

Christian Citizens

When Kingdoms Collide

Most Christians would agree we are members of two kingdoms: that of God and that of man. It is within the kingdom of God that we find His purposes and His peace. It is within the kingdom of man that we find principalities and powers ever striving to oppose God, whether knowingly or unknowingly. It is not the structure of government that necessarily causes our problem—God ordained government, after all—it is too often the spirit of a government that is at issue.

Unless we give in to every extreme demand of any government, no matter how ungodly and demonic, we must admit the need, at times, to call kings, queens, princes, presidents, representatives, senators, or members of parliament to account.

Consider the locust-eating prophet John the Baptist. Matthew 14:3-5 relates an issue with an Israelite tetrarch, Herod. John rebuked Herod for immorality and found himself in jail: “For Herod had arrested John, chained him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, since John had been telling him, ‘It’s not lawful for you to have her!’ Though he wanted to kill him, he feared the crowd, since they regarded him as a prophet.” And Jesus, Himself subject to the governing authorities (paying taxes, showing respect to Pilate), also spoke against Herod, calling him “that fox” (Luke 13:32).

We should not lay aside our discipleship or ignore our sonship when it comes to petitioning or protesting our governments in the present day. When protest is necessary, as much as possible, it should be legal, non-violent, and respectful. It is unbecoming for followers of the Prince of Peace to rush to arms or violence when faced with belligerent king, president, or country. We should not rush to judgment in a misguided bid to secure earthly power.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- What challenges do Christians face being members of God’s kingdom and an earthly kingdom?
- How do you decide what is worth petitioning or protesting your government? What guides your response?

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Pray for Politicians

Criticizing politicians is the Great American Pastime, or so it would seem, and followers of Jesus are not immune. Men and women who claim to have been redeemed by the same Savior often cross swords over political agendas. One wonders how often those outside the faith are confused by the political antics of those within it.

Scripture expects at least one thing of Christians as they relate to government officials—we are to pray for them. In my experience, prayer for those in authority is really low on the personal citizenship agenda. We rarely pray corporately for our government leaders (unless we are in a 4th of July service), and we rarely pray privately for them (unless we are mad at them and want God to make them vote our way).

The young disciple Timothy was admonished: “First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Here are a few practical ways to pray for those in political office:

- Praise God for leaders who preserve religious freedoms.
- Pray for God to give wisdom to those making decisions.
- Pray for cooperation and peace among government officials who disagree, both inside and outside one’s own country.
- Pray for the salvation of those who are not believers.

God has promised to answer the prayers of His people. We might find ourselves pleasantly surprised that prayer can accomplish what complaining never will.

P&R Pause and Reflect

- How would you gauge your comments about politicians and government—beneficial or sinful?
- Where does prayer for politicians rank in your priorities compared to critical comments?
- Does your public example in speaking about your government reflect well your faith in Christ? How can you improve in this area?

Christian Citizens

Living Under God and Government



Since the beginning of the church, Christians have attempted to make sense of the relationship between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God. How do we remain faithful as people holding dual citizenship? We are, after all, citizens of both heaven and earth.

History has shown us many forms of government, among them monarchies, oligarchies, democracies, and republics. Some of these are present even in Scripture, though the Bible never endorses one form of human government over another, aside

from perhaps the theocracy of ancient Israel. People's perceptions of government are also varied. One extreme sees government as the answer to all problems and fundamentally necessary for human welfare. The opposite extreme see all government as tyrannical and to be overthrown. Some view government as a blessing to its people; for others, government is a necessary evil.

Where is the line, the path that Christians should follow when navigating the realms of faith and politics, the kingdoms of heaven and earth? How should we live in earthly kingdoms in light of the gospel? God's Word does address how Christians are to respond to governments of all kinds. Looking at government through a biblical lens will help us avoid extremes that dishonor God and harm our witness.



Voices from Church History

"The battle for godly government isn't won with upward fists of rebellion, but with downward, humble knees in prayer."¹

—Adrian Rogers (1931-2005)



What is your perception of human government—a blessing, a necessary evil, or something else? Why do you feel that way?

Christian citizens are charged throughout the Scriptures to submit to the God-ordained rule of those in human government. But despite the ordination and coordination of God and human government, the laws of human beings are imperfect. When manmade laws run contrary to the Scriptures, they must be abandoned for the sake of a greater commandment and a greater rule. In short, our heavenly citizenship trumps our earthly citizenship.

1. Governments exist to steward God's delegated authority (Rom. 13:1-4).

The first institution and instruction for human government came very early in human history. Immediately following the great flood, God said to Noah in Genesis 9:5-6: "I will require the life of every animal and every man for your life and your blood. I will require the life of each man's brother for a man's life. Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood will be shed by man, for God made man in His image."

For the first time, God had given humans the authority to regulate and deal justly with each other. It was God who instituted the earliest form of human government, and the rest of the Bible's teachings regarding interaction with human governments find their foundation in this truth.



God created the institutions of marriage, family, and government. What similarities exist between these institutions? What are differences between them?

Despite the oft-broken nature of human government, Scripture tells us God was the originating factor in its institution. The governments of the world are ruled by civil authorities expected by God to steward their power in specific ways:

To punish evildoers who are within. In Romans 13, the apostle Paul addressed exactly how the government is to protect against evildoers in our midst.

¹ Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. ² So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. ⁴ For government is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.

Governments have a delegated authority from God so individuals do not have to take justice into their own hands. It is the responsibility of a government to ensure its citizens are protected from evil by punishing those who have done wrong. When evil goes unpunished, society is weakened. When evildoers face justice, the character of God is revealed in the activity of the government.

To protect from evildoers who are without.

This refers to those times when a government must protect its populace from outside invaders and assailants. A primary reason for God's institution of human government is that of justice, which includes the principle of self-defense. A government must defend itself in an effort to maintain freedom and justice for its people. If a government is being attacked or has failed to resolve peacefully any conflict in pursuit of freedom and justice for its people, then it must responsibly and wisely defend its right to be a just establishment as God originally intended for it in Genesis 9.

To promote what is good. In Romans 13:3, Paul wrote that a citizen must “do what is good” to earn the approval of his or her government. From its establishment, the institution of human government was meant for the promotion of righteousness and the prevention of unrighteousness.



What are some benefits for citizens when a government faithfully stewards its delegated authority? What are some limitations that prohibit a government from rightly carrying out its role?



Voices from Church History

“And for this reason too, magistrates themselves, having laws as a clothing of righteousness whenever they act in a just and legitimate manner, shall not be called in question for their conduct, nor be liable to punishment. But whatsoever they do to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and illegally, and tyrannically, in these things shall they also perish; for the just judgment of God comes equally upon all, and in no case is defective. Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of the nations.”²

—Irenaeus (circa 125–202)

2. Christians are called of God to live under governmental authority (Rom. 13:5-7; Matt. 17:24-27; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

What are the expectations of Christians who live under the rule of human government? One of the primary principles guiding the Christian citizen must be the commandment to honor the governmental authority under which he or she lives. In the Romans 13 passage we just examined, Paul went on to write:

⁵ *Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience.* ⁶ *And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks.* ⁷ *Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.*

In our obedience to the government under which we live, we obey the commandment of God, thus honoring and glorifying Him. Jesus honored the government under which He lived, which serves as a lesson and an example to us. Matthew 17:24-27 says:

²⁴ *When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the double-drachma tax approached Peter and said, "Doesn't your Teacher pay the double-drachma tax?"*

²⁵ *"Yes," he said.*

When he went into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, "What do you think, Simon? Who do earthly kings collect tariffs or taxes from? From their sons or from strangers?"

²⁶ *"From strangers," he said.*

"Then the sons are free," Jesus told him. ²⁷ *"But, so we won't offend them, go to the sea, cast in a fishhook, and take the first fish that you catch. When you open its mouth you'll find a coin. Take it and give it to them for Me and you."*

In His discussion with Peter, Jesus explained the larger context for a proper view of taxes and government. As sons of God—Jewish men—He and Peter owed no money to the Jewish temple. Still, Jesus concluded to pay the taxes in order not to offend the tax collectors and their fellow Jews. Jesus paid His earthly dues to whomever required, whether the Jewish temple or the Roman Empire (see Matt. 22:15-22). He did not pay taxes out of compulsion, however; He paid taxes in obedience to the higher law of love and concern for others. Jesus' focus on His spiritual kingdom affected His earthly ministry.



How has a focus on God's kingdom, or the lack thereof, affected your actions while living under earthly kingdoms?

It will not always be natural for us to honor the government under which we live, especially if we disagree with it. Narrow is the path of those who wish to honor God in submission to a dislikable government, but in our honor of human government, we honor the One who has instituted it—the God of our salvation.

Further, the submission of Christian citizens to their governments goes beyond simply honoring God. Scripture supports the idea that submission and obedience to the government can be a means of outreach. First Peter 2:13-17 says:

¹³ Submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the Emperor as the supreme authority ¹⁴ or to governors as those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. ¹⁶ As God's slaves, live as free people, but don't use your freedom as a way to conceal evil. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the Emperor.

In verses 13-14, Peter emphasized that Christian citizens are to honor the civil authorities over them that have been given the responsibility to promote the upright and prosecute the unrighteous. "Peter's implication here is, therefore, that God, not humanity, is behind the setting up of the civil authorities: they are for the regulation of social life, as God intends, and this is reflected in the reason Peter adds: submission is for the Lord's sake."³

Peter then explains, in verses 15-17, that Christians are to utilize whatever freedoms they may have under the authority of their government, however freeing or oppressive it may be, to honor everyone and love their brothers and sisters in Christ. The freedom that Christians have in Christ and under the rule of their government must not be used to conceal evil acts that may undermine the human government that God has ordained or the heavenly kingdom that God has established.



How can honorable submission to government testify to your faith in Christ, especially when the government oversteps its bounds?

How should Christians respond when the laws of God and government collide? God is holy. His laws are an expression of His character. The governmental systems of this world are fallen and corrupt by nature, and their laws can bear this fallen nature as well. It is inevitable that these two orders of laws will come into conflict, perhaps frequently. When such a situation arises, what is our path as God's people?

Being put into such a position is not unique to 21st century Christians. "The relationship of Christians to the state was one which soon became problematic, for in the early centuries of the church all states not only were governed by pagans but included pagan worship within their social, economic and political systems. A collision with the church, owing its primary allegiance not to the state but to Jesus Christ, was inevitable."⁵



Voices from the Church

"As with submission to husbands, parents, masters and church leaders, then, submission to governing authorities must never be absolutized. When governments demand that Christians behave in ways that contradict his expressed will, Christians must respectfully disobey."⁴

—Craig Blomberg

Perhaps the most well-known example in recent history of choosing between the laws of God and the laws of man concerned families in Germany's Third Reich who illegally hid Jews and members of the Dutch Underground from the Nazis. One such family was that of Casper ten Boom, including his daughters Corrie and Betsie.

"The Ten Boom family were devoted Christians who dedicated their lives in service to their fellow man...During the Second World War, the Ten Boom home became a refuge, a hiding place, for fugitives and those hunted by the Nazis. By protecting these people, Casper and his daughters, Corrie and Betsie, risked their lives. This non-violent resistance against the Nazi-oppressors was the Ten Booms' way of living out their Christian faith. This faith led them to hide Jews, students who refused to cooperate with the Nazis, and members of the Dutch underground resistance movement."⁶

History gives us the lens through which we know the ten Booms were right, but what about decisions we must make? In short, we must obey God rather than man.

The Scriptures address this issue in the Book of Acts. Peter and the apostles faced a civil government insistent that preaching Jesus had to come to an end. Acts 5:28-29 contains the crux of the confrontation: "Didn't we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man's blood on us!" But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men."



On what issues of the day should Christians disobey their government? How might respect for authority be shown even when the Christian cannot obey?

Conclusion

The Bible is clear that God is the ultimate Sovereign to whom we all owe allegiance. In His infinite wisdom, He has chosen to delegate authority over the rule of humankind to civil governments, though He still maintains His supreme authority (Dan. 4:32). He has high expectations that His civil servants promote what is good and punish what is evil.

God also has expectations for His people who live under these governments. They are to honor their authorities, obey their laws, and do what is good. In this, we follow the example of our Savior. When a government's law conflicts with a clear commandment of Scripture, however, we must look to our Savior as the highest authority and follow the decision of the apostles—to obey God rather than men.



Some governments attempt to regulate and limit the ability of Christians to obey the Great Commission—make disciples in every nation, baptize, and teach them. How should a Christian think about such a situation, and how should he or she respond?

Christian Citizens

In It but Not of It

Romans 12:1-2: “Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.”

These verses call Christians not to conform culturally to this world and to abstain from certain cultural components that may or may not be conducive to the life of the Christian. As sons and daughters of the living God, it is imperative that we do not assimilate to the fallen world around us.

Equally significant, however, is the charge given by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20: “That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, certain that God is appealing through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God.’”

We must read these passages in light of each other. Followers of Christ do not belong to this present world—it is not our home, as Paul states in Romans 12. But we must not lose sight of 2 Corinthians 5, which encourages believers to participate in the ministry of reconciliation by acting as ambassadors in and to this world, sharing the gospel for the good of those who inhabit all lands.

Christians must not forsake the mission of reconciling this age for fear of conforming to it. As Christian citizens submitting to our governments, we act as ambassadors from a kingdom infused with a gospel ethic.



Pause and Reflect

- Where are you most tempted to conform to the culture? How do you fight it?
- Consider your role as an ambassador for God’s kingdom—how well do your words, actions, and work represent the values of your “home country”?
- Pray for forgiveness where you have fallen short of God’s kingdom; recognize Jesus’ sacrifice already made for you; and rely on the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide you as an ambassador for the kingdom.

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