

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

The Role of the Church in Civil Society June 5 – June 26: 2016 is an election year! We are surrounded by campaign ads, mud-slinging, and talk show opinions. As we witness the decline in the moral fabric of our society, many Christians wonder what role the church is called to play in this saga. Are we called to pursue legislation that upholds the values of our faith or are we to withdraw from the political and civil process in the firm belief that the realms of Church and State are separate? This four-week class is designed to seriously engage these questions and others as we learn together the role of the church in civil society.

The objective of this class is: to develop a biblical understanding of the various roles of the Church and State and sustain a kingdom-focused perspective of civil engagement. Our perspective should be shaped by eschatological revelation, and not disillusioned expectations of social progress.

Introduction: This class will span a four-week period and will seek to answer four fundamental questions: 1) What is the State? 2) What is the Church/Kingdom? 3) How do the two interact? 4) What should we do? The answer to these questions are some of the most important and time-sensitive issues, and reflect the manner in which a believer understands their role as an agent of Christ's redemption on earth. In the west, particularly in the United States, we are blessed with the luxury of freely discussing these issues in light of our scriptural understanding. The fact that other believers in other parts of the world may not enjoy this freedom in no way undermines the validity of what we will learn and explore together. However, such restrictions in freedom do impose certain limitations on the freedom to interact with the State in a Christian manner the way that we are able to do in the United States. Although this may not always be the case, we should be grateful to God for allowing us the privilege of living in a country where such freedom, bought at a great price by our forbearers and maintained at a great price by our contemporaries, can still be enjoyed. Praise be to God for the chance to freely and openly ask the question, *what is the role of the Church in civil society?*

What is the State? Before we can have a meaningful conversation about the interaction between Church and State or Church and civil society, we must first define exactly what is "the State". This lesson will seek to begin from a generic definition that would be applicable for anyone living in any location worldwide, and then focus more specifically on the role of the State in the western hemisphere and in the U.S. in particular. This approach is only espoused for the sake of personal application that is relevant to the majority of the people in this class. Then, we will look at references from scripture about the role and nature of the State.

Part One: *The State as a Social Construct* – In the U.S. we often mistake the term, *State* to be referring to any one of fifty geographical boundaries that originally maintained some sense of autonomy, but was willing to surrender this autonomy for the benefits that derive from being part of a union. This is a correct definition of a State in the U.S., but the term is much broader than that. The essence of a State is an organized community. i.e. a group of individuals, living under some form of governing structure to which all members lend their direct or indirect consent. This is the State in its basest, simplest form: a social construct. The simple law of human nature (those laws that look for a highest common factor among all men) attest to the fact that man is a social animal. Apart from society man would not be man. This society begins with the simplest of constructs: that of the family. Although the relationship between family members (and definition of a family) varies between cultures and people groups, everyone from the most remote Amazonian tribe to the parliamentary democracies of Europe have some definition of family, that is the foundation upon which society is built. This is not to say that there have not been

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experiments throughout history that attempted to eradicate what we in the west define as a nuclear family (such as the socialistic, communistic kibbutzim common in the early days of the modern State of Israel), but even among such groups, whose longevity was abbreviated by the irrationality of their social structure, there still existed a concept of family even if one cast a wide net to include all members of the society. The larger, and more complex these societies or families became, the more complicated the legal structure required to govern them. From families, to clans, to tribes, to nations, the intricacies of the level of government increased as the number of participants within society increased.

So, at the heart of every State (which usually consists of a confederation of clans in which there are several families both extended and nuclear), is the social construct that makes living in community with our fellow man a reality. Social scientist world-wide are agreed that such social constructs are the essence of statehood and government.

Part Two: *The State as Kingdom* – It did not take long in the annals of human history for the social construct referenced above to revert to that of a kingdom (state ruled by a king). It has been jokingly stated that when you have two people in the same room, you have three opinions. Like most jokes, there is an element of truth to this statement. Social constructs even among nuclear families do not function in perfect harmony regardless of the culture or society in which the State evolves. In ancient times, this meant that the weakest family units were more vulnerable to the conquering and raiding whims of other tribes or clans. At the heart of such raids would either be the competition for natural resources such as water or food, or the animosity towards warring clans and tribes that were prejudicial hatreds passed from one generation to the next. In order to be protected from such raids, weaker clans would form allegiances with stronger clans for protection and safety. To attack one member of the confederation was to attack the entire confederation (see Genesis 14). However, even within confederations, there had to be some authority that would hold the people together, or the confederation or clan or family would implode. Thus, on the level of a family, the patriarch often assumed the role as leader. On the level of clan, there were the elders of the tribe. On the level of the State, there was often the king. In order to impose his wish on those who sought his protection (and prevent the young and ambitious from constantly challenging his authority), the ancient kings reverted to attributing their right to rule to some connection with divinity.

Among the ancient world, there were two exceptions to the above scenario. The first was that of the nation-state of Israel, the covenant people of God; however, such a system of governance will have to await next week for further exploration. The other exception was that of ancient Athens, a Greek city that would eventually become the model for western democracy. Under the leadership of Solon (594 B.C.) a representative form of government known as the Assembly was formed pursuant to the state's constitution. The most common among society were issued the right to vote. Later (510 B.C.), Cleisthenes implemented further reforms even more democratic in nature. Such a system of government would have significant influence on the origins of the Republic of Rome, the predecessor to the Holy Roman Empire.

In Medieval Europe, when the introduction of Christianity made the notion that kings had the right to rule because of their innate affinity with the divine blasphemous, the belief in the divine right of kings quickly became the rationale for the continuing justification of kingdoms. The State, according to this firmly held belief, was given by God to the monarch in a similar manner as the Church was given to the Papal See. It was his responsibility to steward and protect all within his realm. Two social reforms were

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influential in dethroning the king's influence throughout Europe making room for a new understanding of statehood. These reforms were the Protestant Reformation, and the Renaissance (in which the classical appreciation for democracy as experienced in ancient Athens and the early Roman republic were idealized). Needless to say, both movements complemented each other, one doing for the State what the other did for the Church.

During this period of time (1644), A Scottish Protestant by the name of Samuel Rutherford wrote a book entitled, *Lex Rex*, which is Latin for *The Law is King*. In this book, the rule of law as opposed to the divine right of kings was advocated as well as the legitimacy of defensive war. Rutherford advocated the way for limited government and constitutionalism (based on his understanding of the biblical covenants). More importantly, he developed the view of the two realms of Church and State, a view that would play a vital part in the later founding of the American republic.

Part Three: *The State as a Social Contract* – After the publication of *Lex Rex*, and the subsequent death of its author who graciously died before he could be burnt for high treason against the crown, a political philosopher named Thomas Hobbes would appear on the stage of world history. Hobbes (1588-1679) developed the concept of the State as a Social Contract, the individual surrenders their right to autonomous rule to be ruled by a governing body, which in turn provides protection, structures and meaning for the individual. For Hobbes, the state of Nature was one that would inevitably result in death, therefore, the individual, in the interest of self-preservation, succumb to a social contract and formed a civil society. This individual is sovereign in the magisterial sense of the word, but surrenders this sovereignty to the ruler (Hobbes was a monarchist). Such acquiescence is the price of living in society.

After Hobbes, John Locke (1632-1704) wrote his *Second Treatise of Government* in which he made the following statement, *“And hence it is evident that absolute monarchy, which by some men is counted for the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all. For the end of civil society being to avoid and remedy those inconveniences of the state of Nature which necessarily follow from every man's being judge in his own case, by setting up a known authority to which every one of that society may appeal upon any injury received, or controversy that may arise, and which every one of the society ought to obey.”*¹

This begs the question, what foundation would the law that, *“... every one of the society ought to obey”* be built upon? Would it be built upon the surrendered sovereignty of the individual as supported by Hobbes? Locke provides an answer to this question when he states, *“God, having made man such a creature that, in His own judgment, it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong obligations of necessity, convenience, and inclination, to drive him into society, as well as fitted him with understanding and language to continue and enjoy it.”*² In other words, the divine right of man to govern himself pursuant to Nature, was the foundation from which the State derived its authority. Such a nature was comprised of reason, a gift from the Creator. The influence both Hobbes and Locke had on the early revolutionaries of the American republic is profound.

After Hobbes and Locke, Thomas Paine (1737-1809) had a significant influence on the founding of the American republic. He states in his book, *The Rights of Man*, *“A man, by natural right, has a right to*

¹ Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government*. Section 90.

² Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government*. Section 77.

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judge in his own cause; and so far as the right of mind is concerned, he never surrenders it: But what avails him to judge, if he has not power to redress? He therefore deposits this right in the common stock of society, and takes the arm of society, of which he is a part, in preference and in addition to his own. Society grants him nothing. Every man is a proprietor in society, and draws on the capital as a matter of right.”³ In other words, sovereignty – the source of authority to govern one’s actions in the context of community – derives from the individual and is a reflection of the natural rights of the individual. So, the American form of government, of which we are primarily concerned in this class, built upon the Lex Rex concept of Rutherford, the idea of a social contract taught by Hobbes and Locke and the divine rights of the individual explicated by Paine. The source of these divine rights and the culmination of the theories referenced above are expressed in the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain using the following statement: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁴

So, from a social historical standpoint, a State can be defined as a community of individuals joined together in mutual consent or social contract to the surrender of certain freedoms for the sake of having God-given rights protected and upheld for the greater good. This definition of a State is what the founders of the United States inherited through the long chain of political thought and experience. Next we will examine the Biblical definition of State.

Part Four: The State as a Defender of God’s Created Order – The Bible is relatively quiet when it comes to endorsing or defining specific types of social government, mainly because of the diversity of governments throughout history and the world. Ultimately, God’s design for mankind prior to the fall would have been more akin to a theocracy than anything currently envisioned by man; however, the fall has proven such an undertaking impossible this side of the consummation of all things. So, what exactly does the Bible say about the nature of the State?

To aid in answering this question, let us look to our Confession (The Westminster Confession of Faith), to determine the parameters of our response. According to the WCF, “*God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under him, over the people, for his own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers... as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full free and unquestioned liberty of discharging ever part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger...It is the duty of the civil magistrate to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”*

One of the essential verses for understanding a Biblical view of the State is Romans 13:1-4, which states, “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities* (note that no distinction is made between a

³ Paine, Thomas. The Rights of Man.

⁴ United States Declaration of Independence

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parliament or a monarch, which has historically been used by advocates of both to support their cause). *For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear for the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval. For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."*

One will do well to note that the above statement does not so much address the manner in which a State operates (for example, ISIS and the Third Reich cannot be said to be servants of God in the sense used above, although their actions are under his sovereign permissive will) as much as how the State *should* operate. The WCF likewise makes the case that the State has a function in the grand scheme of God, but implicitly acknowledges limitations in ensuring that it operates in the manner in which it is created.

Secondly, one will note that the *State* is part of God's creation, and as such belongs to the realm of the created order. The authority of the State does not come from individuals, even individuals who lend willful consent to the social contract that binds the society together. Nor is authority invested in a sovereign. Authority in the Biblical definition of a State comes from God. Has God entrusted men (even unbelieving men) with the responsibility of safe-guarding the good of society? Yes. How is the good of society determined? If societal good is determined through any means other than the universal law of God, then it is an inferior good that will ultimately result in loss of the very freedom governing bodies are tasked with protecting.

Thirdly, since the State is part of the created order, it is fallen. Governance by unredeemed man is depraved. This does not mean that God's common grace whereby his goodness is revealed in a manner so that all men are without excuse, is not active in governance, it is clearer more so in some than in others and at certain times in history more so than others. What this does mean is that as an institution ordained by God, but implemented by men, it is depraved, and will inevitably revert to a place of deprivation if good men (redeemed men) are in the minority.

Conclusion: So, having surveyed the vastness of civilization from the dawn of human history through the founding of America, looking to social and religious philosophers to aid in defining the State, and having at last searched the scriptures to determine a Biblical definition for the State, we have arrived at the following conclusion. The State is part of the created order invested by God with the responsibility of maintaining and upholding the divine moral law of God under which all mankind shall be judged. If that is the biblical definition of a State, what is the Church, and what is the Church's role in civil society? We will explore the answer to this question next week and the week following.