

*Introduction to Christian Ethics Part 2*  
Course Developed by Ron Habinski in 2002/2003  
for

An Adult Bible Class, at Greenbelt Baptist Church, Ottawa

*Unit # 6 Separation of Church and State*

- The ethical issue we will examine in this unit is the separation of Church and state.
  - Incidentally, we will also be using the longest word in the English language.
  - Through the ages, the doctrine of the separation of Church and state has been one of the most distinctive beliefs Baptists.
  - Unfortunately, few Baptists could explain it clearly today if asked to do so.
  - The separation of church and state is a very important principle, because it has to do with our commitment to religious liberty for all.
  - It deals with whether or not the laws of human states should recognize any one religion or church as the official or established religion of the state.
  - **By separation we mean that Christian churches or other religions should not try to control the government of a state or seek privileges and official status for themselves within the state.**
  - **Similarly, the state should not try to control religious groups or use them for its own purposes.**
  - The separation of church and state is taught or implied by scripture, as we will see.
  - It is also supported by the observation that having an official state religion leads to oppression and persecution for other religions, because others tend to be considered radicals, dissenters and possibly unpatriotic troublemakers and enemies of the state.
  - By a natural process, the resources of the state often come to be used to support the official religion and oppose or restrict all others.
- It is important to note some of the things that the separation of Church and state does not mean; it does not mean:**
1. That Christians should try to physically remove themselves from secular human society by living in monasteries or communes (**Jn 17:15f; 1 Cor 5:9f**) or creating their own separate countries (**Jn 18:36f**)
  2. That Christians should become an inward-looking holy huddle which has nothing to do with the society in which we live (**Mt 5:13-16; 22:17-21; 28:18-20**)
  3. That Christians should have no involvement in politics (**Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pe 2:13f**)
  4. That Christian politicians should be prevented from personal involvement in local churches human rulers are God's servants (**Rom 13:1-7**).
  5. That Christians should not give wholehearted support to the reasonable and moral demands of human governments and of citizenship in this world (**Tit 3:1; Mt 22:17-21; 1 Pe 2:13-17; Rom 13:1-7**)

- **When we are speaking about the separation of Church and state there are some technical terms that we should all be aware of.**
- **[WRITE 4 WORDS IN CAPS BELOW]**
- States that have an official state church are referred to as having or practicing religious **ESTABLISHMENT**.
- People who oppose the establishment of any official religion in a state are said to believe in **DISESTABLISHMENT**.
- Historically, Baptists have favoured and supported disestablishment.
- Those who think it good and proper for a human state to have an officially established religion are said to believe in **ANTIDISESTABLISHMENT**.
- Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has tried to gain official established status in any state where its numbers and influence have permitted it to do so.
- In such states it has supported the antidisestablishment view.
- Some predominantly Islamic and Buddhist states have given established status to their majority religion, and thus have held an antidisestablishment view because they do not want their religion to lose its official status.
- Their position is called **ANTIDISESTABLISHMENTARIANISM**.
- This term has long been considered the longest word in the English language, although I suspect that few had any idea what it meant.
  
- Our Congregation is a member of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada.
- The 11<sup>th</sup> belief listed in the statement of faith of the Fellowship and of our congregation states, ***“We believe in the entire separation of Church and State.”***
- This means that we do not agree with the establishment of any one religion or denomination as the official religion of any state.
- In the same way, the statement of faith of the Southern Baptist Convention of churches says, ***“We believe in the separation of Church and state with each having definite and distinct spheres of responsibility.”***
- The principle of the separation of Church and state was first reflected in the laws of a human state in the Baptist colony of Rhode Island.
- American Baptists have been the leading contenders for this principle.
- When the first American colonies were being founded, most European countries had an official state religion; so there was a lot of discussion in the American colonies as to which religion would be the official religion of the United States.
- Roger Williams, the leader of the Baptist colony of Rhode Island, led the campaign which led to the incorporation of the separation of church and state in the American Constitution as the first amendment.
- The first amendment of the American Constitution says, ***“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; - - -”***
- This legislative innovation represented a clear break from the general practice of

European states at that time.

- In 1947 the Alliance Manifesto of the Baptist World Alliance declared,  
*“We maintain that it is most difficult to have establishment and religious liberty at the same time. No church should be given special privileges by the state, nor should any seek such.”*

**- In this unit we are going to look closely at the Biblical evidence supporting the principle of the separation of church and state or disestablishment.**

**- But before we do that, I think it may be useful to consider how Baptists came to recognize and stand for this principle long before any human state or religion officially recognized it.**

**- I think it is important to recognize that we have come to hold this principle because of the clear lessons of history as well as the teachings of Scripture.**

- History seems to show that states which have an established religion are likely to deny full religious liberty to anyone who belongs to another religion or practices a different faith.

- They have often branded such people as traitors, trouble makers and criminals.

- States which have an official state religion have often tried to control it, making it serve the purposes of the state.

- Similarly, established religions have often claimed authority over the state and have harnessed the civil authority of the state to discriminate against and persecute people of different faiths.

- In other words, the establishment of any religion in a country tends to lead to deterioration in the laws, institutions and moral fabric of the country, as church and state both support one another and compete for power and control over one another.

**- Here are some examples of the sorts of evil that I am speaking about.**

- Feel free to comment as we go along, or add other examples that come to mind.

- For centuries the Roman government persecuted Christians for refusing to participate in the worship of the official state gods of Rome.

- The Roman emperor, Constantine, established Christianity as the official state church of the Roman Empire, thus giving Christians an opportunity to become the persecutors for a change.

- Italian history illustrates the corrupting influence of religious establishment on both the state church and the state.

- The horrors of the Spanish inquisition illustrate what can happen when a state is married to a specific religious organization and allows it to have authority over all citizens.

- The organized mass slaughter of Protestant Huguenot Christians in Roman Catholic France was another example of the evils that accompany religious establishment.

- For many centuries, Jews were systematically discriminated against and persecuted in European countries, which were officially Christian.

- The corrupt Russian Orthodox Church and the corrupt and repressive Czarist regime in Russia upheld each other until both fell together, giving rise to a communist state.
- The Coptic Christian Church had a similar incestuous relationship with the royal dynasty in Ethiopia.
- After the Muslim conquest of the Byzantine Empire, Christians were subjected to discriminatory taxation and then to increasingly discriminatory legislation, persecution and forced conversion.
- Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians all participated in the persecution of members of other faiths when they enjoyed the privileges of establishment in England and Scotland.
- During the Protestant reformation, the Baptist movement burst into flame in Britain; and Baptists experienced dreadful persecution there at the instigation of the state and the established church of England.
- This persecution led to the emigration of many Baptist refugees from Britain and the founding of the Baptist colony of Rhode Island.
- Most Protestants have heard about the dreadful persecution that many early Protestant reformers experienced at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church in countries where it had established status.
- What is less well known is that the states in which Calvin, Luther and others established their distinctive brands of Protestant religion persecuted people who did not share their beliefs, including both Protestants and Catholics.
- In 1948, 27 countries continued to practice religious establishment.
- In some of them, such as Muslim Afghanistan and Buddhist Tibet, converting away from the state religion was punishable by death.
- On the other hand, in England and Scotland people who worshipped outside of the state religion came, in time, to be given tolerant treatment.
- Turning away from the state religion is still a capital crime in many officially Muslim states, such as Saudi Arabia.
- It is my understanding that in Israel it is a crime to change your religion, whatever it may be, or persuade anyone to do so.
- For a long time, the Soviet Union did its best to discourage, control and eradicate religion, and other communist states did the same.
- States such as Communist China and North Korea persecuted people who practiced any religion other than atheism or the adoration of the head of state.
- In North Korea anyone caught in possession of a Bible was liable to arrest, torture and 15 years in prison.
- The penalty for distributing Bibles or teaching or preaching the Christian faith was execution.
- I do not know whether this situation has changed significantly in North Korea.
- No doubt the supporters of other faiths are treated just as harshly there.

**Q: Can you think of other examples of the negative consequences of the establishment of religion?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

- Canada has never had an established religion, although there is no specific Canadian law that prohibits this from happening.
- It seems that no religion has ever had sufficient influence in Canada to secure full recognition as the official religion of the state.
- The American principle of the separation of Church and state has had considerable influence in Canadian society as it has also in European states.
- Most Canadians are unaware that at one time only Anglicans could hold high government office in Lower Canada.
- Similarly, during a good portion of Quebec's history, the Roman Catholic Church had virtually the status of an established religion, and people who spoke out for other faiths were harassed and persecuted in many ways.
- Many Baptist pastors and missionaries still living today did a lot of jail time in Quebec jails, as did Jehovah's Witnesses.
- I have heard a number of Baptist pioneers speak about their experience of persecution in Quebec, a persecution that typically involved close cooperation among local Roman Catholic clergy, police and government officials.
- Because of the influence of Anglicanism and other protestant faiths in Lower Canada, and because many schools in Ontario began as Christian schools, the publicly funded schools of Ontario eventually came to teach a Protestant version of Christianity.
- This amounted to a form of religious establishment.
- Many Christians were pleased at this state of affairs, but it has never been compatible with the principle of the separation of church and state.
- It made Catholics, Jews, atheists and members of non-Christian faiths second-class citizens in our public schools, because their faiths were not given equal recognition or respect, even though their tax dollars were used to help fund our public schools.
- I am ashamed to say that many Baptists joined in the protest over the removal from our public schools of the preferential recognition and observance of the Christian faith.
- But applying the same principle, Christians would have no grounds for objecting to the religious indoctrination of their children in the public schools of non-Christian or atheistic countries.
- We would have been far wiser to object to the state-funded teaching of any religion in publicly funded schools, or continue operating privately funded Christian schools.
- Now we have little basis for objection when Christianity and other world religions are given equally unsympathetic treatment in our schools, or when Christianity is given less sympathetic treatment than non-Christian religions and value systems
- Just as government subsidies have supported the teaching of Protestant Christian views in Ontario public, so tax dollars were used to subsidize the teaching of the Roman Catholic faith in Ontario's Catholic schools.
- This has not been an unmixed blessing for Roman Catholic believers.
- One of the things that Catholic Schools have increasingly been struggling with is the fact that when a government funds something, it eventually tries to control it.

- So Catholic Schools have been forced to hire teachers who do not share Catholic beliefs or accept and advocate Catholic moral values.

**Q: How can we explain the popularity of the establishment of one official religion in so many countries of the world?**

**A:** Supporters of religious establishment argue that just as God is supreme in His authority over the world, so His religious representatives should be recognized as having supreme authority over human societies.

- They argue that the governing authorities of the state should recognize and accept the authority of the one true faith.
- Of course, every world religion is sure that it is the only true one, and therefore that it should be the one officially recognized by the state.
- Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians pointed to the theocratic Jewish state of Old Testament times in which God's authority was recognized as supreme over the nation, and the king was regarded as God's anointed servant, appointed by Him to rule over the nation.
- Royal coronations in Britain have been based on this theocratic model.
- British coronations have essentially been a religious occasion in which an individual was given authority to rule by a priest believed to be acting on God's behalf.
- The priest would anoint the king or queen to be with oil, thus symbolically expressing God's approval and authorization of the monarch's reign.
- The advantage of such an approach for the monarch is that the legitimacy and authority of his reign is supported by the religious authority of the priesthood, so he is hard to unseat.
- For the priesthood, the advantage of participating in this process is that the authority of the priesthood is recognized for all time by the monarch whom they appoint.
- The problem with this approach is that it assumes that it is God's plan to rule over individual nations through a priesthood and to appoint civil rulers through them.
- However, the New Testament does not teach that the Church will rule over the world in this age.
- Neither does it suggest that in the Church age there is to be any such thing as a state ruled over by God through individuals chosen and authorized by Him.
- **Let's look at what the Bible says about the position of God's people, the Church, in this world. There are at least nine Scriptural themes which touch upon this subject.**

**1. First there is the doctrine of the remnant.**

- Many passages of Scripture teach that all through the ages God's people have formed a minority or remnant within human society.
- Consider Noah, Abraham, Gideon and the believing remnant in Israel all through its history (**Isa 1:9; 53:1-3; Rom 9:6f, 27;**)

**The same is true about the relationship of the early Church to New Testament Judaism and the Roman empire. (Mt 7:13f; Lk 12:32; (cf. Dn**

7:22, 27); Mt 3:9 (Cf. Lk 3:8); Lk 13:22f (Cf. Mt 7:13f); Rom 11:3-5; 1 Cor 1:26-28.

*- The point of this Biblical theme is that God's people should expect to live in this world as a faithful remnant within an unbelieving society, rather than to rule over the society in which they live or be formally recognized by it as God's true children and servants.*

2. The doctrine of a kingdom not of this world. (Lk 17:20f; Jn 18:36; Mt 13:24f, 30)

*- If Jesus was not interested in establishing an earthly kingdom, then it follows that He did not intend for His people to seek or hold government-approved religious authority and status in any human state.*

3. The doctrine of the growth of wickedness in the world in the last times (Mt 24:7-12; Lk 18:8b; 2 Tim 3:1-5 (2 Pe 3:3))

*- In such a world, a formal alliance between the Church and human states can only interfere with the mission of the Church.*

4. The doctrine of the continuing persecution of believers (Mt 10:16-25, 34, 38; Jn 15:18-22; 2 Tim 3:12f; Rev 6:9f)

*- This teaching implies that the Church will continue to exist in a non-Christian state, which is either hostile or indifferent to the mission of the Church.*

*- Consequently, any alliance between the Church and the state can be expected to deter or compromise the Church's mission.*

5. The principle of *non-submission* to the human governing authority when it conflicts with God's authority (Acts 5:29; Mt 10:28)

*- This non-submission principle suggests that conflict between the demands of human authorities and of God is entirely possible and perhaps to be expected.*

*- The state has no overriding authority in matters of personal religious belief or conscience.*

*- In all such matters, God is to be obeyed directly on the basis of personal knowledge and conviction, and not on the basis of the state's interpretation of His will.*

*- It is because Christians have always reserved the right to disobey civil authorities when those authorities commanded disobedience to God, that our faith has been so objectionable to despots and atheistic governments.*

6. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (Heb 13:15; 1 Pe 2:5; Rev 1:4-6)

*- This teaching implies that every believer has personal access to God.*

*- In matters of faith and conscience, no civil authority has a mediating function between God and man.*

- *Each and every child of God through Jesus has that personal authority and access.*
7. **The fact that the Church and the state have distinct spheres of responsibility (Mt 22:15-21)**
    - *The state is responsible for maintaining peace and order among men (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1f; 1 Pe 2:13f)*
    - *Paul did not teach this idea because he thought that the state would always be just and fair to its subjects or to believers; his experience would have shown him the folly of any such claim.*
    - *But he believed that the state's normal function of maintaining peace and order was assigned to it by God and therefore should be appreciated and recognized.*
    - *The Church is to make disciples (Mt 28:18-20) and promote the spiritual growth of God's people (Eph 2:19-22).*
    - *Both Church and state are responsible to God, and not to each other, and any structural connection that implies otherwise is likely to cause trouble and confusion.*
  8. **The personal responsibility of all individuals to believe in and receive Jesus or face the consequences of failure to do so (Jn 1:12; 3:16ff)**
    - *It is unthinkable that the Church of Jesus should become involved in imposing religious beliefs or observances on unbelievers.*
    - *Attempts to do this arise naturally in states that have an established religion.*
    - *But a genuine personal faith and a personal relationship with God cannot be imposed from the outside by any sort of human authority, and God has not delegated the authority to do so to mankind.*
  9. **The teaching that Jesus' representatives are to provide for their own material needs rather than counting on the support of the public at large (Lk 22:35-37)**
    - *Early in His ministry Jesus instructed His followers to expect the support of the public and count on it (Lk 9:3ff; 10:3-10; Mt 10:5-13).*
    - *But His final word on the subject to His followers was that they should provide for their own needs and support during their ministry and not expect public support (Lk 22:35-37).*
    - *This teaching implies that the Church should expect a lack of sympathy from the ordinary public, rather than official recognition of its spiritual authority and mission.*
- **These nine Biblical teachings provide a strong foundation for belief that the separation of Church and state is part of God's plan for an orderly world in which His people can get on with the mission He has assigned to them.**

**Q: Can you think of any other strand of Biblical teaching that implies the principle of the separation of Church and state?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**

**Q: What are some of the implications of the principle of the separation of Church and state?**

**A:**

**1. Believers are free to influence their government and legislators in lawful ways as individuals, but not by capturing and controlling the powers or resources of the state.**

- When religious groupings in a society form political power blocks or engage in organized lobbying there is always the possibility that one such group will seek and obtain established status within the state.

- As we have seen, this can lead to the unfair use of the state's resources, religious discrimination and the persecution of minority religious groups.

- It may also lead to state attempts to use the moral authority of Church leaders for secular ends instead of leaving it to serve our Lord's purposes.

- It is my understanding that the position of the Israeli government on how Jewish identity is defined, on marriage and on conversion from one faith to another has been shaped to a large extent by the very effective political influence of the orthodox Jewish faction.

- This religious and political splinter group has had an influence out of all proportion to its numbers, because it has been able to control the balance of power in numerous elections through coalitions it has formed with much larger parties.

**2. We should not expect the laws of the secular state to recognize and enforce Christian values and teachings which are not commonly accepted by secular societies (e.g. The Lord's Day laws, Christian divorce standards, laws against homosexual behaviour, or witchcraft, laws forbidding abortion)**

- Our task is to win people to faith in Jesus as saviour and to *willing obedience* to Him as Lord.

- It is not to impose Jesus' teachings on non-believers by force of law or any use of force.

**3. We should refuse to accept any preferential government subsidy of religious ministries out of tax dollars.**

- There are always strings attached to such subsidies.

- Such funding leads naturally to attempts to control and direct the activities and goals of the Church in ways incompatible with its mission.

- Such uses of tax revenues are also sure to be resented and resisted as unjust

by people who do not share the faith that is being subsidized.

**4. We should oppose, and refuse to participate in publicly-funded religious education in the public school system.**

- Such use of the public school system is illegitimate, because it constitutes oppression of religious minorities and non-believers.
- It commits tax dollars to the imposition of teaching that many people do not believe or want to have imposed on their children.
- We would object to the imposition of publicly funded religious education in an officially Islamic or atheistic or Buddhist state, and we can hardly defend imposing our views on others in the same manner when our numbers and influence within our society enable us to do so.
- Because most teachers in public schools are not born-again believers, any attempt to teach Christian beliefs and values in public schools will inevitably be subverted and ineffectual.
- How can our faith be effectively taught by people who neither understand nor believe the message they are teaching, and who may also be actively sceptical and hostile toward the faith and values they are required to teach?
- When secular states get involved in the delivery of ethical teaching, what is taught tends to become some form of humanistic ethics which rejects God's revealed will as the defining standard of what is right and wrong.
- The net effect of exposure to such teaching of the Christian faith by non-Christians is to confuse Christians and mislead others into thinking that the Christian faith is dull and unconvincing, and that moral standards and principles are things that have nothing to do with God.
- It is better for all concerned, and more consistent with religious liberty, for moral and religious instruction to be recognized as a responsibility of parents rather than a responsibility of the state.
- Parents who want their children to be taught Christian beliefs and values in school should think in terms of sending them to schools supported and run by Christians.
- Pastors who participate in religious instruction classes in public schools participate in a sort of spiritual oppression of those who do not share their faith, and give every other religious and irreligious grouping in society a moral right to share their views in the schools as well.
- Letting every religious group have its say it would mislead and confuse students more than it would help.

**Q: Can you think of any other implications of the principle of the separation of Church and state?**

**A: [DISCUSS]**