

# What Is the Relationship between Church and State?

Crucial Questions

**R. C. SPROUL**



# What Is the Relationship between Church and State?

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## Contents

<b>One</b>	Legal Force . . . . .	1
<b>Two</b>	Civil Obedience . . . . .	11
<b>Three</b>	The Sword and the Keys . . . . .	19
<b>Four</b>	Established Religion . . . . .	29
<b>Five</b>	An Instrument of Evil . . . . .	39
<b>Six</b>	Civil Disobedience . . . . .	47



## Chapter One

# Legal Force

A few years ago, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the inaugural prayer breakfast for the governor of Florida. At that breakfast, I addressed not only the group of people who were assembled, but also the governor himself. I said that the event was similar to an ordination service in a church. At an ordination service, a man is consecrated to the sacred ministry of the gospel and is set apart for that vocation in the church. I tried to impress upon the governor the weight of his office:

## What Is the Relationship between Church and State?

Today is your ordination day. Today is your ordination sermon, or ordination ceremony. Your office is ordained by God, just like mine is as a pastor. It is because of God's authority that there is such a thing as government. For this reason, you are called by God to be a minister, not as a preacher in a local church, but as an official of this state. However, in your office as governor, you are not given autonomous authority. Your authority, and the only authority that you have whatsoever, is an authority delegated to you by the One who possesses all authority, and that is God. Ultimately, God is the foundation of authority by which you will rule in government. I challenge you this day to always remember that you are accountable to God for how you exercise that office, and may you not be seduced by this mythological concept of separation of church and state. The state, as much as the church, is instituted by God, ordained by God, and derives whatever authority it has through the delegation of divine authority. The state, therefore, is answerable and accountable to God.

At that time, I was able to say this to the governor of our state. However, to speak in these terms today is to be a voice of one crying in the wilderness. We live in a society that has been radically secularized and where it's assumed that the civil government is not answerable to God and, in fact, has a right to be godless.

In the United States, we often hear the phrase *separation of church and state*, but it should be noted that this phrase does not occur in the country's founding documents. It is not found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Bill of Rights. It comes from a remark made by Thomas Jefferson about the principles that he believed were implied in the founding documents of the United States. But it has now become perhaps the only remaining absolute in American culture: the absolute principle of the absolute separation of church and state.

From the very beginning of Christianity, the relationship between church and state has been a matter of great concern. When we look at the Old Testament, we see that Israel was a theocracy, a state that was ruled by God through anointed kings. Though the church and state had certain distinctions—including distinctions between the

## What Is the Relationship between Church and State?

work of priests (the church) and the work of kings (the state)—the two institutions were so closely integrated that to speak of separation of the two would be fallacious.

However, once the New Testament community was established, the church became a missionary church, reaching out to various nations, tribes, and peoples who were ruled by secular governments. Christians had to face the question of how they were to relate to the Roman Empire, to the magistrate in Corinth, or to the local authorities wherever the church spread. For centuries, the church has had to carefully examine its role in society—especially when that society does not officially hold to a Christian worldview. In order to understand the relationship between church and state from a biblical perspective, we must ask some fundamental questions.

There are many different types and structures of government, but what is the essence, the fundamental principle, of government? The answer to that question is one word: *force*. Government is force—but it's not just any kind of force. It's force that is supported by an official, legal structure. Government is a structure that is endowed legally with the right to use force to compel its citizens to do certain things and not do other things.

Some years ago, I had lunch with a well-known United States senator. We were discussing some of the issues involved with the Vietnam War—then being waged amid great controversy—when he said to me, “I don’t believe that any government has the right to force its citizens to do what they don’t want to do.” I almost choked on my soup! I said to him: “Senator, what I hear you saying is that no government has the right to govern. If you take legal force away from government, it is then reduced to simply making suggestions. But isn’t it true that when governments enact laws, the government functions as that which is designed to enforce whatever laws are enacted?”

Ultimately, the original form of government rests on the rule and authority of God Himself. God is the author of the universe, and with that authorship comes the authority over what He has made: “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1).

We can see a form of government in the creation account. When God created human beings, He gave them a mission: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Adam and Eve were

## What Is the Relationship between Church and State?

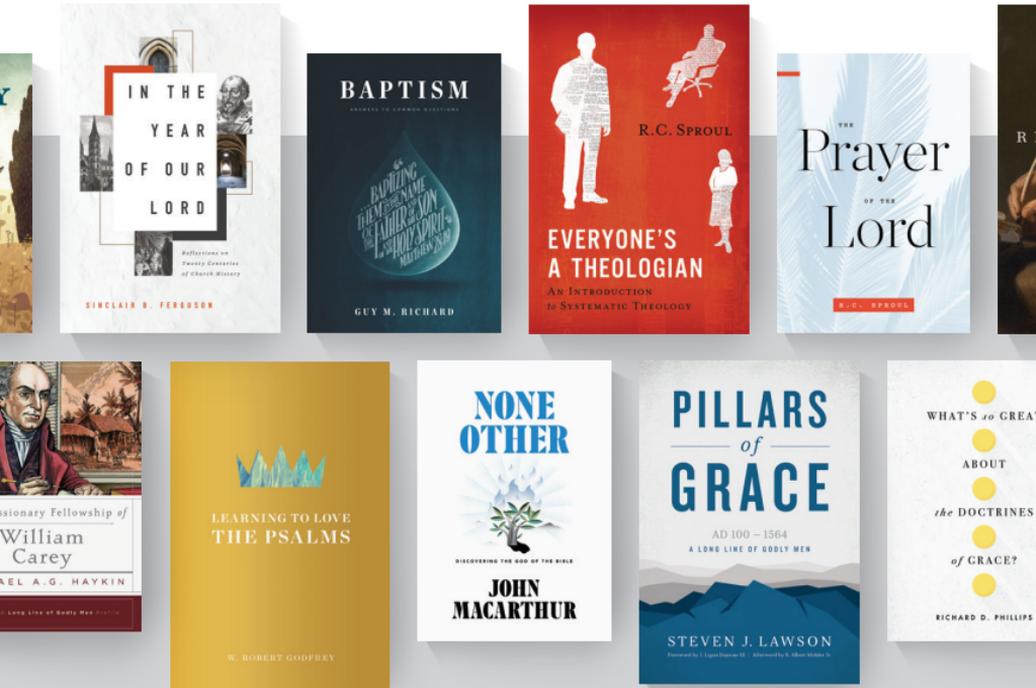
to act as rulers in God's stead, as His vice-regents over creation. God delegated to Adam and Eve dominion over the earth, so that they were to exercise authority over the animals. It was not authority over people, but it was authority over the earth and the environs and the creatures therein, over all of the lesser forms of divine creation.

God also gave Adam and Eve a prohibition: they were not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God gave an ominous warning of what would happen if they transgressed His command: "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). This means that penal sanctions would be imposed by His authority. When Adam and Eve disobeyed His rule and rebelled against His authority, they did not immediately undergo physical death, but rather spiritual death. Physical death was postponed until later, as God in His graciousness exercised mercy. However, one of the punishments that He imposed upon these rebellious creatures was to banish them from the garden of Eden.

We next see a manifestation of earthly government in the angel that God placed at the entrance to the garden of Eden. The angel stood at the gateway to Eden with a flaming sword. The flaming sword functioned as an instrument

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# Is the state accountable to God?

In the United States, people often hear the phrase “separation of church and state.” Many assume this means the government should rule without taking God into account. But that idea is a distortion of the truth.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains where the government ultimately gets its authority: from God Himself. God ordained the state to protect life and promote justice. Christians must respect and honor their earthly authorities but at the same time remember that God is the highest authority of all.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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