

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

As the field leader in Brazil, I had the responsibility to oversee missionaries and resolve church problems. South of us in Campo Grande, a missionary had established a church and later left the field. After awhile that church had problems and some of the members sought help from a Brazilian pastor of a large Baptist church in that city. This man was well known and respected and besides being a pastor, he was a lawyer. Rev. Jonatan contacted me, and I hurried the 500 miles to meet with him and the church leadership.

Over time I established a good friendship with this pastor. One day I told him that as an American ministering in Brazil I had difficulty teaching Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, and I asked him how he taught those texts to his church and in his ministry. I explained that many in America interpret those verses quite literally. His response was “Brazil has many laws that are not right.” It took some time for that answer to become meaningful to me.

When the founding fathers of the United States dumped tea into the bay of Boston, they were disobeying the king and refusing to pay taxes. In our Declaration of Independence, one discovers a long list of grievances against the king of England. Our fathers declared a truth that they believed in so strongly that they were willing to die for it:

WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.¹

This conviction is not found in Romans or Peter, but it is revealed in Daniel 3 and 6 and in Acts 4. It has been a long standing Baptist Distinctive that allegiance to God comes before loyalty to human government. When government and those who represent it violate God ordained standards of good conduct and fair treatment of its peoples and seek to obligate its citizens to follow suit, Christians should take a stand; and that action may bring upon them negative consequences, like the fiery furnace in Daniel 3. Our nation’s fathers chose to disobey the king knowing that his wrath would pursue them, and many lost their lives for the stand they took. A study of that history has led me to conclude that many of those men had the conviction that God was with them.

In the United States today, our courts have made several unrighteous laws that violate sound biblical teaching as well as the laws of nature (God’s Book of Works). It is not even the duty of our courts to make laws; the ninth and tenth amendments have been blatantly violated; and yet congress does nothing to stop the activist courts. Our politicians have voted themselves enormous salaries and expense accounts with super retirement and

¹ *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America*, © 1998 by the Cato Institute, Washington, D.C.

medical benefits. The lobbyists place so much pressure on our representatives with large donations to their campaign accounts that it is almost impossible for justice and the will of the governed to win even a hearing, much less a vote in favor of the people that is constitutional.

The third dispensation on the chart that follows the chapter on the *Doctrine of the Holy Scriptures* is Human Government. A foundation for civil government was laid by God when Noah and his family left the ark. It is recorded in Genesis 9:4-6:

Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.

Dispensational theologians believe that to comply with this passage, man would be obligated to establish a judicial system that would require some form of civil government. Man is a self-centered sinner, and the Bible reveals corruption among leaders in civil governments and in God's services. Though government has its place in a smooth running society and God uses governments, human government is not always perfect.

Peter, in 1 Peter 2:13-16, admonishes us to:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.

According to this passage the God-appointed roles of human government are to: 1) punish evildoers and 2) praise those who do right. The God-ordained responsibilities of the Christian are to: 1) be submissive to the institution of government and 2) not use his freedom in Christ as a motive to violate the laws of government.

Paul, in Romans 13:1-7, wrote:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

According to this passage the purposes for civil government are to: 1. stop evil behavior, 2) promote good behavior, and 3) administer righteous justice as God's minister. The responsibilities of the Christian toward government that does these things are to: 1) submit to authority, 2) pay taxes, and 3) honor leaders.

One could add 1 Timothy 2:1-2, where we are told to pray for our rulers so that we might lead a peaceful life; Proverbs 16:10, where government is told to administer justice; Proverbs 20:26, where government is instructed to drive out the wicked; Proverbs 29:4, where government is admonished to maintain stability and to not accept bribes; and Deuteronomy 17:14-18, where the Lord said that kings were not to enrich themselves but were to serve the people. The Bible teaches that governments bear the sword to uphold righteousness, not to oppress the people.

Daniel 2:41-45 gives us a picture of God's attitude toward corrupt, power hungry people who use government in the wrong way. God will one day demolish those kingdoms. Daniel 7:19-27 tells us that God sees these kingdoms as horrible beasts that He will destroy.

When Israel desired to be like the nations around them by requesting that Samuel give them a king, God told Samuel: "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them." (1 Samuel 8:7) Human government is important and God laid the foundation for it, but the Lord really desires to be the king over His people. We know that when Christ returns, a theocratic kingdom will be established with Him as the King.

When government abuses its powers, upholds evil, and resists righteousness and those things that would honor God, what should the followers of Jesus Christ do? Daniel's three Hebrew companions stood up for what their consciences told them and were thrown into the fire. Though ungodly leaders conspired against Daniel and passed a law that restricted his daily religious behavior, Daniel worshiped God and was thrown to the hungry lions. When the Apostles Peter and John were ordered to not speak or "teach at all in the name of Jesus" their reply to those leaders was: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18-20) They continued to preach the truth about Jesus Christ in spite of the threat of death from corrupt leaders.

My pastor friend in Brazil was right. What he observed as a lawyer in the Brazilian legal system and what we observed in America, where a school official expelled a boy because he had a Bible in his backpack, where babies are legally killed in the womb, and where murders are given light sentences is blatant defiance of God and His desires for us. We

must stand for righteousness and our biblically based convictions. However, the Scriptures give us no right to use violence, such as killing abortion clinic doctors. In our stand for what is right we should pray and use every peaceful method at our disposal in an effort to bring about change and not yield to the ways of the world. In America, we have a representative government. Citizens should go to the ballot box and use it intelligently. I believe that Christians are partly to blame for the moral decay in America.

Care must be taken to maintain a Christ honoring lifestyle. The world should see our lives and praise God. For example, we should pay our taxes; but carefully searching the laws for “loopholes” is part of being a good steward of what God has given to us. I personally believe that the double taxing of dividends is unjust and the current estate tax, properly called the “death tax,” is double taxing and wrong. When the wealthy find ways to avoid the death tax by using trusts, charitable remainder trusts, foundations, and limited family partnerships, they are being careful to pay what is due the government and doing their best to save what they can for God and their families, as the Bible teaches.

Christians are pilgrims on this earth waiting for their eternal home. It is God who has placed each of us where we now live. He has admonished us to pray for those in authority over us. The Lord’s words to the exiled Israelites in Babylon are very appropriate to all:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the LORD on its behalf;
for in its welfare you will have welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7)

Romans 13:1-7 This passage is laid-out in a chiasm.

¹ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. (Hosea 8:4a “They have set up kings, but not by Me.”)

² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

³ For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

In a chiasm, the center point is like the bull's eye of a target. It is the focus of the passage. The surrounding points radiate out from the center and are explained by the center.

If we read Romans 13:1-7 linearly, as we do with most of our English writings, the passage, especially verse one, seems to teach a different doctrine from the *Declaration* of the founders of the United States. Romans 13:1 would also appear to disagree with Esther 3:1-4, Daniel 3 and 6, and Acts 4. But, when we recognize the non-linear, chiasmic structure in Romans 13:1-7, we find that Paul is telling us what many other Scriptures teach (Deut. 17:14-18; 1 Sam. 8:5-18; Psa. 10:16; Pro. 14:35; 16:12-13; 20:8, 26, 28; 22:11; 25:5; 29:2; 29:4), that God's will for government is that it reward the good and punish the bad. This universal teaching of Holy Writ, as stated by Paul in verses 3 and 4—being the focal point of a chiasmic pattern—impacts and guides us as we interpret verse 1. Only God honoring governments come with the Lord's approval.

