

Christians as Citizens

As Christians we must, in this world, maneuver amid many different relationships and in so doing maintain a walk worthy of a Christian. There is the relationship of the local church and the church universal. Most Christians are, of course, involved in our immediate family relationships and then with friends and neighbors who may or may not be Christians. Then there is the workplace relationship in which many are involved, and, finally there is the relationship Christians have as citizens of this country. It is because of the latter that Paul in Romans 13 addresses that relationship dealing with civil authority or government.

We should recall that Paul was, at that time, writing to Christians who lived in the capital of the world, the seat of civil authority and power which was ruled by the emperor and the senate of Rome. We can, therefore, certainly understand the importance of Paul's instructions to Christians on this subject.

Being a Christian, as a Roman subject, was truly a mixed bag. Rome's government had brought many advantages, Roman government had brought a certain order and protection and a sense of civilization which produced trade and prosperity. Also with the coming of the Roman government there came also the Roman advancement in architectural acumen and technology. Yet, on the other hand, Roman rule was rife with cruel subjugation, blasphemous emperor worship, oppressive taxation and certain restrictions which infringed on Christian liberty. How then were the Christians, in that relationship, to regard and interact with Rome's civil authority and power?

Surprisingly, Paul in Romans 13, does not address Imperial Rome and the emperor. In describing civil government, and those in positions of authority, Paul writes in the most general of terms in which he does not focus on any specific form of government nor any particular type of civil office. Why is that the case? Paul's instructions were not meant to be "locked" into the then present situation, but were to pertain to all forms of government and applied, not only to the Roman Empire with its emperor, consuls, and senators of that time, but also to the governments in which any Christians might find themselves residing—including those of us who are presently citizens of the United States of America.

Paul establishes an important principle in Romans 13 when he states that there is no authority except from God. In other words, authority is God given. God possesses all power and authority—He is truly, Lord of lords and King of kings! Therefore, all civil authority or power is a delegated authority and power from God. Authority in its purest sense is always good. The problem is that it is not always wielded by and for Divine Good. Yet, authority which does not stray from God's precepts is to be obeyed by all Christians.

Paul states that the primary purpose of civil government is to act as an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil in a society. Since all members of a society are not Christians, God established civil authorities for the welfare of all involved in that society, thus providing security for His people in that society. It is God's intent that government be just and righteous.

Paul sites four major responsibilities of Christians to civil authority; One, subjection to laws which promote the general welfare of citizens and do not infringe upon God's authority; Two, payment of honest monetary requirements; Three, honor and respect to whom it is due; And fourth, intercessory prayer for those in authority.

It soon becomes apparent that since and when the ruling authority is not Christian in all its values of laws of which it enacts, that Christians are to dwell in peace with all men as much as they are able according to that which is in them—or to live in peace as long as that peace is not at the cost of disobeying the Giver of Authority—God. The apostles illustrated this in Acts 5, “Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Civil disobedience is only acceptable by Christians when obedience to man would be in direct disobedience to God as its primary intent. If and when civil authority has diverged from its righteous intent as God ordained, and begins on a path of evil intent of “fighting against God” then Christians must resolve to obey God rather than men, whatever the cost. Disobedience always has a consequence whether it be of man or of God. The Christian is instructed to not fear man who can only take their lives, but rather to fear God who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

The appropriate question Christians must ask is, can we subject ourselves to certain ordinances of man and not transgress against God? If it is possible to submit without doing damage to God's ordinances, then submission is required regardless of personal discomfort or humbling of pride that results. To misinterpret our own so-called rights as a mere citizen and those of a Christian citizen is a grave error. To rebel against unpleasant demands of civil authority is not the same as rebelling against unholy demands of civil authority.

The perfect scenario is that all men, Christian and otherwise, be subject to the higher powers. Yet, since we as Christians do not live in a perfect world ruled in righteousness, we must always be obedient to God first and then to man. This is what the Scriptures teach and what true Christians practice.

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