

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Romans 13:1-7

By Raymond White

Any discussion of separation of church and state is necessarily politically charged. America's founding fathers had good reason to assert that the two should be independent of each other — the centuries of Catholics and Protestants burning and racking each other was compelling evidence that Christianity had not improved things much since the days of Roman persecution.

Quakers and Baptists and other believers had to come to America to escape that brutality. And when the colonies won their revolution and were able to form their own nation, they disallowed state mandated religions which had inflicted so much state mandated terror. And so the first amendment begins with: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion..." That was the beginning of the bill of rights.

It's not my intent to get deep into what our nation's founders had to say about this subject or how our congress and courts have since been influenced (or not influenced) by the first amendment. All I want to do is let the Bible weigh in and leave it at that.

***Joshua 1:1** Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying, :8 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and thou shalt have good success..*

We think of "Mosaic Law" so much as revelation from God that we seldom think of it as what it really is: the constitutional legal system of a new nation. That it was spoken by God (and therefore God's law) should tell us something about where God's heart is at, that what God really wants from us is social civility and social justice. In other words, he wants us to get along. After all, that's what law is. That it came from God simply adds divine clout to it.

***Malachi 2:7** For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.*

Civil law came from the priests and therefore the priest should stay knowledgeable. For beginning to end (Joshua to Malachi), the nation of Israel's saw its relationship with God and its national purpose through its civil law. The law was God's primary revelation. Any notion of separation of church and state wouldn't even occur to the Jewish mind. Before the Diaspora, any problems they had with God were because they didn't take their law seriously enough. Following the Diaspora, their law was absolute because it was divine.

***Ezra 7:25** And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river,*

*all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. :26
And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king...*

Ezra, a priest, appointed the governors and the judges. Does that mean only Jews could hold office? Not likely considering that Ezra's authority was given to him by a Persian king who was hardly a Jew. But it does make sense that the whole notion of law comes from a divine source above the contrivances of congress.

It's interesting too that in Ezra's mind the law of God and the law of the king (the Persian king) were somehow related — Jews were duty bound to honor both: the law of God *and* the law of the king. Maybe this is our first hint of separation of church and state.

Jeremiah 26:8 ...the priests and the prophets...took him [Jeremiah] saying, Thou shalt surely die. :16 Then said the princes...unto the priests and to the prophets; This man is not worthy to die...:21 And when Jehoiakim the king...heard [Urijah's] words, the king sought to put him [Urijah] to death.

It was the church that wanted to kill Jeremiah. It was the civil authority that saved his life. So don't necessarily trust the church to always make the right moral decision. But then the civil government suddenly switched and tried to kill a prophet, Urijah.

So you never know where the arrows are going to come from. We should keep in mind that the inquisition was entirely a religious movement, as is terrorism today. But throughout history, government has murdered far more people than religion. Any power, church or government, can turn against the truth. Separation of powers just kind of gives the truth more of a chance to percolate to the top. What our founding fathers understood was that concentrated power was dangerous, and so they separated not only church from state with the first amendment, they also divided up the government, the idea being that with such divisions, the truth has a better chance to prevail.

Romans 13:1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. :2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. :3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. :4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. :5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. :6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. :7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

This important text demands that we submit ourselves to secular government. And in this case in Paul's time, the Roman government. This is important because it means we need not seek for a theocratic government run by priests or prophets. The "higher powers" that Paul speaks of is civil authorities, and at that time that was Rome.

Paul's point is that secular law under secular authorities is what God wants. Secular judges, and secular police, and secular jailers and executioners with license to kill are all God's ministers although they do not know it. We need not insist on being subject only to God's law, but we should rather be subject to civil law in general and consider its ministers to be God's ministers.

This very important text accomplishes two things: First, it establishes the need for secular civil law and God's requirement on us to submit to it. And second, that secular civil law is sufficient; that is, we need not seek to establish any religious based government; indeed, religious based governments are generally a bad thing because they demand religious compliance and terrorize all who will not submit to a particular faith.

Mormons have two Articles of Faith that speak to this very issue. They are:

Article of Faith 11: We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let the worship how, where, or what they may.

Article of Faith 12: We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in honoring, obey, and sustain the law.

Religious freedom and submitting to secular law are the principles in view here. Government and laws are fine and good and necessary, but government runs afoul of common sense and decency and its purpose when it legislates religion. For instance.

***Daniel 3:1** Nebuchadnezzar the king made and image of Gold... **:4** Then an herald cried aloud... **:5** That...ye fall down and worship it... **:11** And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.*

Well that was a bad law and there were three Jewish boys who rightly refused to obey it, and as a result of their civil disobedience, they were tossed into the fiery furnace.

***Acts 4:18** And they [the high priests] called them [Peter and John] and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus **:19** But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.*

Again we have government trying to interfere with religious ideas.

The ten Roman persecutions were about suppressing religious ideas. The inquisition was about suppressing religious ideas. But what about the great flood, and what about Israel's genocidal conquest of the Canaanites? Weren't those examples of God's aggression against non-believers? No, there were not. God (the true God, the God of the Bible) never killed people for unbelief. The flood came because —

***Genesis 6:11** The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. **:13** And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them...*

The reason God destroyed the earth with the flood was not because of unbelief but because of violence.

Genesis 15:16 But in the fourth generation they [your posterity] shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full

The reason God brought Israel back into the land of Canaan and displaced the people there was not because those people didn't believe but because of the iniquity.

Yes, Israel was a theocratic government, but that was because it was the real God who sat in the temple as their reigning monarch. If that is true, and you know it's true because God opened the sea for your escape, and stopped the sun, and fed you from heaven, and led you with a pillar of fire, then yes, have your theocratic government because you know with certainty that God really is there.

But other than that unique situation, any theocratic government that mandates religion is generally a bad thing and is simply an excuse for tyranny.

The whole notion of separation of church and state really is a good thing. And, by the way, it goes all the way back to Moses. Long before Moses there was priest who was also a king.

Genesis 14:18 Melchizedek king of Salem...priest of the most high God.

And Moses was both a religious leader and a leader of state. But when Moses died, he had two successors, [1] a young priest, a surviving son of Arron (*Exodus 3:2*) Eliazar, and [2] a judge, a head of state, Joshua (*Numbers 13:16*). And thus the two lines of authority continued in Israel separate and distinct. Israel never had a king who was a priest and never had a priest who was a king.

But it was predicted that one day there would come a leader who was once again both priest and king.

Psalms 110:4 The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

The point of Melchizedek is that he was priest and king; that is, no separation of church and state. Someone would one day come who would be like that. Then one day there was born a child whose right it was to rule with political authority as Joshua had, and whose name was Joshua, or in Greek, Jesus. Also, he was a priest, or anointed, or in Hebrew Messiah, or in Greek, Christ. And when Jesus Christ returns, he will be be our priest and king.

But until then, we must accept no substitutes, no religious leader who wants to use government to tell us what we must do. The whole notion of separation of church and state is our first guarantee of liberty.

But there is another side of this coin. It is government's job to protect people. And it is religion's job to give people enough conscience so that people are safe. But what happens when government fails in its duty to protect people and allows for instance slavery or abortion? Then it is religion's responsibility to remind government of its duty. That is what the prophets of old did and what frequently got them killed, and it is the duty of religion today. When churches help government find its conscience, that is not a violation of separation of church and state, that's the church's duty.