

The Great Controversy Series  
24 The Separation of Religion and State

Last time we saw that ancient Israel was a true theocracy. A theocracy is government of God. God Himself took the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them laws and corresponding punishments. The first four of the Ten Commandments describe man's responsibilities toward God. The last 6 commandments however reveal man's duty to others. In the period of the theocracy, sins such as idolatry, blasphemy, sorcery and Sabbath breaking were met with capital punishment. Why? For example in most countries today sorcery does not receive capital punishment. Why was it so in that time? First of all, these sins were done in front of God.

Exodus 13:21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.

The Lord worked miracles before their eyes. God's existence was not a belief, He was actually among them. In such a situation sins against the Lord would be open rebellion.

Along with this, the Lord Himself judged. Only the Lord can read people's motivations. He would communicate his decisions directly with Moses and Joshua and through Urim and Thummim to the high priest.

The Lord Himself was the king of Israel. But Israel wanted a human king and the Lord gave permission for a person to sit on His throne. One after another, kings sat on the Lord's throne.

In time, these kings behaved so badly that the throne was taken from them. The theocracy ended. The Lord was not giving directions to the people directly. The throne will be given to Jesus when He returns to this world. His kingdom will never end. This kingdom is Jesus' kingdom of glory. Now, Satan contends that he is the king of the world. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. Right now, Jesus' kingdom is the kingdom of grace. There is no theocracy in this world and people have no right to set up a theocracy. This is because it is not a true theocracy and cannot be one.

Jesus made a brief and comprehensive state on this subject. We want to look at and examine these words today.

Luke 20:25 And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

What are Caesar's things? The business of the state. What are the things that are God's? This is the business of religion. Jesus separated these.

People have no right to interfere with your relationship with God. This issue resides between you and God alone. When Caesar, that is the state, enters the area of your relationship with God, the state enters the prerogative of God and it has no rights there. In that situation the state has overstepped its bounds. Paul wrote on this subject.

Romans 13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.<sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.<sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.<sup>4</sup> For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.<sup>5</sup> Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.<sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.<sup>7</sup> Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.<sup>9</sup> For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.<sup>11</sup> And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.<sup>12</sup> The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.<sup>13</sup> Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

This passage is a commentary on Jesus' words, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Paul quotes from the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. In summary the last 6 commandments are this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

In the 10 Commandments are other commands. These are written on the first table of the law. There are four: 1. "You shall have no other gods before me", 2. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them", 3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain", 4: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." These commands concern an individual's relationship with God. As a summary of these Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind."

We see that Paul separated the first four commands from the last 6 as he commented on Jesus' words. As Paul outlined the work of the state, he did not reference from the first four commands. Paul knew the first four commandments. He intentionally did not make reference to them. Why? Because he know that the state has no right to legislate people's responsibility toward God.

Some people deny this concept and put forward this idea: To blaspheme God is not good for society. Thus God wants society to outlaw blaspheme for the good of society.

Of course it is good for people not to blaspheme. People who have a good family education will not blaspheme. But it is not good for the state to force people to be religious or Christian or be bound to any other religion.

The state cannot properly define blasphemy. As a result it should not punish blasphemy. Why. Blasphemy concerns God. Blasphemy is a sin directly against God.

Someone will say: Blasphemy harms society, thus it must be punished. If the Creator is despised our children will eventually be state workers and they will not respect the Creator. The whole society will be ruined. For this reason one of the duties of the state is to punish blasphemy.

But how will the state define blasphemy?

Matthew 9:2-8 <sup>2</sup> Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." <sup>3</sup> And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" <sup>4</sup> But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? <sup>5</sup> "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? <sup>6</sup> "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" -- then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." <sup>7</sup> And he arose and departed to his house. <sup>8</sup> Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

When Jesus forgave someone's sins, some scribes accused Him of blasphemy. But was Jesus guilty? He was not. The people were wrong. For this reason God does not give the right to people and to the state to condemn regarding religion. All the time while thinking they are correct people make mistakes.

Mark 14:61 But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" <sup>62</sup> Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." <sup>63</sup> Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? <sup>64</sup> "You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death.

Sinless Jesus was condemned and executed because He supposedly committed blasphemy. When the right to define, judge, condemn and give capital punishment for blasphemy, they certainly will make mistakes and condemn the innocent.

Acts 6:9-13 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against

Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. <sup>13</sup> They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;

Do you see the issue? In order to defend their own religion, the people accused Stephen, the disciple of Jesus of blasphemy. They resorted to lies. But Stephen was condemned and stoned because of religion. I want to underline the common point in these examples. The charge of blasphemy came against Jesus and His disciples because they spoke differently than the popular, that is, the dominant religion of society. A different viewpoint came as a threat to their own religion and in order to stop this they used capital punishment.

Daniel's three friends in Babylon, which was a pagan religious state, were thrown into the burning fire because they would not join in a religious rite generally accepted by the people. What is this? The state made laws regarding religion and it condemned those who did not comply. It is that simple. But even today, people are persecuting others by enforcing religious rules through the state. In many countries blasphemy means to lower the respect for the popular religion. Thus no one can speak differently from the generally accepted religion. Otherwise the state or individuals will kill them.

In pagan Rome, in the first three centuries of the Christianity, Christians were persecuted. Pagan Rome prohibited unrecognized religions. Christianity was forbidden because it was not a recognized religion. If a state is able to define any word spoken differently from the popular religion then pagan Rome was just in executing Christians because it was forbidden. Rome was only carrying out the law. Christians were openly teaching that the accepted pagan religion was wrong.

In Europe during the Middle Ages, the Waldenses, Huss, Jerome and millions of other people were executed because they proclaimed teachings other than the Catholic Church and that the teachings of the Catholic Church were wrong. If states can enter the realm of religion and if they can punish any word spoken that is different than the popular religion then the Catholic Church was just in killing people.

If the state can define blasphemy then the state in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Mecca had the right to execute a person who announced that the gods being worshipped were not gods, isn't that right? The state could say to him, "You are speaking against our idols, you have stirred up trouble. You blasphemed our religion. You deserve death." If the state executed that person because he supposedly blasphemed then where would the religion be that he proclaimed? It would not exist.

Paganism is a violation of the first and second commandment. If the state can punish the violation of the third commandment dealing with blasphemy, then it can prohibit the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment. In this way the state takes God's place and can set up a theocracy. After people enter this business there is no end to it. People take to themselves all the prerogatives of God.

If a person thinks that the popular religion is wrong, then that person has the right to lessen the reverence for that religion. All religious liberty depends on this. In many countries, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is forbidden. It is counted as blasphemy against the popular religion.

Why? Because it is different than the popular religion and the preaching of a minority religion lessens the reverence for the accepted religion.

The logic goes like this: When those that represent the popular religion hear something different than their own religion, they cannot hold themselves and they riot. Everything is chaos and they resort to violence. Public peace is disturbed. In order to keep the majority group calm, the state does not give permission for anything against it to be spoken. But who disturbed the public peace, the majority or the minority? The majority did it. What does this situation say about the virtues of the believers of the popular religion? They cannot control themselves. They are a group that resorts to violence. Thus they show the virtues of their own religion to be weak.

Civil laws against blasphemy are principles of pagan and papal Rome. It is not Christian. Jesus separated religion and the state. Every step toward enlightenment and religious freedom has been opposed by pagan and Papal Rome.

Can governments and individuals lead people to have respect for God and Christ by bringing civil penalties on them? They cannot. Can people love the religion of those who are ready to drag them court and throw them jail. They cannot. These behaviors are contrary to the very spirit and principles of Christianity. God Himself does not force the consciences of the people. Why should the state get involved in this business?

The business of the state is not to enter religion. The state has no right to judge or condemn a single person's duty to God or prohibit their religious concepts or their saying that the popular religion is wrong. God Himself will judge and punish all these things. God did not delegate this right to governments and individuals.

“Therefore render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.”