

The Christian And The Government

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The Christian is a member of the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:16). It is not a democracy. It is a monarchy, with Christ as its sole legislator. He is King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15). Consequently, His subjects must always acquiesce to His will. What does the Bible teach about the relationship of a Christian to civil government? Consider the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and Peter.

Jesus And Civil Government

“And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a king” (Luke 23:1-2). This was a false accusation. What Jesus actually said is recorded in Matthew 22:15-22. Jesus did not forbid people to give tribute to Caesar. Rather, He acknowledged that man had certain responsibilities to government and certain responsibilities to God. Even the Old Testament, under which Jesus lived, declared: “My son, fear thou the Lord and the king” (Pro. 24:21).

Jesus respected human government although He was superior to it. When Jesus and the disciples came to Capernaum, certain tax-collectors came to Peter and said, Doth not your master pay tribute? He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers? Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee (Matt. 17:24-27).

From this passage we observe: (1) As King of the earth, Jesus had the authority to excuse Himself and His children from paying tribute. (2) Jesus did not argue with the authority of rulers to demand payment for taxes. (3) To set the right example, Jesus did obey the laws of human government. He did pay His taxes.

The Apostle Paul And Civil Government

The Jews were especially reluctant to subject themselves to the Roman government, and those Jews who became Christians might be prone to fight against Rome and thereby rebel against her authority to govern their lives. However, Paul leaves no doubt as to the proper relationship between the Christian and civil government. Romans 13:1-7 reveals:

1. Every soul is to be subject to the higher powers (v.1).
2. The powers that be are ordained of God, i.e., God is the author of civil government (v.1).
3. Therefore, to rebel against the authority of human government is to rebel against the authority of God, Who gave the government its powers in the first place (v. 2).
4. To oppose the authority of human government is to invite damnation (v. 2).
5. We can be free from the fear of those in authority if we do what is right (v. 3).
6. God intended for government to be a servant to the people for the good of the people (v. 4).
7. God has given the government authority to execute wrath upon evildoers (v. 4). The word “sword” in verse 4 refers to the state’s right to punish evildoers even unto death (Gen. 9:6; John 19:10-11; Acts 25:11).

8. Two reasons are given for our submission to government: (1) to avoid penalty or punishment; (2) to have a clear conscience with God (v. 5).

9. These are the same reasons we should pay our taxes (vv. 6-7). After all, government officials are, in reality, God's servants. Some refuse to pay income taxes on the grounds that the government uses the revenue improperly. We have seen already that Jesus instructed His followers to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's (Mat. 22:15-22). Do you suppose that Jesus agreed with everything that Caesar (Rome) did with the revenue they received from taxes? Also, remember that the Holy Spirit led Paul to write, "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:7). Did Paul not know how corrupt the Roman government was at the time he penned these words? In fact, it was as bad as, or worse, than many governments of today. Yet, Paul still commanded the Roman Christians to pay their taxes.

Paul's teaching about the Christian's relationship to government can be summarized in two other passages:

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, (Tit. 3:1).

The Apostle Peter And Civil Government

The teaching of the apostle Peter on this subject is clear:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

From this text we see: (1) Our obedience to the law of the land is primarily "for the Lord's sake" (v. 13). (2) Our obligation is to obey the laws at both the federal level (whether it be to the king, as supreme) and the state level (or unto governors). (3) By living as law-abiding citizens, we can take silence foolish men who might charge that Christianity is an enemy of the state and the nation. (4) The liberty we have in Christ (Cf. Gal. 5:1) is not a license to act maliciously against the powers that be.

Conclusion

"It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes" (Psalm 118:8-9). No government can pass enough legislation to make the world a better place apart from Christ. Civil government, in and of itself, is insufficient to save the world. Our best hope to change the world is by getting our fellow man to trust in the One Who made this world, and Who has prepared a better world for us in the age to come.

Nevertheless, Proverbs 29:2 proves that life is better when the righteous are in authority. The passage declares: "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, the people groan." Since the people rejoice when the righteous are in authority should it not be the goal of every Christian to attempt to put the righteous into

these places of authority? Since righteousness exalts a nation (Pro. 14:34), should not every Christian seek to elect officials who adhere to righteous principles and practice? The relationship between the Christian and civil government is often complex. The simple truth of the matter is that God ordained government for the benefit of His creation. We must honor government but never more than we honor God (Acts 5:29)!