

# A Healthy Gospel Church In A Secular Nation

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 September 2023

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, tonight for a wee while I'd like us to turn back to Romans 13. And I want us to look at the whole chapter and we can read again at verse 1.

Romans 13 verse 1, Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Now, Romans 13 is, I suppose, a slightly unusual chapter in terms of the kind of topics that it's discussing. And as we look at it tonight, we are definitely going to be thinking about something that we don't tend to talk about very much.

And yet it's something that is actually one of the most relevant and pressing issues that affects our lives as followers of Jesus.

And it affects all of us, whatever stage we're at, whether we are well on our way in our journey as followers of Jesus, or whether we're just at the start or not quite sure if we've started yet.

[ 1 : 02 ] We're all affected by the same question. And it's this, what does it mean to be a healthy gospel church in a secular nation?

That's our title for tonight. And within that title, there are two very important words that I think are on the increase.

The first word is the word healthy. The free church has a vision for the nation, which is that there would be a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

And our vision is to be a healthy gospel church for our community, and that we do that hand in hand with our brothers and sisters beside us in the Church of Scotland.

And that health here in Carlisle and across the nation is something that is increasing. We've seen lots of encouragement in recent years, and we're so thankful for that.

[ 2 : 00 ] That's true locally here, but it's also true across the nation. God is doing amazing things, and we're seeing new churches being planted. We are seeing struggling churches being revitalized, and we are seeing people coming to faith in Scotland.

And I think it's really important that we remember that, that the sections of the church that are focusing on the Bible, that are preaching the gospel and striving to live out that gospel, those sections of the church are growing in our nation.

So that word is increasing. The second important word though is the word secular, and that's also a word that is on the increase.

When we talk about secular, we are meaning the fact that as a nation, our country is becoming more and more committed to a position that is either neutral towards religion, or perhaps even more than that is kind of disconnected from religion, maybe even skeptical towards religion.

And that commitment to secularism is very dominant in our society just now. And you see such a change.

[ 3 : 17 ]     150 years ago, the gospel and the Bible, the church was woven into nearly every aspect of public life in Scotland. And in 150 years since then, those threads of faith have gradually been taken out one by one and moved to one side, so that we now live in a nation that would not call itself a Christian nation, it would call itself a secular nation.

And so if we want to be a healthy gospel church, it's a healthy gospel church in a nation that is secular. Often our reaction to that is to think this is awful.

And people will say, you know, they'll look at that situation and they'll say, a terrible thing has happened, and our nation is becoming dark, and there are dark days ahead.

And some of that is true, and there are things that we've seen in our nation that we do lament and that we wished hadn't happened. But the thing we have to just focus on more than anything is the fact that this is happening.

And we have to think about how we as a church will respond. There's no point looking back and thinking, I wish our nation was the way it was 50, 100, 150 years ago.

[ 4 : 41 ]     We need to recognise the way our nation is now, and we need to think about how we as a church respond to this situation. And that's the question we have to think about, how we can be a healthy gospel church in a secular nation.

And all of that is a challenge, and there are lots of things that are challenging for us as individual Christians and as a church. But what I hope we'll also see is that all of that is an opportunity.

And we must make sure we recognise the wonderful opportunities that we have for the gospel today. Tonight we're going to ask three questions, which I hope are going to be helpful.

This is all a little bit different to what we look at, but it's in Romans 13, it's in Scripture, so we definitely have to talk about it sometimes. And here's our three questions. How do we relate to the state? How do we view the state?

And how should the state view us? So we'll look at these together one by one. First of all, we are going to ask the question, how do we relate to the state?

[ 5 : 46 ]     Now all of this raises the fascinating and crucial topic called spiritual, so I was putting that wrong, spiritual independence.

Now, have any of you heard of that phrase? Have any of you heard of the phrase spiritual independence? You don't need to answer that, but you can answer it in your heads. Have you ever heard of that? Well, I'm going to tell you that you have mentioned spiritual independence, I would say probably a thousand times in the past year.

You have probably mentioned it with your lips a thousand times, maybe without knowing it. And the reason you've mentioned it maybe a thousand times is because every time you say the words, Carl away, free church.

You're talking about spiritual independence, because that is what the free in free church is referring to.

The free church of Scotland could just as easily have been called the spiritually independent church of Scotland. And all of this relates to how the church and the state relate to each other, and Romans 13 gives us some key teaching in relation to that.

[ 7 : 02 ]     I'm going to draw a few pictures tonight, so you'll just have to bear with me as we talk about it. What we have to have in mind is that there are two great entities that have been instituted. There's the state and there's the church.

These historically and still today are dominant forces on humanity and on a nation. And there's been loads of different views in terms of how these two institutions relate to one another.

The first thing that we have to emphasize tonight and recognize is that at the heart of the reformed church's understanding of these is a recognition that both are instituted by God.

Both the church and the state are instituted by God. So the church is instituted by God. He's calling people out, gathering them as his covenant community, extending as one church across the nations of the world.

But the Bible also teaches that the state is instituted by God. That civil authorities or the civil magistrates, historically it was known as, that has also been instituted by God.

[ 8 : 23 ] And it's confirmed in Romans 13 that every person be subject to the governing authorities for there's no authority except from God. And those that exist have been instituted by God.

Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment. Before you say, yeah, but that must have been a Christian nation. It wasn't.

That was Paul talking about the Roman Empire, which at that stage in history was not even remotely interested in Christianity.

And yet Paul could speak in those terms. And so we have these two great entities established, the church, the state and the church.

And what we need to think about is the fact that they're both established by God. And they both have their own authority and independence in their respective areas.

[ 9 : 25 ] So in this circle, church stuff, the church has authority and independence. And in this stuff, state stuff, the state has authority and independence.

And both are grounded on the authority of God, in particular on the headship of Christ. The fact that Christ is head of the church and Christ is head of the nations. There's nothing that is outside His dominion.

Now, often in history and still today, it's been held by many people that these two things should be completely separate. That the state and the church are distinct and they are completely to be kept completely apart from each other.

Some people in the church say that and they hold to say that the church and the state should be completely separate. And some people in the state will say that and a secular state would say that, look, religion has got nothing to do with the state, the two must remain separate.

And so often these two circles are kept well apart and a clear line between them is maintained. The difficulty is that that is pretty much impossible to actually happen.

[ 10 : 43 ] Because the reality is there's always or almost always some overlap. You have the state and you have the church and there's a little bit of overlap between them.

Now, that overlap can manifest itself in lots of ways. So you think of some of the state's laws. So the state will have laws about taxation, about health and safety, about employment law, about immigration status.

All of that actually affects the church. Because if we employ somebody, we have to make sure that we comply with employment law. So one of the things that I'm involved in is that we, I'm on the board of ministry, so we have lots of ministries and training like Phil.

And Phil is employed by the church. We have to pay Phil minimum wage, at least. We can't pay him less than minimum wage. We have to pay. But we don't decide what minimum wage is.

The state does. And so there's overlap. And there's overlap in the other direction as well. There's aspects of pastoral care and historically education was very much a church thing. And things like marriage and death, all of these are key aspects of the church's work.

[ 12 : 07 ] But that overlaps with the state. And so although they each have independence, there is nevertheless overlap between these two great institutions.

And the only time they're really completely separate is maybe if you have a church that exists as a kind of like a closed commune that has no contact with the outside world. And the big question is how do these two relate to each other?

And the key point is that they have to exist side by side. They have to interact. And there has to be clear boundaries between their respective areas of jurisdiction.

And this has been a massively important issue in the history of the church. And it's had a massive influence on our country and on history that the boundaries between state and church have to be clear.

And historically, problems have arisen when one side has tried to reach over into the other. So in history, there's been...

[ 13 : 21 ] I'm worried that this is like the most boring term on any way. If it is, never mind. But I'm just going to tell you anyway. In history, sometimes the church has overreached into the state. And that was the problem during the medieval period where the Reformed church would have viewed the medieval period as a period when that was a problem where the church overreached into the state and basically controlled everything.

And when you look back at medieval history in like the 11th, 12th century, the most powerful political figure in Europe, maybe in the world, was the Pope.

And so today, if you said, you know, who's the most powerful political figure in the world, you'd say, well, President of America or one or two others. Back then, if you said who's the most powerful political person in the world, you'd have said the Pope.

Because the Roman Catholic church at that period had huge control over how nations functioned. And the Reformers felt that that was reaching too far over, that that was the church encroaching into the state.

But you've had the problem go in the other way as well, where the state has sought to control the church. And that was the circumstance that led to the foundation of the Free Church.

[ 14 : 45 ] The Free Church was founded in 1843, and that was the culmination of what's called the Ten Years Conflict, which went from 1833 through to 1843.

And at the heart of that controversy was an issue called patronage. Now patronage refers to the system whereby a landowner was able to appoint a minister.

So the person who owned the land that the church was in was able to choose the minister. So instead of you choosing the minister, the landowner would choose the minister. And over ten years the church was basically divided into one group who felt that this was fine, and they were happy with the landowner, and they wanted to defend that position.

But others who were not happy with that and who wanted to protect the congregation's rights to call a minister. Now the thing came to a head because in two or three situations a landowner would appoint a minister, and the congregation said, no, we don't want him.

And the presbyteries would say, we're not going to induct him. And then the minister who'd been selected by the landowner but rejected by the people, he tried, in two or three cases those ministers, prospective ministers, tried to take the presbyteries to court.

[ 16 : 06 ] And so there was various court cases in Edinburgh at the quarter session whereby the government were saying, you have to appoint this minister. And the church was saying, no, you don't.

And the government was saying, yes, you do. And the church was saying, no, you don't. And the free church was formed because those who were in favour of the congregational's right were saying, if a government tells us who the minister should be, that is the state reaching over into the independence of the church.

And they said, we have to leave the church of Scotland. We have to become a spiritually independent church of Scotland. But instead of calling themselves the spiritually independent church of Scotland, they called themselves the free church of Scotland.

And it was all grounded on the fact that those boundaries between church and state had to be maintained, respect had to be preserved.

Now all of this is incredibly important and it comes back to something that Jesus himself said. He said, you are to render to the things, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

[ 17 : 25 ] And they marveled at him. And so as you think about the relationship between the state and the church, we have to recognise that there are certain things that belong to the state.

And we respect that. So as Christians, sometimes you see, sometimes after there's an election, you might see people holding up signs saying, not my prime minister or not my first minister, whatever.

We can't do that because we respect the fact that our state functions as a democracy and the electorate as the right to choose who they want to be the leader.

And we respect that. And we don't say, I'm not accepting that. We absolutely do accept that. But we do not allow and we do not accept the state reaching into the church, telling us what we should preach, who our ministers should be, or how we should function as God's covenant community.

And it's very, very important that we are clear where the boundaries lie. And I'll give you a very interesting example from the 1830s. We're talking about that 10 years conflict when the free church was formed.

[ 18 : 39 ] One of the things that happened was in a congregation in Aberdeenshire, well, kind of Banffshire, the court of session had sided with the minister who the people didn't want.

And they had said to the Presbyterian there and to the wider church, nobody can preach in that church except the man who we think should be the minister.

So everybody else was banned from preaching. Now, in those days, the government owned the church buildings. The government paid for a church building to be built. The government actually also paid ministers wages.

And so they said, nobody can preach in that church building unless it's the person that we approve of.

And all the ministers who were opposed to the government said, okay, that's absolutely fine. And the reason they said, okay, was because they recognized that the church, that the government owned the building.

[ 19 : 41 ] And they said, well, okay, you own the building, you can say what you like. We'll meet outside. And then the government tried to ban people from preaching anywhere in the district unless it was the person that they'd appointed.

And the men said, no way. You cannot stop us from preaching. And in fact, ministers traveled from all across Scotland to go and preach in that area because they said the government, you own the building, you can do what you like with the building, but you absolutely cannot stop us from preaching the gospel.

And that's where you see the balance between our spiritual freedom and our recognition of the state's independence in its own area.

And the balance has to be maintained. We must not use our spiritual freedom as an excuse to disregard the state's authority. We're not like anarchists.

We are not disrespectful to the way a nation functions. But at the same time, if our nation tries to stop us from preaching the gospel, if it tries to influence the message that we proclaim, we say no.

[ 20 : 52 ] We will absolutely not give up our spiritual independence. And so that relationship is very important to maintain. All of that raises the question, how do we view the state?

And in particular, how do we view a secular state? And it's very easy to think, well, it's bad. And I think that can be the instinctive reaction of many people today. They look at a nation like ours that is not particularly motivated by a desire to adhere to biblical teaching, and we think that's bad.

But I think it's important for us not to be so simplistic in something like that. And what we have to do is actually make sure that we take our theology into our understanding of how a nation functions.

Because our theology tells us that whatever aspect of humanity you look at, you are going to see a mixture of good and bad. And the reason for that is because we are made in the image of God, and we are fallen and broken in sin.

And so every single functioning aspect of human society from a common-gracians committee to the Houses of Parliament is going to be a mixture of good and bad.

[ 22 : 09 ] And that's important for us to recognize when we look at our nation today. Some aspects of our nation's decisions are not good. And we don't agree with them, and that's particularly seen in big ethical issues where decisions taken by our state are opposed to biblical teaching.

And that's true in regard to unborn children. It's true in regard to sexual ethics. It's true in regard to what our country sees as acceptable entertainment. And it's true in regard to the many inequalities that we see in our society, particularly regarding wealth.

But despite that, many aspects of our government are good. And in fact, many of them are grounded in Christian values. So the fact that everybody gets educated in Scotland, that comes from the Bible's influence.

The fact that everybody can vote, men and women, that comes from the Bible's influence. Efforts that are made in regard for relieving poverty, the provision of healthcare, and the toleration of different religious opinions.

All of that historically is grounded in the church's influence. And so many aspects of our government today are very good, and it's so important that we recognize and give thanks for that.

[ 23 : 29 ] And Paul makes it very clear that the state has a key role in helping our nation thrive. And that can happen even if our nation's not particularly Christian. And Romans 13 talks about two areas where that's very true.

In Romans 1-5, Paul talks about the fact that a good functioning government is crucial for restraining evil.

And that's speaking about how a criminal justice system functions and how that's so important to make sure that wrongdoing is rightly punished, and justice and fairness are maintained. And then, verses 6-7, talk about a well-ordered society.

And good government allows a nation to thrive. And when you see things being mentioned by Paul, like taxes and revenue and respect and honor, you don't have to think about it for long to realize that these things are crucial building blocks for a healthy society.

And as a church, it's crucial that we recognize what's good, and that we thank God for it, that we pray for everybody involved in the functioning of our taxes, our revenues, that we cultivate respect, and that we recognize the honor that is due to so many different people in so many different roles.

[ 24 : 52 ] We need to recognize the good and thank God for it. And we need to navigate the bad. The fact that we live in a nation where there will be challenges, we will have to navigate that.

And the only way we can do that is when we're clear about where the boundaries lie, when we know more and more about what the Bible is teaching in regard to right and wrong.

And so it's important that we recognize that we relate to the state in a relationship where the two are going to interact, the church and the state. We have to respect the independence of each one in its own area.

We view the state not just as this bad awful thing, but recognizing that there's aspects of it that are good and bad, things to concern us, but things that we should also rejoice in.

The most important question I want you to leave you with tonight is this. How should a secular state view us?

[ 25 : 52 ] How should a secular state view the church? When we think about that question, it's very easy for us to feel threatened.

And we kind of think that the church is becoming more marginalized, and maybe in some ways it is. And in response to that, we think, well, we want to be recognized. We want to be listened to.

We want to be helped, and we want the state to view us as something important and something that should be cared for and given an appropriate place.

And that's not entirely wrong. I'm not saying that that is completely wrong. But is that really how we want to be seen? When we think about how we function as a church, is that really how we want to be seen?

Do we want to be seen as those who always come across as though we feel threatened and our fists are up, if you like, that we're frustrated at the way our nation is, that we're angry about how things are going, that we're protesting?

[ 26 : 58 ] Well, maybe there are things, well, there definitely are things that will worry and frustrate us. And maybe there will be times when we need to stand up and raise our voices in protest about things.

But this chapter reminds us of something crucial. It reminds us of the fact that when the state looks at us, when a secular nation looks at us, they should not see us primarily as angry agitators or as fearful victims or as irrelevant fanatics.

Instead, there is one key thing that secular Scotland should see when they look at us. They should see that the church loves her neighbor.

That's what Paul emphasizes so powerfully. Oh, no one anything except to love each other for the one who loves has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.

And any other commandment are summed up in this word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[ 28 : 22 ] When we're a church in a secular nation, there is so much that is out of our hands. The laws that get set are out of our hands, the entertainment that our media feeds us is out of our hands, the political agendas and ideologies that are pursued, all of that is out of our hands, the campaigns that people run, the things that people get obsessed with on social media.

We can't control any of that, but there is one thing that we can control. We can control the fact that we will love our neighbor, because we are the ones who do that.

And that's such an important thing for us to remember. And you know, often we lament the fact that our nation doesn't take Jesus seriously, but if we are not being seen as those who love our neighbor, we have to ask ourselves, are we taking Jesus seriously?

Often we can be taken up as a church with all the stuff that we see in the nation around us. We see this happening, we see this changing, we see this going on, and our minds are just consumed by the stuff that we see in the nation around us.

And that's often all we think about, often all that we talk about in terms of how to understand this relationship between the church and the state. Everything is dominated by what we see in the nation.

[ 29 : 53 ] But a far, far more important issue, and a far, far more important question, is what does the nation around us see in us?

What does Scotland see in the church? And that is where living in a secular nation is a huge challenge, because often we will have to swim against the tide in so many different ways.

But what I want you to see tonight is that that is such an amazing, amazing opportunity.

And I love the fact that this chapter at one level speaks of massive questions about global powers and about the establishment of nations and the relationship between the church and the state and all these massive topics that can often leave our head scrambled in knots.

And yet before the end of the chapter, and it's only a short chapter, Paul comes around to tell us what we need to do, and it's so beautifully simple. He says you need to love your neighbour.

[ 31 : 09 ] And that's such an amazing opportunity for us as a church, for us to stand out as a beautiful community of love and of generosity and of patience and of kindness.

And I want you to never ever doubt for one second that what you have, what we have in the church, it's everything that our nation needs, and it's everything that our nation craves.

And it's so important for us to remember that as we go into a new week, I'm pretty sure that every one of us goes into this week. When we think about the nation, when we think about history, when we think about all of these things, you probably feel very insignificant and you probably feel like you've got nothing to offer.

And yet this chapter is reminding us that the love that you show to the people that you meet this week, the kindness, the patience, the warmth that you show towards your colleagues, your neighbours, your family, that is bringing you right to the very heart of what Paul is telling us to be.

And it's getting us right to the very heart of what will make all the difference to our nation. Because what does Scotland need today?

[ 32 : 35 ] Scotland desperately needs a church that sticks to the Gospel, a church that lives out the Gospel, and a church that shares the Gospel with deep, deep love for one another.

And that's a big challenge, and we can only do it with God's help. But do you know something, and I want you to remember this, you can do it. You can actually do it.

And you can go into this week and be such an amazing blessing to the people that you work with, the people that you'll meet, the people that you interact with, and all of it is bearing testimony to the fact that Jesus is our saviour, and he is everything that our nation needs.

Let's pray.