MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE

The Reformers’ teachings on Scripture and righteousness by faith led to a new era of religious freedom. Embracing the Bible as the ultimate spiritual authority means rulers can’t coerce people’s consciences. When testifying before the 1521 Diet of Worms, Martin Luther concluded his defense by saying, “Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by the clearest reasoning,... I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience” (Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* [1911], 160). The breach between church and state had been created. Before the greatest assembly of the empire, Martin Luther had denied the state’s so-called right to control matters of conscience.

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was determined to crush this rebellion. Luther’s death seemed certain, but the Elector of Saxony, who believed all his subjects should get a fair trial, managed to secret him from the road outside Wittenberg to Wartburg Castle, about 125 miles (200 km) away. When Luther openly returned a year later, Charles V had become too embroiled in various wars to continue uprooting the Reformation movement. Amazingly, when the emperor convened the Second Diet of Spires in 1529 to prohibit Lutheran teachings, several German princes who had accepted those teachings risked their lives to stand firm on the same convictions Luther had articulated eight years earlier (Ibid., 201). They accepted no limitation on the people’s right to spread God’s Word. This week’s study examines biblical support for the separation of church and state that resulted from the Protestant Reformation.

**Read This Week’s Passage:**
Matthew 22:15–22
Write out Matthew 22:15–22 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 17–21. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
Jesus’ enemies worked hard to try to trap Him with His own words. In Matthew 22, the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees each brought cleverly crafted questions intended to make Jesus stumble. Their questions were chosen from the most hotly debated topics of the day: politics, marriage, and theology (vv. 15–40). Their strategy was to try to force Jesus into taking sides on these controversies so He would automatically alienate Himself from one side of the argument. Jesus was not afraid to firmly take sides on certain issues regardless of public opinion, and yet He answered in such a way that disarmed and silenced His critics.

This incredible ability is perfectly demonstrated in the first question-test Jesus faced, which the Pharisees and Herodians colluded to create (Matt. 22:16). For context, Pharisees and Sadducees were on opposite sides of the political spectrum. The Pharisees were nationalists who sought deliverance from Rome’s authoritarian rule so they could be a sovereign nation once again. They were the most popular amongst the Jews at the time, but they hadn’t secured the necessary positions for political power as such positions were not elected by popular vote. The high priest and the Sanhedrin, Israel’s highest governing body, were such positions, and were mostly occupied by Sadducees (Acts 5:19)—wealthy elites who were willing to compromise with Rome. Less is known about the Herodians, but they supported the dynasty of Herod, one of Rome’s “client kings.” As such, they aligned with the Sadducees in being pro-Rome. It’s therefore surprising that Matthew 22 records nationalist, anti-Rome Pharisees conspiring with globalist, pro-Rome Herodians to flatter Jesus and entangle Him in their political web with their first question, which had to do with whether Jews should pay taxes. Here’s what we can learn from Jesus’ response to that question (vv. 15–22):

1. Jesus saw through their pretenses and hypocrisies and would not lower Himself to their level (v. 18).
2. He unequivocally answered their question about taxes by pointing out Caesar’s image on the coin, an action that told the people that Caesar had a claim on their currency. But the answer also revealed that because we are made in God’s image, we owe Him our lives (Gen. 1:26, 27).
3. He identified two distinct and separate domains of responsibility: to the government, and to God (Matt. 22:21).
4. He left the people who were trying to cross-examine Him speechless (v. 23).

The attempts to weaken Jesus’ credibility by drawing Him into political disputes only strengthened His influence. Everyone could see that He could handle the toughest questions of the day. Matthew 22 reveals the heavenly wisdom Jesus had in navigating contemporary debates, a wisdom He promises to give us when we need it (Matt. 10:19).
TWO DOMAINS

Jesus answered the religious leaders’ questions with principles that were brief in form but broad in application. He could’ve explained much more, but perhaps this was one of those moments He was thinking, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Thankfully for modern readers, many of the questions this passage may raise are explored later in the New Testament. Romans 13:1–10 mirrors the language of Matthew 22:21 but provides more explanation. It should therefore be studied as an inspired commentary on Matthew 22:18–21.

How do the separate domains of God and government interact? God’s domain encompasses everything, including our responsibility to government (Rom. 13:1). God delegates authority to our leaders, which is why Paul refers to government agents as “God’s ministers” three times in Romans 13. Paul was referring specifically to the Roman government in this letter, and it’s nearly impossible to exaggerate the corruption of that regime. The believers to whom Paul wrote lived under erratic government leaders who were guilty of some of the most treacherous crimes against their subjects. Even so, Paul gave those people this warning: “Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring [God’s] judgment on themselves” (v. 2). God requires submission even to corrupt governments, but submission is not without limits.

Romans 13 places limits on the authority of government. The New King James Version translates the word “due” in verse 7 and “owe” in verse 8 from the same Greek root word. The English Standard Version provides a clearer translation by using the same word in both verses: “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” These verses name areas where we have obligations to government authority: taxes, revenue, respect, honor, and in summary, loving one another according to the law. Notably, these verses mention nothing of worship, blasphemy, Sabbath keeping, or any other aspect of our love to God. God alone has jurisdiction over the vertical love we owe Him as described in the first four commandments (Exod. 20:1–11; Matt. 22:37, 38), but has delegated to human governments responsibility for protecting safe and proper vertical relationships as explained in the last six commandments (Exod. 20:12–17; Matt. 22:39, 40). God has given governments the responsibility of protecting each person’s individual rights, suppressing evil, and guarding relationships with our neighbors. Though the corrupt government in Rome often betrayed its citizens and failed in its responsibilities, Christians were still to respect that authority so long as it did not infringe on their duties to God. As far as possible, we should obey both the laws of God and the laws of government, but when a conflict arises between divine law and human law, God’s law is always supreme. As the apostles said, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29, NKJV).
What relationship do the following verses have with Matthew 22:15–22?

Romans 13:1–10  
Acts 5:28, 29  
John 18:33–37  
1 Peter 2:13, 14  
Titus 3:1  
1 Timothy 2:1–4  
Daniel 2:21; 4:17, 25, 32

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE

By embracing the distinctions Jesus made in Matthew 22:18–21 along with the inspired commentary in Romans 13:1–10, we can see the wall Jesus established that separates church and state. The government is allowed to use instruments of force when protecting neighbor-to-neighbor relationships, guaranteeing individual rights, suppressing evil, and maintaining order: “For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4). However, while the sword is a legitimate tool for the state, Jesus declared weapons of force off limits for the New Testament church: “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). To Jesus, the clear difference between the methods the church uses to accomplish its mission and those the state uses should be an obvious indicator of where the distinct line separating church and state lies.

As we discussed in lessons 1 and 3, Jesus established the church to strengthen our relationship with God without subjecting us to force or coercion. As an example to all church leaders, Jesus always honored the boundaries He established separating church and state. He was gentle and mild, never employing intimidation or violence. He firmly resisted all attempts to make His role and goals civil ones instead of spiritual ones.

The separation of church and state reveals Jesus’ mercy, goodness, and wisdom. This doctrine was very foreign to the founders of other religions, evidenced in their ambitions for the complete blending of government and religion. The dark and sinister histories from the centuries where church and state were combined show the church’s terrible mistake in departing from this Messianic teaching and apostolic doctrine. As the Protestant Reformation rediscovered the Bible, the gospel, and the Savior, it’s no wonder that they reinstated a separation of the two domains founded on Christ’s teachings.

In continuing the work of those who have gone before us, our mission includes both the proclamation of truth and the defense of religious liberty. Ellen White put it this way: “The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God’s witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His word. We are to receive this word as supreme authority. We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation” (The Acts of the Apostles [1911], 68). Our spiritual heritage includes the duty to properly comprehend and advance the message of religious liberty.
**inSight**

Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the passage, what are some decisions that must be made in your personal life?

What are some practical decisions you must make in your school, family, workplace, and church life?

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Read more inSight from the Spirit of Prophecy at www.inversebible.org/RL05-7

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**NO EARTHLY THRONE**

“The spies had expected Jesus to answer their question directly, in one way or the other. If He should say, It is unlawful to give tribute to Caesar, He would be reported to the Roman authorities and arrested for inciting rebellion. But in case He should pronounce it lawful to pay the tribute, they designed to accuse Him to the people as opposing the law of God. Now they felt themselves baffled and defeated. Their plans were disarranged. The summary manner in which their question had been settled left them nothing further to say.

“Christ’s reply was no evasion, but a candid answer to the question. Holding in His hand the Roman coin, upon which were stamped the name and image of Caesar, He declared that since they were living under the protection of the Roman power, they should render to that power the support it claimed, so long as this did not conflict with a higher duty. But while peaceably subject to the laws of the land, they should at all times give their first allegiance to God.” (Ellen White, The Desire of Ages [1898], 602.)

“But today in the religious world there are multitudes who, as they believe, are working for the establishment of the kingdom of Christ as an earthly and temporal dominion. They desire to make our Lord the ruler of the kingdoms of this world, the ruler in its courts and camps, its legislative halls, its palaces and market places. They expect Him to rule through legal enactments, enforced by human authority. Since Christ is not now here in person, they themselves will undertake to act in His stead, to execute the laws of His kingdom. The establishment of such a kingdom is what the Jews desired in the days of Christ. They would have received Jesus, had He been willing to establish a temporal dominion, to enforce what they regarded as the laws of God, and to make them the expositors of His will and the agents of His authority. But He said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ John 18:36. He would not accept the earthly throne.

“The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses,—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart.” (Ibid., 509.)

“I saw that it is our duty in every case to obey the laws of our land, unless they conflict with the higher law which God spoke with an audible voice from Sinai, and afterward engraved on stone with His own finger.... He who has God’s law written in the heart will obey God rather than men, and will sooner disobey all men than deviate in the least from the commandment of God. God’s people, taught by the inspiration of truth, and led by a good conscience to live by every word of God, will take His law, written in their hearts, as the only authority which they can acknowledge or consent to obey.” (Ellen White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1 [1863], 361.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What lessons can we learn from how Jesus responded to His critics in Matthew 22?

What differences does the New Testament identify between the church’s role and the state’s?

Do you think the government still derives its authority from God even when it’s grown corrupt? How does God handle such instances?

What is the purpose governing authorities? (Rom. 13:4)

What is the Christian citizen’s responsibility to the government?

Do you think it will be difficult to tell when the government’s laws conflict with God’s? Why or why not?

How can we nurture the courage to stand against the government now, before we need that courage?