

The Christian Response to the Authority of Government

The Bible tells us that Christ possesses all authority and as followers of Christ, we are to preach the gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15). The Bible also tells us to be in subjection and submit to governing authorities (Romans 13:1-2, 4-5, 1 Peter 2:13-14). What happens when human authority conflicts with the commands of God? **Is being in subjection to authority or submitting to authority the same as blindly obeying that authority? No!** That would mean that God had given us commands that cannot be kept for human authority often conflicts with God's commands.

Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Mark 16:15 (NASB)

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."

Romans 13:1-2, 4-5 (NASB)

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

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.

1 Peter 2:13-14 (NASB)

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

To have a proper view of governmental authority we need a good understanding of how the Bible teaches us. Throughout the Bible, we see many plainly stated commands and truths that are common to all believers. God has also given us many examples to follow (1 Corinthians 10:11) from the lives of ordinary people who demonstrated extraordinary faith when they came in conflict with human authority. In addition, each Christian will hold beliefs of a purely personal nature dictated by the individual's conscience (see Romans

14). Recognizing the different ways the Bible teaches us helps us prioritize what we believe and helps us know how to teach others. In the Bible, we will see plainly stated truths, examples, and lessons about individual conscience, and God's uses all of these to teach us about our response to governmental authority.

1 Corinthians 10:11a (NASB)

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction...

From the plainly stated truths, we can take direct lessons but we must not add to these words. From examples, we may find instructive lessons that help us make decisions but many of those decisions may only apply to the individual. However, the examples God gives us are consistent with the commands of God and His unchanging nature. If we are to have an accurate view of the Bible's teachings then our beliefs must also be consistent with the commands, truths, and examples God gives us. Beliefs that are purely personal must remain just that, purely personal. As we organize our beliefs and give them proper emphasis, we should always strive to reconcile our beliefs with the Bible. When we find conflict between our beliefs and the Bible's teaching it is our beliefs that must change because we cannot change the word of God.

For example, many believe that the Bible teaches us to "obey" governmental authority. This is not true. The Bible tells us to submit, to be in subjection, but it does not teach us to obey. Submission, subjection, these are plainly stated truths but we also find many examples to follow from those who disobeyed the laws of man in order to obey the commands of God. These examples demonstrate a willingness to submit to authority and to suffer the consequences when confronted with such choices.

How we respond to governmental authority is not always simple. So, God provides us with many different views into complex situations. We see those who obeyed God and faced death. Many of these died for their faith and obedience to God. Many others escaped death because of their faith. Others used the political tools of their day and their rights to stay alive in order to continue serving God. The Apostle Paul

used his rights as a Roman citizen to retain his freedom and to avoid certain death (Acts 22:25 and Act 25:11). Esther used her rights as Queen to thwart a plot to kill the Jews (see the Book of Esther). These examples are very useful for Christians that live in a “free society” where we must use every legal means to protect our religious freedom following the examples of Paul and Esther.

Acts 22:25b (NASB)

²⁵ "...Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?"

Acts 25:11 (NASB)

"If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar."

Discussed in the Books of Exodus and Hebrews the King of Egypt enslaved the Hebrews and wanted to limit their growth as a nation commanding that all male newborns to be slain. The midwives disobeyed the King, and God blessed the midwives (Exodus 1:16-17, 20-21). The parents of Moses disobeyed the Egyptian king's edict and hid Moses saving him from death (Hebrews 11:23).

Exodus 1:16b-17, 20-21 (NASB)

¹⁶if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live. ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live.

²⁰ So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. ²¹ Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

Hebrews 11:23 (NASB)

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

In Daniel, we find three Hebrews who refused to obey the command of the King that required them to worship an idol. These three expected God's deliverance but were willing to suffer the consequences, a furnace of blazing fire, but God graciously delivered them (Daniel 3:17-18, 27). These three suffered because they chose to obey a direct command of God not to worship idols (Exodus 34:14). Christians in many countries have experienced persecution, commanded by their government not to meet together to worship God, but such governmental commands violate the Bible's teachings for believers to assemble. The Christians in those countries must determine how they will meet but

they must also be in subjection and willing to accept the consequences from governmental authority.

Daniel 3:17-18, 27b (NASB)

¹⁷ "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

²⁷the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.

Exodus 34:14a (NASB) —for you shall not worship any other god...

As a matter of devotion and personal conscience Daniel prayed to God three times a day, disobeying a law that prohibited such prayer. Daniel was condemned to the lion's den but God delivered him (Daniel 6:10, 16, 22). God did not command all Hebrews to pray three times a day but Daniel suffered because of a matter of personal conscience, his devotional practice. Today, even in countries with so-called religious freedom we see Christians persecuted over personal conscience issues. There are many laws and pending legislation that impose mandatory biometric enrollment. Many object to biometrics because of similarities to the mark of the beast (see Revelation 13:16-18). Others object to any photo identification. Such laws would force many Christians who have strong personal religious beliefs to choose between conscience and survival, as was the case with Daniel.

Daniel 6:10b, 16a, 22 (NASB)

¹⁰and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.

¹⁶ Then the king gave orders, and Daniel was brought in and cast into the lions' den....

²² "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths and they have not harmed me, inasmuch as I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O king, I have committed no crime."

The Book of Acts also has many examples of extraordinary faith when believers faced persecution from governmental authority. Peter and the other apostles disobeyed their leaders and preached the gospel telling their leaders, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:28-29). Their actions brought about suffering because they obeyed God rather than men (Acts 5:40-41). This was not an act of rebellion

against authority for Peter and John had previously told their leaders “you be the judge,” but they went on to declare their choice to obey God knowing the consequences (Acts 4:19, 20).

Acts 5:28-29 (NASB)

²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”

Acts 5:40b-41 (NASB)

⁴⁰they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Acts 4:19b-20 (NASB)

¹⁹Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; ²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.

One of government’s main purposes is to maintain order in a society (Romans 13:4-5, 1 Peter 2:14). When Christians disobey God and disobey government, they can expect consequences. When Christians obey God and disobey government, they may suffer the unjust (but expected) consequences from government (1 Peter 4:15-16). Christians must live with the expectation of persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Although Christians are typically “law-abiding,” we are in a world that is directly opposed to what Christ taught and what Christians believe. Persecution will happen.

1 Peter 4:15-16 (NASB)

¹⁵ Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; ¹⁶ but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

2 Timothy 3:12 (NASB)

¹² Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Persecution against Christians is increasing around the world. For the first time in history, there exists the political will and technology to identify, track, and control every person in the world. These are facts, not speculations. Even in the United States, the balance of power is shifting from the people ruling government to the government ruling the people. **How will such powers be used when the compelling interests of government overrule the religious rights of the individual?**

Persecution must be expected for those who live godly lives. Existing freedoms carry no enduring promise. Freedom is only possible through diligence, sacrifice, and knowledge. The Bible instructs us that cowardice, willful ignorance (Hosea 4:6), and disobedience to God’s word, are actions that bring about suffering and enslavement. We must fully accept our biblical obligations if the gospel is to be preached to the whole the world.

Hosea 4:6a (NASB)

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge....

Christians do not always agree but when we see others suffer, we must act. All Christians collectively have the shared obligation to preach the gospel and we are all members of the body of Christ, the church. When we see any injustice or religious freedom threatened, we must act (1 Corinthians 12:12, 26). How will God judge us when by our inaction or silence we give approval to the tools of tyranny when they are unleashed against fellow believers (James 4:17)?

1 Corinthians 12:12 (NASB)

For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:26 (NASB)

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

James 4:17 (NASB)

Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the few Christians who stood up against Nazi Germany said, “To not act, is to act.” To remain obedient to God under any circumstance Christians must know how to respond to governmental authority in a way that is biblically solid. Ignorance is not an option.

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