



The Reflector

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Must Christians Submit to All Governing Authorities?

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These are troubling times in America for Christians. As we watch developments in Washington we cannot help but to fear that some of the basic rights that we have enjoyed since the establishment of this republic may soon be taken away from us. The freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the freedom of assembly, the right to privacy, and other basic rights are under attack by the far left wing of American politics. The gay/lesbian special interest groups are gaining more and more influence in Washington. Anti-Christian bias is clearly influencing many of those in high places. We have read about efforts being made to include any public condemnation of the gay/lesbian lifestyle in new “hate crime” legislation. As we watch all of this, along with the government’s becoming more and more socialistic, many among us are sincerely wondering if God expects Christians to submit to the kind of government that ours is fast becoming, and if so to what extent that submission should be.

The following passages deal with the Christian and his relationship to civil powers:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do

what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Romans 13:1-7 NKJV)

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. (Titus 3:1-2 NKJV)

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-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter

2:13-17 NKJV).

There are three things that a Christian should learn from these verses: 1) God ordained civil government 2) the Christian should submit himself to every civil power that is over him and 3) and as servants of God (in the civil realm) they are due our taxes and honor.

Given the “mess in Washington” or the “mess down at City Hall” or the “mess down at the state Capitol” the American Christian finds it hard to always consistently apply what these verses teach. In our desire to do something about these messes it is easy, if we’re not careful, for us to see loopholes in these verses that may not be there. It’s easy for us to conclude that there are only certain kinds of civil powers that God has ordained and expects us to honor and obey. So, if my government is not the kind of government that I believe God ordained then I am at liberty to ignore its authority and to refuse to honor it. And if my government is not faithfully following the purpose for which it was originally ordained then that frees me from submission and honor. I do not believe such conclusions are either scriptural or logical.

It is true that the reason that God ordained civil government was to punish evildoers and to protect those who do good. Ideally all civil government would honor that twofold purpose. But what if government falls short in these areas and even branches out into areas beyond the scope for which he was originally ordained? What if those people who occupy governmental offices are less than honorable or maybe even outright crooks? How can we honor and respect such people?

In spite of its flaws civil government and the corrupt personal lives of its officials, through the years, it has generally, in the past, and continues today to protect its citizens (with some notable exceptions) and to punish evildoers. Therefore Christians are to continue to submit to them and give them their dues. We need to keep in mind that there is one general exception that God has given to this and all other over/under relationships of which Christians are a part in this present world. The exception being, “We must obey God rather than men.”

(Acts 5:26). This general principle is applied to civil powers in this verse, but is broad enough to apply to all of our over/under relationships. It applies to the husband/wife, parent/child, master/servant as well as the government/citizen relationship.

Speaking of over/under relationships. Do those in the “over” positions in these relationships have to measure up to the ideal purpose for which they exist in these respective relationships? Do they have to measure up to what God expects of them in their respective positions before those “under” them are obligated to submit and honor them. If a husband does not love his wife as he should, does not provide for her as he should, and honor her as he should, as God has ordained he should, does that free the wife from her duty of submission and honor to him? If a parent does not fulfill his God ordained role as a parent as he should, does that free the child from obedience and honor? Likewise, if a ruler does not faithfully fulfill the role envisioned by God, does that free the Christian citizen from submitting and honoring his position as ruler?

It is a fact that very few civil rulers have been paragons of virtue. It is also a fact that the “Most High rules in the kingdom of men.” (Daniel 4:17, 25, 34 NKJV). Men do not have to be righteous men to serve as “God’s ministers” in the civil realm. The Scriptures are replete with examples of rulers raised up by God to serve his purposes in the civil realm who were immoral, ruthless and depraved in their character. God has never called on his people to honor and respect the *character* of such men but does call upon them to respect and honor their office/position.

While God does rule in the kingdom of men, he does not legislate the type of government that each society is to have. Some societies have a monarchy, some a democracy, some a republic, and others a dictatorship. Whatever the form it still falls within instructions concerning civil powers given to Christians in the New Testament. In America, and some other countries, it has fallen our lot to live under a democratic form. As US citizens we have certain rights that others may not have, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the

freedom to vote our officials in and out of office. As Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to his advantage, we can use our freedoms and rights to our advantage. So, our duty to submit to the authorities as per the apostles teaching does not preclude my using my freedom of speech and press granted unto me by the constitution of our government. I can use that freedom to criticize our lawmakers and those that enforce the laws. But I must do it respectfully and in a way that honors the positions that they hold.

As a Christian and a teacher of the gospel I have the responsibility to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but to rather expose them. (Ephesians 5:11). We have the obligation to do all such duties without “preferring one before another” (Cf. 1 Timothy 5:21). No one is immune from such exposure. If my next door neighbor is publicly practicing the “unfruitful works of darkness” I may need to publicly expose his works for what they are for his own good and for the good of those he might be influencing. If that neighbor happens to be the mayor of my town the obligation is the same. If he happens to be the President of the United States the obligation is the same without respect of persons. This is the kind of thing John the Baptist did in relation to Herod’s sin. But this can and should be done in a way that still shows respect and honor for any office the government official with authority might hold. I still have to submit myself to his authority by obeying every ordinance unless it can be shown that the ordinance would keep me from doing the will of God. I may think the ordinance is silly, unnecessary, and even oppressive but until it is changed I will respectfully obey it unless I’m able to show that I cannot obey it and obey God at the same time. Not to do so would be tantamount to disobeying the ordinance of God (Romans 13:2). In the meantime, I may even use what little influence I might have to try to get the official(s) voted out of office as per the right given me under our democratic form of government. Until that happens I will continue to treat them with respect and honor due them as officeholders yet at the same time holding any sins they may be guilty of in contempt.

It is a mishandling of the passages to interpret them in a way that would make them apply only to the righteous or godly rulers. Or only to those governments that uphold righteousness and condemn unrighteousness. Granted that this is ideally the kind of government that pleases God and that such was the purpose for which God ordained civil powers. It is still true early Christians, the ones to whom these instructions were originally written, were expected to submit to their rulers of that day. Paul wrote at a time when the supreme civil authority was the Roman Empire whose rulers were far from righteous at almost every level of authority. Peter wrote at a time when Christians were either being or about to be severely persecuted by the very authorities they were commanded to obey. In my judgment, it is pure fantasy to think that these writers only had in mind obedience and honor to *certain* “governing authorities” and not “*every* ordinance of man” (1 Peter 2:13 KJV).

Churches — God-Centered or Man-Centered?

Sewell Hall

Religion by its very definition would seem to involve God. The word godly means God-centered. However, there are those who practice a religion that is all about man rather than God. To say that such religion is godly is not to say that it is wicked, but simply that it is not centered in God.

Jesus described such people in his day in the words of Isaiah: “These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8-9). Paul writes of those who are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” while at the same time “holding a form of godliness” (2 Timothy 3:4-5). Jude describes some who are in the church, but are “ungodly men, who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

Why would ungodly individuals continue to profess

religion? Some do so, “supposing that godliness is a way of gain” (1 Timothy 6:5). Others, like Diotrophes (3 John 9), love the preeminence that they have attained in the church. Or, like the rulers of (John 12:43), they may love “the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

Contrasting Churches

Local churches may be led either by godly or by notgodly men - that is, by men who are most concerned for God and things of the Spirit or by men whose concerns are primarily human and temporal. Such churches can be distinguished by the following:

Goals: Godly leaders have as their goal “the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things unto Him who is the head - Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-15). Men whose thinking is not dominated by God have as their primary goal increasing numbers - a big church. They consider numerical growth proof of God’s approval.

Doctrine: Godly leaders are determined to abide in the doctrine of Christ and not to go beyond it (2 John 9). Not godly men, knowing that most of the public “will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4), provide the teachers that will tickle their ears.

Discipline: Godly leaders will insist that, in harmony with God’s instructions, the church “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Not-godly leaders advertise: “Come as you are” and boast that they are not judgmental, receiving everyone regardless of lifestyle.

Worship: Godly leaders insist that God be worshipped “acceptable with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews

12:28) while not-godly men place great emphasis on “worship” that pleases the public and they seem concerned only that everyone leave “feeling good about themselves” and eager to return.

Preachers: Godly leaders are not nearly as concerned with excellence of speech or of wisdom as that preachers be “determined not to know anything...save Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). Not-godly leaders insist that preachers be entertaining and personally popular, even with the world. *Activities:* Godly leaders test every proposed action by all the scriptures, determined to “do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17), while not-godly leaders offer whatever people want - sports, entertainment, education, feasts, travel - with little apparent concern for what God wants.

Testing Ourselves

The Bible blesses those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). By contrast it condemns those who have “pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thessalonians 2:12). Our taste in churches will help us determine which we are. How will a person who has “pleasure in unrighteousness” feel about a church whose goal above all other things is to remake him into the image of Christ, whose doctrine is “the apostles’ teaching,” a church where he is put on notice that he must live a godly life or be disfellowshipped, where worship is designed exclusively to please God, where preachers preach only the word of God - reproving, rebuking and exhorting - where activities are altogether spiritual?

On the other hand, how will one who is hungry and thirsty for righteousness feel about a church he visits where he receives nothing but entertainment, where the “sermons” are little more than jokes and pop psychology, where sin is never rebuked, sinners never convicted or exhorted, and where activities are the same as those offered at a public school, theater or country club.

What kind of church are you seeking - the church of your choice or the church of God’s choice? A godly church or a not-godly church?

~via *College View Columns* ; Florence, Alabama and *Market Street Messenger*, Athens, Alabama