

Text: Romans 13:1-7

Title: "The Bible doctrine of the separation of church and state"

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Introduction: [slide 1] Separation of church and state is the most influential of the Baptist distinctives. Larry Oats has correctly said that every church in America is in this sense a Baptist church. Separation of church and state is apparent in a comparison of 12:1, "I beseech you, Brethren," and 13:1, "Let every soul be subject." [slide 2] Isaac Backus was a man used of God to bring to our nation the blessing of this truth.

[slide 3] Years ago I was sitting in an Economics class at Western CT State University one evening, when our professor entered noticeably agitated. Dr. Collins was a Fordham graduate and a self-identifying [Ted] Kennedy liberal. What had irritated him before coming to class was that George H. W. Bush had told the press earlier that day that he felt it was very important to begin each day in prayer as President.

Dr. Collins explained to our class that what irritated him about Bush's prayers was that they were a violation of the separation of church and state. At the time, I was the Assistant Pastor at The Baptist Church of Danbury, which was founded in 1790 and traces its heritage back to the days when Thomas Jefferson used the phrase *wall of separation between church and state* in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. I took the position that the President's prayers were not a violation of this separation. As my teacher and I argued, many in the class eventually objected that we were supposed to be studying economics, so that is what we did.

[slide 4] In colonial Massachusetts, the Certificate Law of 1771 made it possible for Baptists and other dissenting denominations to obtain a religious exemption from taxation levied for

the state-church. The law provided exemption for those whose “names shall be contained in a list or lists which shall be exhibited to the assessors . . . on or before the first day of September in that year and signed by three principal members of the antipedobaptist congregation to which he or she belongs and the minister thereof (if any there be), who shall therein certify that the persons whose names are contained in the said list or lists are really belonging thereto, that they verily believe them to be conscientiously of their persuasion, and that they do frequently and usually, when able, attend the public worship of God in such congregation on the Lord’s Day” [William G. McLoughlin ed., *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets 1754-1789* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1968), p. 45, fn. 21].

[slide 5] Our nation’s forefather, Isaac Backus, led Baptist opposition to the measure for five reasons: (1) the exemption practice implied that civil authorities can set up one religion over another; (2) civil authorities should represent the people in fulfillment of civil obligations, not ecclesial obligations like charitable giving; (3) the conscience of an individual should not need to be certified to state authorities; (4) the measure puts an earthly power between Christ and his people; and (5) coercive measures targeting religion tend to provoke civil unrest [pp. 44-45].

[slide 6] Dr. Collins and Isaac Backus express two different understandings of what *the separation of church and state* means. Collins and I argued our cases from a constitutional perspective; Backus argued his case from a biblical perspective. Collins referred to the constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state, whereas Backus referred to the biblical doctrine of the separation of church and state. In his day, there was no such constitutional doctrine.

A constitutional doctrine is different from a biblical doctrine in important ways:

1. Their authority comes from different sources. A constitutional doctrine's authority comes from the framers of the constitution and from the people who ratify and amend the constitution. A biblical doctrine's authority comes from the Author of the Bible, the God of Heaven. His authority is absolute and infallible.

2. Their authority extends over different jurisdictions. A constitutional doctrine's authority extends over a constitutional republic, in our case, the United States of America. A biblical doctrine's authority extends over all mankind. It rules over every jurisdiction among men (like communist China).

3. Their authority possesses different natures. A constitutional doctrine is temporal and variable by nature. It is a social contract among men which can be established, changed, and discontinued by men. A biblical doctrine is eternal and immutable. It is the Word of God, not of men.

4. Their authority serves different purposes. A constitutional doctrine preserves the rights of citizens. A biblical doctrine glorifies the Lord and propagates His gospel. The purpose of the biblical doctrine of separation of church and state is that God's people might live "quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty; for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:2b-4).

[slide 7] The purveyor of the biblical doctrine of the separation of church and state, Isaac Backus, was born in 1724 in Norwich Connecticut and baptized as an infant in the First Congregational Church of Norwich. When Isaac was 16, his father died leaving behind ten children and a six-week-old infant for his mother to raise on her own. She fell into a great state of depression after her husband's death, until a year later the revival winds of the First Great Awakening under George Whitefield began to blow through New England.

The spirits of Isaac's mother were revived when she found true saving faith in Christ, and Isaac would later write about his own conversion experience on August 24, 1741, "While I was mowing alone in the fields . . . I was enabled by divine light to see the perfect righteousness of Christ and the freeness and riches of His grace. . . . The Word of God and the promise of His grace appeared firmer than a rock. . . . My heavy burden was gone, tormenting fears were fled, and my joy was unspeakable" [quoted in William G. McLoughlin ed., *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754-1789* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1968), 2-3]. Have you been enabled by divine light to see that Christ died for your sins?

New Light Congregationalists began to see problems of apostasy in their Congregational churches. In Norwich, the Backus family became part of an effort to begin and build a building for the Bean Hill Separate Church. In 1746 at 21 years of age, five years after Isaac's conversion, God called him to preach, and he was given a license to do so by the Separate brethren. He was used of God a year later to lead a group of 16 souls out of the Titicut, MA parish to form a Separate church in that community, where he was ordained as its pastor.

[slide 8] At one point the establishment church of Titicut decided to build a building and levied a tax on its citizens to pay for its construction. Backus refused to pay the tax, and he would have been put in jail were it not for the willingness of a friend to pay the tax for him. Others in Backus's congregation had their goods confiscated and sold at auction, and a female member of his church served a 13-month jail sentence.

Massachusetts law in those days exempted Baptists from paying religious establishment taxes, but not Separate Congregationalists. For this reason and others, some of the more radical members of Backus's congregation pressed for becoming Baptists. Along the way, Isaac married a Baptist, Susanna Mason, and finally in 1748 he preached the sermon in which he de-

clared that infant baptism was wrong. He was baptized in 1751. In 1756 he became the pastor of a new Baptist congregation, the First Baptist Church in Middleborough, MA.

[slide 9] Brown University (then Rhode Island College) was founded in 1764, and Backus served as a member of its board of trustees for 35 years. He was also active in the founding of the Warren Baptist Association in 1767, serving as its first clerk. Our Baptist forefathers understood the value of sister-church fellowship and cooperation. Backus wrote in his minutes of that first meeting:

“Whereas there hath of late been a great increase of Baptists in New England, which yet have not such an acquaintance with each other and orderly union together as ought to be, it has been thought by many that a general meeting or association might be a likely means to remove this evil, and to promote the general good of the churches. Therefore, a number of elders, being occasionally together last year, did appoint a meeting at Warren, in Rhode Island Colony, on September 8, 1767, and sent an invitation to others of their brethren to meet them there, to confer upon these affairs. Accordingly a considerable number of elders and brethren met at the time and place appointed; and Elder John Gano, from New York, opened the meeting with a suitable sermon from Acts, xv. 9.”

[slide 10] It was a year later that Backus first took up his pen to write about the Bible doctrine of separation of church and state in a pamphlet he titled, “A Fish Caught in His Own Net.” The “Fish” was the Reverend Joseph Fish of Stonington, CT, whose congregation had lost two-thirds of its membership to the Separates and Baptists, and who had decried the stand of the Separates and Baptists as unbiblical in nine published sermons.

Application: What is somewhat ironic and instructive for us today is the truth that our forefathers’ struggle for the separa-

tion of church and state was both a battle against the encroachment of the civil government upon Separate and Baptist congregations and against the encroachment of the establishment church upon the functions of civil government. In his pamphlet, Backus mentions four biblical separations between church and state.

I. The legislation of the church and of the state are separate (1 Pet. 2:13-17). Backus: "The Holy Ghost calls the orders and laws of civil states *ordinances of man*, 1 Pet. 2:13. But all the rules and orders of divine worship are ordinances of God, and it defiles the earth under its inhabitants when these laws are transgressed and ordinances changed [i.e., exchanged]" (McLoughlin, p. 191). What Backus complained of in this regard was that human ordinances were being established to determine who could and could not be a God-called minister. Civil government legislates with the ordinances of man; the local church with the ordinances of God. The legislation of the church and state are separate.

II. The leadership of the church and of the state are separate (Matt. 20:25-28). In regard to the support of ministers of the established church with public funds, Backus wrote: "Many plead in this case that promise to the church, that Kings shall be her nursing fathers and Queens her nursing mothers. But what an odd story would it be for any to tell of the very kind parents who manifested such a tender regard for their children that they would rob one child of his food or cast him into a dungeon to uphold another in grandeur!" Backus's point, of course, is that the Kings and Queens of the slogan should take equal care of Baptists as well as Congregationalists. Jesus's point is that the leadership method of the state – to exercise dominion, is separate from the leadership conducted in the church – which is to serve for the sake of the gospel.

III. The jurisdictions of the church and of the state are separate (Matt. 10:28). Backus wrote this criticism of state authori-

ty exercised in his time, that “their authority is not over the bodies, but it concerns the souls of men” (McLoughlin, p. 224). His point was that the state has no authority over the souls of men. Christ is the only Lord of the conscience (see Rom. 13:4). Jesus spoke of this separation of jurisdictions to prepare His disciples to be persecuted by civil governments, which always seek to overreach their boundary and control men’s souls. The jurisdiction of the state is limited to the body. They cannot touch the soul. The jurisdiction of the Lord, however, has authority over both the body and the soul. He has assigned care for the soul to His local churches.

IV. The missions of church and of state are separate (Matt. 10:8,14; Acts 26:15-18). Backus: “The work of Gospel Ministers is to labor to open men’s eyes and to turn them from darkens unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, Acts 26, 18. And as any kind of force tends to shut the eyes rather than open them, therefore Christ’s special orders to his first ministers were, ‘Freely ye have received, freely give.’ ‘And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet,’ Matt. X, 8, 14. This should be a testimony against them, that Christ’s ministers had not forcibly taken from them so much as the dust of their city, Luke ix, 5” (p. 191).

Conclusion: [slide 11] Perhaps the greatest declaration of the separation of church and state came from the lips of the Lord Jesus in his good confession before Pontius Pilate. Standing at the threshold of his crucifixion at the hands of Roman civil authority, Jesus explained to Pilate the Bible doctrine of the separation of church and state this way: “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence” (John 18:36). Rather than call the force of civil government to His defense, Jesus died willingly for sinners, praying for them, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Our Roman's passage is clear that civil government is ordained by God (13:1, 4), just like church government. In the United States, God has established a civil government of the people, by the people, and for the people, our citizens. Because we are those citizens, our responsibility before the Lord is to rule well this nation as its civil authority and under its constitution. Ruling well includes praying for her if we find ourselves President someday.

But ours is not a government of the churches, by the churches, and for the churches. In our role as local church members, we belong to a kingdom not yet of this world. Someday, however, this separation of church and state shall be terminated by our King, and the kingdoms of the world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). May we be both faithful citizens and faithful church members in these separate realms until that day.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching