



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

**ARTICLE 12 [MB Confession of Faith]**

# Society and State

COMMENTARY

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The church of the new covenant looks to the pages of the New Testament for guidance in its relationship to the ruling powers under which it lives and carries out its mission. In Old Testament times the people of God, Israel, came to be identified with the nation-state. However, this theocratic ideal, according to which the people of God and the state were to coincide, was never completely realized. Because of the waywardness of the covenant people, Israel as a state came to resemble other nations.

When Israel as a whole broke God's covenant and became apostate, the prophets foresaw a day when God would make a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). However, even in the dark days of Israel's apostasy there were always those who remained true to God's covenant in the midst of a godless nation. This "sacred remnant" is the connecting link between the old and the new people of God, the church—all of them children of Abraham by faith.

## The State in the New Testament

In contrast to ancient Israel, the new people of God that emerged on the day of Pentecost transcended all ethnic and national boundaries. Right from its inception the church had to come to terms with the governing powers, both Jewish (Acts 4:1-22) and Roman (Acts 16:16-40). It is then not to the Old Testament, but to the New that Christians must look for models on how to relate to the nation-state in which they happen to live. Although the New Testament writers do not give us explicit instructions on all aspects of the Christian's relationship to the state, the main lines of thought can be discerned.

The Gospels make clear that Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God. This was not an earthly kingdom with territorial boundaries. Rather, Jesus wanted to establish God's rule over the hearts and lives of those who were willing to commit their lives to Christ in faith and obedience. In the teachings of Jesus there is no confusion between the kingdom of God and the political state. Although it was popularly expected in the Judaism of his day that the coming Prince from the House of David would restore Israel to former greatness as a political kingdom, Jesus made it very clear that his kingdom was not of this world.

Our Lord rejected Satan's offer to give him the kingdoms of this world if Jesus would worship him (Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5-8). When asked by Pilate if he was in fact a king, Jesus explained that his kingdom was not of this world. If it were, then his disciples would fight. And so the state had nothing to fear from Jesus and the messianic movement he had begun (John 18:11). Whereas the Zealots in Jesus' day, on one hand, tried to overthrow the ruling power by force, and the Sadducees, on the other hand, worked hand in glove with the Roman authorities, Jesus did neither. He did not agitate for the overthrow of the government, nor did he identify with the government. One of the reasons he didn't use "Messiah" as his self-designation (although he was fully conscious of being Messiah), was that the word had political connotations in the Judaism of his day. He was not a Messiah who would establish a Jewish political state, but who would suffer and die to atone for the sins of the world. He was not only the Davidic king, but also the Suffering Servant.

Jesus never questioned the legitimacy of the state as such. He gives us to understand that the state was instituted by God, but that the kingdom of God and the political kingdom are not coterminous.

## The State Instituted by God

Jesus was born and lived all his life under Roman rule, as the Herods and the Roman governors exercised it. He taught his disciples by example not to offend the ruling powers (Matt. 17:24-27). He advised



his contemporaries to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17). He reminded Pilate, who condemned him to death unjustly and for political reasons, that he had no power over him unless it had been given to him from above (John 19:10,11). He forbade his disciples the use of force in their attempt to defend him (Luke 22:49-51), and warned them that those who took the sword were bound to perish by it (Matt. 26:52). Although Jesus was charged with sedition and crucified as a revolutionary, the Gospels make it plain that he was falsely accused and that he died according to the salvation purposes of God to atone for the sins of the human race, and not for crimes against the state.

The apostle Paul took the same position with respect to the state as did Jesus. Authority, he explains, is from God, “and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1 NRSV). Resistance to divinely established authority calls for punishment by the ruling powers. Government has been instituted by God for the good of society as a whole (Rom. 13:4).

It is implied that all governments have some sense of what is good and what is harmful for their subjects. In the context of Romans 13 Christians are warned not to repay evil with evil (Rom. 12:17). Whereas Christians are forbidden to kill others, the state bears the sword (Rom. 13:4). Nevertheless, even when the state diverges from the ways of God’s kingdom, believers are to accept the state and be subject to it. State is not by nature divine in character, but it functions as God’s servant in the present age. It is, however, provisional and temporary, for it passes away at the dawn of God’s eternal kingdom.

The kingdoms of this world are not to be confused with the kingdom of God. Paul writes that the rulers of this age, because of their blindness and unbelief, crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). He writes that behind earthly rulers there are supernatural evil powers that seek to use the rulers of nations to carry out their evil designs. He also cautions members of the church not to have their disputes settled before the courts of justice, not because of possible unjust rulings on the part of justices who are not believers, but because of their limited understanding of the nature of the church. When internal quarrels arise within the Christian community, believers dispense with the state without rejecting it or taking over what legitimately belongs to the state (1 Cor. 6:1-10).

The apostle Peter in his writings shows the same ambivalence toward the ruling powers as expressed by Jesus and Paul. He exhorts believers to accept and even to honor human authorities, whether the emperor or governors, who have been sent by God to punish the wrongdoer and praise the one who does right (1 Pet. 2:13-16).

Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, in which God’s people are exhorted to submit to the demands of the state, must however be read together with Revelation 13, where the apostle John gives us a view of a state that has become totalitarian and satanic. When the state demands supreme loyalty from all its citizens, a loyalty which belongs to God alone, then believers must obey God rather than human authorities (Acts 4:19). In such a situation the church does not fight back (Rev. 14:9,10), but endures “the pain of unjust suffering” (1 Pet. 2:19), and follows in the footsteps of her Lord (1 Pet. 2:21), who when he was abused, did not return abuse, but “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23 NRSV).

In light of the fact that the state, in whatever form it takes, is governed by different principles from those which guide the members of the kingdom of God, we must ask more precisely: What are the duties of Christians with respect to the state?

### **The Believer’s Obligations toward the State**

First of all, Christians are urged to pray for government leaders and all who are in high positions, so that they might lead quiet and peaceable lives “in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2 NRSV). Also, as good citizens believers are obligated to pay taxes. “For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants.... Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due...” (Rom. 13:6,7 NRSV). It is also a believer’s duty to treat the governing authorities with respect and honor (Rom. 13:7b; 1 Pet. 2:17b).

Moreover, it is incumbent upon Christians to obey the laws of the land, not simply because non-compliance brings penalties, but for reasons of conscience (Rom. 13:5). Also, the church is under obligation to seek the good of society. “Whenever we have opportunity,” writes Paul, “let us work for the good of all” (Gal. 6:10 NRSV). “Always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thess. 5:15 NRSV). To Titus Paul



writes: “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good...to be peaceable and considerate” (3:1, 2).

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah encouraged the Israelite exiles in Babylon to do things which characterized good citizenship: be productive, raise families, seek the peace and prosperity of their adopted cities, and pray for the well-being of Babylon. Peter exhorts his readers to live honorably in society so that people “may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). No doubt the apostle remembered the words of Jesus who urged his followers to let their light shine before others so “that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

However, the state at times makes demands on its citizens with which believers cannot in good conscience comply. Although they are willing to give to Caesar what belongs to him, they are not willing to give to Caesar what belongs to God. To give the state one’s ultimate loyalty is idolatry.

And so the believer’s patriotism and love for homeland must always be tempered by the realization that the state often stands in opposition to the kingdom of God. The followers of Jesus must therefore avoid extreme forms of nationalism.

### **The Church in Tension with the State**

Although the state is instituted by God for the common good of society, and believers are exhorted to seek the welfare of society and state, there are limits to the obedience that Christians offer to the ruling powers. This means that the church will always live in tension between the demands of the state and those of the kingdom of God, between the values of the culture in which it lives and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Believers will not, therefore, immerse themselves completely in the cultural practices of the day. Nor will they withdraw from society. Rather they will seek to live within cultures that are pervaded by evil practices, as salt of the earth (Matt. 5:16). Where possible they will take a stand against economic and judicial corruption, racial discrimination, mistreatment of the needy and disadvantaged, and all forms of violence against human beings. Such criticisms of evils that are harmful to society are not in contradiction to the respect Christ’s followers show to the governing authorities. For example, when believers refuse to make oaths they do so in order to witness to the profound significance of truthfulness in any society.

There are circumstances in which Christians will have to suffer at the hands of the ruling authorities when they cannot in good conscience comply with the demands of the state. For example, we believe that as followers of Jesus we should refrain from violence and the taking of life, and for that reason not serve in the military. The practice of non-resistance, as taught by Jesus (Matt. 5:38-42), may at times lead to suffering at the hands of the state.

Moreover, Christians who take the ethical teachings of Scripture seriously will often stand in conflict with the current values of the society and of the state. Speaking out against such evils as abortion, violence, sexual immorality, gambling, and the like, will not always endear the church to the society in which it lives. Or when the state forbids the spread of the gospel, Christ’s faithful witnesses may lose their rights or even their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The church throughout the centuries has lived and carried out its mission under different forms of government. Although some governments have been friendlier than others, the church during its long history has had to suffer repeatedly at the hands of the state. Also the church has often failed to live up to the standards of the kingdom of God as set forth by Jesus and has caused much offense in the non-Christian world. It is therefore of utmost importance that Christ’s followers avoid offending those still outside the church (1 Cor. 10:32). Believers must strive to live without compromising Christian integrity, working and waiting for the day when the kingdoms of this world will pass away and God’s eternal kingdom will appear in all its glory.

