



The Church and Civil Government

*Statement of Position of the
Conservative Mennonite Conference
on Church-State Relationships*

**Peace & Witness Committee
Conservative Mennonite Conference**

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Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

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INTRODUCTION

The world is full of conflict, hatred, and fear. We hear of wars and rumors of wars. There are race riots, hot and cold wars, and conflicts between nations, in communities, in homes, and within the hearts of people. There are many voices calling for our attention and response. We affirm that the only complete and permanent solution to man's problems is found in the transforming power of Christ. Therefore, he who is interested in taking seriously the Christian life, responds to the voice of the Prince of Peace who says, "Follow me." Current world conditions require the Christian to examine carefully his responsibility and involvement in the light of the Word of God.

I. GOD IS SOVEREIGN

God is creator and sustainer of all life and matter (I Tim. 6:15; Rom. 14:11; Acts 17:24; Heb. 1:3; James 4:12; Rev. 19:6). All nations, kingdoms, and peoples are subject to the sovereignty of God. God raises up and puts down kingdoms and rulers (Dan. 4:17, 35; Isa. 40:22; Jer. 27:5). Though rulers may be ungodly, He may direct them to accomplish His purposes (Prov. 21:1; Ezra 6:22; Ezra 7:21).

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

God has made Jesus Christ the head of the church (Eph. 1:20-22; Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18). All authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). "This is my beloved Son, hear Him" (Mark 9:7). He is the head of all principality and power (Col. 2:10).

God also appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, etc., through whom He carries out His plan for the church (Eph. 4:11-12; Acts 13:2; I Cor. 13:2).

II. THE CHURCH AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT

We recognize both church and state as fundamental institutions established by God for the good of the human family and for His purposes. In purpose, function, goal and methods, they are quite distinct. Also in relative importance the church far outweighs the state. The state is also essential for the needs of society and to provide an atmosphere for the function of the church.

A. The Nature and Purpose of the Church

The church is a body composed of individuals who have voluntarily responded to the call of God to separate themselves from the world and yield themselves in full submission and obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ who purchased the church by His own blood (Acts 20:28). God has translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13). The members of the church are here on earth as strangers and pilgrims (Heb. 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11), as ambassadors for Christ (II Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20), as ministers of reconciliation, calling people to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ (II Cor. 5:18, 19).

The church on earth is the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). The church is commissioned to go into all the world, to preach the Word of God, to baptize and to teach the gospel (Matt. 28:19, 20).

B. God's Plan and Purpose for the State

Civil governments rule by divine appointment as God's servants (Rom. 13:1, 2, 4, 6; John 19:11), but not as sons. They are secular in nature. The purpose of civil government is to maintain law and order by protecting the good and punishing the evil (Rom 13:3, 4; Acts 23:22, 23; I Pet. 2:13, 14). In carrying out its work, civil government has the God-given right to levy taxes (Matt. 22:17-21; Mark 12:17; Rom. 13:6, 7) and to use the sword for the protection of the good and punishing evil doers (Romans 13:4).

C. Guiding Principles in Relationship

1. We believe the basis of positive divine love is the new birth (John 1:12-13; John 3:3, 6, 7) whereby we are "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1:4) and have "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 5:5). Through faith in, and commitment to Jesus Christ, we strive to live in peace and love toward all men (I Thess. 5:15; Heb. 12:14; Mark 9:50), and therefore cannot return evil for evil (Rom. 12:17-21).
2. We believe that redeeming love as exemplified by Jesus Christ is the heart of the Gospel (John 3:16) and is expressed through the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and in the corporate body of Christ, the church, through practical expressions of peace and love (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27-28; John 13:34; John 15:12-17; I John 4:7).

3. We believe that the New Testament teachings on non-resistance and separation of church and state continue to be fully relevant guides for the church in facing the problems of today (Hebrews 13:8; Mark 13:31).
4. We believe that the life of the true Christian disciple is guided by the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the New Testament (John 14:16-18; 15:26; 16:13-14; II Tim. 3:16). Our primary loyalty is to Christ and His body, the church, and supersedes any responsibility to the nations (Acts 4:19 and 5:19). Since God has instructed that we be subject to civil authority, we believe it to be our duty to obey civil authority unless obedience to such authority clearly violates God's law as enunciated in the Scriptures. Any coercive demonstrations, politically motivated protest movements and civil disobedience may not be engaged in. In recognition of the supreme authority of God's Word, we believe we ought to obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19; Acts 5:29).
5. Since civil governments are God-ordained (Rom. 13:2, 4, 6; John 19:11) with a distinct role in society, we express appreciation for their blessings and liberties, and we respect, honor and pray for the leaders of nations (Rom. 13:7).
6. We believe the church cannot carry out its supreme mission of evangelism and service through the arm of the state, neither can the state carry out the mission of the church. Therefore, we do not rely on the ballot box or legislation to accomplish the task. The church has priority over the state for the talents and services of its members (Acts 4:19, 20; Acts 5:41-42).
7. We believe we may appeal to civil government, especially where scriptural principle is involved or the recognition of faith refused, or in any matters which would hinder the work of the kingdom of God. We may appeal for due treatment under the law (Acts 16:35-39) but should be restrained in assertion of our rights and particularly in demands for privileges.
8. We believe neither the church nor the individual Christian citizen is directly responsible for the acts or policies of civil government.
9. When brethren disagree, we submit our case to the church for decision, not to the courts of civil government (1 Cor. 6:1-8).

D. Principles Applied to Current Issues

1. We believe that participation in war is contrary to the teaching and spirit of Christ and God's will revealed in His Word (Matt. 5:39; Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:28; Rom. 12:21; I Cor. 6:7). Therefore, we can have no part in carnal warfare or conflict between nations, classes, groups, or individuals, and we can not accept military training or service in any form.

We base our position of non-participation in warfare on Biblical non-resistance as distinguished from what is today properly known as pacifism. Non-resistance was designed by God to demonstrate the love and grace of God to all men through the Christian.

The Christian's experience results from and is based upon the new birth and continuing commitment to Christ to the New Testament principles for the purposes of communicating God's love to all men and bringing all men to salvation to Christ. Non-resistance therefore is uniquely Christian. We believe that no more effective force exists today for a social change than the transforming power of Jesus Christ and that any effort short of such commitment is limited by sinful human nature and inadequacy.

2. We seek through positive Christian service, and consistent Christian witness at home and abroad, to express the redemptive love of Christ which seeks to bring healing and well-being, rather than destruction and death, to a troubled world.
3. Our ministry and concern must relate to the spiritual, physical, and social needs of our fellowmen through the local and world-wide church programs, rather than by involvement with groups whose motivations are social or humanitarian, and often include elements that have little respect for Christian principles. We can not support movements which use hatred, emotionalism, extremism, and nationalism in attempting to correct social or political problems. Our response to social injustice is symbolized by sacrificial service rather than by marches, demonstrations, and obstructionism.

Therefore, civil disobedience is unscriptural and is not sanctioned unless clearly compelled by commitment to scriptural principle. We further believe that civil disobedience is destructive of our witness to the non-Christian and stands in direct contradiction to the suffering nature of the life and teachings of Christ.

4. We do not desire for ourselves economic or social gain resulting from injustice or war, nor can we knowingly assist in the production of materials used primarily in the support of war or destruction. Nevertheless, we consider it our duty to faithfully pay taxes to civil government (Matt. 17:24-27; 22: 15-21).
5. We believe the non-resistant Christian can not consistently hold any office or employment under civil government, which would involve duties conflicting with Biblical teaching and principles.
6. Since the constituents of civil government are not necessarily Christians and since in the enforcement of law, the state can not operate on the non-resistant principles of the kingdom of Christ, we do not seek to impose these principles upon the state (Rom. 8:7, 8).
7. We can not pledge allegiance to any government or flag which would be in conflict with our superior allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
8. Since Christians contribute to the national economy and welfare by exercising its potential through business and labor, professional occupations, and by taxes, we believe we may also receive aid through the various programs of civil government except where ethical principles are violated. We cannot receive aid which is accompanied by restrictions or requirements which may conflict with or limit the free exercise of the Christian conscience.

III. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

It is our desire to support and strengthen those who have come to a position in line with that set forth in this document.

Since there are groups which oppose war for mere political, social, humanitarian, or other reasons, with motives, methods, and goals different from ours, we wish to keep our identity and witness clear as not being part of, or collaborating with such groups.

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