

HOW THE CHURCH AND THE STATE SHOULD RELATE (Genesis 21:22-34)

Life is all about relationships. It really is. The joy or sense of fulfillment you have is determined by the health of your relationships. Obviously, if you have vibrant, strong, and nurturing relationships, you will be happier than you would be if your relationships were shallow, strained, or unhealthy.

Jesus identified what we call the great commandments. They are two in number, and they are meant to govern our most important relationships. The first, great commandment teaches that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We were created to have a love relationship with God. That is the vertical relationship.

The second, great commandment addresses our horizontal relationships. It says we are to love our neighbor as we do ourselves. “Our neighbor” tells us this is horizontal because our neighbor is neither above us nor below us. He or she is on the same plane, but the words “as we do ourselves” indicate there is a third relationship. It is an internal one. It is the relationship we have with ourselves.

So, you and I have at least three categories of personal relationships—the vertical, the horizontal, and the internal. All three are meant to be loving relationships.

- If you don’t love yourself, you will not take care of yourself, and you will not be happy.
- If you don’t love others, you will cut yourself off from the mutually supportive relationships God means for you to have, and that will have negative consequences.
- Finally, if we fail to love God we will have missed the whole point of life, and we will forfeit the abundant life Jesus came to give us.

The broadest of the three relationships is the horizontal because there are numerous sub-categories. Within this large group of horizontal relationships, we could divide it into many smaller groups. There are marital relationships, a variety of family relationships, friend relationships, work relationships, church relationships, and community ones.

There is another horizontal relationship that we rarely consider. It is our relationship with the government. You might think it is a vertical relationship with you on the bottom and the government on the top dictating what you are and are not to do. Here, in the United States, that is not the way it is meant to be. We have a concept called “We the People.” The government is supposed to work for us, not the other way around.

We often refer to the government as the State, while we refer to the coming together of God’s people as the Church. The relationship between the Church and the State is a difficult one. Some people, when describing their closest relationships say, “It’s complicated.” That would be an apt description of the relationship that exists between the Church and the State. It can be very complicated.

One of the great benefits of preaching systematically through the Bible is that it forces you to deal with texts that you might otherwise skip over or outright avoid. Such is the

case today. If I were not preaching through the life of Abraham as I am presently doing, I would never preach the text we are going to examine today. I almost decided to bypass it anyway. It lacks the punch and appeal of other texts like the one we will tackle next week. Genesis 22 demands to be preached. It contains high drama and suspense.

When I looked at the verses I have chosen for today, my initial response was, “That is kind of interesting,” but I wondered if there was enough there to really develop a sermon. You may be wondering the same thing by the time I finish.

We must keep in mind that the entire Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, not just bits and pieces. That means every verse of this Book is profitable, even the obscure parts, even the parts we easily overlook.

My intention with today’s text is not to describe the present relationship between the Church and the State nor what it once was. My goal is to take this text, and based on God’s word, tell you what the relationship should be.

I will admit that the words “Church” and “State” are found nowhere in the passage we will read. While that may be the case:

- Abraham obviously represents the sacred, and King Abimelech represents the secular.
- Abraham is the godly one while Abimelech is the pagan one.
- Abraham is the first patriarch of the Jewish faith, and the NT holds him up as the father of all those who have faith in God.

I would not be doing violence to the text to say that in Abraham we find a type or symbol for the Church. King Abimelech, on the other hand, is the government. He is the King, the monarch. He is the State.

Look with me as we read Genesis 21:22-34. From the patriarch and the King, I find three lessons as to how the Church and the State are to relate to one another.

The Church and the State are to Respect One Another

Clearly, Abimelech showed respect to Abraham. This is a bit surprising because the last time we saw the two together, the King rightly reprovved the wayward patriarch. In a show of cowardice and an appalling lack of faith, Abraham passed his wife off as his sister. Unaware of this deception, King Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem without a word of protest from Abraham.

Eventually, in a nighttime vision, God makes it clear to the King who Sarah is and, also, tells the King plainly that if he doesn’t return Sarah promptly, God will take him out.

King Abimelech returns Sarah the very next day, and when he does, he asks Abraham a series of questions trying to figure out why Abraham did what he did. He makes one complaint, “You have done to me things that ought not to be done” (Genesis 20:9). Abraham makes a rather lame excuse that is really an insult. He says, “I did it because I thought, ‘There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife’” (v. 11).

Abimelech had good reason to harbor resentment and bitterness of heart toward Abraham, but he doesn't do that. Some time has passed, and the first words he speaks to Abraham are a compliment: "God is with you in all that you do" (21:22). Why did he think that God was with Abraham? Well, how many husbands and wives who are 100 and 90 respectively, do you know who welcome a baby boy into their home, and that baby is theirs biologically? I think that was sufficient evidence that God was with Abraham.

Abimelech had further reasons to believe God was with Abraham. He was a man of considerable wealth and influence. In Genesis 14 we read that the combined forces of four kings attack the combined forces of five kings. The four kings are victorious. Look at vv. 11-12.

Abram hears the news. What did he do? Did he say, "Damn the luck! Too bad for Lot and his family?" No. Look at vv. 14-16. Abimelech would have been aware of what Abraham had achieved, and he would have concluded that this was the blessing of Abraham's God upon him. That was both the conclusion and the prayer of another King. When we studied the NT letter Hebrews we learned about Melchizedek. He was both a priest and a King. Look at 14:19-20. One of the defeated kings whose people and goods Abraham rescued was the King of Sodom. The King proposed that Abram return the people and keep the spoils. Look at Abram's response (vv. 22-24). Many years had passed since the events of chapter 14, and now Abraham is much richer and much more powerful, but these riches and this power were not conferred upon him by man. This was from the gracious hand of God.

Abimelech knew that. He respected Abraham.

In his commentary on Genesis, James Montgomery Boice offers these words:

We [the Church] are certainly like Abraham in our faults and hypocrisy. There is enough of that to go around. But I wonder if, in addition to our faults, there is also enough of the evident blessing of God on us and our efforts to cause the world to sit up and take notice . . . Is our presence in our communities and cities an obviously good thing? Would the loss of Christians in our society be a clear tragedy?

You are familiar with the movie that is shown every year during the Christmas season, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The main character in the movie is George Bailey played wonderfully by Jimmy Stewart. He becomes despondent and thinks the world would be better off if he had never been born. His guardian angel, Clarence, shows him what life would be like if George had never been born. His family and his community would have been a dark, depressing, and even dangerous place if George's influence had been absent.

And what would our world, our country, and especially our community be like if the influence of the Church were non-existent? Think of all the schools, hospitals, and social service agencies that the Church and Christians have started and staffed through the years. And consider what life would be like in our land if the Church had never been around to start those. Our land would be dark, indeed.

The Church has been an undisputed blessing in the past, but are we being a blessing to society in the present? If the churches of Enid suddenly disappeared, would the influence

of those churches be missed and mourned by the community? To be even more specific and personal, if Liberty Southern Baptist Church were to close our doors, would we be missed by anyone other than those who presently attend?

Whether they do or not, the powers that be in our government—nationally and locally—should respect the Church for the positive difference the Church makes in our country, state, and city.

While the State should respect and appreciate the Church, we as the Church have a responsibility to respect the State. Abimelech asked Abraham to swear that he would deal with him and his family honestly and kindly in the land where they lived. Abraham said, “I will swear.” In other words, Abraham was saying, “You can count on me to deal fairly with you.”

Earlier, we read Romans 13:1-7. We are to obey the government insofar as our conscience allows us to do so. We honor and respect the government by doing the right thing, but also by the words we speak.

Thankfully in our country, we have the right of free speech and freedom of the press. We have every right to disagree with the government and to criticize our authorities. Try doing that in North Korea, China, or Russia, and see how far you get. As long as I don’t threaten a public official, I can rant and rave as much as I want.

There is a difference, however, between what I can do and what I should do. You may completely disagree with the policies and the performance of various politicians. Let me ask this, “How much time do you spend praying for those with whom you disagree?”

We are far too quick to go online and blast people instead of praying for them and interceding for them.

We know that Jesus is to be our model. Jesus had some harsh things to say about the religious leaders of his day, but I don’t recall Him ever calling out the Emperor or King Herod or Pilate, the Governor of Judea. Pilate was not a nice guy. I think I would be correct in calling him a thug. He routinely used violence to make his point and get his way. Even though Pilate is the one who ultimately condemned Jesus to death, Jesus never went on the offensive to criticize Pilate. He just didn’t do that.

Far too often we speak harshly of those with whom we disagree. We make fun of them. We insult them. We tell derogatory jokes about them.

On Monday, I had a meeting with a man in OKC. When it got to be lunchtime, he asked where I would like to eat. I said, “I’ve never met a hamburger I didn’t like.”

He replied, “I know just the place.”

I followed him in my car to a small restaurant on the NW Highway that I had never noticed. It was called Little Mike’s. I had a great hamburger. I loved the fried onion rings. I couldn’t help but notice all the quotes, cartoons, and clippings that adorned the walls. A progressive Democrat would not feel at home at Little Mike’s. Little Mike is clearly not a fan of the current president, his administration, or liberal politicians. When I got my hamburger, the top bun bore a brand of a recent president’s name. His name starts with a “T” if you are wondering.

I don’t fault Little Mike for his views. I probably share many of them. My concern is that we are disobeying God’s commands to honor and respect our leaders when we go out

of our way to ridicule them. We can do better than that. We should do better than that.

The interaction of Abraham and Abimelech teaches us how the Church and the State are to relate. The first lesson is that the Church and the State are to respect one another. Mutual respect is what is both lacking and what is sorely needed in today's culture.

We come to a second lesson.

The Church and the State are to Resolve Their Differences

It seems that sometime after their conversation, Abraham went to King Abimelech with a complaint. Some of Abimelech's servants had seized a water well that belonged to Abraham. A water well in the desert was of strategic importance and of great value. Abimelech basically said, "Hey, I don't know anything about this. This is the first I have heard of it." I have no reason to doubt that Abimelech was telling the truth.

The two agreed that the well did belong to Abraham. They formalized that agreement, and as a good-faith gesture, Abraham gifted seven ewe lambs to Abimelech.

Christians should be lovers of peace, but it is not enough simply to love peace. Jesus never said, "Blessed are those who love peace." He did not say, "Blessed are those who talk about peace or stand for peace or prefer peace." Jesus said, "Blessed are the . . ." who? "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). To be a peacemaker, we must enter the fray. We must go into the area where peace is absent, where contention reigns, and work to bring warring sides together.

Jesus was a peacemaker. The Bible teaches that at one time we were at war with God. We were His enemies. We wanted to be in charge, thank you very much. We wanted to sit upon the throne of our lives, calling the shots, making the decisions. Jesus, however, did something. We read in 1 Timothy 2:5-6 that Jesus became our mediator. As a mediator, Jesus stood between a holy God and sinful men, and He brought us together. According to v. 6, Jesus accomplished that by giving Himself as a ransom. Making peace often involves paying a price. Abraham paid a price. He didn't owe Abimelech seven lambs. Jesus didn't deserve to become a sacrificial lamb.

We often have a choice to make. We can be right and defiantly stand our ground basking in our rightness or we can make peace and pay a price to do so. That doesn't mean we give up our convictions. It doesn't mean we compromise the truth. It doesn't mean we violate our conscience.

Abraham didn't say, "O, you can have the well. We didn't need it anyway." He stood his ground for what he knew to be true, but he did it humbly.

Humility is very disarming. It takes people by surprise because they rarely see that in our world today. Humility is oddly powerful. It could be thought of as left-handed power. It looks all the world like weakness, and yet God uses it to do great things. You will remember that Paul wrote in Philippians 2 that Jesus took the form of a servant, that He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death. It was through His death that Jesus accomplished the work of salvation. Now, Jesus has been elevated, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.

Like Jesus, we are to humbly serve and make peace if peace can be made. Sometimes it

can't. Again, it was Paul who wrote, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). Some people aren't happy unless they are mad. You can't help that. What are you gonna do? That brings us to the third lesson.

The Church and the State are to Remain in Their Own Lane

We have a saying, "Stay in your lane." The State is to be the State, and the Church is to be the Church. It is the job of the State to govern, and it is the job of the Church to be the Body of Christ in this world.

Look at vv. 32-34. King Abimelech went back to doing his thing whatever his thing was. What did Abraham do? He called on the name of the LORD.

Boice explained:

. . . the church must be different from the world. It must be in the world, for Christ has put it there. It must identify with many of the world's interests, for it shares in these interests. Still, it will not be of the world. Its values will not be the world's values, nor will its priorities be the world's priorities. The true church must always strive to be what it is in fact, namely, the community of the people of God.

One of the priorities of the people of God is prayer. In v. 33 we find a name of God that had not been used yet. This is the very first time it shows up in Scripture. It is translated in the ESV as "the Everlasting God." Some versions translate it as "the Eternal God." The Hebrew text reads, "YHWH El Olam." YHWH is God's personal name. *El* means "God." *Olam* has an interesting meaning. Originally it meant "unknowable" or "incalculable." The idea was that no one knows how long God has been; no one can calculate the length of His existence. Eventually, the word came to mean "eternal." Our God is the eternal God.

One of the greatest things we can do for our world is to pray for it. The church is to leave governing to the State, but the Church can do what the State cannot. We can bring our nation and our world before God in prayer.

Please understand, there is a difference between the Church and individual believers. Christians need to be involved in politics. We need Christians who take their faith seriously to run for office and when they are elected for their faith to guide them in the decisions they make and how they govern.

Moscow, Idaho is a town of about 25,000. It is home to the University of Idaho. It is also the home of Christ Church. It is the largest church in Moscow, Idaho. Their website announces the mission of the church: "Our desire is to make Moscow a Christian town through genuine cultural engagement that provides Christian leadership in the arts, in business, in education, in politics, and in literature." To that end, they run a Christian K-12 school. They started a Christian college. They began a ministerial training program. They have formed their own publishing house. Members of the church have run for political office.

While the Church is viewed by some as overly political and is certainly controversial,

I think every Church should seek to Christianize the town where they are located.

Our goal should be to make it hard to go to hell from Enid, OK. Right now, it is too easy. Brothers and sisters, let us be the Church. With the hymn-writer, I call upon you, "Rise up, O Church of God."