

## **Local Churches and Civil Government**

**By Paul R. Blake**

I received the following two questions regarding the interaction of local churches with civil government: "I am wondering about a subject that you could perhaps help me research. I am wondering if it is scriptural for a church that is trying to follow the Bible to incorporate in order to be able to buy land for a building. I understand that the Church is the Kingdom of Heaven and it is a Spiritual Kingdom ruled by Jesus through his local appointed Elders. Do you have any Bible study material one way or the other on this topic? How about a statement of faith or something that a person wanting to be baptized signs stating what they believe, and that they are in agreement with the teachings of the congregation, and agree to be in subjection to the local elders, and that they agree to be spiritually disciplined and even dis-fellowshipped if necessary to save their souls, and that they agree and promise they will not bring a suit or go public with any complaint and promise to not sue and hold harmless the leaders of the Church, the Preacher, and any and all members and the corporation that holds the deed to the land and the building?"

Answer: Like customs, legal matters are subject to change. While the word of God does not change, it does supply Christians with general instructions regarding interaction with persons regardless of the cultural law and customs of the world in which they live. Regarding incorporation, Christians comply with the laws of the country in which they are citizens. "Therefore submit yourselves 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. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1Peter 2:13-15).

There is nothing in the laws for incorporation for not-for-profit and non-profit organizations that violates the nature, work, organization, or New Testament pattern for the church. It simply helps the church to exist and be recognized by the rest of the world as a distinct entity that is lawfully capable of conducting business as necessary with the world, i.e. build a meeting house, purchase supplies, remain exempt from taxation, etc. It is little different from that of a Christian who must have some form of identity in order to do business, i.e. drive a car, open a bank account, purchase a prescription, etc. Unless one can prove that incorporation violates the New Testament pattern for the church, the local church must comply with the customs and rules of the country in which it resides. Romans 13:7 instructs Christians to: "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor." Complying with the law does not imply that the church is subject to local government rather than to God; they manifest subjection to God Who commanded Christians to comply with civil law.

With regard to a statement of faith in the form of a signed document, there is no authority for this in the New Testament. Christians declare their faith in the Lord and their willingness to obey the will of God when they confess Christ with their mouths. "That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:9-10).

Their confession of faith is a de facto statement of their intent to be a follower of Christ. A local congregation may not require more of an individual than the scriptures authorize. However, fellowship in a local church is a privilege, not a right; and, it can be offered or refused by the local church for scriptural reasons. The apostle Paul acknowledged the need of some to have letters of recommendation to establish fellowship. "Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?" (2Cor. 3:1). Local churches are to refuse fellowship to those who come to them with erring doctrines (2John 9-11).

Local churches are to end fellowship with sinning Christians who refuse to repent (1Cor. 5). The church at Jerusalem was acting responsibly when they refused fellowship with Saul of Tarsus until he was commended by Barnabas (Acts 9:26-28). Christians do not need letters of indemnity or contractual agreements when establishing fellowship, nor do Christians go to court against one another for ANY reason (2Cor. 6:1-8). A local church may not require anything that is not authorized in scripture.

However, in this litigious world local churches often have to deal with ungodly professed Christians who have no moral compunctions against suing their brethren. In addition, local churches often have to deal with deliberately ignorant brethren who stubbornly persist in believing that their personal beliefs, opinions, and applications of scripture are equal to what is actually written and authorized in the word of God. Furthermore, local churches are encountering on an increasing basis, professed Christians who are afflicted with paranoia, who believe that they must isolate themselves and the local church from all practical and necessary interaction with the world around them. Paranoia and sound faith are not equal to one another, and it is extremely problematic for elders in a local church to have to bear with such persons and keep the local church sound and at peace simultaneously. Yet it must be understood that in each generation, Christians in local churches must bear with the hardships endemic to that time, and this is what churches must bear with today; that is, government that requires local churches to obtain legal identification and immoral professed Christians who sue local churches. The first century church had to bear with persecution in Roman arenas, but our burden is different. Nevertheless, God requires that we bear patiently with governments that require incorporation for churches and with Christians immoral enough to sue churches, and let God judge them both in the end.

### **Devoted to the Word of God**

"Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts" (Jer. 15:16). A young lady, when asked to explain "devotional reading of the Bible," answered, "Yesterday morning I received a letter from one to whom I have given my heart and devoted my life. I freely confess to you that I have read that letter five times, not because I did not understand it at the first reading, nor because I expected to commend myself to the author by frequent reading of his epistle. It was not with me a question of duty, but simply one of pleasure. I read it because I am devoted to him who wrote it. To read the Bible with that motive is to read it devotionally, and to one who reads it in that spirit, it is indeed a love letter." (From Illustrations for Pulpit and Platform, by Aquila Webb, p. 51) Let us read and study the Bible devotionally because we love the One who gave it to us.

### **Don't Worry, Be Happy**

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25). According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, the word "worry" comes from an old English word which means literally "to choke or strangle." Truthfully, that's what worry does to us. It chokes and strangles us, leaving us in a miserable, depressed condition. Worry is a self-imposed curse which we can be avoided. Someone has rightly said, "If it's bad enough to worry about, it's bad enough to pray about." Paul said, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).