

Sphere Sovereignty

In *Matthew 22:21*, we find an oft-quoted verse: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus is responding to a trap that the Pharisees have set for him, either to discredit him or to have him arrested by the Roman soldiers who would have been nearby. The Pharisees asked him if it was right for a Jew to pay the imperial tax, the tax that Caesar collected from everyone in his empire. If Jesus said that it was to pay the tax, he would lose credibility with many of his fellow Jews, for they despised the Romans and hated paying the tax. On the other hand, if he said that it was not right to pay the tax, the soldiers could arrest him for sedition and anarchy. Either way, the Pharisees would accomplish their goal of having Jesus’ influence curtailed.

Jesus responded with the words, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” We are told that the Pharisees were amazed, and they left him alone, at least for a while. We might ask ourselves why the Pharisees were amazed? Were they amazed that Jesus had saw their trap and had sprung it, escaping it unharmed? Were they amazed at Jesus’ cleverness? Or was their something else?

The way the Pharisees posed the question, “Should we pay the imperial tax to Caesar?” creates a line in the sand. When is it right to submit to the government and when do we cross the line? Where do we draw the line, and is it ever right to cross it? The Pharisees came from a long tradition of resisting the civil government, first the Greeks and then the Romans. Many from their tradition had chosen to die for their faith rather than do what the government demanded. They had drawn a very clear line, one that allowed for minimal submission to the government and one that should not be crossed at all. They taught that to submit to the civil government was to take a stance against God. Conversely, submitting to God was to stand against the government.

Jesus’ reply challenges the idea of there being a line which we cross. He says that we must give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. Jesus’ answer is not so much a clever way to escape a trap as it is a profound way of understanding who has authority over what. Jesus, in a way, was introducing us to the teachings of Abraham Kuyper, 1800 years before Kuyper was born. Many of us have been influenced by Kuyper who taught the concept of sphere sovereignty. As we know from both the teachings of Peter (1 Peter 2:13) and Paul (Romans 13:1ff.) ruling authorities are given to us by God for our good, and it is our obligation to submit to them. Thus, when the government demands taxes, they have the right to do so, and we must pay them. When they make laws, we are obligated to obey them because they have the right to make and enforce laws. God has given governments an area of life (sphere) over which they are sovereign, and we are obligated to recognize that sovereignty. Thus, we are obligated to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

We are also obligated to give to God what is God’s. Since that is the case, then we are moved to ask the question: “What belongs to God?” The simple answer: everything. Kuyper taught that there are many spheres (areas) over which various groups/persons have been given authority. Governments have authority over their nations, home owners over their homes, children over their toys, and teachers over

their classrooms. In our world there are many spheres and many authority figures, but God's sphere includes them all. Quoting Kuyper: *"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"* In other words, every sphere of life, no matter how small or how large comes under the authority of Jesus Christ.

This is the amazing thing about Jesus' answer to the Pharisees. He put to an end the idea that submission to the government is opposition to God. Instead, he is saying that submission to the government is submission to God. At the same time, and most importantly, every sphere of life, no matter what it is, does not exist independently but is subject to the authority of God in Jesus Christ.

The implication of this is that there is no separation of church and state, at least not as we practice it today. While we can (and should) argue that there is (and should be) a separation between government and home (each has its own sovereign sphere), and while there is and should be a separation between business and education (each has its own separate sphere), the church, as the representative of Jesus Christ, has the right to speak to every sphere of life. Even more, Christians, as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, have the obligation to speak to every sphere of life, calling it to submission to the one who is Lord of all. Because everything belongs to God, all of life must be lived in service to him and all earthly authorities must be subject to his reign by being obedient to him. What is more, all businesses, all households, all schools, all service clubs, all retirees, all medical facilities – everything that exists is obligated to submit to the overarching authority of Jesus Christ. It is the church, Christians together, who have the responsibility to make sure that every sphere knows what God asks of us.

The role of a Christian, thus, is not to say with defiance "I will not submit to your authority," for that authority has been given by God. Rather, the Christian's responsibility is to say, "Submit yourself to the Lord for he is sovereign over your business, home, nation, etc." Thus, our energy is not to be used in acts of defiance and subversion but in creating opportunities to instruct and guide all spheres of life to submit to the authority of our Lord and Saviour. After all, all people everywhere are called to give to God what belongs to him. Not all are aware of that obligation and not all know how to do that. We can help others understand and so learn to live under the reign of the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

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