

Our Relationship with Civil Government

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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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed (Rom 13:1-7).

Few people today have a favorable opinion of civil government. The rulers of our country and around the world are often oppressive, morally bankrupt, and self-serving. The Roman Empire was all of this and more. During the time when Paul wrote to the saints at Rome, Nero was emperor. Over time, his reign grew increasingly erratic and oppressive.

For this reason, some have suggested that Paul did not write this section of the letter. Perhaps Paul had not given much serious reflection on this subject at this point in his life. Certainly, his later imprisonments would have altered his views about government: at least this is the argument.

Complicating this section is how this passage has been used and abused by all sorts of people defending all sorts of causes. Some used this passage to defend slavery and racial segregation in our country and abroad. This passage was used by Augustine and later by Thomas Aquinas to introduce the concept of "just wars." Regrettably, these examples show what happens when verses are taken out of context and made to defend every self-serving cause under the sun.

If we are careful to keep this paragraph in the framework of the last chapter, we can better understand Paul's point. In the last half of chapter twelve, Paul warns against saints taking personal vengeance when they have been wronged (Rom. 12:14-21). While Christians are forbidden from exacting personal vengeance, this does not mean God is indifferent toward evil or human suffering. God does not want evil to go unrestrained or unpunished, nor does God approve of anarchy.

Christians were not highly regarded in the Roman Empire. Nero would later use Christians as a scapegoat for the burning of Rome in AD 64. Paul does not want Christians to develop a

reputation for being hostile towards the government. As has been aptly pointed out in the past, Jesus was willing to die for a cause, not kill for one.

The Church is to be considered a revolutionary community. However, the revolution of Christianity will only be harmed when saints resort to worldly tactics of vengeance to protect themselves or advance the kingdom of God. The Church will become viewed as just another power-broker, set on advancing its self-interest. Remember, power in God's kingdom is to be used sacrificially and without self-interest (Mark 10:35-45). Now that we have given this paragraph its proper context, notice two points Paul makes:

1. Government is ordained by God. Rulers exist because God wants His world to be orderly. God's creation is supposed to be a symbol of His unified, peaceful nature. Divine ordination, however, does not give blanket justification for all the actions of governments. This simply proves that God wants order and that He does not want evil to be left unchecked.

2. Christians are to pay their taxes (Rom. 13:6-7). This point likely reflects the historic context of the Roman Empire. Christians may have been trying to rationalize not paying taxes based on the fact they regarded Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. Governments using tax money for sinful purposes is not new, nor is it justification for Christians to refuse to pay taxes.

What's Your World-view?

Today, our nation is becoming increasingly partisan. Ungodly rhetoric is hurled in all forms of media. The loudest voices get the most attention. Violent words have led to violent actions. As Christians, we must resist participating in any form of rebellion against our government. Such actions are sinful. Rebellion undermines the order God seeks to establish within society through government. Paul plainly stated that those who resist government will incur judgment.

While we are citizens of a country and have political opinions, our world-view cannot be purely political. Our world-view must be refocused by an awareness of what God did for the world through Jesus. For example, Paul was not focused on usurping the tyrannical rule of the Romans. Instead, he taught, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Paul's world-view was shaped by the Gospel. His prayer was for the salvation of all men, even government officials. His prayer was for peace that saints could have a quiet life. There is nothing quiet and dignified about calling for violence to be used against the government. There is nothing quiet and dignified about rebellion. God's mission in the world was human salvation.

Therefore, Paul's mission was to seek the salvation of everyone through the Gospel. As the people of God, we must share in this mission.

Conclusion

Christians must properly understand the role of government as designed by God. This will help us understand our relationship with the world. If we are not careful, we can develop attitudes and behaviors which make us and the Church indistinguishable in the world. When the Church is viewed as just another political action committee, Christians have gone wrong. Christians must pray for leaders and work to help bring order to God's creation through Jesus.

We have been living in difficult times. For reasons everyone is aware, we have been under considerable stress. Stress will not be alleviated through hatred, anger, and violence. James wrote, "The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (Jas. 1:20). The peace we all desire will never be gained through a political or economic system. It certainly will not be gained through political insurrection. Peace can only be experienced through obedience to God through faith in Jesus.