

The Biblical Model of Church and State

By Gary DeMar

One way to keep Christians out of the public arena, especially politics, is to claim that there is a separation between Church and State. The argument is based on the assumption that in biblical times, Church and State were merged, and in modern times, the First Amendment separates the two institutions. Supposedly, under biblical law, priests ruled over elders, judges, and kings. If this is the case, so the argument goes, the Bible cannot be used in our modern pluralistic society where the Constitution forbids the State to be ruled by ecclesiastical officers. Of course, as we will see, Church and State were not merged in the Bible, and the Constitution does not mention a Church-State separation because the institutions were already jurisdictionally separate in the colonial era. Max I. Dimont, writing in *Jews, God, and History*, sets the historical record straight:



Moses receiving the law

In the Mosaic Code the civil authority was independent of the priesthood. Though it is true that the priesthood had the right to settle cases not specifically covered by Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 17:8-12), that did not place it above the civil government. The priesthood was charged with the responsibility of keeping this government within the framework of Mosaic law, just as the United States Supreme Court is not above the federal government but is, nevertheless, charged with the responsibility of keeping it within the framework of the Constitution. Moses also laid the foundation for another separation, which has since become indispensable to any democracy. He created an independent judiciary.¹

The Bible teaches that there are multiple jurisdictions with specified functions and limits of authority and power: family, Church, and State.² Each of these governments has its own jurisdictional boundaries. In Israel, the torah (law) was viewed as the authority for all three

governments. While the standard of law was the same, not all laws could be applied in the same way under each jurisdiction. For example, a father could discipline his own child for an infraction, but he could not discipline another family's child, excommunicate a church member, or impose and carry out the death penalty on a criminal. While the State has the authority to try and execute convicted murderers and impose other civil penalties, individuals, families, and churches do not.

An elder in a church, in conjunction with other elders in his church, has ecclesiastical jurisdiction within his own ecclesiastical body to discipline any member according to the guidelines laid down in Matthew 18 and to participate in proceedings to reconcile differences between fellow-believers (1 Cor. 6:1-11). He cannot go to another church, however, and exercise discipline there,

although he may be asked to sit in a judicial capacity, but only under the direction of the government of the church where the proceedings are taking place. Neither can he enter the jurisdiction of civil government as a representative of the church and use the power of the State to impose ecclesiastical laws upon the general citizenry.

None of this means that an individual church member cannot use the Bible to

determine whether a candidate running for political office is fit for that office. The Constitution does state that no religious test can be given to someone seeking public office (Art. 6, sec. 3). But this refers to governments supplying the test, most probably designed to keep denominational distinctives from being imposed uniformly.³ Some scholars



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claim that since the Constitution requires an “oath or affirmation,” and “an oath imposes a sacred obligation,” therefore “an oath requirement could be characterized as a ‘religious test.’ Nineteenth-century church historian Philip Schaff wrote, ‘in recognizing and requiring an official oath’ for both state and federal officeholders, ‘the Constitution recognizes the Supreme Being, to whom the oath is a solemn appeal.’”⁴ It seems that George Washington, a constitutional participant and our nation’s first president, understood the oath in this way since he took his oath with his hand on the Bible and stated “so help me God.” Some of the constitutional delegates pointed out the religious nature of an oath.⁵ None of this means that individual voters cannot develop their own test and vote accordingly.

Examples of Jurisdictional Separation

These principles have a long history, going back to the Old Testament. Moses became the chief judicial officer in Israel, assisted by numerous lesser civil magistrates (Ex. 18:17–26). Aaron, Moses’ brother, became the chief ecclesiastical officer as High Priest, assisted by numerous lesser priests (29:1–9; Lev. 8). Moses did not carry out the duties of a priest, and Aaron did not perform civil tasks.

In the days of the Judges, Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Gideon and Samson served as political officers (Judges 1–13), while the son of Micah, Phineas, Eli, and the Levites served in an ecclesiastical capacity (Judges 17; 20:28; 1 Sam. 1–8).

During the period of the monarchy, King Saul served in a civil capacity while Ahimelech ministered as the chief ecclesiastical leader in the nation (1 Sam. 10 and 21). David was king while Abiathar carried out the duties of a priest (1 Chron. 15:11). David’s son, Solomon, ruled as a civil officer while Zadok pursued the ecclesiastical obligations (1 Kings 1:45). King Joash and Jehoiada the priest (2 Kings 11) and King Josiah and the priest Hilkiah (2 Kings 22:4) maintained jurisdictional

separation. Even after the return from exile, Church and State as parallel institutions operated with Governor Nehemiah (Neh. 7) and Priest Ezra (Neh. 8).

Jurisdictional Cooperation

In biblical terms, there was never such a separation between Church and State that the State was free from following the guidelines of Scripture for its civil duties (Deut. 17:18–20). Both priest and king were required to sit before the law to be instructed. The priest was to follow guidelines pertaining to ecclesiastical affairs while the king would glean from Scripture those directives designed for his civil office. If a case was too difficult for the civil ruler to decide, the Bible gives the following instruction: “You shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them, and they will declare to you the verdict in the case” (17:9). The Levites, as experts in the Law, were to assist the civil

ruler, but the Levites were not called on to rule in place of the king.

The cornerstone for leadership in both Church and State was based upon ethical considerations and previous governmental experience (Ex. 18:17–23; Deut. 1:9–15; 1 Tim. 3:1–7). The New Testament describes leaders in Church and State as “ministers” (Mark 10:42–45 and Rom. 13:4). Even when describing the role of the civil magistrate, the Greek word for “deacon” or “servant” is used. The idea of a civil ruler

as a minister is still with us. Men and women who work in the area of civil government are often described as “civil servants.” The word underscores the ruler’s duty to serve rather than to “lord it over” those under his authority. The civil “minister” rules for our “good,” and he is “an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4). Some nations still refer to their nation’s highest



George Washington takes the oath of office with his hand on an open Bible



Aaron the High Priest

office holder as the Prime Minister.

King David did not dismiss the exhortation of the prophet Nathan after being confronted for his sins of adultery and murder.

Although David at first did not know that the rebuke was levelled against him, he did not act as if it were unusual for someone of Nathan's position to seek the counsel of the king and even to offer the king advice. David accepted Nathan's rebuke. He did not tell Nathan that there is a "separation between Church and State": "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD'" (2 Sam. 12:13). Modern-day separationists are closer to the way Herod responded when John the Baptist rebuked him for his adultery (Mark 6:14–29).

Crossing the Boundaries

There is always the danger of jurisdictional usurpation, when, say, civil government removes the jurisdictional framework and enters the domain of the Church. The Bible cites a number of examples of how the king sought to overrule the authority and jurisdiction of the Church. King Saul assumed the duties of the priests when he offered sacrifices. He stepped out of bounds from his kingly duties (1 Sam. 15:9–15, 22). In another place, King Saul killed the godly priest Ahimelech because he would not fulfill the king's political goals (1 Sam. 21:1). King Jeroboam established his State religion in Bethel and Dan. Non-Levites of the worst character were appointed to serve as priests (1 Kings 12:26–31).

King Uzziah is said to have been "proud" (2 Chron. 26:16). His pride led him to go beyond his legitimate civil jurisdiction. While he was "chief of State," being the king in Judah, he was not a priest. King Uzziah could not assume the role of a priest and perform ecclesiastical duties.

He had no jurisdictional authority to serve in the Temple, the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament Church. Uzziah ignored God's law and "acted corruptly,

and he was unfaithful to the LORD his God, for he entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense" (2 Chron. 26:16).

God is serious about jurisdictional separation. The king was struck with the most feared disease in all Israel: leprosy! "And king Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from

the house of the LORD" (v. 21). He lost access to the Temple, was isolated from the general population, and lost his kingdom to his son, Jotham, who "was over the king's house judging the people of the land" (v. 21).

Azariah the priest was not passive in this whole affair. He knew the limitations of the king's power. He, along with "eighty priests of the LORD" (v. 17), took action

against the king. They "opposed Uzziah the king" (v. 18), making it clear that "it is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense" (v. 18). The priests commanded Uzziah to "get out of the sanctuary" (v. 18).

These "ecclesiastical officials" are called "valiant men" (v. 17) because they acted with great risk. While there were eighty of them, the

king still commanded an army. He could have put them to death. There was a precedent for this when Ahimelech the priest helped David against King Saul (1 Sam. 21–22). King Saul called on Doeg the Edomite to attack the priests, after the King's own servants refused. "And Doeg the Edomite turned around and attacked the priests, and he killed that day eighty-five who wore the linen ephod" (1 Sam. 22:18). Doeg the Edomite had no qualms about killing the priests. In our day, if our nation moves further



Ezra the Priest reading the law



Nathan confronting King David

from its biblical foundation, we'll see similar despisers who will rape the Bride of Christ, the church. King Uzziah had Saul's hate in his eye: "Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged" (2 Chron. 26:19).

But there have been times when the Church has forgotten its God-ordained role. The Church can deny its prophetic ministry when it is seduced by politics, that is, to see politics as the sole way to advance God's kingdom. Isn't this what happened when the people wanted to crown Jesus as King, to make Him their political ruler? (John 6:15). They showed their true allegiance when Jesus refused to accept their view of what they thought God's kingdom should be like. "The distribution of bread moved the crowd to acclaim Jesus as the New Moses, the provider, the

Welfare King whom they had been waiting for."⁶ When Jesus did not satisfy their false conception of salvation, they turned elsewhere: "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). They denied the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the dead heart of man. For them and for many today, man's salvation comes through political power. Jesus, however, is not a political Savior, but His saving work should impact politics. Civil government is ordained by God.

Notes

1. Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God, and History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 47.
2. Gary DeMar, *God and Government*, 3 vols. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision).
3. For an opposing view, see Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).
4. Daniel Dreisbach, "The Constitution's Forgotten Religion Clause: Reflections on the Article VI Religious Test Ban," *Journal of Church and State* 38:2 (Spring 1996), 289.
5. Dreisbach, "The Constitution's Forgotten Religion Clause," 288-289. The word "affirm" was most likely "added to accommodate the religious sensibilities of Quakers, Moravians, and Mennonites who take literally the Biblical injunction, 'swear not at all.' Matthew 5:33-37" (290, note 157).
6. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 42.