

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Introduction:

1. According to the Bible, the function of government is to maintain societal order that promotes peace and liberty (Romans 13:1-7).
2. Through the concepts of "Nature's God," "Natural Law," and People's Law," the founders of this country sought to pattern government after God's wisdom.
3. Foundational to this type of government was the freedom of religion.
4. The First Amendment of the Constitution declares: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*"
5. Yet, today, the phrase "separation of church and state" is used to claim that religious expression must be excluded from anything associated with government.
6. What is the origin and meaning of this phrase?
7. And, more importantly, what does the Bible teach about the separation of church and state?

I. Bible Principles

(Matthew 22:15-22)

- A. Jesus demonstrated that the church and state were separate institutions.
- B. Thus, man has a responsibility to the state (Romans 13:6-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).
- C. However, his greater and higher duty is to God (Matthew 22:37; 4:10).
- D. The Bible is clear that a government has stepped beyond its purpose and authority when it begins to dictate in matters of religion (John 19:10-11).
- E. When this happens, the Christian must obey God even if it violates the laws of men (Daniel 3:16-18; 6:10-11; Acts 4:18-20; 5:29).
- F. Thus, the separation of church and state is to keep the state out of the church.
- G. However, God expects the church to influence the state (Acts 26:27-28; Romans 13:1-4; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Philippians 4:22).
- H. This truth and these distinctions were understood clearly by the Founding Fathers.

II. Background Particulars

- A. In 1644, Roger Williams – a Puritan preacher in the Massachusetts colony – wrote of a "wall of separation" between the church and the world.
 1. "The church of the Jews under the Old Testament...and the church of the Christians under the New Testament...were both separate from the world. When they opened a gap in the hedge, or wall of separation, between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world, God always broke down the wall, removed the candlestick, and made His garden a wilderness, as at this day. If God is ever pleased to restore His garden and paradise again, it must of necessity be peculiarly walled in from the world unto Himself."
 2. This idea was based upon God's parable of Israel as His vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7).
 3. For these views, he was banished from the colony in 1635.

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4. This led him to found the colony of Rhode Island in 1643, in which these views were accepted, and no state church was established.
 - B. Obviously, the goal was to keep the church separate from the influence of both the government and the world.
 - C. After becoming president, Thomas Jefferson wrote of “a wall of separation between Church and State” in 1802.
 1. “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God; that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship; that the legislative powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.”
 2. Jefferson was proclaiming man's inalienable right to religious freedom without interference from the government.
 3. It should be noted that this statement was written in a personal, private letter to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut.
 - D. The intention was to limit the power of the government to establish a national religion or to prohibit or interfere with the expression of one's faith.
 - E. It was never intended to keep religious principles from influencing the morality of citizens or public officials.
 1. The Founders believed in what Benjamin Franklin called the “fundamental points in all sound religion.”
 2. “Here is my creed: I believe in one God, the Creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render to him is in doing good to his other children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound religion.”
 - F. In fact, the Founders encouraged the practice and the teaching of these fundamental principles.
- III. Bold Policy
- A. It was not until 1947 that the Supreme Court interpreted the “separation between Church and State” as a prohibition of religious expression in federal or governmental functions or spaces.
 - B. The Founders would have been shocked.
 1. On December 4, 1800, Congress – both House and Senate – approved the use of the Capitol building as a church building.
 - a. In fact, regular worship services had been held there since 1795, while it was still under construction.
 - b. This continued until after the Civil War and Reconstruction.

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- c. The first public use of the House Chamber was a church service on December 13, 1857. (*Services were also held in the Senate Chamber and the Supreme Court Chamber.*)
 - d. In all these services, "the rostrum of the Speaker of the House was used as the preacher's pulpit; and Congress purchased the hymnals used in the service."
 - e. Interestingly, two days after writing the letter using the phrase "separation between Church and State," Thomas Jefferson attended church services in the Capitol building.
2. In 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, stating that "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."
 - a. Congress decreed that formal education should include religion and morality along with knowledge.
 - b. This did not mean that a particular sect's doctrines were to be taught, but the general principles of religion were to be a part of one's education.
 - c. Benjamin Rush declared: "The great enemy of the salvation of man, in my opinion, never invented a more effectual means of extirpating Christianity from the world than by persuading mankind that it was improper to read the Bible at schools" (*A Defense of the Use of the Bible in Schools*, 1791).
 3. Numerous examples could be cited that demonstrate the Founders support of religious expression in government spaces.
- C. They held religion and morality as essential to freedom and proper government.
 - D. In his Farewell Address, George Washington stated: "Of all dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. ...And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. ...Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail to the exclusion of religious principle."

Conclusion:

1. Only in Jesus are Church and State truly united – for He is both Priest and King (Hebrews 3:1; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14).
2. In the spiritual kingdom of Christ – the church – Jesus is Head of all (Ephesians 5:23).
3. By submitting to Him, one may find true liberty – spiritual freedom from the bondage of sin (John 8:30-36).