

ARTICLE 12

Society and State

The State as Instituted by God

We believe that God instituted the state to promote the well-being of all people. Christians cooperate with others in society to defend the weak, care for the poor, and promote justice, righteousness, and truth. Believers witness against corruption, discrimination and injustice, exercise social responsibility, pay taxes, and obey all laws that do not conflict with the Word of God.

God has given governments authority to maintain law and order and to punish wrongdoers. Followers of Christ respect and pray for those in authority so that peaceful order may prevail. We deplore the loss of life in the exercise of state-sanctioned violence.

Christian Allegiance in Society

The primary allegiance of all Christians is to Christ's kingdom, not the state or society. Because their citizenship is in heaven, Christians are called to resist the idolatrous temptation to give to the state the devotion that is owed to God. As ambassadors for Christ, Christians act as agents of reconciliation and seek the well-being of all peoples.

Because Christ forbids the swearing of oaths, we simply affirm the truth in legal transactions. Believers do not participate in secret societies which demand the swearing of oaths or which otherwise conflict with the Christian's allegiance to Christ and the church. At all times, believers are called to live as faithful witnesses in the world, rejecting pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.

Exodus 20:13,16; Leviticus 19:11; Psalm 82:3-4; Jeremiah 29:7; Daniel 2:21; 3:17-18; 4:17; Matthew 5:13-16, 33-37; 6:33; 17:24-27; 22:17-21; John 15:19; 17:14-18; Acts 5:29; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 5:6-13; Philippians 1:27; 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 3:1-2; James 5:12; 1 Peter 2:13-17.

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COMMENTARY

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 (Jeremiah 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 (Matthew 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 (Matthew 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 Pilate 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 (Matthew 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" (Romans 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 (Romans 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 (Romans 12:17). Whereas Christians are forbidden to kill others, the state bears the sword (Romans 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 Corinthians 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 Corinthians 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 honour 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 Peter 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 (Revelation 14:9, 10), but endures "the pain of unjust suffering" (1 Peter 2:19), and follows in the footsteps of her Lord (1 Peter 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 Timothy 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..." (Romans 13:6, 7 NRSV). It is also a believer's duty to treat the governing authorities with respect and honour (Romans 13:7b; 1 Peter 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 (Romans 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" (Galatians 6:10 NRSV). "Always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thessalonians 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 honourably in society so that people "may see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Peter 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" (Matthew 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 (Matthew 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 nonresistance, as taught by Jesus (Matthew 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 offence in the non-Christian world. It is therefore of utmost importance that Christ's followers avoid offending those still outside the church (1 Corinthians 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.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Article 12 of the confession deals with the relationship of Christians to the state. Attention is focused on the responsibility of government to “promote the well-being of all people” and to “maintain law and order.” As believers, we are admonished to support the government with obedience, taxes, and prayer, while still remembering that our primary allegiance is to Christ’s kingdom, not to the state or society. In our complex modern world, it can be difficult for believers to appropriately give allegiance to Christ’s kingdom while still respecting governmental authority and praying for leaders. Specific direction in the basic categories noted in Article 12 continues to be important.

The New Realities

According to Article 12, Christians are to cooperate with others in society to advance public welfare and order. Relationship to the state in previous years was often defined by a one-time encounter with the draft board, by conscription in time of war, or by an occasional encounter with use of the oath. We are now faced with more complex issues involving Christians and the state. In the United States, for example, we live in a time when the advancement of public welfare and the maintenance of law and order are increasingly distinguished from one another. In recent years, the focus of government has steadily moved toward maintenance of law and order (as defined by more severe penalties for violations of the law and increased spending on prisons) and away from public welfare (as defined by spending and programs involving education, health care, and public works). Greater portions of our tax dollars are now being spent to punish rather than prevent and to incarcerate rather than to educate. These realities are being felt more keenly within our congregations as all levels of society and government look toward the church for help in addressing the resulting gaps in public care.

The pressure of state and society is to give priority to law and order. The desire to protect our families and maintain our personal and financial security may lead us in the same direction. It is our responsibility to act out of allegiance to God’s kingdom as citizens of heaven and those who look forward to the imminent return of Christ. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in situations of sin and brokenness. We cannot be ambassadors of Christ if our allegiance is rooted in a particular nation. This applies to the local congregation as well. Are we ready, as citizens of heaven and

members of a local congregation, to respond to the needs of public welfare left unaddressed by the state? Are we ready to witness to the state about the need to defend the weak and care for the poor?

The New Influences

Relationship to government as defined primarily by issues of participation in the military, swearing of oaths, or payment of taxes can no longer be the sum of our focus when considering the modern pressures of society and state. We must more consciously consider the subtle and increasingly pervasive influences of the broader social order.

The historic position of the Mennonite Brethren is that we give primary allegiance to the kingdom of God, not the state. The history of Mennonite migrations and stories of conscientious objectors to military service provide ample testimony. With the decreasing overt influence of the state in our lives (such as in general conscription), issues of ultimate allegiance become less clear. Occupational pursuits, nuclear family priorities, and concern for immediate and long-term personal security are becoming greater influences upon decisions made in regard to the Christian's relationship with and witness in society.

On the congregational level, most local churches no longer spend significant time and energy on issues of military conscription or the exercise of oaths. This is true partly because of changing social realities and partly because many of these questions have been addressed or dismissed in the past when these issues seemed more urgent. However, specific situations do persist.

Congregations continue to have ample opportunity to exercise faithful witness to the kingdom of God in light of the pressures of society and state. Following are only a few examples of the many ways in which we can witness faithfully in the world while rejecting those pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity. These highlight some areas of "rub" that can occur while we dwell in this world, yet live as citizens of a higher kingdom who look forward to the unexpected and imminent return of Christ.

Diversity and Inclusion

What does it mean to witness against racism, sexism, and classism, and live as those whose citizenship is in heaven? In recent history, our national denomination has been mono-ethnic and solidly middle-class. It is now becoming more ethnically and economically diverse. A real challenge exists for those of Northern European ancestry who have historically held power and staffed the structure of the denomination. We must respond faithfully and with integrity to the existing under-represented congregations already a

part of our structures, and the congregations of new immigrants and people of other backgrounds who wish to join our denomination. It is a great challenge to be accountable to one another, individually and as congregations, in the spirit of God's love for us. We must recognize our temptation to control others and trust God to work in others, finding appropriate ways to share our material wealth and privileged position without being manipulative. We have a tremendous opportunity within denominational structures to be a reconciling presence and healing light in an age full of the darkness of racism, sexism, and classism. We are called to become the church of Revelation 7:9—"a great multitude...from every nation."

Immigration Issues

What does it mean to witness against discrimination and defend the weak in an era of tightening and increasingly complex immigration regulations? Immigrants who are church members and illegal aliens share their illegal status and testify to the grace of God at district Mennonite Brethren conferences. In light of such texts as the Old Testament injunctions to accommodate the alien and stranger (Deuteronomy 24:17-18), Jesus' words about our responses to prisoners and strangers (Matthew 25:31-46), and the New Testament command to show hospitality to others including strangers (Hebrews 13:1-2), we must take seriously the call to live faithfully by discerning appropriate responses to our immigrant sisters and brothers, and by rejecting the compromising pressures of public opinion and harsh and confusing laws.

Local churches, on their own or in combination with other churches, can actively address the physical and spiritual needs of the marginalized in their communities. Some congregations are attended by significant numbers of illegal immigrants. For many more congregations, immigration and documentation issues are very pressing. With the continuing adoption of congregations of recent immigrants into the denominational fold, we must consider more seriously the current changes in immigration law and the increasingly restrictive and confusing immigration policies with stiffer penalties. Can traditionally middle-class Mennonite Brethren churches respond compassionately to immigrant sisters and brothers living in our midst, yet in need? Faithful witness might even take the form of advocacy with elected officials, encouraging them to respond with compassion to those who are on the margins in our communities.

Prison Issues

What does it mean for ambassadors of the reconciling Christ to pay state taxes which support a system of retributive incarceration? In some states,

residential burglary can mean a 25-year sentence in state prison. Is it enough to send letters and once-per-quarter packages to the ones incarcerated? As those whose allegiance is to the kingdom of God, we should work to address basic injustices in the system. When attachment to our material possessions is so great that we are willing to support long-term incarceration as punishment rather than address the individual and root causes of the offence, we are assenting to societal pressures that can compromise our Christian integrity.

Taking seriously the call to forgive and disciple others allows us to proclaim our allegiance to God's reconciling kingdom rather than the divisive kingdom of this world. Particular attention should be given to those publicly ostracized and often brutalized such as the homeless, recently released prisoners, legal and illegal aliens, and those marginalized because of skin colour, manner of speech, or physical and mental abilities. Involvement with local organizations that minister to prisoners and work to find preventative solutions can also be a point of connection for local congregations looking for ways to embody the reconciling love of God.

Individual Security

What priority do we give our personal comfort and long-term security as those who resist the idolatrous temptation to give devotion to the state? This is another area in which we may find common practice at odds with Jesus' kingdom call. What is our responsibility to the increasing needs of those losing basic public assistance in our own communities or those experiencing overwhelming poverty in other parts of the world? Are we willing to share part of the interest generated by our capital or even to give some of our capital away? Will we encourage government to care for the weak and poor at the expense of state-guaranteed retirement benefits? It is a fallacy for citizens of heaven to believe that future security can be guaranteed on earth by trusting in our individual abilities to provide for ourselves or the state's ability to do so. The reality is that others perish, physically and spiritually, when we refuse to share. When we abdicate our Christian responsibility to care for others, we violate the spirit of Article 12.

The local congregation is an ideal forum in which to explore the undeserved blessings given to us by God, to witness to one another about our mutual dependence, and to support one another in making investment and retirement decisions that reflect the values of God's kingdom.

Daily Life

It is easy to overlook the significance of the ordinary. The state now permeates our lives to a degree that our forebears would not have understood. We depend upon the state for health, safety, consumer regulations, business incentives,

vital networks of transportation, regulation of utilities, and for guarantees of minimum wages and benefits. We expect that government will guarantee safe food and water, security of our homes and families, and opportunities for persons to support themselves. It is our practice, if not our confession, to trust government for the provision of those things needed to sustain us on a daily basis. Ongoing discernment is needed to ensure that our ultimate trust remains in God over government.

Beyond the words we use to describe our relationship to God and government, there are a series of symbols by which we represent that relationship in the daily life of the church. Many sanctuaries contain a large Bible to demonstrate the centrality of the Word and a pulpit to emphasize the preaching of the Word, a cross to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ and perhaps a cup and plate to signify our communal sharing in Christ's sacrifice, horizontally aligned seating that orients us toward the word or perhaps semi-circular orienting us more toward the community of faith. Some congregations display the national flag with the Christian flag in a specific, subordinate relationship as is prescribed in the display of the national flag, symbolic of thanks and loyalty to the nation. The contradictory juxtaposition of such divergent symbols of loyalty cannot be ignored when considering what it means to give primary allegiance to God's kingdom.

It is in our daily life that our beliefs become real, to ourselves and to those around us. When we speak the words of God and live by the patterns of Scripture, we exemplify our allegiance to God. Our churches also provide clues into the nature of our ultimate fidelity. The role of government, and its negative expression in unchecked nationalism, so obviously tearing people apart around the world, remains a great challenge for us in North America as we consider how to declare in word and deed and symbol where our ultimate allegiance resides. Our recognition of and response to the pervasive nature of government influence in our lives and churches has much to say about how we live out our Christian integrity and witness.

Participation in Government

Article 12 does not specifically address the issue of those who choose to participate directly in government. Christians are admonished to "cooperate with others in society" to achieve the ends God sets out for the state, but are clearly distinguished from the state. The article encourages prayer for and an attitude of respect toward government authorities. Some in our churches choose to participate more actively in the daily affairs of government through elected or other positions, and some work directly in law enforcement areas, potentially placing themselves in situations involving the use of deadly force.

While there is no outright prohibition to these activities in Article 12,

a key consideration is the statement, “As ambassadors for Christ, Christians act as agents of reconciliation and seek the well-being of all peoples.” In this area, as with other aspects of our relationship to society, there is a good deal of discernment necessary in following the example of Christ, who consistently challenged the rich and powerful and stood up for the poor and powerless. Involvement in political parties and governmental processes presents unique, and often difficult, challenges in following this model.

It should also be noted that simple abstention from direct involvement in governmental affairs does not free one from such considerations. There is much benefit and security derived from the proper function of government as instituted by God. Just as we recognize the pervasive nature of government influence in our daily lives, so we must recognize the security and freedoms that surround the majority. These benefits should not lessen our desire to follow the model of Christ who spoke boldly to the powers of his time and was willing to suffer the consequences for doing so. Whether we participate directly in government or are recipients of its benefits, we must continue to discern our relationship to the state and our response to pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.

Finding Our Way

Over the years, we have worked to find our way regarding the proper relationship of Christians to the state. In these changing times, we continue to focus our attention and discernment upon a host of less obvious ways in which society and state can influence our lives, affect the needs of those around us, and compromise our commitment and witness as citizens of God’s kingdom.