

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNMENT: A Fourth of July Message

Theme: The church of Jesus Christ must strike a balance between honoring those in governmental authority as instruments of God, while maintaining a prophetic role that enables us to be salt and light in a decaying world.

Text: Romans 13:1-7

On this day when the Fourth of July falls on a Sunday, I thought this might be a good time for us as followers of Christ to reflect upon our role vis a vis the government. On this day when we celebrate the birth of our nation with deep gratitude and great thanksgiving for the freedoms and benefits that the genius of democracy affords us, just how are we as the church of Jesus Christ to position ourselves toward those in authority over us?

To answer this question, we must first answer another question, how is government viewed in Scripture? We will find that there is a healthy tension in Scripture itself that informs us as to how we are to respond to government. On the one hand, as our main text this morning will teach us that the government is established by God to provide order and justice in society. On the other hand, governments have a tendency to exalt themselves in place of God and become tyrannical and despotic. Let's look at both of these pictures biblically, and then ask, the question, what position should the church of Jesus Christ take in light of this biblical tension?

Let us turn first to the most well known text on the role of government, Romans 13:1-7.

Read Romans 13:1-7

The only thing worse than bad government is no government. Exhibit A for this truth is Iraq. With the hand over of power to a sovereign Iraqi government, what is their most important concern? Security and order. Unless they can get a handle on the insurgency and bring order to this fledging government, freedom will mean very little. What is freedom without order? Whether it is in Iraq, or the streets of our inner cities ruled by gangs, no government is worse than bad government.

Our God is a God of order. Our passage of Scripture this morning is about the divinely ordained role of the state to provide order in the body politic. The appropriate response of Christians is to uphold order through submission and obedience.

The question our passage answers this morning is, how does the Lord maintain order in a fallen world?

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I. All Authority comes from God. (Romans 13:1,2)

Romans 13 begins by asserting a general principle, all authority comes from God. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13:1) What Paul affirms is that there is one final and ultimate authority, the Lord God himself. Yet the way God exercises that authority is to delegate or mediate it through human beings or, even better, human institutions. This is God's way of creating rule and order in this world.

Think of the various spheres in which authority and order are needed:

In the family, God has placed parents over children.

In education, God gives administrators and teachers authority over students.

In government, God has ordained elected officials to have authority over citizens.

In churches, God orders our common life by placing pastors, elders, and trustees in charge of the flock.

In recognition that all authority is instituted by God, what should our response be to authority? "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities..." (Roman 13:1a) We are to honor the constituted authority by giving it our reverence and obedience.

Children are to obey parents.

Students show respect to their teachers and principals.

Citizens pray for and revere their elected officials.

Church members follow the lead of those over them.

Why? "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so bring judgment upon themselves." (Romans 13:2) Here is the kicker. The attitude we have toward human authority is a direct reflection of our attitude toward God's authority. We cannot say that we honor and revere God's authority, while bad mouthing and

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selectively following human authority. A direct window into the condition of our hearts is our attitude toward human authority. If you find yourself bristling at this statement, it is an indication of how true it is.

How convicting this is! And to think this message this morning is brought to you by a child of the 60's. I was raised during my high school and college year in the era that said *"don't trust anyone over 30."* Bumper sticker wisdom was, *"Question authority."* I was an angry person in the late 60's and early 70's. I was angry at our country and angry at educational institutions because I was caught up in the atmosphere of distrust and rebellion against authority. We have continued to reap the whirlwind of the wind of rebellion that was sown in that period.

"But sometimes authorities are wrong", you say. Of course, they are. Do you think Paul was naive about this? The authority that Paul has in mind here is the state. Who was the state at this time? Rome. It was Rome who presided over our Lord's death. Pontius Pilate was its representative. Paul had a mixed view of Rome. On the one hand, Paul used his Roman citizenship to full advantage, for Roman citizens had the right of due process. On the other hand, Paul would die at the hand of an emperor gone mad, Nero.

What we must understand and what we have lost today is that there are two parts to Biblical authority. **There is the person in authority and there is the position of authority.** In other words, even if we have a difficult time respecting the person in authority, we are called to respect the position the person holds.

I have a clear recollection when this truth stabbed my heart in very convicting fashion. It has been sport for some time to be into government bashing. This was particularly true for me when President Nixon was under the gun during the Watergate investigation. Negative epithets rolled off the tongue without censure. At this time I was doing my devotions in I Samuel. I read with intrigue the story of demented King Saul jealously chasing his rival future King David all over the wilderness. David had gained popularity in slaying Goliath and won the hearts. Saul could not handle the adulation toward David. He had sworn to kill him. In the Engedi wilderness David hid in a cave. Saul wandered into the cave, unaware of the presence of David and his men. David's men wanted to do Saul in on the spot, but David forbid them. Unbeknownst to Saul, David cut off a corner of his robe. After Saul left the cave, David followed him out. When Saul was at some distance, David called to him. When Saul turned and looked, David fell to the ground and bowed in reverence before him. David said to Saul, **"Why do you listen to those who say, 'David seeks to do you harm? This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave, and some have**

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urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed.'" (1 Samuel 24:8-10) Saul certainly had long since quit behaving as one who was worthy of the office. Yet he held the office and the office itself is worth revering. We need to again respect the position that someone holds as much as the person who holds the position.

II. The State is God's means for providing public order. (v. 3-7)

Paul has in mind here the role of the institution of the state that goes beyond personalities. Admittedly Paul creates an ideal picture of the state at its best. Paul writes, *"For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from the fear of authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant (minister) to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore it is necessary to submit to authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are servants of God, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor then honor."* (Romans 13:3-7)

Here are five points that Paul makes:

1. The state is an instrument or servant of God. The word "servant" used here is exactly the same word "minister" we use in the context of the church. Three times Paul calls the state a "servant of God". Twice in verse 4a: "for he is God's servant to do you good." v. 4c: "He is God's servant, an agent of wrath"; "This is why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants".

2. The proper role of the state is to reward good and punish evil. In other words, it is to carry out justice.

3. To carry out this role God has delegated force to the state, called "the power of sword." There is a difference between force and violence. Violence is uncontrolled and unprincipled use of power, whereas force is controlled and principled use of power. The images we saw from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were based upon violence and not force.

4. We are to obey not simply from fear of punishment but because there is an internal governor called the conscience that honors the authority of the state as an expression of God's authority.

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5. We pay taxes because there is a legitimate place for the role of government in the proper and just ordering of society.

But you are dying to ask the question: But does that mean blind obedience? What if the state ceases to reward the good and punish the evil doers? What if the state, as it has done so many times in this past century, becomes a terror to its own people? What if the state exalts itself over God and puts itself in the position of ultimate authority and fails to realize that it has only derived and limited authority? Are we to blindly obey then? No.

As positive a picture as Paul paints, the apostle John in the Revelation 13 portrays the state as a beast who blasphemes God. The government has the potential to come under demonic influence, pictured as a dragon which demands ultimate allegiance. Here are some selective verses from Revelation 13: *"The dragon gave the beast its power and his throne and great authority...The beast opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name...he was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. He was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation."* This is an evident usurping of the authority of God.

The Scripture is clear when taken as a whole. The state is to be respected as a divine institution, but to give it blind, unqualified obedience would be idolatry. When any authority, be it the state, or an abusive husband, or an over-bearing parent, tries to absolutely control the life of another, then that person appeals to a higher authority. All human authority is derivative, and limited. There is only one ultimate and final authority, God Himself. The general principle is this. **When human authority forbids what God expressly commands, or commands what God expressly forbids, then we not only may, but must disobey the human authority.**

Civil disobedience has strong Biblical precedent. The Hebrew mid-wives refused to kill the Jewish first born males, thus saving Moses to be lawgiver and redeemer of the Israelites from captivity. Daniel refused to fall down and worship the golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar. When Peter and John were instructed by the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 to cease preaching the gospel, they refused to obey. Their justification. *"We must obey God rather than man."* (Acts 4:19)

Some of the worst periods of church history have occurred when the church meekly capitulated to the powers that be, rather than resisting the state when it was usurping God's authority. Hindsight is 20/20, and we should learn from history. One of the greatest failings of the last century was the inability of the German Lutheran Church to stand up against Hitler as he was rising to

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power. Historians have concluded that one of the reasons for this was a deeply embedded teaching of blind subjection to governmental authority as an over application of Romans 13.

Justin Martyr was a teacher and leader of the Christian church in the middle of the second century under Roman rule. "Look at us. We are model citizens. Our religion teaches us to pray for the emperor and be submissive. We are called to pay taxes and honor you. We drive our chariots within the speed limits. When it comes to daily matters of civil obedience, we are model citizens of the empire. However, there is a limit to what we may do. We cannot worship you." Because of statements like this, Justin became a martyr, refusing to bow before the emperor as an embodiment of deity. In Justin's mind there was only one Lord, Jesus Christ and therefore he would die before he said, "Caesar is Lord."

Given the spectrum of the biblical teaching that, on the one hand calls for us to be subject to and honor the state as a means of God's just ordering of society, and yet on the other hand, not to be naïve about the potential of the government to overplay its hand, what is to be our relationship to the state? Generally, we are to be salt and light in our culture. Jesus has assigned us this position that we would illumine the truth and be the preservative against decay.

1. We are to model respect for authority. This means that as ones who submit to God's authority, we respect at least the position of authority, even if have a difficult time respecting the person in authority. Parents are to instruct their children to obey their teachers and listen to their coaches. Too often today parents take the side of their children over against those in authority as if their children could no wrong. We must learn to govern our tongues in how we speak about those in political authority over us. We can offer critical comments in a respectful manner about those who hold political positions that differ from our own. For our attitude toward authority is direct indication about how reverence and respect toward the authority of God over our lives.

2. We have every right to be proud of the heritage upon which our government is founded. The framers of our Constitution seemed to have a good handle on the sinful nature of human beings and an appropriate skepticism when it comes to the accrual of power. There has almost never been a truer maxim, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." With that in mind the forefathers divided the powers into three branches of government: legislature, executive and judicial. Along with this came a Bill of Rights meant to build a hedge around tyranny by providing freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion. That is why the world wants to live here.

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3. Yet, as salt and light we know that the foundation of a society is rooted in a transcendent morality. A democracy is only as good as its people are good. It was never intended by the framers of the Constitution that religion be removed from public life. John Adams wrote, "A Republic can only be supported by pure religion and austere morals." Washington agreed, "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles."

What are the consequences when truth is only in the eye of the beholder and we have lost any sense of revealed truth that comes from God? Charles Colson in his novel *Gideon's Torch* writes a fictional dialogue between a Christian U. S. Senator and a very secular Attorney General. The Senator says, "People want to do their own thing. They see liberty as the right to do what they want, but it isn't. Liberty is the right to do what they ought to do. So now we have chaos because we have no moral consensus—which I might add, has always been supplied by religious beliefs."

The Attorney General replies sarcastically, "Very incisive."

The Senator continues, "Yeah and very true. In a free society that honors virtue, you have 270 million policemen; in a society that mocks virtue, you can't hire enough policemen." This has proven to be true whether in the corporate board rooms of America, the halls of government, or the urban ghettos. If people do not have an internal moral compass, then we can't deploy enough police to go after the bad guys.

There has been an attempt in recent years, to remove transcendent truth from public life. We have gone through a complete reversal from the time of our founders in this country. The original intent of the first amendment and **The Establish Clause**, as it is called, "Congress shall make law respecting the establishment of religion", and the **Free Exercise Clause**, "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof", was to provide freedom *for* religion, not freedom *from* religion. To quote Stephen Carter, a law professor at Yale University, "The Establishment clause by its terms forbids the imposition of religious belief by the state, not statements of religious belief in the course of public dialogue."

Regardless of our secular society's attempt to remove faith from the public arena that should not deter us. We need no one's permission to speak the truth as God's has revealed it.

4. This leads me to my last important point and implication of the biblical teaching on the role of the state. If the church is to be salt and light, and infuse

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a transcendent moral vision into society, we must do so by keeping a critical and prophetic distance. In other words, we can never become so identified or so enmeshed with the state, that we have lost our ability to play the role of the prophets of old. God has ordained the church to speak to the powers. When the state oversteps its bound, we should be the first to tell the state where it has gone too far. Whether that be on issues of personal morality such as the nature of marriage, or the sanctity of human life; or public issues such as the value and equality of the races, or God's heart for the poor; or issues of national and international politics, such as committing our troops in war; the health of the state is dependent upon the faithful opposition and alternative vision of the church of Jesus Christ.

Our service this morning began with the procession of the cross leading the flags. We wanted in this symbolism to demonstrate that the cross must always have preeminence over the flag. As much as we honor the flag, our first allegiance is to Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the nations. Though we are proud citizens of the United States, we are all first and foremost citizens of a "holy nation." We belong to a church without borders. The church is made up of people from every tribe, people, language and nation with a common loyalty to Jesus Christ.

In summary, 1. Let us pray regularly for those in authority over us, that we might lead peaceable lives. As we are called let us as Christians be involved in public life. 2. Let us teach and show respect for authority as unto the Lord. 3. Let us live and speak the truth so that we can be a preservative in a society that is sowing the seeds of its own destruction. 4. And let us be so bold as to not remain silent, but recapture our prophetic role, and may there be no doubt where we stand when the powers forbid what God commands and commands what God forbids.