

# Editorial: Reflecting on our Christian Responsibility to the State

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The issue of the relationship between the church and state is an ancient one that the church has wrestled with since its very inception. Our Lord clearly taught the principle that the two realms are to be separated (see Matt 22:21), but the exact line of demarcation has been greatly disputed throughout the history of the church. Before Christianity became the favored and then official religion of the Roman Empire, believers followed Paul's instruction to be subject to the governing authorities (see Rom 13:1), except when that subjection conflicted with explicitly understood commands of God or the preaching of the gospel (see Acts 5:29). But by the end of the fourth century, a new arrangement existed between the church and state that required the need for closer definition of the relationships between them, which differed greatly depending upon whether the church took root in the East or West.

In the West, due to a variety of influences, the view of the two "powers" or "swords" developed, namely that God has established the power or sword of the church and the state. During the Middle Ages, this view was generally accepted, namely, the concept of a single society with two aspects, each with its own responsibilities, authority, and power, but the question of supremacy remained undefined. As a result, there was constant friction between the two over these precise areas. During the Reformation, Martin Luther sharply distin-

guished the temporal from the spiritual, but then considered many ecclesiastical functions, such as administration, as nonessentials thus providing the basis for most Lutheran States to develop a territorial system in which the political rulers supervised various church affairs. John Calvin, on the other hand, tried to argue for a clearer distinction between the spheres of church and state, but, at the end of the day, he still believed that it was the duty of the state to protect the church by maintaining peace and following biblical guidelines in civil affairs.

However, in the Anabaptist-Baptist tradition, we most clearly discover a more consistent separation of church and state, a view that, for the most part, was adopted in the new world. Thus, for example, in America, there was a greater separation between church and state than in Europe, but it must be quickly stated, unlike the rhetoric of many today, this never entailed the view that there was to be a complete separation of "religion" from national life. No doubt, in recent days, as America has become a more pluralistic country in the sense of diverse religious viewpoints outside of a Judeo-Christian framework, the exact role of "religion" (and which "religion") in public life has become more problematic, especially for evangelicals. In this regard, think about the recent discussion regarding whether an evangelical should vote for a Mormon, such as Mitt Romney, to serve in the White House, let alone whether a Christian should vote

for a Muslim or anyone else from a non-Christian religion to serve as the President of the United States.

Now given the fact that Christians have wrestled with these issues throughout the ages, and especially given the fact that 2008 is an election year in the United States, we thought that an edition of *SBJT* devoted to various reflections on the relationship between church and state would be not only be helpful for our readers, but also instructive and wise. Not only are reflections on this important area part of what is entailed by Christian discipleship and making every thought captive to Christ (see 2 Cor 10:5), but they are also necessary given the benefit we have as Christians who live in a democratic society. One of the great privileges that Western Christians have, unlike some believers in other parts of the world, is that we have the opportunity to participate in the political process. Even though our allegiance first and foremost is to the Lord of the church and not to the state, God has sovereignly ordained government(s) to establish his purposes in the world (Rom 13:3-4). And as citizens of the state, especially democratic governments, we have a privilege and responsibility to participate in the political process and express our views as Christians.

In this important way, the church has an important prophetic role, as salt and light in the world, to witness to the values that God demands for any society. To be sure, this kind of Christian political involvement does not cancel out the spiritual form of Christ's church and kingdom, nor does it call the state to promote the gospel with political power and muscle. But it does mean that as the church, we have a responsibility to call the state to carry out what God demands and expects

of all governments, namely to protect and promote life, to uphold what is good, and to restrain what is evil, so that we may live at peace, and that the gospel may have free course in our society and in the world. No doubt, we must never think as Christians that salvation comes merely through the political order, a mistake sometimes sadly made by Christians. Rather, salvation only comes through the proclamation of the gospel, which leads to new birth, and people repenting of their sin and believing in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But with that said, especially living in the West, we as Christians have a unique privilege and responsibility to make our views known and to bear witness to the gospel in every aspect of our lives, including the political process.

All of the articles and forum pieces of this edition of *SBJT* are written with the goal of helping us better to think of our Christian responsibility to the state. Even though each author is addressing a different aspect of this relationship, both in terms of historical and contemporary issues, all of them together are written with the conviction that Christians must biblically and theologically, carefully and wisely, wrestle with how to apply the Scriptures to our lives, including our political lives and involvement in society. It is our prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will better lead to this end so that we may learn afresh what it means "to be in the world but not of it," and what is entailed to live under the Lordship of Christ for his glory and our good.