
Christian's Responsibility to Government

Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17

Russ Kennedy

Every two years in the United States of America as in many other participatory governments, we face the privilege and responsibility of selecting those who will govern us. As Americans, we tend to focus on it during the presidential elections – Christians in other nations in different rhythms of politics face the choices in different ways.

We have been given a wonderful opportunity and its accompanying responsibility – we have some say in who is elected. At the end of the day we get the government we picked and usually, the one we deserve. But let us not fool ourselves – our choices and votes are not ultimately determinative. God's purpose, plan and providence are. He will raise up and will tear down in every nation across globe as he sees fit. So once again, we are faced with a tension. We must choose well and we must trust and rely on God.

We are coming up on a time when we will have the opportunity to cast our votes for the men and women we believe ought to govern us. This is an opportunity to think clearly and Biblically about what the Bible requires of us. This is a time when we are deeply concerned, even though we ought to be paying some attention all along.

We are not going to attempt a comprehensive Christian theory of government – but over the next four weeks, we will help us think through our responses and responsibilities. But, we will this morning have clearly defined for us from the Scriptures our responsibility to any government God sees fit to place over us. And, we will think about the additional right and privilege we have in America to vote.

The Biblical Principles

Romans 13:1-4

If we are going to respond Biblically to our government, then we need a Biblical framework. While the whole Bible is needed, Paul in Romans 13 gives us a whole Bible summary of a Theology of Human Government. Paul is writing these words in a time when all Christians would have been living under governments that would not have been influenced at all by Biblical principles. Yet he clearly outlines our attitudes and our responsibilities to human governments as heaven's citizens.

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. 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.

The State as a God Ordained Authority

(v.1-3)

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as an authority ordained by God by His power. The imperative then is that we are to be subject to the governments God place over us. Why are we to do this? Paul gives us several compelling reasons.

All authority spheres are defined and described by God. Thus God Himself is the overarching authority within which governments operate – God initiated and installed human government after the great Flood. So governments have authority, not by sheer physical power, but by Divine decree.

The authorities that are in place are there by God's design, decree and providential placing. No government comes into place apart from God's sovereign will and all governments that come into being emerge from the decrees of His hidden will. In Acts 17, Paul says that the rise and fall of nations and people groups has God centered reasons behind it.

Those who resist and rebel against the governing authorities resist and rebel against God. When we resist and rebel against God, we are subject to the correcting and judging hand of God.

So, Christians are to do good and not evil. Good governments will support and defend its good citizens and restrain and punish its bad ones. Bad governments may not function as they were designed to by God, but that does not give Christians the right to do evil just because the government is bad. Do we trust in our God or do we not? Will we live as citizens of heaven here where we fully expect that fallenness and sin will twist the good design of God into dangerous and despicable powers?

Now it is imperative that this text not be made to stand alone. No authority may command or compel a Christian to disobey God. So Peter and Paul and a long host of Christians have stood before evil rulers and declared that they must obey God. But they were submissive as they bore with joy the punishments meted out, seeing the suffering and martyrdom as a privilege. So while at times we must disobey when ordered to do evil, we will be submissive as we humbly accept the persecution that comes.

The State as a God Employed Servant

(v.4)

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.

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as a servant employed by God for His purposes. God has designed the state to carry out certain functions. When the state operates within these functions, they serve God's purpose and the good of their citizens. When they do not, then they can become a danger to a people. One of the primary functions of government is to implement justice and to carry the sword. The state is to punish evildoers even up to capital punishment. It is to carry the sword of public justice. War is a legitimate function of carrying the sword. So Christians who were converted while in the Roman army could stay in the army and fight for Rome. In fact, Paul in verse 4, sees the bearing of the sword by the state as a weapon of God's own wrath. This draws from a rich variety of texts in the Old Testament prophets where God used foreign and evil nations to execute His justice and wrath against both His own people and against other nations.

I want to point out again that Paul is writing under a horribly evil government and to people under a horribly evil government. We cannot therefore say from verse 4 that governments that do not serve God's good are illegitimate and not to be submitted to and possibly even overthrown. So, we are to be subject to the governing authorities, not just to maintain a clear conscience before God, but also not to put ourselves in the way of God's wrath.

The Universal Precepts

Having therefore a Biblical foundation, what practical implications are drawn from it and applied as Christian responsibilities? These are given both here in Romans, as well as in 1 Peter 2:13-17 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

Moreover, hear me well. We are to respond in a God pleasing way to our government, not because government is of the people, by the people and for the people – but because government is of God, for His purposes and our good. Government is not by the consent of the governed, but by the ordination of God. Watch how this fundamental belief shapes Paul's and Peter's directives.

Submit

1 Peter 2:13-17

¹³ 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. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

We must submit to the government God places over us.

The clear command here, as well as in Romans 13:1, is to be in submission to the government. Peter is careful even to detail a multi-level, bureaucratic government where there are local governments and national governments. He is consistent with Paul in his understanding of the Biblical function of government. (v.14). His aim is that Christians, by their submission even in the face of suffering, will silence foolish ignorance (v.15). Christians, while being free, must not use that freedom to disobey the law but places themselves under the Lordship of Christ as His servants (v.16). In the midst of living out relationships as heavens citizens and the world's neighbors, he commands and commends honoring the emperor (v.17).

Submission in the Bible is not blind, unthinking obedience. It is careful bending to authority. It means that when the authority is functioning properly, to watch over our tendencies to rebel and disobey out of sheer depravity. It means that when an authority commands us to sin, then we make a Biblical appeal, if necessary disobey and then with grace, bear the consequences or flee.

Honor

Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17

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.

¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

We must honor and respect those God places in the government.

This verb used in both of these texts means to show respect, to honor. It is given as a positive command. It means that while we may have to confront and speak critically of evil character or conduct, we do not speak in such a way, with such words or in such a tone that evidences dishonor and disrespect.

What does this mean practically? It means that if we have a president or senator or legislator who is wicked or stands for folly, we may point those things out. But we must not

use disrespectful titles, names, labels, jokes, etc. When Mr. Clinton was president, I disagreed with much that he did and stood for – but we don't call him names. And while Mrs. Clinton is a senator, she is to be treated with respect even when we disagree with her sin and folly.

Taxes

Romans 13:6-7

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.

We must pay our taxes to support the government as God has ordained.

God has ordained that the government be supported through taxes. Their ministry of justice is underwritten by revenues derived from those benefiting from the proper exercise of their governmental functions. To not pay your legitimate taxes is a form of rebellion and disrespect. To pay more than the minimum tax is unwise and poor stewardship. Pay all of as little as is allowed.

By the way, don't get into arguments that not paying illegitimate taxes which are evil either because they are a tax on income or because they are used to fund immoral causes. I do not find exceptions like this anywhere I read in the Scriptures. It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, the tithe was based on income and there was no levying of sales taxes or trade tariffs.

Pray

1 Timothy 2:1-2

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.

We must pray for the people and government so that they will function as God has intended.

The final responsibility is one of supplication, prayer, intercessions and thanksgiving for all including kings and governors – all those who have the rule over us. We ask God to cause them to function as He has designed – as a support to the good and a scourge to the wicked, to bear the sword of justice properly. What we are seeking in this kind of praying is to live under a government's protection free of the government's interference and opposition. What we seek is to live righteous lives in peace and quiet, godly and dignified in every way.

Therefore, our praying now is to be hugely informed by the purpose, the effect that praying should produce. We will pray for our present government, the coming election and the government that will be in place generally in the same way. But, we will pray with some sense of detail over where that government is failing to serve God's purposes.

Is it possible that the present interference and opposition of local and national governments in private life and church ministry is the direct consequence of our activism on one hand and our lack of praying on another? I leave that question to challenge you in your times of praying.

Reflect and Respond

Be committed to your heavenly citizenship first...

Show proper honor and respect to our leaders...

Fulfill all your responsibilities to your government...

Register and vote...

Support and elect good leaders...

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.

