

Government: Getting Along With Caesar • Romans 13:1-7

What do you think of churches where patriotic sermons are regularly preached? Where overwhelming preference is given to one political party? Where there is endorsement of right-wing politics? Where the national flag is prominently displayed? Where great emphasis is placed on being a Christian nation? Where strong stands are taken against those who are not Christians or do not agree with Christians? Of course, I'm describing German churches in the 1920s and 1930s. Led by the teachings of theologian Carl Schmidt, Christians and churches legitimized Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party.

The relationship of Christians to government dates back to the time of Jesus Christ. It was one of the hottest issues among those who asked Jesus questions and debated about God's kingdom and the Roman Empire. When Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay the heavy taxes that Rome required his response was, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." At the end of his public teaching Jesus was accused of the capital crime of treason because he claimed to be a king and the only king in Rome was supposed to be Caesar. Even after Jesus, much of the New Testament book of Acts is about St. Paul's relationship to the Roman courts and his privileges as a Roman citizen.

The New Testament church was born under a government that legalized slavery, tolerated abortion, taxed severely, violated basic human rights and executed large numbers of people. But it was also a government that established and insured peace, built roads that are still usable today, expanded commerce and prosperity and offered more justice than any other government in their world. There is a sense in which Christianity was able to take root and grow because of the positive aspects of the Roman rule.

The ancient issues have not gone away. There are Christians in America today who are so loyal to this country that they would readily lay down

their lives for America. There are others who hate our government so much that they are willing to blow up buildings and kill innocent people as a form of protest. Our purpose here is not to address present politics. Rather, let's try to understand the basic biblical principles for one of life's most important relationships—government.

The first principle, and one that in a sense governs the other principles that we find in the New Testament, is that government is God's. Please take a look at the Bible for yourself. Chapter 13 of Romans begins with a defining statement: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

We will come back to the "submitting", but for now, understand the importance of the Bible's teaching that "there is no authority except that which God has established." God himself has established government authority. It is a gift from God. It is the means for providing social order in human society. Government is the means for controlling and directing human behavior.

The word the Greeks used for government was the same word they used for the helmsman on a ship. The helmsman of a ship is the person who directs the ship's course.

Government comes in many different forms. Monarchies are rule by kings or queens, aristocracies are rule by nobles, republics (like the United States of America) are rule by representatives and democracies are rule by the people. Neither God nor the Bible establishes any form as the

"right way" of governing. The issue is whether or not they are used righteously.

All government derives its authority from God. At this point Romans 13 differs from the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution that declare government derives its authority from the consent of the gov-

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erned. In other words, as Christians we believe that God has ultimate control and will rule nations as he chooses whether or not that matches the vote of the people.

Having divine authority does not mean that a government is always right. God has also given authority to parents but many parents have abused that authority. God has given authority to the human race over nature but many humans have used that authority to pollute and destroy nature. Governments rule by divine authority but that authority has often been misused.

God's authority extends over every government. The United States, Canada, Russia, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, China, all governments exist and exercise authority with divine permission. No country has more of God's authority than another country, although some have been more faithful to God than others.

When we read the rest of Romans 13 we must not forget this principle of authority. All Christian attitudes toward government authority grow out of the belief that government is God's. The way we speak about our own government or the government of Haiti or Cuba, Holland or Canada does not primarily depend on whether we like the policies, politicians, laws and taxes. We say what we say and do what we do primarily in relationship to the God whom we love and serve and who gives authority to the governments in our world.

We find a second powerful principle that greatly defines the relationship of Christians to their governments in Philippians 3:20: ". . . *our citizenship is in heaven.*" These words were written to the people of the Imperial colony of Philippi. Scattered throughout the Roman Empire were special cities designated as colonies. The people were Roman citizens, often given citizenship after honorably serving 21 years in the army. In the colonies everyone wore Roman clothes, followed Roman customs, lived by Roman laws and spoke the Roman language of Latin. Even though surrounded by people of another language, customs and loyalty they knew they were Romans and lived accordingly. Their loyalty was to Rome.

Some years ago I spent some time in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa. My favorite place to visit there was

the United States Embassy. There I found people who dressed like I dressed and spoke my language. It was very hot, but they had a swimming pool. There was a restaurant there that served hamburgers and Cokes with ice cubes.

In a foreign land I knew I was different from most other people. And it was like that in Philippi—a Roman colony in a non-Roman province of the empire. They understood very well the idea of being a citizen of one place surrounded by people who were different. It was to that group of people that St. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20, ". . . *our citizenship is in heaven.*"

Christians are citizens of heaven. We are like colonists in a foreign land. We think like heaven, dress like heaven, live by heaven's laws and speak heaven's language. Our first and highest loyalty is to heaven and to the King of heaven, Jesus Christ. It is quite secondary that Christians happen to be English, French, German, Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, Canadian or American. We live and work here temporarily. We are foreigners on earth. Our citizenship is in heaven. According to II Corinthians 5:20 we are ambassadors for Jesus Christ. In other words, we are heaven's representatives on earth.

The practical implications of heavenly citizenship are many. It means we have more in common with Christians from a different country than we have with non-Christians who grew up around us. The highest affinity is a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Everything we say and do on earth is most about our belonging in heaven.

It is with these powerful principles governing our thinking that we move to the third principle of Christian relationship to government in Romans 13:1-7 where it says:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For

he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of consciousness.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

It is a Christian's responsibility to respect, submit and do what is right. These would be easy words for Christians to read and follow if they were set in a backdrop of a godly, Christian government; but they were not. The only govern-

ment the original readers knew was the Roman government that was heathen and anti-Christian. The leaders worshipped pagan idols. They persecuted, enslaved, imprisoned, overtaxed and crucified Christians by the tens of thousands.

Christians stood out in the Roman Empire as supernatural. They did things the Romans could not figure out. Caesar took away their rights and they spoke of him with respect. The Romans taxed them into poverty and they paid their full taxes honorably. Soldiers mistreated them and they submitted. Christians did what was right and good even when they were treated in ways that were wrong and bad. They did not win the Roman Empire with weapons or litigation or protest or anger or political organization. They turned an entire empire to Jesus Christ with love and integrity and respect and submission and by doing what was right.

Those early Christians obeyed the words of I Timothy 2:1-4 where they were told to pray "*for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*" Christians are those who pray for the good of political leaders no matter what their policies or behavior.

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How did they do that? The natural response to that kind of government injustice is to rise up with anger and antagonism. But those early Christians constantly came back to their love and loyalty for Jesus Christ and the conviction that their citizenship was in heaven.

Does all of this work today? The evidence says yes. It is estimated that in 1949 there were one million Christians in the country of China. They had lived under a government that was amazingly sympathetic to Christians and won-

derfully open to missionaries. When the communists took over they expelled the missionaries and persecuted the Christians, killing hundreds of thousands of them. Under the worst of government conditions the church in

China has grown to over 60 million. Christians do not need an agreeable government to live Christianly because our citizenship is in heaven.

But, what about Americans today? As I see it, there has never been a time in history when Christians have been more involved in politics and government. In most cases it has been for wonderful good. Christians have taken advantage of the fantastic opportunities God has given to us in a free and democratic society. It is wonderful to see godly men and woman representing Jesus Christ in political parties, in the courts, in the legislature and on city councils and school boards. It is very good.

But let us never begin to think that we belong here or that our true citizenship is in America. We are Christians. We are citizens of heaven. Our first loyalty is to Jesus Christ. He is our first love.

At the other extreme are those who profess to be Christians and behave as if they were heathen. They speak vicious words against the government. They do not submit to political leaders. They refuse to pay taxes or do so with great complaint in direct defiance of God and the Bible. They depend on human power rather than on Christian faith. They fail to respect and pray for

the president and others that are in authority even though that is what God says a Christian is to do.

We at Wooddale Church are delighted that many Christians from this church are active in government and politics serving as salt and light for Jesus Christ. But we understand the primary role of the church—gathered as biblical and spiritual, not political. It is our call to worship and obey God, learning together how to live like Jesus Christ regardless of the changing politics around us.

Let it be seen in us and said of us that we are Christians. Let there be not doubt in our hearts, our words or our actions that we will live like heaven on earth as ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

When a heathen government exiled St. John on the prison island of Patmos because of his Christian faith he wrote the book of Revelation. In it he looked forward to the future when there would be no Rome or Israel, Babylon or Brazil or United States of America. He looked forward to a future time when we would be in our homeland of heaven—people from every tongue, tribe

and nation. He described that wonderful day to come in Revelation 11:15 when he wrote, “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.*”

Until that day comes, we are called to live faithfully for Jesus Christ.

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