

# Conformed, Transformed or Simply Bewildered?

Romans 12:1-2  
August 27, 2017

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Reading different newspapers the past couple of weeks has been challenging to say the least. What happened at Charlottesville and the president's response to it have made people stop, re-evaluate who they are, what they stand for, and where they draw the line.

It's a good time for us as Christians to do the same.

## **CHURCH STATE-RELATIONSHIP – COLLUSION.**

### **Introduction**

What is our relationship with the government? What are we called to be? Called to do? What does God want of us when talking about the relationship between church and state?

Presbyterians usually turn to the Bible for such questions, and we find very clear answers about what the relationship between church and state should be. The problem is that they are often contradictory.

### **Hand-in-Hand Collusion**

The Old Testament tells about the ancient kings of Israel who were chosen by God and anointed by God's prophets/priests, which suggests an intimate relationship or bond between the two. Church and state worked hand-in-hand to fulfill God's will and God's purpose.

But we know from history where that ends up.

**Rulers** who claim to rule through Divine Right – and ignore the church or try to tell the church what to do.

**Churches** who support the government no matter what it does – why we have often supported totalitarian governments who oppress and torture minorities – the trade-off was Churches got a free-hand to do whatever they wanted to do.

To be sure, the arrangement sometimes works out quite well. In Canada's early days, the government focused on foreign affairs and the military – protecting Canadians from invaders (Americans).

Churches were responsible for internal matters – we established schools, colleges and universities; we built hospitals; and at times we ran the municipal government.

In the end, however, we began to focus more on producing good Canadian citizens than good Christians. In the end, we ended up with residential schools.

Church-State collusion does not work. We recognized that in 1854 when the government of the time – Canada did not yet exist – decided against having a State religion. We re-affirmed it in 1969 – or thereabouts – when churches withdrew from running residential schools, and eventually when the State took over education and hospitals and other civil functions.

We might have similar goals – wanting the best for people – but our underlying principles are too different to work hand in hand ...

## **CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIPS - DISTINCTIVENESS**

### **The Lesson from Exodus**

... which brings us to our Old Testament lesson for today. The first thing we notice about our Old Testament lesson is the conflict between the Pharaoh and the Jewish midwives.

The Pharaoh – who was the god-king for ancient Egyptians – ordered the midwives to kill any Jewish male baby but to spare the girls. The midwives did not comply.

**This was not a question of abortion.** This was not a situation where the midwives were committed to saving lives and refused to do anything to kill a helpless child. Ancient midwives were the experts not only on helping mothers give birth but also on terminating unwanted pregnancies. They had likely had their share of killing newborn babies who were unwanted, deformed, or too weak to survive.

**What Pharaoh was asking was genocide, pure and simple.** With no men around, within one generation there would be no purebred Jews either, and within a few generations, no Jewish culture or identity.

**The midwives had to decide how to respond.**

They decided to **not collaborate with pharaoh.** They did not lead an armed rebellion against Pharaoh – against the Egyptian government. They did not try to force pharaoh to change his mind. They simply refused to participate.

**“Church” and State were different – and sometimes in conflict.** The secret for surviving was to hold onto what they knew for sure. The midwives **held true to who and what they were – Jews.**

### **The Lesson from Paul’s Letter to the Romans**

This distinction between the two is perhaps best captured in Jesus’ admonition to give to **Caesar what is Caesar’s** and to God what is God’s but Paul’s letter to the Romans builds on that distinctiveness.

Paul begins by recognizing a fundamental difference between God’s kingdom and what is happening in the world – a difference between God’s values and society’s values.

The danger for Christians is to be sucked into what the worlds says and values. Paul warns us: **We are not to conform.**

Rather we are **to be transformed** – by God – by the renewing of our minds so that we know God’s will.

**That’s the challenge – how do we know God’s will?** Paul doesn’t answer that – at least not in what we read today.

For most of his Christian life, Paul was preaching to Jews living outside Judea – living in Rome and other parts of the Roman Empire. He recognized the challenge of keeping God’s commandments – doing God’s will – when living in a society that held very different values. **Holding onto that difference was fundamental** in Paul’s view. We need to keep God – Jesus – in focus.

### **The Lesson from Matthew**

It is our Gospel lesson from Matthew that goes further.

Jesus asked a simple question, “Who do people say that I am?” and then **“who do you say that I am?”**

Eventually, Peter said, “You are the Christ” – for a brief moment, Peter recognizes God in Jesus – and Jesus’ response that Peter was the stone on which the Church would be built and, in verse 19, the power that Jesus was giving to that Church

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

**In other words, the Church as a whole has the power and authority to make a difference in the world and in heaven.**

The secret – or the key – is that it all begins with God – God opening our eyes to see truths that most people will never see – and that knowledge gives us the ability to make a difference – to change things on earth and in heaven.

## Summary

Three passages with three different perspectives on how we deal with the State (government), society-at-large, the world, and yet the message can be summed up as follows:

**Know who are you and what you are as one of God's people and act accordingly.**

## CHURCH STATE-RELATIONSHIP – A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

### Historically

Which brings us back to the present – or at least closer to it.

During World War II, many people fought, opposed, and resisted the Nazis and fascism. Soldiers fought. People in North America and free countries Europe opposed Nazis however they could. Many people in Nazi-occupied countries resisted however they could. Many stood by and did nothing, for whatever reason.

Two stories really stand out for me:

- Monsignor Angelo Roncalli was the Vatican's only official representative in Turkey. He interacted with Nazi government officials as well as with Jewish and other leaders. In 1944, he arranged for over 50,000 baptismal certificates to be distributed to Jews in Hungary – those documents led to over 100,000 Hungarian Jews escaping the Holocaust. When asked whether the Jews had actually converted to Christianity or not, he replied, "It didn't matter. Hand them out – save their lives – and let God sort it out at the Last Judgement."

The small French village of *Le Chambon-sur Lignon* had a very remarkable history during the War. Many of its citizens were French Protestants and the entire town worked together to save Jewish lives.

They did it – not because Jews had been threatened but because people needed help. *Matthew 25*.

Not one Jew, saved by those villagers, was found – captured by the Nazis. In fact, the pastor, André Trocmé, would get an anonymous phone call warning about SS coming to search their village – giving the people time to get the Jews safely hidden.

Those stories – and many others – tell of people who had a strong sense of who they were as Christians, how that brought them into conflict with the State and the difference that made for so many.

### The Present Context

Traditionally in Canada, Presbyterians have worked with the government in many areas.

We have often seen ourselves as being good citizens called upon by the government to support the government and to help create good citizens.

We have done this by being involved in education and in medicine. Most of Canada's older schools, colleges and universities were actually established by the Church – The same is true for Canada's hospitals. Canada's health system, and social net that establishes working conditions and looks after vulnerable members of society – these initiatives often had their beginnings in the Church – and it was Christian leaders who pushed for their acceptance and implementation by the State.

At the same time, we have made mistakes – residential schools being one of the most obvious.

At times, we have challenged the government – becoming their voice of conscience – and sometimes it was the government challenging us to re-examine our position on issues.

More and more, however, we seem to be drifting away from the State – going in a different direction. But how different are we?

For many of us – that's a question we have to answer on our own. How different from the world-at-large are we? And why do those differences exist?

- Is it because we are closed-minded, holding on to ancient traditions and prejudices?

- Is it because we are Christian, holding onto what we know of God and what God has revealed to us?

The Presbyterian Church is trying to find out what its role and relevance in Canadian society is today – and you'll likely be hearing more about this over the next few months – plug for some workshops I'll – and others – will be offering.

Certainly – as a Church – we will be faced with re-examining our relationship with the State given the current political climate.

But, ultimately, it is you as individual Christians, who will have to answer what your faith means to you – will you go along with whatever is happening, will you hold onto your identity as a Christian – will you resist?

### **CONCLUSION**

Racism has reared its ugly head. Like it not, most of us have racist leanings. It's natural to feel uneasy when encountering people who are different from us in some way. The more obvious the differences, the stronger the sense of uneasiness and fear – particularly if combined with bad experiences.

Having that feeling or sense of unease may be normal but **how we act is a matter of choice.**

- We proclaim God is love – but do our lives show that?

(Boston anti-racism protester) Imani Williams

- "I saw a confrontation happening with a Trump supporter in the middle getting escorted by two police officers. The crowd of about 30 people was swelling around them making it hard to move forward. I knew I had to help because it was just wasn't a positive situation.
- "They were never going to learn anything by being surrounded and screamed at by 30 people. Even though one of the Trump supporters wasn't innocent and definitely instigating, the better lesson was getting him to the other side of the fence where he and other alt-right sympathisers could look out at all of us and see how few they were versus.
- how many we were, and come to terms with how many of us were willing to stand up against hate.
- "That sort of self reflection is the only thing that can change people and get them away from hate and sympathising with hatred. I started helping one guy, and then by the end there was five or six guys just following behind me. The Boston Police Department trusted me enough to get them through.
- "I wasn't going to let someone take away my humanity because I was angry and frustrated. I wanted to act above. I wanted to combat hate with compassion. Sometimes conflict can't be avoided, but it should be avoided at all costs."

**Transparency between what you say and what you do has never been more important.**

### **How does my life show my love of Jesus?**

- (Transparence quote comes from the BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20170822-how-a-corporate-mission-can-drive-young-workers-away>)