

# New Testament Theology of the State, Part 1

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## Introduction

Church and state issues continue to be the source of many conflicts among Christians today, resulting in a massive confusion in what exactly a Biblical theology of the state and public policy entails. The confusion often prompts awkward answers to important questions regarding the relationship of Christians to government, such as “What kind of government should a Christian support?,” “What public policy should be obeyed?,” or “What does submission to government mean?” Most Christians attempt to justify their political philosophy Biblically with Romans 13 in some way, if they attempt at all. At first glance, this appears to be an acceptable solution – Paul seems to call for submission to government. But how do we reconcile this passage with the undeniable fact that individuals acting within the coercive machinations of states have been the greatest culprits of criminal action and violence in the history of mankind? In Germany during the 1930s and 40s, for instance, theologians used Romans 13 to encourage submission to the Nazi regime, especially since it was democratically elected. More recently, a member of the Zimbabwean parliament declared that the corrupt dictator-president

Robert Mugabe was sent from God and “should not be challenged in next year’s watershed polls.” Obviously, these are inappropriate ways for Scripture to be used, but how much different are we who live in the United States, a nation that often claims to be Christian? Are we simply to comply with the government because the Bible says so, or is more at stake?

Clearly the church has a need for a better framework for evaluating the nature of the state and the consequences of public policy. I propose to begin this process with an analysis of some New Testament passages that seem to address the relationship of Christians to civil government, specifically what we find in the gospels and in Romans 13.

## **The Gospels and the State**

The initial step toward developing a Biblical theology of government must be to examine the teachings of Jesus. What did Jesus say and do that helps us to understand what our reactions to government must be? Often those who want to derive Biblical principles about government from the gospels turn to the famous “Render to Caesar” passages, an event recorded in each of the synoptic gospels (Matt. 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, Luke 20:20-26). But is this the only gospel text worth discussing regarding civil government? In my opinion, it is not. One can also obtain some important information about the nature of the state through the temptations of Jesus and a brief comparison of the kingdom of man to the Kingdom of God.

We begin with an analysis of the “Render to Caesar” passages, first examining the text of Matthew 22:

*<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.<sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?”<sup>21</sup> They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22, NRSV)*

In Matthew, the Pharisees send some of their disciples along with Herodians to Jesus in order to “trap him in his words” at the temple. The Gospel of Mark says that “*they* sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Jesus,” *they* likely being the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders mentioned in Mark 11:27. Strangely, Luke identifies the questioners as “spies” from the priests, teachers, and elders. The identity of these interrogators is not trivial. Indeed, the Pharisees and Herodians had stark differences in philosophy. Herodians were pro-Roman rule, and they used the Romans’ power to obtain certain benefits. The Pharisees, in contrast, were more ambivalent towards the Romans; Pharisees would generally tolerate them as long as Jewish religious practices were left alone. However, the Pharisees and Herodians are brought together because of their shared opposition to Jesus.

In each gospel, the question is prefaced differently, but the phrasing of the question itself is always the same: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" The question is very clever. The Herodians would be *for* paying the tax, and if Jesus answers in the negative they have grounds to arrest him for rebelling against Caesar. On the other hand, the Pharisees would generally *not* like the tax (although they are forced to pay it), and an answer in the affirmative would likely result in a loss of popular support of Jesus. Furthermore, there is a subtle legal phrasing in the question by asking "is it lawful," or in some translations "is it permitted." In other words, the Pharisees are asking, "Is it *consistent with Torah* (Jewish Law) to pay the tax to Caesar or not?" All those present were aware of the law and of the words of Leviticus 25:23, "The land [of Israel] shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine." The question is now more complicated because Torah may be at stake. Since Caesar is trying to take the land from God, is it not disobedience to pay the tax?

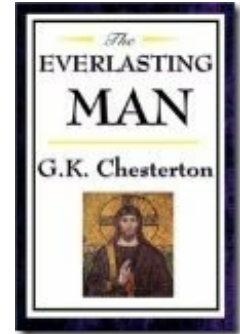
Jesus saw through the trickery, of course, and responds with a clever gambit of his own. When he asks the Pharisees to produce a coin, they unwittingly bring forth the very evidence that exposes their hypocrisy. Jesus asks them whose image and inscription is on the coin. They answer, probably reluctantly, "Caesar's." But they, and the surrounding people, realize their error, for the *inscriptions* on these coins would always read, "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the deified Augustus, chief priest." The *Pharisees*, those leaders expected to uphold the law of God, have brought into the *temple* an item that effectively breaks the second commandment, to have no graven images, showing that in their hearts they break the first commandment as well. They, not Jesus, are the hypocrites. They are the ones who bought into the Roman's pagan system. In commentator Thomas Long's estimation, Jesus' response means, "Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No man can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). You seem to have made your decision, forged your convenient compromise. But what about your obligation to God? Render to God what belongs to God. Choose this day whom you will serve" (251).

If this interpretation is correct, then there is effectively no guideline set forth here for resolving church and state issues. State practices are not legitimized here by any means. Rather, Jesus says that any neat schemes of division in life that we create must come down, and discourages nationalism or jingoism as a legitimate church practice. We may live under a state, but we belong wholly to the God who is above all states. We are always to render to God what is God's.

An interesting clue to the nature of the state emerges in the temptations of Jesus Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13), which few commentators develop. In Matthew, the third temptation of Christ is "the kingdoms of the world and their splendor," which Satan can give Jesus if he pays obeisance to Satan. Strangely, even though Satan is considered "the Prince [ruler] of this world" (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11), we do not often seriously consider what Satan's offer means. I think that Satan was quite sincere in his offer; Jesus did not brush it off as impossible. Jesus seems to understand that the kingdoms of this world *do* belong to Satan, and we should not think otherwise. Logically, this means that the kingdoms of the world are at enmity with God. In fact, Scripture witnesses to this directly and indirectly in multiple places. The Old

Testament strongly indicates that the pagan religions, often encouraged by Satan through their sorcery and witchcraft, were intimately tied to a nation's political leadership. G.K. Chesterton agrees with this assessment and gives evidences from history in his book The Everlasting Man. Herod clearly perceives that the baby Christ-child is a threat to his power, and hence orders the killing of hundreds, if not thousands of infants in an attempt to stop this incursion (Matt. 2). Furthermore, the theme of Babylon as an evil state under the influence of Satan permeates the book of Revelation. In Revelation 18:4, for instance, God exhorts His church to "come out of her [Babylon], my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues."

Briefly discussing the differences between the kingdom of man and the Kingdom of God is illustrative in this discussion. One of the recurring themes in the gospels, especially Matthew, is that Jesus is a *king* bringing forth the Kingdom of God. But Jesus explicitly says that, "My kingdom is not from this world... my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). The "rules of the kingdom" as explained in the Sermon on the Mount are unlike any sort of state laws that have ever existed. Furthermore, it is not the job of the Christian to use *physical force* to bring about his kingdom, but rather to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). The kingdoms of man are founded upon power and violence, but the Kingdom of God is founded upon humility (Matt. 18:4), service (Matt. 20:26), and love (John 13:35). While we cannot help being tied to states in this world, we are reminded once again that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).



In summary, Jesus' direct teachings about civil government are virtually non-existent, but the gospels make some strong implications about the nature of the state that might surprise us. The state appears to have a strong connection to Satan and his kingdom, and is antithetical to the Kingdom of God, which shuns the use of power for personal gain.

*Continue reading [part 2](#).*

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