

Harvest Christian Fellowship
"Theology @ 9" Handout
February 29, 2012
"The State / Government" - Facilitator: Alex Crain

The State, Government

Introduction:

What is the Christian's responsibility to the State, to the Government? Before answering this question, we need to define these key terms.

Definitions:

The State can be defined as, "a political institution that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory."¹

Government can be defined as, "the political direction and control exercised over the actions of the members, citizens, or inhabitants of communities, societies, and states."²

As a political institution, the State seeks to govern the people within its jurisdiction. The forms of government will vary, but the point is that the State, as a political institution, governs within its specified territory. The means through which the State governs is through its monopoly of the legitimate use of force – its power to enact laws and enforce them, to tax and to spend the tax revenues as it sees fit, to keep and maintain the civil order within its jurisdiction, to wage war against aggressor states, etc.

Everything the State does is through its monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Finally, this operation of the legitimate use of force occurs within a certain territory (which we've been calling its jurisdiction). The territory could be national borders between nation-states, or state borders within a federal republic of states. Whatever the case may be, the authority of the State is only applicable within its jurisdiction.

Three Key Scriptures: Passages that deal with the Christian's responsibility to the State:

1. Matthew 22:21

Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

¹ <http://cargobelman.wordpress.com/2011/09/19/christianity-and-the-state-a-christians-duty-to-the-state/>

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/government?s=t>

2. Romans 13:1

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.

3. 1 Peter 2:13-14

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

The general message from all three of these passages is that the Christian is to submit to the State and to render unto the State whatever belongs to the State. But note that our submission to the State is done on the basis of our prior submission to God first and foremost.

In other words, we submit to the State not because the State is virtuous, but because God is sovereign and we owe Him our allegiance. God has ordained the State, so our submission to the State is, in a sense, a submission to God.

The exception to this rule is when the State requires the Christian to act in a way that is contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Bible (cf. Acts 5:29).

Acts 5:25-29

25 And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people."

26 Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them,

28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

*29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "**We must obey God rather than men.**"*

Although God ordains the State, that doesn't mean that the State is good, nor does it mean the State executes the will of God in its moral (or revealed) sense. In fact, if you look at most of the States throughout human history, you would be hard pressed to find any that were good or that executed the moral will of God. They were all ordained by God to execute his sovereign will, but few of them could be called "good."

Despite this, Christians are called to submit to the State. What does that mean? Do Christians have to be fans of the State? Do we have to love the State?

What does submission to the State look like for the Christian?

- The witness of the NT seems to suggest that Christians are to be model citizens of the State.

- We pay our taxes, we respect the governing authorities, we submit to their authority in all cases except, as mentioned above, when to do so will violate the commands of God.
- Christians are not called to be radicals or revolutionaries when it comes to the State. We are not called to rebel against the status quo.
- Look at the life of Jesus. He did not seek to overthrow the Roman Empire (a fact that didn't sit well with the Jewish revolutionaries). The Christian's duty is to Christ, first and foremost.
- Christians are "strangers in a strange land." Our true citizenship is in heaven.

Philippians 3:18-20

18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven...

- Augustine's monumental work, *The City of God*.³
 - Two "cities" he describes are the "City of Man" and the "City of God."
 - The City of God is eternal and takes as its sole concern the greater glory of God. The perfect rule of God is the passion of all its citizens.
 - The City of Man is filled with mixed passions, mixed allegiances, and compromised principles. Its citizens engage in deadly patterns of disobedience to the rule of God due to the fact that they assume moral autonomy, and then revolt against the Creator.
 - But even though the City of Man is passing away, it doesn't mean that it's ultimately unimportant.
 - Love of neighbor, grounded in our love for God requires us to work for good in the City of Man, even as we set as our first priority the preaching of the gospel—the only means of bringing citizens of the City of Man into citizenship in the City of God.
 - Christians bear important responsibilities in BOTH cities.
 - Political disengagement is disobedience to God.
 - Idolatry of politics is dishonoring to God.
 - Love of neighbor for the sake of loving God strikes the right balance.
 - We are concerned for the culture, not because we believe that the culture is ultimate, but because we know that our neighbors must hear the gospel. Part of the way that they hear it is by our standing in the public square and giving voice to Christian convictions based on God's eternal truth.

Romans 13 Abuse

Even in the midst of telling Christians to submit to civil authority, Romans Chapter 13 limits the power and reach of civil authority. Civil government must not be a "terror to good works." It has no power or authority to terrorize good works or good people. God never gave it that authority. And any government that oversteps that divine boundary abuses its authority. Here are a few examples of civil disobedience in Scripture:

³ Albert Mohler, *Culture Shift*, Multnomah, 2008. pp. 3ff.

1. Did Moses violate God's principle of submission to authority when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster in defense of his fellow Hebrew?
2. Did Elijah violate God's principle of submission to authority when he openly challenged Ahab and Jezebel?
3. Did David violate God's principle of submission to authority when he refused to surrender to Saul's troops?
4. Did Daniel violate God's principle of submission to authority when he disobeyed the king's law to not pray audibly to God?
5. Did the three Hebrew children violate God's principle of submission to authority when they refused to bow to the image of the state?
6. Did John the Baptist violate God's principle of submission to authority when he publicly scolded King Herod for his infidelity?
7. Did Simon Peter and the other Apostles violate God's principle of submission to authority when they refused to stop preaching on the streets of Jerusalem?
8. Did Paul violate God's principle of submission to authority when he refused to obey those authorities who demanded that he abandon his missionary work? In fact, Paul spent almost as much time in jail as he did out of jail.

What does submission to the State look like specifically for Christians in the United States of America?

We in the United States of America do not live under a monarchy. We have no king. There is no single governing official in this country. America's "supreme Law" does not rest with any man or any group of men.

America's "supreme Law" does not rest with the President, the Congress, or even the Supreme Court. In America, the U.S. Constitution is the "supreme Law of the Land." Under our laws, every governing official publicly promises to submit to the Constitution of the United States.

The significance of this distinction is important to note. Because in America, the "higher powers" are not the men who occupy elected office; they are the tenets and principles set forth in the U.S. Constitution. Under our laws and form of government, it is the duty of every citizen, including our elected officials, to obey the U.S. Constitution.

One writer⁴ contends that this is how Romans Chapter 13 reads to Americans:

"Let every soul be subject unto the [U.S. Constitution.] For there is no [Constitution] but of God: the [Constitution] that be [is] ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the [Constitution], resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For [the Constitution is] not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the [Constitution]? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For [the Constitution] is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for [the Constitution] beareth not the sword in

⁴ <http://www.cuttingedge.org/news/n2229.cfm>, 2007 Don Boys, Ph.D.

vain: for [the Constitution] is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.

For this cause pay ye tribute also: for [the Constitution is] God's minister, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."

Thoughts, questions?

Conclusion:

Clearly, Christians are not automatically to give absolute, unconditional, and unthinking obedience to their government. From direct statements in Scripture and biblical examples, it is clear that it is sometimes necessary to disobey civil rulers. Norman L. Geisler has compiled a list of these exceptional circumstances:⁵

- 1. When the government prohibits the worship of God (Exod 5:1)**
- 2. When it requires the taking of innocent life (Exod 1:15-21).**
- 3. When it demands killing of God's servants (1 Kings 18:1-4).**
- 4. When it requires the worship of idols (Dan 3:1-7).**
- 5. When it commands prayer to a man (Dan 6:6-9)**
- 6. When it prohibits the propagation of the gospel (Acts 4:17-20).**
- 7. When it demands the worship of a man as God (Rev 13:4, 8).**

There are also indications throughout the Romans' text that obedience, while universally required, is not absolute or unlimited. The government has delegated authority which comes from God. It is not to usurp the place of God.

The believer has an obligation to the state, but is also under a higher obligation to God (cf. Acts 4:17-20). This text makes it clear that the duty of the ruler is to punish evil and reward good. When the state prohibits good and demands evil, it is no longer performing its God-ordained task.

Christians are told to obey for conscience's sake. When the state demands what conscience will not condone, by biblical standards, then Christians must disobey. Balance is needed. We should not empty the meaning of Romans 13:1-7 with a thousand qualifications. Civil rulers need the support of Christians under their authority.

But the state can never have the place that must be reserved for God alone. Therefore, it is a duty of believers to pray regularly for those in authority over them (1 Tim 2:1-2) so that they may live godly and peaceable lives.

1 Tim 2:1-2

⁵ Norman L. Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985).
<http://www.tmsj.edu/tmsj/tmsj10f.pdf>

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Closing Prayer