation, had of the relationship between the Church and the state. The Anabaptists occupied the middle ground between the Reformers and the Church of Rome. They had the dubious honor of persecution from both sides. They embraced justification by faith alone, along with Martin Luther and the rest of the Reformers. They also were resolutely against the Roman Catholic Church, but differed with the Reformers in their understanding of the relationship between the Church and the state. They saw the Church as being a completely separate entity from the State.

Authentic Christianity is firmly committed to the idea of nonsameness, to the idea that people are never to be thought of as all being in the same category in the matter of ultimate convictions. Authentic Christianity sees human society as composite, that is, consisting of people of diverse ways of thinking. It does not expect to encounter unanimity in human society; it expects to find some men stumbling at the very same cross in which other men glory. Leonard Verduin, *Anatomy of a Hybrid*, page 7.

The Anabaptists believed in the separation of the Church and state. They viewed both the Church and the state as holding and using a sword. The state uses the sword of steel to enforce its laws. The church uses the sword of church discipline to enforce its decrees of excommunication. The state is made up of both believers and unbelievers. Belief in Jesus Christ is not a requirement for participation in the state. On the other hand, only those who profess Christ as Lord are allowed to participate in the life of the Church. They never expected to see a truly Christian state. The Anabaptist Vision can be better understood by noting the marks of an Anabaptist. Marks of an Anabaptist (from *The Reformers and Their Stepchild*, by Verduin)

1. The Church is made up of those who profess to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.
2. The Church is a voluntary association of professed believers.
3. Because they held to a Church made up of professed believers, rather than all those living in a given area, they were called Heretics.
4. They rejected the idea of salvation through baptism.
5. They gathered in out-of-the-way places for worship.

6. They believed in rebaptizing those who has been baptized as infants but had come to a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
7. They were committed to materially caring for one another.
8. They believed in the remnant principle, that true believers would always be a distinct minority in a hostile unbelieving world.

The Realm of Common Grace

The Anabaptists believed that the state was in the realm of common grace. Common grace refers to the relationship between the Creator and all mankind, to the benefits given to mankind solely on the basis that they are his creation and made in his image. Common grace has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not someone is a believer. Anything positive that an unbeliever experiences in this life is due to common grace.

"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Matthew 5:43-45. (NIV)

Another aspect of common grace is evident tin the divine government or control of human society. It is true that human society is in a state of human fallenness. Were it not for the restraining hand of God, indeed, our world would long since have degenerated into a self-destructive chaos of iniquity, in which social order and community life would have been an impossibility. That a measure of domestic, political, and international harmony is enjoyed by the generality of mankind is due to the overruling goodness of God. ...He even calls secular rulers and magistrates ministers of God, since their proper concern is the maintenance of order and decency in society. -- Philip Hughes, "Common Grace," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, page 480.

Civil government is not a Christian institution but an institution established by God to bring order to a fallen world. The mistake that some well-intentioned believers make is to try to organize civil government in such a way that only Christians would qualify for participation.

The New England Experiment

The Puritan Vision for America was to establish a new "Israel." Hence, unlike modern liberal democratic ideas, the New England Puritans were not primarily individualists seeking a neutral republic open to all religious views. Rather, they held to a Christian commonwealth, which they hoped would aid in reforming the rest of the world by being a "city set on a hill" based on the true Reformed religion. Thus they were not inconsistent with their own values when they in turn persecuted dissenters or heretics in the midst, such as the Baptist Roger Williams. He was forced to leave Massachusetts and became a found of Rhode Island, which was set up to tolerate various "denominations" of Christians. -- Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World; The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries*, page 126.

Though the need for limited government was recognized and though church polity [government], in its congregational opposition to episcopacy, had a democratic look to it, Puritan New England was anything but democratic. It was in fact an oligarchy in which the ruling party consisted of only ten percent of the population. To vote or hold office in the Massachusetts Bay colony, one

had to be a "freeman," one has to be admitted to church membership -- and membership required approval by the elders and the whole congregation with reference not only to doctrinal belief but also to conduct and to "the works of grace upon his soule," or "how God hath beene dealing with him about his conversion." -- John Warwick Montgomery, *The Shaping of America*, page 43.

Putting All the Pieces Together

How should a Christian view civil government? The following are some of my thoughts that might help you sort through the subject.

1. There is no requirement for leaders of the state to be believers. All civil authorities are God's servants
2. Common grace is the basis for the state, while special grace is the basis for the Church.
3. The transformation of society is NOT the primary agenda of the believer in the New Covenant era. The example of slavery shows that the believer is not commanded to abolish slavery, only to regulate it when he has the opportunity to do so. The fact that the application of biblical principles, such as the priesthood of all believers, will eventually bring the believer to the point of rejecting slavery does not change the issue that the elimination of slavery was not of first importance for the believer.

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from our heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him." -- Ephesians 6:5-9. (NIV)

4. True believers will always be a distinct minority in a hostile unbelieving world (Matthew 7:13-14). The best that believers can hope for is to have a majority of citizens sympathetic to biblical ethics.
5. The believers' role in society is to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). They are to seek to influence their country in a biblical direction.
6. Belief in the God of the Bible can NEVER be forced on a society. The nation of Israel was the only nation that God outwardly controlled. Belief was forced on Israel because it served as a physical picture of the true people of God.

What About Civil Disobedience?

"Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men!'" --Acts 5:29 (NIV)

Is it ever right to disobey the government? The answer is yes, but a qualified yes. The believer must disobey when he is ordered by the authorities to do something that Scripture forbids him to do, or he is forbidden to do something that Scripture commands him to do. It is only in this circumstance that disobedience is honoring to the Lord. The fact that I might think that a particular speed limit is ridiculous is an irrelevant concern -- to willfully break the speed limit is rebellion against our Father in heaven.