

# Separate Powers and Complementary Ministries

*Mr. Donald C. Macaskill*

Perhaps the passage that speaks most clearly about the role of government is Romans 13:1-7. However, the Old Testament model of a theocracy also throws light on the subject. To those of us who believe there is only one covenant of grace which began in the Old Testament and is continued in the New Testament, this should pose no problem. The model of Israel as the Old Testament Church is therefore assumed to be correct in this short article.

Many people think that a theocracy was a merger between Church and State. This is not true. In Israel the Church and State were distinct. They were separate ministries. Each had their responsibilities and their own area of supervision. Each had a separate function under God and received instructions and directions from Him and was accountable to Him. One verse which demonstrates this is (II Chr. 19:11) which tells of King Jehoshaphat bringing the nation back to God. He referred to the separate functions of the Church and the State by saying *"And take notice: Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebediah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Israel, for all the king's matters"* (II Chr. 19:11).

The two separate ministries of a theocracy are also seen in Israel's wilderness wanderings - Moses being the civil ruler and Aaron being the priest. Both had their work defined by God and both were accountable, not to each other, but to God. There was the additional "office" of prophet, who could rebuke both Church and State. The prophet was not an official of the State but represented God in addressing the people. In the Old Testament, the Church had its role in spiritual matters and in eternal issues, and the State had its role in civil and judicial matters and in earthly

matters. Both were doing God's work and one assisted the other without interfering in the other's role. They were complementary ministries.

It was the Church, and not the State, who had the responsibility of caring for the poor and needy. No NHS or DHSS with mandates and regulations and budgets from the State! Single mothers and widows like Ruth and Naomi had to "reap the corners of the field" and gather "handfuls of purpose" dependent on the godly obedience to the Levitical laws of the public (see Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22). Individual prosperity was, as today, dependent on national obedience to the covenant with God's blessing.

In the New Testament there are no directions for the State to take responsibility for health and unemployment, etc. It appears the Church still has that responsibility. The Apostolic Church was certainly concerned about the daily help of widows and in fact put so much emphasis on this work that they had to re-establish the role of full-time preaching and praying, as seen in Acts 6. The Church also seemed to have a "list" of those who were in need of help, for Paul directs Timothy *"Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number"* (I Tim. 5:9). The NIV reads *"No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is sixty"* and adds *"As for the younger widows, do not put them on such a list"* (I Tim. 5:9-11). So it seems that the Church did at least some caring in the community.

The Bible teaches that the family bears the main responsibility for the financial and other types of aid and no other institution or group should usurp that authority. Paul has very severe words to those who are careless about family aid *"If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel"* (I Tim. 5:8). Again Paul talks to the Church about dealing with those who refuse to work and earn their own living *"If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat"* (II Thess. 3:10). Of course, it is unwillingness to work, not inability to work, that is condemned.

Romans 13 outlines the extent of the role of government – it is restricted to defence (protection of innocents) and the punishment of criminals but also to encourage and reward good living. *“Do what is good and you shall have praise of the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good”*

---

**“The Church is God’s institution for welcoming sinners and showing understanding, kindness and love. The State is God’s institution for justice.”**

---

(Rom. 13:3-4). The State’s role is to punish evil doers – that is why the State, not the Church, carries the sword. *“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”* (Rom. 13:4). Prayer for State officials is so that *“we [Christians] may live a quiet and peaceable life”* (I Tim. 2:2). The State must dispense justice. The Church must dispense mercy. The Church is God’s institution for welcoming sinners and showing understanding, kindness and love. The State is God’s institution for justice.

We live in days when almost everyone looks to the government for help and aid and never thinks in terms of God withholding blessing. There is a real sense in which our nation has made the State our God to whom we look for all kinds of assistance. If we stick closely to the Bible’s teaching we will discover that governments have too much authority and power and are gradually creeping into the moral and spiritual areas of the Church by legislating away our Christian foundations. The New Testament seems to me to teach that the role of government is limited to defence, security, justice. It ought not to enter into the realm of education, health, social services, and related matters.

*This article was authored by Donald C. Macaskill, minister of the gospel in the Dundee congregation of the Associate Presbyterian Churches in Scotland.*