

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The church has to do with the religious life of man, while the state has to do with his secular life. The church has reference to the spiritual interests of man, while the state has reference to the temporal and secular interests of man.

Three principles may govern the relation of church and state: the supremacy of the church, the supremacy of the state, and the reciprocal independence of each other. Each of these has been tried. The first is the ideal and program of the Roman Catholic church. The second was adopted by the churches of the Reformation, but it brought confusion and failed to give the churches satisfaction. It remained for the third principle to receive practical application and to come to fruition under the constitutional government of the United States.

The New Testament teaches clearly that the government of the early churches was democratic and autonomous. The authority of the local church was supreme in the management of its own affairs. It received, disciplined and dismissed its own members. It received and disbursed its money. It elected its own officers and sent out its own missionaries. No outside authority, either ecclesiastical or civil, could call in question the acts of the church in the management of its own affairs. As long as the rules of faith and practice were preserved, and the principle of separation of church and state was observed, things proved satisfactory but with the introduction of false teachings with reference to the relation of church and state, complications arose which resulted in discord and bitter strife.

The Scriptures fully recognize the authority of the state in its proper sphere. When Jesus was questioned in regard to paying tribute to Caesar, He answered, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and to God the things which are God's." The people to whom He was speaking were under the dominion and protection of Caesar's government and were obligated to support it by the payment of taxes. They were also under the divine government and therefore were responsible for giving proper recognition of its authority even as they received its protection and providing care.

Church people are to be models as citizens in their obedience to law and in their support of the state authorities, but nowhere is the state recognized as having authority in their religious life. Nowhere in the New Testament is there the slightest hint that the church should dominate the state or that the state should dominate the church. Everywhere each is recognized as occupying a distinct and independent sphere. Church and state should be separate. The state has no right to impose penalty for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal.

Church and state operate in different spheres, the church in the field of religion, and the state in the field of government. The two are to be kept separate and distinct.

The Christian is a citizen of two countries, the kingdom of God and his own country. The good Christian will be a good citizen of each.

There are certain duties which the Christian owes to his government. First, he must obey its laws.

Second, he must give financial support to his government.

Third, he must take an interest in his government and participate in its affairs.

There are duties which a Christian owes to God, and these are supreme. When there is a conflict between the laws of man and the laws of God, the Christian must obey God.

Certainly there was no sign of union between church and state in the early days of the church. It was not until the fourth century that definite union between church and state was consummated.

It is just here, in the relation between church and state, that grave dangers are arising today. The danger is twofold. There is a growing tendency on the part of the government to invade the realm of religion and impose restrictions on the churches. On the other hand, there is a persistent effort on the part of certain religious organizations to bring the church and state into partnership. This is true especially in the field of education.

The union of church and state has always been attended by many evils. It has resulted in the loss of religious freedom, in a formal church without spiritual power, and in constant bickering and strife. Our Baptist fathers led in the fight for religious liberty in this land, and won a glorious victory. It cost blood and tears, but they did not hesitate to pay the price. The fruits of their victory must not be allowed to perish through the indifference of their children.

Perhaps the largest contribution the new world has made to the old is the principle of the separation of church and state. Historians give great credit to Baptists for the establishment of this principle in America. Under Baptist influence Rhode Island established the first government in human history that granted full religious liberty to all faiths. Largely through Baptist influence, strongly aided by Jefferson and Madison, the Constitution of the United States provides that, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion; or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or the press."

Separation of church and state means the recognition of the church as supreme in matters of religion and the state as supreme in civil authority; and never shall the two be joined or intertwined in any way whatsoever. There shall be no preference shown, no molestation offered, or no aid given. No tax monies are to be used for parochial or private education or for building church institutions such as hospitals.