

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

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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.

SBJT: Why is it helpful to compare and contrast Romans 13 and Revelation in considering the role of governing authorities?

Thomas R. Schreiner: First, we shall consider Rom 13:1-7. Believers are com-

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manded to submit to governing authorities. Against some scholars, there is no reference to angelic powers here; the authorities mentioned are secular rulers. We can be confident that human rulers are in view, for taxes are obviously paid to civil authorities, not angels. Paul emphasizes that rulers have been appointed and instituted by God. Seeing God as the one who ordains rulers was not a Pauline innovation but harkens back here to the OT where God's sovereignty over rulers is affirmed regularly (2 Sam 12:8; Prov 8:15-16; Isa 45:1; Jer 27:5-6; Dan 2:21, 37; 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). Civil authorities are not the ultimate authority. God establishes rulers, and he removes them from power as well. Their authority is delegated and provisional, and, hence, they must not succumb to arrogance.

Since rulers are ordained by God, believers are called upon to submit to authorities (cf. also Titus 3:1). Governing authorities maintain order in society by punishing evil and extolling what is good. Rulers have the right and duty to use the sword to enforce justice against those who practice evil (Rom 13:4). It is likely that the reference to the sword refers to capital punishment, which is enacted upon those who kill with malice aforethought. Again Paul draws upon OT tradition, especially Gen 9:6.

Occasionally Rom 13:1-7 has been interpreted as a treatise, as if Paul comprehensively speaks of the relationship between believers and ruling authorities. We must recall that the admonition is exceedingly brief and was originally written to the Roman churches. Paul did not intend to examine in any detail the role of government. Hence, the exhortations in Romans 13 cannot be used to say that in every possible situation the govern-

ment must be obeyed. The call to submit represents the normal way that believers should respond to civil rulers. Paul was quite aware from his own experience as a missionary that those in power could act unjustly and thereby promote evil rather than good. Furthermore, the text is forced to say more than it intends if *carte blanche* authority is assigned to governments. It was simply not Paul's purpose to specify the cases in which faithfulness to God would demand contravention of what the government ordained.

John in Revelation, however, looks at government from another perspective, and we must put together what John says in Revelation 13 with what Paul says in Romans 13 for a more comprehensive view of secular rule. The city of Rome in Revelation represents Babylon with its greed, love of luxury, and immorality (Rev 17:1-19:10). Most significantly, Babylon spills the blood of the saints (Rev 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). Believers lived in a context in which the governing authority oppressed them and even put them to death (Rev 2:12; 6:9-11; 20:4; cf. Rev 3:10). Satan likely finds a home in Pergamum because the emperor cult was practiced there (Rev 2:13). The Roman empire is not presented as a model of justice and righteousness but as a rapacious and inhuman beast that tramples upon and mistreats God's people (Rev 13:1-18). The image of the beast stems from Daniel 7 where the kingdoms of the world are portrayed as inhuman beasts that unleash evil upon their subjects. The beast of Revelation combines the evil characteristics of all the beasts of Daniel 7, so that the Roman empire is viewed as the culmination and climax of the evil rule of human beings. What stands out particularly is that the beast of Revelation

demands supremacy and worship, so that it stands as a rival to Almighty God and the Lamb. The beast has its own prophet speaking on its behalf (Rev 13:11-18), and it lays claim to its own resurrection (Rev 13:3). The beast wields its power over believers, so that it persecutes and slays those who oppose it (Rev 13:7). Whereas Paul focuses on government as an entity that restrains evil, John emphasizes the satanic and demonic character of government. The problem with Rome and every government is the desire for totalitarian rule. Lurking behind the government's demand for absolute commitment and submission is Satan himself, who uses government to advance his own ends so as to procure worship of himself.

It might appear that Revelation represents government run riot as it exercises its insatiable appetite over the lives of others. Indeed, Rome's power comes from Satan himself (Rev 13:4). Nevertheless, God still reigns sovereignly over all the beast does, so that the beast accomplishes nothing apart from God's will. Revelation often refers to God's throne, highlighting the truth that he rules over all (Rev 1:4; 3:21, etc.). The entirety of chapter 4 focuses on God as creator and hence as the sovereign one. So too, Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Rev 1:5). Even in chapter thirteen which features the beast's rule on earth, John repeatedly remarks that the authority that belongs to the beast "was given" (*edothē*) to him. Most likely, this form is a divine passive, emphasizing that authority was granted to him by God himself. Hence, God allowed him to blaspheme (Rev 13:5), to rule for forty-two months over the entire world (Rev 13:5, 7), and to conquer the saints and put them to death (Rev 13:7). Even the abilities and miracles of the false prophet were given

to him (Rev 13:14, 15). Even though God rules over all, evil cannot be ascribed to him. The intentions and motives of Satan and the beast are malicious, but God's intentions and motives are perfect, even though he ultimately reigns and rules over all that happens. John does not attempt to provide any philosophical defense of how God can rule over all things without himself being stained by evil. He simply assumes that God rules over all, and yet at the same time affirms that the evil inflicted by Satan and the beast is horrific and deserving of judgment by God.

Believers await the day when God's reign over the world will be consummated. In the meantime God has ordained governing authorities to prevent anarchy and to regulate lawlessness, so that a measure of peace and order exists in the world. Believers are called upon to submit to these authorities, unless the authorities mandate something that God forbids. NT writers are not naïve about the venality and evil of governing powers. In Revelation the profound evil and even demonic character of the state is unmasked. The *pax Romana* was certainly not the whole story behind Roman rule! Nevertheless, believers are not encouraged to adopt a revolutionary mindset, as if they could bring in the kingdom of God through political change. They are to pay taxes and ordinarily subordinate themselves to authority. Still, their ultimate devotion is to God himself and Jesus as Lord, and hence when government demands totalitarian worship it must be resisted. [Note: The wording here is adapted slightly from the forthcoming book, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker, 2008).]

SBJT: One of the most formative books in the history of the West has been Augustine's *The City of God*. What was the context in which it was written, and what was Augustine's main point in the book? Furthermore, what lessons about history and the Christian life can we continue to draw from this seminal work by Augustine?

Michael A. G. Haykin: Augustine wrote this work over the course of fifteen years (412-427) and in the light of the impending fall of the Western Roman Empire. There were a number of key events in the late fourth century that led to this climactic event. But what some have identified as the "true moment of collapse, the moment of irreversible disaster"¹ for Roman imperial power in the West was the crossing by huge numbers of barbarian warriors—Vandals, Suevi, and the (non-Germanic) Alans—over the frozen surface of the Rhine River, Rome's natural frontier in that part of the Empire, during the winter of 406-407.² They poured into the western provinces of the Empire, wresting forever those areas of the imperium from Roman rule.

But the event truly emblematic of the passing of Roman might was the three-day sack of Rome in August of 410. Alaric (d. 410), more of a profiteer than determined enemy of Rome, and his Visigoths, who were largely Arian by theological conviction, entered the city on August 24. Over the course of the next three days the symbolic heart of the Empire went through what Augustine would later describe as "devastation, butchery, [and] plundering."³ A number of leading senators were slain, women were raped, even some who had devoted themselves to celibacy for Christ's sake, and others taken hostage.

Although Rome had long ceased to be the real political heart of the Empire, her status in the early fifth century was iconic, the symbol of an entire way of life, and her sack by a foreign invader—the first since the Celts had taken the city in 390 BC—spoke volumes, however, to a world accustomed to finding meaning below the surface of a text through allegorization.

Pagans, Augustine tells us, were sure that the disaster was attributable to the abandonment of the worship of the old gods, which had taken place during the fourth century when the Roman Emperors declared themselves to be "Christians."⁴ Augustine quoted pagans as saying to believers, "Look at all the terrible things happening in Christian times [*tempora Christiana*], the world is being laid waste ... and Rome destroyed."⁵ This pagan conviction was rooted in the long-held belief that it was Roman *pietas*—namely, Rome's submission to the gods and her fulfillment of her duty towards them—that had guaranteed her earthly triumphs and stability.

Many Christians were equally stunned and shocked by the horrors that had overtaken the city of Rome. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate, for instance, was absolutely overwhelmed by reports that he heard and for a while could do little else but weep.⁶ When he did write down his thoughts he did so through the medium of apocalyptic language. "The whole world is sinking into ruin," he told one correspondent.⁷ Jerome, like so many other Christians of his day, seems to have been utterly unable to conceive of a Rome-less world.

By Augustine's own admission, *The City of God* was "a long and arduous" task, a "huge work" as he says at its close.⁸ The Latin text runs to about a quarter of a mil-

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lion words. Not surprisingly, at times it is repetitious and rambling, replete with diversions and sidebars, as it were. Some of the latter—dealing with subjects like the relationship of true philosophy to skepticism, the meaning of the miraculous, and the Incarnation as an expression of divine humility—are extremely interesting windows into Augustine’s thinking.

All of this means that it is not easy to produce a comprehensive summary of the book. But at the book’s heart was Augustine’s mature reflection on God’s purposes in the realm of history, a reflection that sought to be rigorously biblical and that represented a well-thought-out rejection of any vision of history that equated the Kingdom of God with earthly realms. Although the taking of Rome by the Visigoths provided the immediate reason for beginning the work, there is every indication that even if this event had not happened Augustine would have written this massive tome. As Johannes van Oort puts it, “The *City of God* is not an occasional pamphlet that developed into a comprehensive work, but one of Augustine’s principal works, written after a long process of maturation.”⁹

What abiding lesson may we learn from this seminal work? Obviously, there are many, but one lesson in particular is that Augustine reminds us that the Christian life is a life of pilgrimage. The eternal world to come is the believer’s true home. Those who are journeying towards this goal are part of a holy community that lives by faith, hope, and self-denying love, and that is thus marked by humility and obedience to God.¹⁰ Nor can this community be fully identified with any earthly kingdom, for none of these kingdoms are eternal.

In this age, the City of God often goes through tribulation and hardship. Augustine refuses to countenance the fundamentally pagan idea that religious commitment automatically issues in health, wealth, and prosperity. Christians do go through suffering. But, Augustine skillfully argues, suffering is never simply that and nothing else. Rather, it is how suffering is borne. It can be either a curse or a blessing, since it hardens and degrades the godless, but purifies the devout and frees them to seek God and find in him their true wealth and joy.

There is thus an ambiguity about history when it is viewed solely in the light of this age. Both good and bad befall both those in the pilgrim City of God and those inhabitants of the earthly city. No clear distinction can be made between the two communities if one simply looks at the circumstances affecting them. This obviously demands that we view history from its eschatological end-point.

But this also means that Christians cannot stand aloof from the needs of their fellow-citizens for when afflictions come they affect all in an earthly community. Christians therefore can and should be good citizens and involved in the life of the earthly communities surrounding them.¹¹ As Augustine said in a sermon preached at the time he began work on this massive work:

I beg you, I beseech you, I exhort you all to be meek, to show compassion on those who are suffering, to take care of the weak; and at this time of many refugees from abroad, to be generous in your hospitality, generous in your good works. Let Christians do what Christ commands, and the blasphemies of the pagans can hurt none but them selves.¹²

ENDNOTES

- ¹R. P. C. Hanson, "The Reaction of the Church to the Collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the Fifth Century," *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972): 273.
- ²Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 510-11.
- ³*City of God* 1.7 (*St. Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* [trans. Henry Bettenson; London: Penguin, 2003], 12).
- ⁴*City of God* 1.1; *Retractions* 2.69.
- ⁵*Sermon 81.7, 9 (Sermons III (51-94) on the New Testament (The Works of Saint Augustine. A translation for the 21st Century, III/3* [trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991], 364, 365). This sermon was preached in either 410 or 411 and represents one of Augustine's earliest responses to the sack of Rome.
- ⁶*Letters* 126.2; 127.12.
- ⁷*Letter* 128.5.
- ⁸*City of God* 1.Preface; 22.30.
- ⁹Johannes van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: Study into Augustine's "City of God" and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 87.
- ¹⁰*City of God* 19.23.
- ¹¹*City of God* 19.26.
- ¹²*Sermon 81.9 (Sermons III, 366).*

SBJT: What should the Christian's posture toward the state be?

Jonathan Leeman: Most people, whether Christian or not, assume a posture toward the state somewhere on a spectrum between an old man's cynicism and a young man's optimism (picture Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington").

Thoughtful Christians commonly warn fellow believers against the latter end of this spectrum—against over real-

izing their eschatologies and over equating the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. Salvation will not come from the state, and a pastor's job is to preach the gospel. Period. Whatever opinions he harbors over health care, minimum wage, or immigration, he has the authority to preach the Word and not one word more (2 Tim 4:2; also, John 7:18).

So cautionary tales are told about the leftward and rightward ventures of main-line Protestantism and the Moral Majority, respectively. (Of course, Emergent and New Perspective stump speeches make one think this tale should be rehearsed more often!)

Postmodern Cynicism

But in our postmodern and media-saturated era, I wonder if the more common sin among the saints is cynicism and apathy. Those are the sins of my post-Vietnam generation, anyhow. Where the modern man had ideological delusions of political grandeur, whether of the Marxist or liberal variety, his postmodern progeny is (ironically) the older cynical man on the spectrum (See Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernism* [London: Verso, 1997]). The Enlightenment ideologies that formerly claimed the faith of the nations were blown to smithereens when the real story was leaked: "It's All About Power Says Postmodernism."

For once, the Christian with his doctrine of original sin can embrace this bit of wisdom from the world. We know that every ideology, whether the West's or the East's, is a form of idolatry (See David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003], 15, 22-34). We know that every political hero is deeply fallen.

In the late nineties, the window of

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my office in Washington overlooked the entrance to Monica Lewinsky's lawyers' building. My colleagues and I probably lost several hours of work watching the DC paparazzi swarm as she came and went. In retrospect, what's more remarkable to me than anything Clinton did through the entire affair was the fact that the Republican speaker of the house leading the impeachment charge against Clinton was simultaneously having an affair of his own, as he recently acknowledged.

Sure enough, patriotism is harder to find today than it was in my grandfather's day. It feels clichéd to list off Watergate, Iran-Contra, "Read My Lips," Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, and Abu Ghraib, but these clichés have transformed America's political culture. Cynicism and apathy are in. Why waste your time with politics?

Biblical Response to Cynicism

In jarring contradistinction to such cynicism comes Paul's admonition: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). His words strike our condescending ears for several reasons. First, praying typically involves a commitment of the heart that is anything but natural toward those in authority over us. Second, Paul urges Christians to pray with expectation: "*that* we may live peaceful and quiet lives." In other words, pray to the end of effecting change in the political mechanisms responsible for yielding peaceful and quiet lives. Prayerfully involve yourself, Christian, in the affairs of the state. Third, Paul surely had

more reason to be cynical about government living under Caesar than anyone in the democratic West.

And Paul's example is not the only one which commends a supportive posture toward the state. Joseph's posture was loyal, diligent, and hard-working as he prepared Egypt for famine. Daniel's posture before Darius the Mede was downright reverential, as evident in his exclamation, "O king, live forever!" (Dan 6:21), even if that was a common salute for a king (see Dan 2:4; 3:9; 5:10; 6:6). Even Jesus' command to render to Caesar whatever belongs to him exemplified a certain kind of deference.

In short, Christians should not regard the state with disdain, contempt, or apathy, but with prayer, honor, and reverence. As Paul said speaking of the governing authority, "he is God's servant for your good" (Rom 13:4).

Both the young man's tour-bus naivety and the old man's back-room cynicism result from the same failure to trust Christ. What is cynicism, after all, but the fruit of placing one's hope in the wrong place to begin with.

Like Non-Christian Family Members

The appropriate posture of a Christian toward the state can be analogized, I believe, to a Christian's posture toward non-Christian family members. We Christians desire for our family members to know Christ. But even if they never do, we still hope they will live morally, act justly, work legally, and show compassion. And we act in their lives toward this end, as when we teach our children to be law-abiding citizens, whether they embrace the gospel or not.

We may not be called to love and care

for the nation to the same extent we are called to care for our family members, but the command to love our neighbors as ourselves obligates us to seek the nation's good, including, as occasion permits, through the mechanisms of the state.

I'd even propose that this analogy can be rooted in the structures of redemptive history. In ancient Israel, the mechanisms of the state and of the family were subsumed within covenantal structures. One might say that the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants assigned jobs to the nation-state and to the family. A Jew's religion operated *through* the state and *through* the family. The three spheres overlapped. The IRS and the church offering plate worked together.

Not so under the new covenant. The people of God are no longer defined by political and familial-ethnic boundaries. Jesus' distinction between what's rendered to Caesar and what's rendered to God presumed that the nation state of Israel was no longer sovereign, and the context of Jesus' remarks in all three Synoptic Gospels demonstrates the divine intentionality behind this dramatic shift. Before and after the passage containing Caesar's coin are parables and inquisitions indicating that the Jews' time was up. God was bringing in a new administration. The old office holders were only tenants (e.g., Mark 12:1-12).

Paul's willingness to appeal to Caesar over and against the Jews on a capital matter indicates this same bifurcation of political and spiritual authority (Acts 25:11ff). Indeed, it's at first odd that the latter chapters of Acts would be so consumed with this appeal to Caesar and the movement toward Rome. Yet Luke's movement from Jerusalem in the early chapters of Acts to Rome in the latter

chapters clearly has not just missiological implications, but covenantal and political ones (See David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000]). From the Israelite's perspective, church and state were now divided.

Henceforth, no earthly emperor could legitimately claim the name "holy" or the ability to rule by "divine right." Instead, God's people would live in permanent geographic exile, even as they dwell permanently with God. (How deeply ironic and tragic that one significant segment of the church would identify its authority and name with Rome and, for many centuries, alternatively collaborate and compete with the emperor for secular rule.)

Did that mean Paul could blow off the old political, familial, and religious alliances with the wave of a cynical hand? Hardly. Instead, he said, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom 9:3-4). His heart yearned for them.

Are a Christian's family obligations moot? Hardly. "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8).

Just as a Christian should continue to care for his family's welfare, even though the economy of redemption has now placed church and family in different spheres, so a Christian should pray for the nation and seek its good through the mechanisms of the state, even though church and state belong in different spheres.

Render to Democracy

What specifically are we obligated to

render to Caesar in a democratic nation? Pay our taxes, stop at red lights, and generally stay out of trouble?

In fact, I believe we are obligated to render to a democratic Caesar everything the command to love our neighbors requires us to render. You might say we're to render to democracy what belongs to democracy.

Like love's requirements generally, different opportunities and resources will require different levels of engagement from individual to individual, whether voting, lobbying, nominating, campaigning, adjudicating, or even participating in civil disobedience. A failure to vote, if one is capable, is arguably a failure to love one's neighbor and, therefore, God. Quite simply, God has placed this and other institutional mechanisms into the Western Christian's hands for securing peace, justice, and mercy.

This means there's no room for cynicism or apathy in a Christian's posture toward the state. As the general public becomes more apathetic, Christians should remain civically informed and engaged. Yet we do so remembering the lines between church and state and between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

In the final analysis, it's a deepening understanding of this new covenant gospel that simultaneously compels and constrains the Christian's regard for the state, keeping us from veering toward either cynical indifference or false messianic hopes.