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Church and State: The Ethic of Critical Distancing

Biblical studies on “how the New Testament perceives church-state relationships” identify three distinct stances that are commended in different New Testament writings:

1. the ethic of subordination (found in the letters of Paul and in 1 Peter)
2. the ethic of resistance (found in Johannine writings and, especially, Revelation)
3. the ethic of critical distancing (found in the Synoptic Gospels)

Here we look at the ethic of critical distancing. For the other two views, see 1.18 and 1.19.

Summary Description of the Ethic of Critical Distancing

The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels models an approach to governing authorities that avoids both the sort of submissive subordination to the state evident in Romans 13 and the uncompromising demonizing of the state evident in Revelation 13.

On the one hand, Jesus accepts the powers that be, both Jewish and Roman. He is no political revolutionary, no Zealot, no advocate of a theocracy created by human hands or political force. He does not preach the overthrow of the political order or armed revolt. He even permits the payment of tax to Caesar and

to the Temple hierarchy. Above all, he teaches a radical love ethic that includes forgiveness and love for the enemy and nonviolent resistance to evil.

On the other hand, Jesus is no servile subject to those who rule. Although he accepts the political order, his allegiance is to God and God alone. Accordingly, his life from beginning to end is a history of conflict with those in power. He criticizes those who abuse and misuse their power, wealth, and position. He allows the tax to Caesar but along with it calls for a higher obedience to the things of God.¹

Key Texts Expressive of the Ethic of Critical Distancing

Mark 10:42–44:

Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Matthew 5:38–44:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also . . . You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ . . . But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Mark 12:13–17:

Then they sent to [Jesus] some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” And they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Common Observations regarding the Ethic of Critical Distancing

Walter Pilgrim says,

Disciples of Christ always live on the thin edge of compromise as they use and misuse the coins and systems of Caesar, whether in the political, economic, or military realm. One can give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and seek to determine what is appropriate for Caesar. Yet it is significant to note that in this story Jesus does not call Caesar a servant of God nor claim that earthly rulers are instituted by God and so worthy of obedience.²

Jesus may evince an ethic of critical distancing for the time in which he lives, but he also speaks of a future time when his followers will

be dragged before governors and kings who persecute them violently; he tells of anti-Christ's who will come and of a desolating sacrilege to be set up in the holy place (see Mark 13). His counsel then is to "flee to the mountains" (13:14) and hope for the time when the Son of Man will send out his angels to gather his elect (13:27).

1. Walter Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 123.
2. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, 72.