

A Biblical View of Church and State: Implications for Same-Sex Marriage

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In understanding the biblical role of church and state – and its implications for homosexuality – we must first understand the transformational nature of God’s kingdom.

Christ is not only “head over all things to the church” (Eph 1:22), but also “ruler of kings on earth” (Rev 1:5). Through Christ’s resurrection and ascension he has been given “all authority in heaven *and* on earth” (Mtt 28:18). This was in fulfilment of the Old Testament’s anticipation of a Messianic kingdom that would fill the whole earth and rule the nations.

Daniel, in particular, foreshadowed this with his interpreting of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, providing a prophetic forecast of universal history. Appearing to Nebuchadnezzar was the great image of a man – representing human autonomy and its pretensions to power in the flow of history. In descending quality of materials, it foretold human history, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar as its head and shoulders of gold, to its chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, and finally legs of iron with feet of part iron and clay (Dan 2:31-45). The majority of commentators agree that this superlative human image represents four major consecutive empires of human history: Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman.

Rather than an evolutionary upward trajectory, humanism (represented in this image of a human colossus) is exposed as, in fact, devolving from gold down to iron and clay, climaxing history in a “stone cut out by no human hand” thrown onto the feet of the image. Not only are the feet destroyed but also the whole idolatrous image collapses with the stone becoming a mountain that fills the whole earth.

The *stone* and the *mountain* are none other than Christ and his kingdom, invading human history in the period of Rome’s rule. It not only crushes the Roman Empire and the Caesar-cult, in particular, but also collapses the whole humanistic system of autonomous man. Thus Nebuchadnezzar’s image is a potent prophecy of the transformational nature of God’s kingdom and its ultimate victory in history:

And in the days of those kings [the Roman Empire] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever

Dan 2:44

The book of Revelation, in the time of the Roman Empire, declares that *now* – in the climax of history this has been fulfilled: “...The kingdom of the world *has* become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ...” (Rev 11:15, emphasis mine). The kingdom of God has already been inaugurated in the person of Christ.

And so, we might ask, “What is the role of the church in the advance of Christ’s kingdom in the world?”

Isaiah provides the answer as he also prophetically proclaims the coming age of God’s reign on earth:

2 It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, 3 and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Isa 2:2–3

As we have already seen in Daniel 2 (v 35, 44-45) the “stone cut out without human hands” becomes a *mountain* that fills the whole earth. In biblical symbolism *mountains* signify nations and kingdoms (Jer 51:25; Ps 72:3; Heb 12:22, 28; Rev 17:9-11).

But here we not only see a mountain but, specifically, the “mountain of the *house* of the Lord” that is lifted above all others. God’s *house* (church) is established upon the supreme *mountain* (kingdom), foreshadowing the church being built upon the rock of the revelation of Christ and his kingdom thus prevailing over the gates (authority) of hell (Mtt 16:18).

Therefore, with the rise of this “mountain of the house of the Lord” above all others the nations spontaneously respond by saying, “Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may *teach* us his *ways*... For out of Zion shall go the *law*, and the *word* of the Lord...” (v 3).

Here we discover the role of the church. It is to *teach* the nations, as they “flow to the mountain of the Lord”—that is, as they respond to the supremacy of God’s kingdom and power. Precedents already exist for this in history: as the gospel spread and prevailed throughout the known world of the first centuries it drove back the demonic darkness of a pre-Christian world and ultimately establishing the Christian nations of Europe, leading to the missionary expansion to the whole planet.

However, we must ask as to *what* the church teaches the nations: it is God’s *ways*, *law*, and *word* (v 3).

These law-words were not only given for Israel’s own prosperity but also as a demonstration of God’s wisdom and ways to the nations:

1 “Now, O Israel, **listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform**, so **that you may live** and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 “You shall not add to **the word** which **I am commanding you**, nor take away from it, that you may **keep the commandments** of the LORD your God which I command you. ... 5 “See, **I have taught you statutes and judgments** just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 “**So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples** who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ 7 “**For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?** 8 “Or what great nation is there that **has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?**”

Deut 4:1–8 (emphasis mine)

Israel’s role as a missionary nation to the earth is also revealed in Exodus:

5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

Exod 19:5–6

As a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” she is to model God’s economy for all nations, not only through her cultic life (redemptive economy) but also through her ethical life (moral/legal economy) by obeying his voice and keeping his covenant. It is significant that the ethical stipulations of the covenant follow immediately on the heels of the revelation of Israel’s missionary purpose in Exodus 19. The Ten Commandments are given in Exodus 20, followed by their application in various case laws through chapters 21-23.

Clearly, God’s purpose for old covenant Israel as a missionary nation has now been expanded to the new covenant church (in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile), as evidenced by Peter’s citation of this very passage as applicable to believers (1 Pet 2:9).

Using different language, Paul picks up the same thought, also applying it to the new covenant church:

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration [*oikonomos*] of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

Eph 3:8–10

The apostolic mission to the nations was to bring to light, through the gospel, the creator-God's economy ("administration" – *oikonomos*, literally, the law of the house) for the world.

Nevertheless, like Israel of old, God has purposed that a people will model that plan: "that the manifold *wisdom of God* might now be made known *through the church* to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

The new covenant church is now mandated to extend the kingdom of God by teaching and demonstrating God's multi-faceted wisdom and ways before a watching world (Mtt 28:18-20).

How does she do this except by obeying God's revealed will for the totality of human existence—in her communal life and relationships, in her economic practice, in marriage and family, in sexuality, and in ethics and holiness. And how does the redeemed community know the will of God except through the Scriptures; and so, according to Paul, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). *All* Scripture categorically includes the law, without which God's people are ill equipped for their own obedience and for teaching the nations God's ways.

The redeemed community's mandate to teach the nations to obey all that our Lord *commanded* is revealed in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*teaching* them [i.e. nations] to observe all that I have *commanded* you" (Matt 28:19–20, emphasis mine). Our Lord who taught the disciples during his earthly ministry is also the Lord who gave the law through Moses. The law of God not only provides an objective ethical standard for the believer's life, but also for social and political policy. This was well recognised by both the early church Fathers and the Reformers, but has been sadly forgotten by the contemporary church. And as a result we have lost our savour and thus our prophetic voice to the state and civil society.

The modern secular humanist exorcism of Christianity from the public square claims a false notion of the separation of church and state that is foreign to the framers of the American constitution, not to mention the biblical view of church and state. The rationale of the American constitution, rather than prohibiting Christianity from a voice in public affairs was, in fact, to prohibit an "established" church – as in the Old World – and a consequent sectarian favouritism. Additionally, it would save America from the abuses of the unholy alliance of church and state, as so often experienced in the European Christendom construct. For the Christian to claim that the church has no business "foisting" its ethics on society is to buy into the secular humanist argument. It presupposes the existence of ethical neutrality. But if one is to think biblically, in terms of the human condition, neutrality is a myth. To think that a secular humanist state will be objective in its ethical judgments is to bury one's head in the sand. In a fallen world of antithesis – of sin and righteousness and of truth and error – there is no ethical neutrality. Secular humanism while denying a religious status is exactly that—a religion; and as such will seek to establish laws based on its belief system, rooted in the ultimacy of autonomous man. Consequently, the state will inevitably be governed according to an ethical system—the only question, is which one.

Separation of church and state was first modelled in Israel. Under God, the political and cultic were separate spheres, governed by kings and priests respectively. Independent of both, the prophets spoke as God's voice to violations of the covenant in either sphere. Furthermore, Israel modelled federal principles of government: although David was divinely called to be king he made covenant with the tribal leaders for the equitable functioning of his kingly authority. Federalism – a sharing of powers by independent states – as a political system was rooted in the covenant life of Israel. In fact, our word "federal" comes from the Latin *foedus* for covenant. The Swiss Reformers first recognised these covenantal principles, developing a political theology that travelled from the continent to the British Isles, and thence to America. So, from the biblical view, God is sovereign over all human governments and spheres, including church and state, covenanting with them and delegating his authority to them. Each sphere is divinely defined and limited; nonetheless, God speaks into them with moral and spiritual authority, without violating their delegated authority and function.

Christ taught that we should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's (Matt. 22:21). There is a clear distinction between two spheres: the civil and the ecclesial. The state wields its authority by the sword – that is, by force of arms (Rom 13:4) – whereas the church wields its authority also by a sword, but in its case by the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (Eph 6:17) – that is, not by the force of arms, but by the force of truth; the former is coerced obedience, the latter un-coerced.

The church is not to rule over the state nor vice versa. Both, though, are sovereign spheres under God—all authority devolves from him (Rom 13:1). Paul teaches that the state is a “servant of God” and must be obeyed as an “avenger of God's wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4-6). The role of the state is to enforce God's justice, but how will it know what justice is unless the church fulfils its role to teach the nations the word of God? Clearly, then God's word contains the wisdom and ways of God for the governance of nations—for public policy and ethics.

The civil applicability of biblical law has been explicit throughout the history of the Christian movement. From early Christian Europe through to Anglo-Saxon Christian England to the Reformation and beyond, the ethical influence of Christianity, including the Old Testament law, has been potent in establishing an objective standard for justice. King Alfred the Great (AD 871-924), for example, understood that the Old Testament law had not been rescinded by Christ, maintaining the judicial law's general equity in a non-Israelite setting. He thus codified the Ten Commandments, as well as the judicial law and biblical case laws, into his Law Code, establishing a transcendent ethical foundation for justice and the development of English Common Law. Biblical law was thus foundational for the law-system of the English-speaking world.

Consequently, to claim that Christianity, including the Old Testament law, should have no influence over the state and society is contrary to history and more especially God's design for the world. While maintaining the integrity of the sovereign spheres of church and state, God's people are responsible to be a prophetic voice to their culture. How can this occur unless that voice is in harmony with the law of the Old and New Testament?

This is what Paul calls the lawful use of the law as discussed earlier under [law and grace](#). The law provides God's holy and righteous requirement in human behaviour and social relationships. Its exercise through the state into society is not for the justification of Christians but for unbelievers in the curbing of sin:

8 Now we know that **the law is good, if one uses it lawfully,**

9 understanding this, that **the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners,** for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,

1 Tim 1:8-10

This sin list, addressing aberrant behaviours, is clearly an allusion by Paul to the civil application of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 21-23.

One issue space prohibits us from addressing in this regard is that of capital punishment as found in the judicial law of the Old Testament. Explicating a biblical penology would necessarily demand a separate paper. Nonetheless, suffice to say that we resonate with the Westminster divines that the “general equity” (Westminster Confession, Chapter 19) of the judicial law must be distilled for its contemporary application. And this will require a great measure of wisdom and social intelligence under the leading of the Holy Spirit for Christian leaders to advise policy makers appropriately.

Nevertheless, we have seen from our discussion above that the role of the church in its relation to the state and civil society is educative, teaching the ethical system revealed by God in the Scriptures, whereas the role of the state is judicial, administrating justice in accordance with that ethical system. We established that for the church to be obedient to the Great Commission to disciple the nations it demands a teaching role—and this includes the teaching of both the law *and* grace. Thus, while the law defines God's righteous standards the gospel provides the ability through God's grace to obey it. Consequently, while the state's role is to uphold that righteous standard through the sword of the civil magistrate, the church's role is to uphold it through the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. It is not for her to enforce the law judicially, but to teach it and at the same time offer to the sinner – in this case the homosexual – the free gift of God's grace. This necessitates speaking the truth in love

(Eph 4:15)—in Christ mercy and truth have met (Ps 85:10). There is no place for the state, civil society, or the church to persecute homosexuals and deal with them unjustly.

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