

Religion and Civil Government

By Martin Pickup

When we study the Bible it is important to realize that the way people conceived of things in ancient times is not always the way that we conceive of things today. For example, we make a sharp distinction today between a person's religious life and his civic life, between spiritual duties and secular duties. But the ancients did not separate these concepts. We make the distinction largely because of the Bible's influence upon Western thought, yet when the Bible was being written many of its concepts were quite novel. As we consider what God's word teaches about a Christian's responsibility to civil government, we will improve our understanding if we consider the biblical teaching within the context of the ancient perspective.

The term *religion* suggests to our minds something more than what ancient worshipers envisioned, and it omits something that they saw as essential. We commonly define religion as "a system of belief," implying that a person who practices a religion does so because he has chosen a particular system of doctrines and way of life. The ancients had no such word or concept. The people of ancient Ephesus, for example, offered sacrifices and prayers to Diana, a goddess whose temple cult was part of the social fabric of the city, but there was no religious system associated with their acts of piety. Moreover, worship in antiquity was indistinguishable from civic duty. Not only was there no "separation of church and state," but the distinction itself would have been meaningless to the ancient mind. A Greek man living at Delphi paid homage to the god Apollo whether he believed in Apollo's real existence or not (and many philosophically-minded Greeks and Romans did not believe in the gods). In the ancient world it

was a person's nationality that determined what gods he worshiped and how the rituals were conducted. Religion, culture and politics were all one and the same.

The above facts help us to appreciate how innovative the gospel of Christ was as it spread throughout the first-century world. The gospel called upon individuals in every society the world over to believe in one true God and to implement, in whatever culture they lived, a form of worship and ethical way of life that God revealed.

Christianity did not impose a particular culture upon the nations of the world. This was in contrast to the Law of Moses which *had* prescribed a unique socio-political order for the people of Israel. In keeping with the ancient mode of thought, the Mosaic system created a society where religious and civic duties were inseparable. But the teaching of Jesus was something that a person could practice within any society, within any culture. Though Christianity denounced all false gods, erroneous doctrines and immoral lifestyles, it did not seek to re-order societies as such. It sought to reform the thinking and behavior of individual people. Centuries earlier, Alexander the Great and the Grecian empire Hellenized the world by building gymnasiums, athletic arenas and other institutions of Greek culture in the lands they conquered. But Jesus Christ conquered the hearts of individuals, capturing one conscience at a time. Rather than restructuring social institutions, Jesus commanded people to live within their respective societies in a way that reflected the moral and spiritual principles of God.

The gospel of Christ did not change a person's earthly citizenship. It neither created, nor negated social responsibility. Peter was a Jew before he became a Christian, and he remained one afterward. Paul was a Jew as well as a Roman citizen before and after he obeyed the gospel. The baptism of Sergius Paulus did not require him to step down as proconsul of Cyprus

(Acts 13:12), nor did a soldier's conversion mean that he had to cease his military service on behalf of the government (Luke 3:14; Acts 10:1; 16:27-33). What the gospel did require was that every disciple carry out his social duties in accordance with Jesus' teaching, thereby acting as lights in the world (Matt. 5:14-16).

The gospel also taught that, in addition to one's earthly citizenship, every Christian was a citizen of a heavenly kingdom, the spiritual community of God. This, again, was a novel concept. A Christian served a God who was not one of the traditional deities of his nation's history and he engaged in worship acts that had nothing to do with civil allegiance. Thus, Christianity presented a unique distinction between one's relationship to Deity and one's relationship to society—a difference between religion and culture.

Nowhere in Scripture is this distinction presented more keenly than in the account of Jesus' response to the Jewish leaders who asked Him whether it was lawful for a Jew to pay taxes to Caesar. This was a hotly debated issue among first-century Jews. As we noted above, the Law of Moses had created a thoroughly theocratic society where service to God and service to governing officials (viz., priests, king, city elders) were inextricably linked. Such a system underwent a strain in Old Testament times whenever Israelite officials were unfaithful to God's commands. But the domination of Palestine by Gentile powers—in the first century, by the Roman empire—created a unique situation that the Mosaic system did not address. What if the governing authorities of Israel were pagan Gentiles? Many Jews believed that giving financial support to Rome amounted to a rejection of the Law and disloyalty to God. Others, like the Pharisees, acknowledged that Roman domination was illegitimate, but they felt that

acquiescence to Rome was a pragmatic necessity until God's kingdom could be established and Rome overthrown.

Jesus' response to the issue is unprecedented. Calling for a denarius, "He said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said to Him, 'Caesar's. Then He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'" (Matt. 22:19-21). Jesus makes a distinction here between one's service to God and one's service to human government. Just as no Jew would regard worshiping Yahweh at the Jerusalem temple as a civic duty to Rome, the reverse was also true: honoring Roman officials had nothing to do with the worship of the true God, and it did not involve an individual in any sinful action that the pagan government practiced. The reaction of the crowd to Jesus' teaching was sheer amazement (v. 22). Jesus had established a new way of perceiving of God and civil government: He differentiated them as two distinct realms of personal obligation.

Jesus did not speak of one's obligation to obey government as a temporary, pragmatic necessity, like the Pharisees thought. Jesus presented it as an essential, on-going responsibility. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," He commanded. Several New Testament passages echo this teaching and stress a Christian's obligation to his society and government (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Tim. 2:2; Ti. 3:1). The distinction Jesus taught between religion and society becomes particularly paramount when civil authorities demand of a Christian something that is in conflict with Christ's teaching. On such occasions, disciples of Jesus will proclaim, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). They will maintain their loyalty to God even when doing so brings persecution from society (1 Pet. 4:12-17; Rev. 2:10). But such persecutions are not the norm of daily life, and in most circumstances a Christian can, and must, be a model citizen in

the eyes of the world (1 Pet. 3:13). By doing so, a Christian honors Christ and represents Him favorably to a world that needs to know the Lord. “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution . . . For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:13-15).

The gospel of Jesus Christ demarcates two distinctive realms of responsibility, one religious and one social. On one level, Christians are to be an active part of their society. But on a higher plane, spiritually and morally, we are not to be of this world (John 17:14). Ultimately we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, and we anticipate the future return of our Lord—a time of the dissolution of all human societies and governments, and the sole continuation of the perfected, eternal kingdom of God.