

## The Church and the Civil Government

### Introduction:

1. *“My kingdom is not of this world ...”* (Jn 18:36). Christians are citizens of a spiritual kingdom; their citizenship is in heaven. But we live in a world where the rule of our spiritual King is not recognized, where people do not act according to spiritual standards and values.
2. Recognizing this dilemma, God provided for civil government to maintain social order among an earthly population that is predominantly rebellious to His laws. Through civil authorities God keeps evil within tolerable limits.
3. Christians, first and foremost, belong to a spiritual kingdom and their allegiance is to Christ. But we also live under the constraints of civil law, and we are to *“submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good”* (1 Pet 2:13-14).

### 1. The Church

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**Objective:** To foster spiritual relationship between men and God, thus creating fellowship between faithful men.

**Scope:** Deals with transgressions of the law of God: adultery, greed, hypocrisy, lying, drunkenness, etc.

*Not all sin is crime, though it may be (i.e., murder, rape, robbery).*

**Methods:** Teaching (warning, rebuke, exhortation – 2 Tim 4:2), moral suasion (Mt 18:15), collective rebuke (Mt 18:16-17a), punishment (in the form of expelling the sinner – Mt 18:17b; 1 Cor 5:5, 9-13; 2 Cor 2:6).

**Purpose:** Spiritual restoration unto God leads to reconciliation with others.

**Forgiveness may be granted ...**

### The Civil Government

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**Objective:** To create and maintain order in society that *“all may lead a quiet and peaceable life”* (1 Tim 2:2).

**Scope:** Deals with criminal and civil behavior deemed by society at large to be injurious in some way.

*Not all crime is sin (i.e., preaching the gospel where forbidden).*

**Methods:** Legislation, education, enforcement, use of force, investigation, arrest, trial, fines, imprisonment, curtailing of civil rights, etc.

**Purpose:** Punish the offender (debt to society), promote lawful behavior (deterrence), provide for public order, safety (Rom 13:1-6).

**But civil and criminal consequences may remain.**

## 2. Dealing with Spiritual and Criminal Violations

A. The church is not a criminal institution; its purpose is not to resolve criminal issues.

1. The elders' rule is spiritual; their oversight concerns things pertaining to the maintenance of fellowship with God.
2. The role of an evangelist is to teach the word of God relative to doctrinal, moral and civil responsibilities of a Christian.
3. The Lord did not equip the church to investigate crimes, levy fines, incarcerate criminals and otherwise rectify the moral ills of society. *The primary role of the Lord's church in its collective function is to foster spiritual fellowship with God.*

B. Two passages often discussed when considering offenses among brethren:

1. Mt 18:15 – *“If your brother **sins** against you ...”*.
  - a. This scope is not criminal violation but sinful behavior. As previously noted, some sins are also crimes and must be dealt with by the church *and* the state, but Jesus has in view “fault” and “gaining” the brother back from sin. The ultimate action here enjoined by the Lord is church discipline; i.e., withdrawal of fellowship.
  - b. The issue of **privacy**: *By its very nature, crime is not a private sin; it is a wrong done against society itself and the individuals thereof.* This is why prosecution is undertaken on behalf of “the People,” and we read about crime in the newspaper and see it on the television news as a matter of public record.
  - c. **Illustration**: A brother lies to me and I am the only one who knows he lied. It is not a crime, but he has sinned against me. I follow the directions of Mt 18. On the other hand, if a brother rapes my wife, she is not obligated by the mandate of Mt 18 to go to him alone and convict him of his sin. The matter has changed from the spiritual realm to the civil realm due to the nature of the offense. The offender still needs spiritual restoration, and such may be corporately urged upon him due to the now public nature of the offense.
2. 1 Cor 6:1-8 – This passage has to do with *“having a matter against another,”* a grievance or complaint other than criminal offense (Rom 13) or sin (Mt 18; 1 Cor 5; 2 Th 3:6-15; Rom 16:17). They are the *“smallest matters”* (1 Cor 6:2); *“things pertaining to this life”* (1 Cor 6:4); i.e., grievances, disputes, disagreements over issues less than full-blown transgression and criminal behavior.

- a. The passage suggests habitual, persistent behavior among the congregation (1 Cor 6:6, 8). This suggests a spirit of animosity that enlisted the civil courts in attacking each other.
  - b. Paul counsels the appointment of a “*wise man among you ... who will ... judge between his brethren*” (v 5). Who will assert that Christians should shun the criminal justice system and establish their own inter-congregational courts to handle criminal offenses among us?
  - c. **Illustration:** Two brethren go into business together. Over time they have a falling out and disagree over how to fairly untangle their affairs. This is a matter of propriety and involves judgments that can be rendered by a wise and mutually respected brother serving as an arbiter.
- C. Failing to honor the context and scope of these passages will result in twisting the Scriptures to our destruction (cf. 2 Pet 3:16).

### 3. Observations

- A. Christians are to obey the laws of the land. We are not at liberty to ignore laws we find unpleasant or inconvenient. **Illustration:** A brother in Florida who was dying of cancer and leaving his family destitute robbed a bank. While certain mitigating factors evoke sympathy, criminal prosecution is automatic.
- B. Christianity should not be used as a shield to avoid the consequences of serious of-criminal offense. We may be forgiven and spiritually restored, but we are still accountable to civil authorities for our misconduct. Jesus may have “paid it all” to atone for our sins, but we may still have to pay the debt we owe to society. **Sin and crime carry horrible consequences.**
- C. Perhaps it is in the best interest of the offender to face the undiluted consequences of his actions. The “loving” thing is often the hard thing, but cowardice masquerading as sympathy may not be willing to implement what is needed.