



## Chapter 24: Of the Civil Magistrate

Politics is not my thing, but I do not doubt that is an important aspect of our lives on earth. I'm not versed in political theories and things. I usually keep a distance, But I agree with Dr. Samuel Waldron concerning the fact that the sovereignty of God extends itself over all things, including politics and His people should influence those in high positions. Also, "To restrict Christianity to the 'spiritual' realm is, ultimately, to destroy it."<sup>[1]</sup>

In this chapter, we will concern ourselves with the civil government as ordained by God, its purpose, and power. What does Romans 13 teach? Must we obey the government in all things? May Christians work in the government?

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### §1 God Hath Ordained Civil Magistrates To Be Under Him, Over The People

1. God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath **ordained civil magistrates to be under him**, over the people, **1 for his own glory** and the **public good**; **2** and to this end hath **armed them with the power of the sword**, for defence and encouragement of them that do good, and for the punishment of evil doers. **3**
  1. Ps. 82:1; Luke 12:48; Rom. 13:1-6; 1 Peter 2:13-14<sup>[2]</sup>
  2. Gen. 6:11-13 with 9:5-6; Ps. 58:1-2; 72:14; 82:1-4; Prov. 21:15; 24:11-12; 29:14,26; 31:5; Ezek. 7:23; 45:9; Dan. 4:27; Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:3-4; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1 Peter 2:14
  3. Gen. 9:6; Prov. 16:14; 19:12; 20:2; 21:15; 28:17; Acts 25:11; Rom. 13:4; 1 Peter 2:14

### Subject To God

There are two things which are first of all asserted: 1) God is the supreme Lord, and 2) civil governments are to be subject to Him. That God is the supreme over all we need not need to mention here. But we may say a few things about the civil government being under the authority and headship of God. The civil government should subject itself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Any government which does not acknowledge Jesus Christ is in rebellion against God. This is the description of all, if not most of, governments in our world. The civil government should acknowledge that they're a tool in the hand of God for the good of its citizens. God has put them in the positions that they are in. It is God who ordained them according to their roles as a president, governor and so on.

The government should rule under the authority of God *over* the people. The government and those who work there have a higher responsibility and position in the world. They are to reign over the people for the people's good. They are to protect them and provide for them and promote peace and righteousness. It does not take us anytime to notice that this is not actually the world in which we live. This is a broken and rebellious world. Most governments in the western world promote homosexuality and abortion, among other things which the Bible condemns. The ideal picture is that of a government which submits to the Lordship of Christ and serves its people in righteousness and peace. And citizens which submit to the

Lordship of Christ and for Christ's sake submit to their governments too. But this sadly not the case.

## Romans 13

The primary passage which the Confession draws on here and which is used in discussions concerning the place of the government is Romans 13:1-7. Therefore, it would be helpful for us if we take a look at the passage. I come to the passage and by no means do I intended to give a long exegesis about it. I'm merely sharing my short thoughts about the passage and its implications. As I said, politics is not my favorite subject.

Rom. 13:1-7 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**. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 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, 4 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**. 5 Therefore **one must be in submission**, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for **the authorities are ministers of God**, attending to this very thing. 7 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.

### Verse 1

The Apostle first gives a command and then goes on to explain and give the basis for his command. Everyone should be under and be subjected to "the governing authorities" and "the higher powers" (KJV). The reason of this is simply the fact that every authority exists because God, Who is sovereign over all and blessed forever, has ordained that authority and government to be. God is the ultimate authority and therefore, obedience to civil authority is obedience to God. 'God often claims and asserts that "He" sets up one, and puts down another; Psa 75:7; Dan 2:21; Dan 4:17, Dan 4:25, Dan 4:34-35.'<sup>[3]</sup>

But it is essential here that we must make an important caveat, lest we should claim that sinning is tolerated by God. For, we learn a general and a simple principle from Acts 4:19-20; 5:28-29 that when a command of civil (or religious) authority contradicts the Word of God, it is to be disobeyed. As John Knox noted long ago, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." Disobedience to any government when it contradicts God's Word is obedience to God. Therefore, when the government commands us to take oaths or to do things which the Lord has forbidden, disobedience to them is actually obedience to God. Just because God institutes all governments, whether good or evil, does not, in fact, mean that He approves of what they do and expects His people to obey. In fact, as observed by Calvin, "When God wants to judge a nation, He gives them wicked rulers." Do we need to cite proof-texts for this idea? Is not the history of Israel from the book of Judges and onward a clear demonstration of this truth?

Albert Barnes noted the occasion of this passage:

(3) many of the early Christians were composed of Jewish converts. Yet the Jews had long been under Roman oppression, and had borne the foreign yoke with great uneasiness. The whole pagan magistracy they regarded as founded in a system of idolatry; as opposed to God and his kingdom; and as abomination in his sight. With these feelings they had become Christians; and it was natural that their former sentiments should exert an influence on them after their conversion. How far they should submit, if at all, to heathen magistrates, was a question of deep interest; and there was danger that the "Jewish" converts might prove to be disorderly and rebellious citizens of the empire.

(4) nor was the case much different with the “Gentile” converts. They would naturally look with abhorrence on the system of idolatry which they had just forsaken. They would regard all as opposed to God. They would denounce the “religion” of the pagans as abomination; and as that religion was interwoven with the civil institutions, there was danger also that they might denounce the government altogether, and be regarded as opposed to the laws of the land,

And he also added, ‘It is quite probable, however, that the main danger was, that the early Christians would err in “refusing” submission, even when it was proper, rather than in undue conformity to idolatrous rites and ceremonies.’<sup>[3]</sup> Thus the Roman Christians were displaying an attitude of anarchy and not submitting *at all* to authorities. Therefore, the Apostle writes this chapter to command them to obey and honor authority. Barnes also observes in what way these governments are ordained:

Are ordained of God - This word “ordained” denotes the “ordering” or “arrangement” which subsists in a “military” company, or army. God sets them “in order,” assigns them their location, changes and directs them as he pleases. This does not mean that he “originates” or causes the evil dispositions of rulers, but that he “directs” and “controls” their appointment. By this, we are not to infer:

- (1) That he approves their conduct; nor,
- (2) That what they do is always right; nor,
- (3) That it is our duty “always” to submit to them.<sup>[3]</sup>

Likewise, John Gill's observations are good and helpful:

The order of magistracy is of God; it is of his ordination and appointment, and of his ordering, disposing, and fixing in its proper bounds and limits. The several forms of government are of human will and pleasure; but government itself is an order of God. There may be men in power who assume it of themselves, and are of themselves, and not of God; and others that abuse the power that is lodged in them; who, though they are by divine permission, yet not of God's approbation and good will.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Verse 2

Therefore, resistance to civil governments in things which God has not forbidden and are not contrary to His Word will bring the judgment of the state and of God upon the person. But this does not mean that God will punish the same which the civil government punishes. A few years later from the time of writing of the Epistle to the Romans, the Rome Empire will require its citizens to worship Caesar and declare “Caesar is Lord” instead of “Jesus is Lord.” The civil government did, in fact, punish Christians, feeding them to lions and burning them at the stake. But, will God punish the disobedience of the faithful Christians because they disobeyed the civil government? Absolutely not. In fact, He will reward those who gave their lives for the sake of Christ! In this, we see an instance which brings the wrath of the government upon the person, while it brings the glory and acceptance of God upon the same.

But also notice what is said in v. 2: resists what God has appointed. The Apostle is speaking not only of those who resist the government, but they who resist the *ordinance* and *establishment* of the government. They resist the idea of any government and basically want anarchy. They will incur the judgment of God because they are resisting that which God has ordained, namely, civil government.

## Verse 3

The reason why we should not resist authorities is because they are to encourage the good and punish

the evil. This is, at least, how it is supposed to be, but we all know better. Therefore, this point strengthens even more what we said concerning disobedience to evil governments is obedience to God. What shall we do when the government punishes those who will not offer incense and declare “Caesar is Lord”? The government did punish the Christians, but God welcomed them into glory. This means that the government is not fulfilling its God-given purpose and are in rebellion against God and will be judged in righteousness for their conduct. But, if we live under a “decent” government, there are still a lot of biblical laws which they uphold. For example, punishments for murder, stealing; monogamy in marriage and so on. Many civil governments uphold all kinds of laws which have their basis in God. Therefore, when one disobeys these things, they are disobeying God. But when one rejects, for example, homosexuality or polygamy, they are not rebelling against God, but merely against the government. They are standing against the government *for* God. They may incur the punishment of the government, but not that of God because He has clearly spoken on the subject.

## Verse 4

The reason that civil governments (when not contradicting the Word) are to be obeyed is because they are God's representatives. God exercises His rule through them. They are God's *servant* and His tool to order and govern the world. The civil magistrate is a servant of God, carrying the approval or judgment of God upon its citizens. They are to act for the good of their citizens in accordance with God's righteousness and law. Barnes notes that the civil government is “to protect you in your rights; to vindicate your name, person, or property; and to guard your liberty, and secure to you the results of your industry.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The issue of the death penalty is a strong emotional issue. I don't pretend to have studied it in detail. But I will claim that there is no biblical basis for Christians to object to the death penalty, for example, in cases of murder when the evidence against the murderer is pretty clear. We must remember that the death penalty for murder predated Sinai and thus was not a part of the Mosaic civil law which has expired (Gen. 9:5-6). I know that the issue is very emotional, but as to the righteousness of the punishment, it is indeed righteous. How can I say any other, if God has said that a murder ought to be executed? We see here the same principle. The New Testament does not abrogate the death penalty for the civil government, but as we have in the present passage, “he does not bear the sword in vain.” The Lord has put that sword in his hand in order that righteousness may be maintained and wrongdoing be punished. Calvin noted:

This is the same as if it had been said, that he is an executioner of God's wrath; and this he shows himself to be by having the sword, which the Lord has delivered into his hand. This is a remarkable passage for the purpose of proving the right of the sword; for if the Lord, by arming the magistrate, has also committed to him the use of the sword, whenever he visits the guilty with death, by executing God's vengeance, he obeys his commands. Contend then do they with God who think it unlawful to shed the blood of wicked men. <sup>[5]</sup>

This bearing of the sword addresses both the issue of the death penalty and of war. As it is said in the next paragraph of the Confession, it is not directly sinful for civil governments to go to war. But it is sinful only when the war is not necessary and not for a just cause. Likewise, it is with the death penalty or other sorts of punishments. Some governments do in fact bear the sword in vain and use the sword for all kinds of violations and injustices not warranted by the Word of God.

## Verse 5

Therefore, on the basis of vv. 1-4, we are to subject ourselves to the government for God's sake, in order to avoid His wrath and “for the sake of conscience.” Obedience to the civil government, when they're in

agreement with the laws of the Almighty, is at the foremost, obedience to the Almighty. Hence, "for the sake of conscience." Barnes notes:

**For conscience' sake** - As a matter of conscience, or of "duty to God," because "he" has appointed it, and made it necessary and proper. A good citizen yields obedience because it is the will of God; and a Christian makes it a part of his religion to maintain and obey the just laws of the land; see Mat 22:21; compare Ecc 8:2, "I counsel them to keep the king's commandments, and "that in regard of the oath of God."<sup>[3]</sup>

Jamieson, Fausset, Brown note that this phrase means "out of conscientious reverence for God's authority."<sup>[6]</sup> God is the foremost authority and King Whom we should obey. Therefore Peter writes, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1Pet. 2:17). This is significant because of the fact that this Epistle was written to a group of Christians who were being persecuted by everyone around them including the emperor or king, Nero. John Gill notes on this passage:

Caesar, the Roman emperor, though a wicked, persecuting Nero, and so any other king or governor; who, so far as he acts the part of a civil magistrate, preserves the peace, the property, and liberty of his subjects, is a terror to evil works, and an encourager of good ones, and rules according to the laws of God, and civil society, is deserving of great honour and esteem from men; and which is to be shown by speaking well of him; by a cheerful subjection to him; by an observance of the laws, and by payment of tribute, and doing everything to make him easy, and honourable in his government<sup>[4]</sup>

Even these wicked kings Christians are called to honor and obey when they are in accord with God. Peter also wrote, before this passage:

1Pet. 2:13-14 **Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution**, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to **punish those who do evil** and to **praise those who do good**.

Peter and Paul are on the same page.

## Verses 6-7

Therefore, he shows here, based on all that was said in vv. 1-5, the reason that we are to pay taxes to the government and to honor them. They are God's servants and as such, they are to be honored and respected.

## Summary

The import of this passage is that the government should be seen as an institution of God, under His sovereign lordship. It is given for the good of people and to punish the evil. Christians should not promote anarchy but submit to God's sake to their authorities. But they do not have the liberty, because of the civil government, to disobey God.

## §2 It Is Lawful For Christians To Accept And Execute The Office Of A Magistrate

2. **It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate** when called there unto; **1** in the management whereof, as they ought especially to **maintain justice and peace**, according to the wholesome **laws of each kingdom** and commonwealth, so for that end they may lawfully now, under the New Testament **wage war upon just and necessary occasions.** **2**
  1. Exod. 22:8-9, 28-29; Daniel; Nehemiah; Prov. 14:35; 16:10, 12; 20:26, 28; 25:2; 28:15-16; 29:4, 14; 31:4-5; Rom. 13:2, 4, 6.
  2. Luke 3:14; Rom. 13:4.

Christians are not to reject involvement in civil matters but are to accept them. It is not sinful, contra the Anabaptists, to work in the government. Christians in the government are to seek peace and justice. They are not to turn the civil government into a theonomy, but they are to influence it and maintain justice and peace. Their rule is to be according to the laws of the land, yet one cannot disconnect their own convictions of the Law of God. One cannot be neutral at work and Christian at home. When a Christians work in the government, they should try to bring their Christian convictions with them to work. They cannot believe one thing on Sunday and promote contrary things on the other days of the week.

Examples of believers involved in *pagan* governments are Daniel and his three friends, Nehemiah who later became governor of Judea, but before this, he was a cupbearer to Cyrus the king of Persia. It was his request to the king which initiated the return of the exiles to Judea and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. These wise people influenced their *pagan* governments with the principles of God's Word and God blessed their endeavors. How much more should Christians now to be an influence in their governments and the world. We should concern ourselves not only with heavenly things but earthly things also.

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## §3 In All Lawful Things Comanded By Them, Ought To Be Yielded By Us In The Lord

3. Civil magistrates being set up by God for the ends aforesaid; subjection, **1** in all lawful things **2** commanded by them, **ought to be yielded by us in the Lord**, not only for wrath, but for conscience sake; and **we ought to make supplications and prayers** for kings and all that are in authority, that **under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life**, in all godliness and honesty. **3**
  1. Prov. 16:14-15; 19:12; 20:2; 24:21-22; 25:15; 28:2; Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14
  2. Dan. 1:8; 3:4-6, 16-18; 6:5-10, 22; Matt. 22:21; Acts 4:19-20; 5:29
  3. Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4

We've already discussed that on the basis of Romans 13 obedience to civil government in agreement with God's laws is obedience to God. Therefore, when we obey them in these things we are obeying God and we have an obligation to obey them. We ought to pray for our governments that they may more and more conform to the will of God, which will result in blessings upon the nation that has the LORD as their God (Ps. 33:12). We ought to pray for wisdom for them and above all, that they may come to know the Lord and thus rule justly under subjection to Him. From Jeremiah 29:7 we get a general principle that we are to seek the good of our countries where we live and not their doom. We should pray to God that He would be merciful to bless our nations with repentance and faith in Christ, knowing that this will result in prosperity and peace. There can be no true peace among men if there is no peace between God and men. Therefore, it is necessary first of all to have peace with God and then to bring *the peace of God in the Gospel* to everywhere.

Honor everyone. Love the  
brotherhood. Fear God. Honor  
the emperor.

(1 Peter 2:17)

## Footnotes

1. <sup>^</sup> [Sam E. Waldron. A Modern Exposition Of The 1689 Baptist Confession Of Faith. \(Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2013\). p. 353.](#)
2. <sup>^</sup> [Many Scriptural references have been supplied by Samuel Waldron's Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith which was apparently supplied by the Westminster Confession of Faith 1646.](#)
3. [a, b, c, d, e Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.](#)
4. [a, b John Gill. Exposition of the Entire Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.](#)
5. <sup>^</sup> [John Calvin. Commentaries. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.](#)
6. <sup>^</sup> [Jamieson, Fausset, Brown. Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible \(Full\). Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.](#)