

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

We Must Obey God Rather Than Men

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Acts 5:17-42

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 5:17; that’s on page 913 in the pew Bibles. We’ve been slow walking through the Book of Acts, using these foundational stories to re-evaluate everything we think we know about the church. Now feels like a good time to re-evaluate everything we think we know about the church, doesn’t it? COVID19 revealed some cracks and deficiencies in our makeup and understanding. COVID was a stress test, and a good stress test can save your life – if you respond to it appropriately. So that’s what we are trying to do. We are looking at these foundational stories as a sort of standard and plumbline. We want to see where we are out of line – and by God’s grace we want to make improvements and corrections in advance of the challenges and opportunities that are coming.

This morning we are reading a story about a pivotal confrontation between the church and the state. Now in the Old Testament, at least at several points in the story, the church and the state were one and the same. Under King David for example – the church and the state were one and the same. The word “church” in a theological sense, refers to the ASSEMBLY of the REDEEMED. Now, in the Old Testament SOMETIMES the ASSEMBLY of the REDEEMED existed INSIDE a hostile, foreign state – we think of the church in the time of the Babylonian Exile for example – but for much of the Old Testament, the church and the state were largely

overlapping entities. Israel was the church! Israel was the assembly of the redeemed - and Israel was a state. It had a King and an army and a court system. But in the New Testament we see that situation undergoing a significant SHIFT. We've talked many times about how God made the decision to grind the covenant community down to a single stone – Jesus Christ. Jesus said:

“Have you never read in the Scriptures: ““The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” (Matthew 21:42 ESV)

So God is doing a BIG THING! He is radically reconstituting the covenant community – he is PRUNING and REPOSITIONING the tree for maximum fruitfulness! From now on the church will be an assembly of the redeemed operating inside every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth! That will be glorious! That will be transformative! And that will be COMPLICATED – as we see in the passage that hopefully lies open before you now.

I want you to stick a tab or a tassel or a ribbon in that passage to hold it open, but now I want to also open your Bible to Matthew 22:17-21; that’s on page 827 in your pew Bibles. We are looking at TWO passages this morning, and we have to! In Acts 5 we see the disciples wrestling with how to relate to a hostile state government – but the only reason that was a wrestle for them was because of what Jesus had said in Matthew 22:17-21. In essence we need to understand the general rule and the occasional exception in terms of how the church relates to the state. That’s what we’re looking for this morning; so hopefully you have BOTH passages open before you now. We’ll begin with Matthew 22:17-21. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:17–21 ESV)

The General Rule: Render Unto Caesar What Caesar Is Due

Alright, so here in this passage we find the general rule. Jesus tells us to render unto Caesar what Caesar is due. We think of the word “Caesar” as someone’s name, but it is actually a title. It means “Emperor”. Jesus is saying that the Emperor, the King, or in more general terms, the state HAS LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY and therefore, he is DUE appropriate respect, appropriate honour and specifically, appropriate tax revenue from his subject peoples. Now, Jesus rebukes the Roman conception of Imperial authority when he asks whose image was on the coin – by using that word he actually reminds the crowd that Caesar is an image bearer. He is a human being who resembles and represents God, but who is not God himself. In essence, Jesus right sizes our conception of government authority. The Romans treated their Emperors like gods, the Jews were always in rebellion – neither of those is the right approach according to Jesus, rather we should render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s.

Brilliant!

In essence, Jesus says here that Caesar has been delegated certain authority, in the same that our parents have been delegated certain authority. Our parents too are flawed and fallen human beings – and yet, God commands us to obey them and to render unto them appropriate honour and respect. The 5th commandment says:

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Exodus 20:12 ESV)

So over the course of our human lives, generally speaking, we will OBEY GOD by obeying our parents and by obeying our governmental authorities. Both of them have been given responsibilities and both of them have been assigned appropriate authority.

This became standard doctrine in the early church. The Apostle Paul acknowledged the legitimate authority of the Emperor in Romans 13 saying:

“he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, 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.” (Romans 13:4–7 ESV)

So, in this new situation, wherein the church is called to exist inside every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth, we have been given a general rule to guide us along the way and the general rule is this:

RENDER UNTO CAESAR WHAT CAESAR IS DUE.

Pay your taxes.

Show respect.

Obey the law.

Fair enough – BUT what if the STATE forbids you to do what God commands? That is the situation being navigated in Acts 5, so flip forward now to our PRIMARY passage for this morning, Acts 5:17-42 and hear again, the Word of the Lord.

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”

²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. 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.**”³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing.³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail;³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice,⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:17–42 ESV)

This too is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

What If The State Forbids You To Do What God Commands?

So what do we do when the command of the state and the command of God come into conflict? That’s what the Apostles are wrestling with in this story. Jesus had said “render unto Caesar what Caesar is due” but Jesus had also said “go therefore and make disciples” so what do you do when the state forbids you to do what God commands?

Every person under the Lordship of Jesus Christ needs to think this through.

What do we do when a LAWFUL but LESSER authority tells us to do something that clearly contradicts the Word and Will of God?

Young ladies, what if your parents TELL YOU TO GET AN ABORTION? What if they say that having this baby will ruin your life? What if they say that you need to finish university first. What if they say that this is just not the right time! You must ABORT that baby!

What are you going to do?

Are you going to obey your parents?

Or are you going to obey God?

This passage is giving us guidance. In Acts 5:29 Peter states the matter plainly; he says:

“We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29 ESV)

God is our Ultimate Authority – and God has spoken to us authoritatively through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Look again at what Peter says in his brief address before the senate. He says:

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as **Leader and Savior**, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given **to those who obey him**.” (Acts 5:30–32 ESV)

Peter says: “The order of the Universe has been established and declared to us. We’ve got God the Creator UP HERE and he has positioned Jesus – who is truly God and truly Man – as LEADER and SAVIOR over all things going on down here, so HIS AUTHORITY has to be our ULTIMATE authority and therefore HIS WORD TO US trumps your WORD TO US. So, we’re

in a bit of a pickle here fellas. You want us to stop preaching, but YOUR BOSS and OUR BOSS is telling us to keep preaching, so we must obey GOD rather than men.”

Peter is just acting consistently with his new understanding of the universe.

God has exalted Jesus as Leader and Saviour.

That’s why we say that Jesus is Lord! Because he is! He is Leader and Saviour. He is the ruler of all humanity and as such he is the ultimate authority. His word trumps all! There are STILL LESSER AUTHORITIES in the universe, but there are no RIVAL AUTHORITIES. So if your parents or your Premier, or your Prime Minister ever command you to do what God forbids or forbid you to do what God commands, you must obey God rather than men.

That’s the message of this passage.

It’s pretty straight forward.

But how does this work out at street level?

Working This Out In Practice:

Let me walk you through a few guiding principles in terms of practical application. Number 1, obviously you need a clear command.

1. You need a clear command

You can’t just pull out: “We must obey God rather than men” every time your mom asks you to tidy your room. You need a clear command and there is no clear command to wallow in your own filth as a teenager. I know because I’ve looked for it.

And likewise – there is no clear command in the Bible as to what day, what time, how often and in what form we should meet as a church for worship. You see, this is why this whole question became SO CONTROVERSIAL over the course of the pandemic. It forced us to think carefully about what we believe the Bible COMMANDS in terms of the form of our worship gathering. During the worst parts of the pandemic we were only allowed 8 people in the building so as to provide recorded or livestreamed services to the congregation. Then later we were allowed 10 people for any reason – so we had 8 people in here to record on Sunday and then we had multiple gatherings of 10 people at various times during the rest of the week. That’s how “we did it” in the worst of the lockdowns during COVID.

But some people said that Caesar did not have the right to make that demand of us and so they said to Caesar: “we must obey God rather than men.”

Now listen – first of all I want to say how much I respect anybody who is willing to go to prison for the sake of his religious convictions. I don’t have any malice towards the men who made the decisions they did to disobey the government protocols during COVID, so long as they made those decisions out of personal conviction. I have been in personal contact with some of those men. I respect why they did what they did. But I am on the record as disagreeing with those men – for the simple reason that I could not locate a clear command.

Now you might say, “what about Hebrews 10:24-25 which talks about not neglecting to meet together” – what about that? Well – we wrestled with that, believe you me, but that text doesn’t say anything about when we meet or how we meet or whether we have to gather the whole congregation together into one room, it just says we mustn’t neglect our meetings.

Did we neglect our meetings when we obeyed the pandemic restrictions?

I have a pastor friend in Toronto who had a smaller congregation and so in the worst days of COVID he conducted 17 small services for 10 people every week. Was he neglecting to bring his people together because he didn’t gather all 170 of his mostly older flock into one room during

the worst days of the pandemic? Or is there some flexibility around the hows and the wheres of Christian gathering?

I think there is. I think you see it in this passage. Acts 5:42 says:

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:42 ESV)

So it sounds like they had large group meetings and small group meetings and it was all “church” because they together in some form or another teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. That was my understanding – that was our understanding as a Board of Elders – but I happily acknowledge that it was complicated and my point here is just to say, that if you are going to DISOBEY the STATE then you need to have a clear command from God. The Apostles in this text had a clear command from God - it was clear and it was confirmed. Look again at verses 19-21:

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,²⁰ “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. (Acts 5:17–21 ESV)

The Apostles had a clear command from Jesus – the Great Commission – confirmed by an angel of God– and on that basis, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

What I’m arguing for here is simply clarity and caution. In the heat of the battle, when tempers are high, it is easy to see whatever you want to see in the text. Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans 13 – where Paul reiterates the command of Jesus to render unto Caesar, says:

“Few passages of Scripture have been studied and analyzed over the years more than Romans 13:1-7. This history of interpretation has largely been the history of attempts to avoid what the passage at first sight plainly seems to be saying.”¹

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans* in The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 424.

So, if you catch yourself doing that, slow down and seek confirmation – that’s all I’m saying, because you need a clear command before you apply Acts 5:29 to whatever grievance you may have with the government.

And then secondly, you need to maintain a respectful attitude throughout.

2. You need to maintain a respectful attitude

At no point in this story do we hear the Apostles insulting or reviling the members of the Jewish senate. They are respectful. They tell the truth; they pull no punches; but there is no malice and no dishonour. We see the same thing later in the trial of the Apostle Paul. Church history tells us that the Apostle Paul had very poor eyesight and so at one point he does not appear to know who he is talking to. We read about this last week in the RMM. In Acts 23 Paul is talking and someone slaps in the mouth:

Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?”⁴ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?”⁵ And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’” (Acts 23:3–5 ESV)

Paul apologized for inadvertently addressing a ruler of his people with disrespect. Think about that. How many times have you 100% ‘advertently’ addressed a ruler of your people with disrespect? How many Christians need to repent over their bumper sticker game over the last 3 years?

Listen, you can have opinions, you can make your opinions known, you can vote your conscience, but one thing you cannot do as a follower of Jesus Christ is address the leaders of your people with disrespect. That is not an option. Peter knew that. He told his people:

“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Peter 2:17 ESV)

So listen, every once in a while – if you have a clear command – you are going to have to disobey the state, but you never, ever, ever get to be disrespectful. To do that, you’d have to disobey a clear command from God.

Thirdly, if you go down this road – and every once in a while you are going to have to – but if you do, when you do:

3. You need to be prepared to pay the price

Remember the whole point of this series is to re-evaluate everything we think we know about church – and there are people who have thought that at various points in our history that if the government is in the wrong, then we as the church have the right to violent resistance. But that isn’t what the Bible says. The Bible says that if the government forbids you to do what God commands, or commands you to do what God forbids, you have the right to disobey AND the associated privilege of being beaten and abused for the sake of the name.

That’s what happened in this story.

Look at verses 40-41:

when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. (Acts 5:40–41 ESV)

The Tyndale New Testament Commentary points out the obvious here, saying:

“It may be observed that neither here, nor anywhere else, do the Christians respond with violence to being arrested”²

²I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 126.

I wish that went without saying, but as history reminds us it doesn't. We do not use the sword to protect or extend our permission and privilege in the culture. We stand our ground. We speak the truth. And we suffer the consequences, even rejoicing when we are counted worthy to suffer on behalf of the Name.

And then lastly, when you find yourself in a situation like this – when you have to say no to the government - you must be careful to maintain your focus on the mission that was given to you by Christ.

4. You need to maintain focus on the mission

When we feel justified in conflict, we often push too hard and fight too long. The Apostles could have said: “They started it! They drew first blood! Now we need to commit ourselves to bringing down this corrupt and ungodly government!” Instead, as we read in verse 42:

“every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:42 ESV)

That's my hope for the Canadian evangelical church in the aftermath of COVID. We need to get back to work! We need to focus on the mission! We were not told to become a political action committee. We were not told to wage constant war on the government. We were told to teach and preach that the Christ is Jesus! So let's get back to that! Let's go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that Jesus has commanded. And lo – he will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

