

The Christian and Civil Government (5th)

(Today we continue looking at the relationship of civil government and the Christian as taught in the Scriptures. Today's study revolves around I Peter 2:13-17.)

In our last study we reviewed Romans 13:1-7 regarding civil government because it is referenced in article one of the confessions verifying that civil government is ordained by God. Now we will consider the verses supplied from I Peter. Though the *London Baptist Confession* does not reference any verses from I Peter in article one, it does list verse seventeen in article three. The *Westminster* and the *1862 Presbyterian USA* confessions give I Peter 2:13-14, while the *Cumberland Presbyterian Confession* lists I Peter 2:13-17. Therefore, we will now look at these verses regarding the Christian's duty to civil government. They are as follows:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using *your* liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all *men*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

These verses, along with following verses through verse seven of chapter three, refer to the subject of submission to authority in every area of life. I believe they are connected to verses twelve through nineteen regarding suffering, even at the hand of civil government. Obviously, there are other related passages within this epistle concerning these subjects, but we will limit our discussion to the passages referenced in the confessions. Before doing so, allow me to remind you that Acts 5:29, "We ought to obey God rather than men," must never be forgotten.

The passage begins with the plain and simple command of God: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." This is an essential element for peace and orderliness in any society. It is clear that because of the violence and mob rule that is escalating daily, not only in our own nation but throughout the world, submission to authority has virtually vanished. Along with submission is giving respect (honor) to those in authority. Our text refers to all in authority and emphasizes king and governors. I am appalled at professing Christians, regardless of their political views, that often malign, ridicule, and make fun of our leaders in government. The rulers in Peter's day were as wicked and vile as we have today. In fact, the current king in power when Peter wrote this epistle was very likely Nero, who was an extremely harsh, wicked, vile, and unjust king, though it appears that the first five years of his kingship was good. Yes, John the Baptist condemned Herod for his adultery with his brother's wife; and Jesus called Herod a fox. They were in a unique setting that qualified them to act as they did. However, we never find any New Testament minister speaking disrespectfully of the civil authority in any way. Without question ministers are to preach against sin and condemn any and all sins regardless of the person committing them; however, unless the civil authority is a member of the congregation it is not to pass judgment on him. On the other hand, if the President of the United States (as well as any civil power) is the member of a congregation, that congregation should discipline him for any and all sins (especially the public sins generally associated with politicians) whether it be lying, fornication, adultery, railing, drunkenness, or any such sin. See I Corinthians 5:11-13. He does not deserve special treatment. But we do not find Christians in general or any congregation in particular in the New Testament showing disrespect for any office in civil government, nor did they march, protest, or fight against the government

in any way. Why are Christians to live this way? For the Lord's sake and because we are servants of God. This is aligned with Romans 13:5 where Paul said that the Christian is to obey "for conscience sake."

Though verses eighteen and following were not listed in the confessions, I believe they should be considered with the verses under consideration because of the context. The principle of submission was established in verse thirteen: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." Therefore, in verses eighteen through verse twenty, servants are addressed to obey their masters. They were further instructed to not only obey the "good and gentle" masters, but they were to submit to the forward or difficult or harsh masters. Verse nineteen further says, "For this *is* thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully." The Greek word for "thankworthy" is the same word that is translated "grace" in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are ye saved." And the word "acceptable" in verse twenty is the same Greek word. In short, when we suffer from the authority over us as a Christian; that is, when we do good and suffer unjustly for it (whether as a servant or a citizen under civil authority or in any situation of life) we are manifesting the grace of God in our lives. God, through the inspiration of Peter, stated in verse twenty that we are called to such and Christ is our example in such suffering. In fact, our Lord taught us that the life of a Christian is a life of suffering and so do the epistles. See Mark 10:30; Acts 14:22; II Timothy 3:12; I Peter 4:12-16, and other related passages. As we previously noted, in the days of Christ there were unjust taxes and yet He paid them to avoid offence to the civil authority; therefore, by paying unjust taxes today it does not prevent us from worshiping the Lord. However, if we pay them with a spirit of malice and hatred, or any unchristlike attitude, we do not honor God. Equally, when unjust laws are forced on us, we should seek every opportunity as a citizen of the country to change them within the lawful bounds of our government, but it is not the function of the house of God to seek to establish civil laws to advance the gospel of God. When we as a citizen seek to establish civil laws we should not think we are being persecuted as a Christian when others oppose us. However, when we are assembling to worship the Lord in His house and the civil powers work to stop us we must put the Lord first and consider it a blessing to be persecuted for His name's sake. See Matthew 5:10-12; Acts 5:41-42, and other related passages. Also, there are occasions when a congregation or congregations may unite together to appeal to the civil authorities when they are unjustly imposing religious laws on Christians and we plan to say more about this in later studies. For now, we are simply laying the basic foundation and principle regarding the relationship of the Christian to that of civil government. So far we find that though the Christian is to be submissive to the civil government, there are no indications that the civil government is to be involved in the affairs of the congregation of God. In fact, if there are issues within the membership of the assembly, God clearly said that it is to be settled within the congregation and to avoid the civil government, I Corinthians 6:1-8. The Scriptures teach that it is better to be wronged (literally, be treated unjustly) or defrauded than to go to the civil authorities which are often unbelievers and unjust people. If Matthew 18:15-18 and I Corinthians 6:1-8 were practiced among professing Christians it is likely the divorce rate would not be so high among church members or more would be identified "as an heathen ... and a publican."

I Peter 2:15 plainly teaches that submission to civil government is "the will of God." Furthermore, it is with such "well doing" that the Christian stops the mouth of unbelievers. As servants of God, we are to live so that the cause of Christ is not wickedly or unjustly spoken against not only by the civil government, but by any authority. (Compare I Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:5.) There is no place for the professing Christian to be boisterous or a loud mouth individual. While we are to pray for those in authority over us in civil government, it is so that we may "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty," I Timothy 2:2. Peter followed up in his epistle that when we are asked to give an account of our faith, that we are to answer with "meekness and fear," I Peter 3:15. He further stated that when the opposition speaks evil of us as evil doers they will be ashamed in their false accusations of our good lifestyle in Christ, verse sixteen. In verse seventeen, he said, "For *it is* better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing." In other words, when setting all of these verses in context

with the Christian's relationship to that of civil government, our role is more that of living in submission to civil government than by a Christian lobby or political action group striving to enforce Christian principles on the government. The Lord willing, we plan to discuss this in more details in the future, but our time is up for today. May the Lord direct us with wisdom to live as Christians in every area of life.