

Our relationship with Caesar

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In my state of South Carolina, we have a long history of not wanting anybody to tell us what to do with our land, our possessions, or our money. This has created a sense of fierce independence, as history bears out.

These days, we want our taxes and our government as small as possible. Discussions abound about the role of government--what it should do for the whole community, what it has no business doing. Some assume that the government has no responsibility to support the poor and vulnerable in our community. That's not its job; Caesar has other fish to fry.

In our neck of the woods, when we ask Caesar who will help the poor and vulnerable, the outcasts and the castoffs, we are told that this is the faith community's job. It's cool that Caesar recognizes that we are made in the image of God and reflect Christ's compassionate heart. We are called to love and serve our neighbor. But there remains the question of who *pays* for this love of neighbor.

After all, Caesar has the power to raise armies, to make and enforce laws. The government can decide to tax us all and punish us if we don't pay. Faith communities in this country have no similar power. We can preach the Word, inspire people to give to wonderful causes and operate social service agencies, but we do not have any authority over all citizens to legislate or fund compassion and mercy.

What this means is that in order to be the image of God in the world and to give to God the things that are God's, we must both challenge Caesar and cooperate with Caesar. This is the delicate balance on the razor's edge we call discipleship.