

The *SBJT* Forum: Christian Responsibility in the Public Square

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Thomas R. Schreiner, Michael A. G. Haykin, and Jonathan Leeman have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Is there anything distinctive about a Christian—and specifically biblical—understanding of the relationship between church and state?

D. A. Carson: Quite a lot of answers might be given to this question. For example, one of the remarkable features of the Bible is the sheer wealth of the perspectives it brings to bear on this subject. It does not content itself to offer nothing more than a reductionistic monochrome ideal, but faces up to the exigencies of a broken world. Consider the following list of portrayals of the relationship between church and state—by no means an exhaustive list: (a) In passages ranging from the beatitudes to the teaching of Jesus before his passion to the instruction of the apostle, the Bible not infrequently speaks in terms of opposition and persecution. Where the persecuting power is not personal or local, but the state, then clearly one kind of church/state relationship is being recognized as the sort of thing with which many Christians have to come to terms. (b) On the other hand, a passage like Romans 13:1–7 tells us, within certain parameters, to respect the state and be obedient to it. Inevitably some have attempted to reinterpret this passage in various creative ways (I have briefly addressed these

alternatives in the fifth chapter of my book *Christ and Culture Revisited* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008]). On the face of it, however, the straightforward meaning of the text should not be avoided: Christians are duty-bound to obey the state as they obey the Lord, for the Lord himself has ordained the authority of the state. Set within the witness of the New Testament, of course, such an injunction has necessary limits. When the state tells us to defy or disown God, we must reject the authority of the state: we then adopt the stance of the first apostles, who insisted they were obliged, if push comes to shove, to obey God rather than human beings (Acts 4:19–20). In that case, of course, Christians must be willing to absorb the persecution that might then ensue—which of course brings us back to the first form of the possible relationships between church and state, already described. (c) Sometimes the confrontation is more restricted, of course. Opposition may spring not from state opposition—in the first century, Rome itself—but from local authority. In other words, official persecution is not necessarily state persecution. That was obvious in the Québec of my youth. Between 1950 and 1952, Baptist ministers spent a total of about eight years in jail. None of this was

D. A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his many books are *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Baker, 2004), *How Long O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2nd ed., Baker, 2006), and the forthcoming *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008).

sponsored by the Dominion of Canada; none of it sprang from judicial decisions in the highest provincial courts. All of it, so far as I am aware, was municipal. Similarly in the first century: persecution could break out in Philippi and be threatened in Thessalonica, while just down the road Berea might be wonderfully peaceful. At very least, however, that means the state is adopting a kind of “hands off” self-distancing from the problem. If the state is not the active agent of persecution, neither is it the bulwark of religious freedom. (d) From a biblical perspective, an eschatological dimension is inescapable. Even while the New Testament writers want Christians to be good citizens, they also insist that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20–21); we belong to the “Jerusalem that is above” (Gal 4:26). That means that thoughtful Christians can never afford to give ultimate allegiance to any state. However much his reign is currently contested, Jesus is reigning now with all authority—and ultimately Jesus wins, his last enemies crushed under his feet. The Christian’s allegiance to the state, then, is always and necessarily contingent, conditional, partial. (e) Whether the state is supportive or confrontive of Christians as individuals or of the church as a community, we must recognize that the essential dynamics of its authority are thoroughly *unlike* the operation of authority as it ought to be manifested among believers (Matt 20:20–28).

This is far from an exhaustive list of biblically-grounded stances on the relationship between church and state. The entries on this list are enough to remind us, however, that any analysis of the relationship that depends too narrowly on *one* of these perspectives, claiming this one perspective to be the biblical control, is

necessarily wrong because it is reductionistic. What must be found is a biblical-theological framework that is comprehensive enough to embrace *all* that the Bible says on these matters, recognizing that the Bible does not offer us mutually exclusive case studies from which we may pick and choose, but a “thick” description that turns on such immense themes as the sweep of the Bible’s story-line, the matchless sovereignty of God, an account of rebellion and redemption, and much more. In short, *one* of the things that is unique about the biblical revelation of the relationships between church and state is its extraordinary depth, penetration, subtlety, flexibility, and “thickness.”

One other distinctive element should command our attention here, *viz.* Jesus’ remarkable utterance, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:13–17). Some have attempted to domesticate the passage by asserting that since nothing ultimately belongs to Caesar, nothing should be paid to him. That interpretation does not listen very attentively to the context of Jesus’ utterance. Others argue that Caesar and God operate in mutually exclusive domains, and just as Caesar must not intrude onto God’s domain so God must not intrude onto Caesar’s. That interpretation ignores the repeated insistence that God alone is God: if Caesar has authority in certain domains, it is because Caesar has received this right from God himself. From a Christian perspective, all legitimate authority ultimately derives from the God of all authority. Paul, clearly, understood the point (Rom 13:1–7): the powers that be are ordained by God, and therefore they cannot possibly be thought of as independent of God or, still less, properly competing with God.

So what, then, is the force of this passage, and why do we judge it to make a unique contribution to Christian understanding of the relationship between church and state? Living in the West, as we do, two thousand years after the empty tomb, we find it easy to forget that, before the coming of Christ, religion and state were tightly bound together. Transparently this was true in ancient Israel, but it was no less true of the surrounding nations and of the great pagan empires. Of course, a really large and diverse empire like the Roman Empire might allow many religions within its borders—religions that were often tied to particular geographical or ethnic regions. It was not long, however, before Rome insisted that, apart from the exception of Jews, *all* living within the boundaries of the Empire must acknowledge the deity of the Emperor himself and offer a little incense to him from time to time: religion needed to be in the service of the Empire. For Jew and Gentile alike, then, Jesus' words "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" were staggeringly original, evocative, even mysterious.

Two thousand years of subsequent history bear witness that, however poorly Christ's words have at times been thought through and applied, the distinction has never entirely been lost. Sometimes the distinction worked its way out in terms of tussles between the authority of the Pope and the authority of monarchs; sometimes it worked its way out in terms of brutal anti-clericalism; sometimes it worked its way out in terms of various theories of the separation of church and state (the American model is not the only one, of course). But even where people spoke of themselves, rather optimistically, as belonging to "a Christian nation," the

vast majority meant by this and similar expressions that Christian ideals were encoded in much of the nation's laws, or that a majority of its citizens belonged to the Christian heritage, or the like. They did *not* mean that the nation was Christian in the same way that, say, the ancient Israelite nation was constituted the covenant people of God, even though from time to time rather risky analogies were drawn.

I shall end with three brief reflections that flow from this biblical element in the theological relationship between church and state:

(1) And as far as I can see, Christianity's contribution in this respect is unique. Where other religions have tried to adopt something like it, it has in part been under Western influence. For instance, Shintoism and Buddhism may recede somewhat in Japan owing to pressures from consumerism, democratic forms of government, and even philosophical materialism. Thus one might be a pretty consistent secularist in Japan, provided one continues to conform to the dictates of expected and approved conduct imposed by a shame culture. But no major religious figure has attempted to introduce into Japan the kind of distinction between church and state that Jesus introduces.

(2) In this respect, Christianity is thoroughly unlike Islam. Its founder never said anything remotely similar to "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." There is no "church" that is somehow distinct from the "state": the *ummah*, the people of Allah, are all those who submit to the will of Allah, and one of the state's functions is to enforce the law of Allah. It has no quasi-independent function. The fond hope of many Western liberals that Islam will eventually develop

in the direction of some sort of similar tension is probably unrealistic: for Islam to develop in this direction, it would have to cease being Islam in the various configurations in which it is known. One of the reasons why it is difficult to imagine exactly how Islam might evolve in this direction springs from the fact that Islam's appeal is not to a God who reaches into a lost world and saves by calling to himself men and women whom he redeems, thus constituting them a separate community *distinct from the state*. Rather, in Islam people are simply expected to submit to Allah. People do not become Muslims by a kind of Islamic form of regeneration, but by willingness to submit to Allah. Muslims do not typically speak of knowing God, or being loved by God, but of submitting to Allah. One could, I suppose, imagine an evolution in Islamic thought that begins to think of the *ummah* as a special community distinguishable from the state by its willed submission to Allah, but in the absence of historical rootage for the distinction introduced by Christ, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," it is difficult to discern from what corner of its intellectual history this distinction might spring.

Of course, it is unrealistic to think that the various forms of Western democracy, including democracy's characteristic embrace of freedom of religion, owe their existence to nothing other than Christianity: they owe much to the Enlightenment, the peculiar rise in the eighteenth century of the European nation-state, and to several other influences. Yet one of the foundational influences was certainly Christianity, and that includes simultaneous beliefs in a sovereign God who holds us accountable (shared with Islam), and a fundamental distinction (however

worked out) between church and state—a distinction that traces back to the Lord Jesus himself.

(3) It cannot be too strongly emphasized that even after Christians have recognized the uniqueness of Jesus' words, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," much more study and theological synthesis are needed to work out what the relationship between church and state should look like in practical terms. It is one thing to recognize that Jesus mandates some sort of distinction; it is another to spell out the concrete parameters of the distinction. Thus there are Christians today who follow Stanley Hauerwas, for example, who thinks, in effect, that we should not bother trying to reform the state with Christian ideals, but devote our energy to establishing an alternative community. On the other hand, there are theologians whose placement of law in their theological synthesis demands that they work toward a renewal of the nation such that biblical law will become the law of the land in every domain save where Jesus has specifically abrogated it. Inevitably there is a spectrum of positions between these two poles—and still more variations along quite different axes, too. This is not the place to begin to test representative positions by Scripture. I am merely specifying that all of these theories and their outworkings share something fundamental at the core, something unique to Christianity, something that is traceable back to Jesus Christ.