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Politics and the Christian Worldview

By Freddy Davis

Romans 13:1-7, for some people, seems to indicate that Christians are not to push back against government authorities, but are to be completely submissive to them. This passage reads:

1 Every person is to be subject 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. 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 servant 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 servant 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 the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

So based on this, how should Christians act in relationship to the "governing authorities?"

The Purpose of Government

In truth, the answer to the preceding question is a bit more complicated than most realize. The concept of "subjection to authorities" needs to be more fully understood before giving a definitive answer.

Before doing that, though, we need to say one word about what government's purpose is *not*, according to the Bible. It is not the purpose of the institution of government to do the work of ministry. This does not mean, of course, that the operation of the government can legitimately be done based on non-biblical values. Just because the government's purpose is not to evangelize does not mean that those working in government should check their faith at the door. No, Christians, no matter what line of work they happen to be in, need to live out their faith in every part of life. To complete the thought, in an institutional sense, it is the work of the church to evangelize the world. The work of government is different.

So just what is that work? To get at this deeper insight, we need to begin by grasping the biblical understanding of the purpose of government. What does the Bible say about that? There are actually two functions that are expressed.

The first function is to maintain order. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 expresses it this way: *1 First of all, then, I urge that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made in behalf of all people, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.*

The very idea of the citizenry leading a "tranquil and quiet life" means that there has to be a societal environment which allows that to happen. In societies where crime and violence are rampant, justice is not provided in the legal system, and the economy is in free fall, the citizens are not able to focus on accomplishing the best for themselves and their families. They are having to be in a defensive mode for the

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purpose of survival. It is the government that has the power and the responsibility to maintain order in society so individuals can go about life to accomplish what God has given them to do.

The second function of government is to punish the guilty and protect the innocent. 1 Peter 2:13-15 expresses it this way: *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. 15 For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.*

Thus, it is not enough for the government to provide order in society, it must do it in a particular way. It must do it in a way that is objectively just. The very concept of justice means that those who are guilty of wrongs need to be punished, and those who are innocent must be protected. This requires a set of governing values that are able to make that determination. Just any set of values will not do. The only values that are truly able to give that kind of guidance are biblical values. So while it is not the job of government to evangelize the world, it is required to do its work in a way that is compatible with biblical values.

Who Are the Rulers?

Another important matter that must be understood, in order to get at the truth about how Christians need to deal with politics, has to do with the nature of the authorities who lead out in government.

In the day when the New Testament was written, the western world was dominated by the Roman Empire. On the empire level, it was headed by emperors (dictators). At more local levels, the various locations

within the empire were ruled by kings, governors, and procurators who were appointed by the emperor and his advisors. These leaders were all essentially lawmaker, executive officer, and judge. They told the people how it was going to be, and the citizens had no recourse. They had no say in anything related to how the government was run, and no responsibility for how political decisions turned out. Based on these circumstances, the New Testament writers, guided by God's revelation in Scripture, shared with believers in the churches that they should be good citizens by obeying the law and praying for those in power. The only caveat was that they should not deny their faith (see Daniel chapters 1, 3, & 6; Mark 12:17; Acts 5:17-32).

The circumstances in modern day America are quite different. We don't have dictators that we must obey. In fact, our political leaders are not rulers in any sense of the word. In the American system of government, the law is the ruler, and it is the law that citizens must be obedient to (again, as long as the law does not require us to deny our faith). Thus, obeying the government is not obedience to persons, but to the law.

Regarding persons in leadership, they are officials who have been put in place by the populace to represent the public interest. If they fail to do that, it is up to the citizens to remove them and replace them with people who will. That puts the citizen in a very different position from what existed in the Roman empire.

In America, rather than being subjects of a ruler, we are stewards of the government system. In other words, we are responsible before God for managing what goes on in government. As such, it is required of us, as citizens, to monitor the work of the representatives we elect, and hold them accountable for the leadership they provide. If they represent us well, according to

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our values and expectations, we can allow them to continue leading. If they do not, we are responsible for removing them from office and inserting someone else.

In the process of doing this, we are not freed from the responsibility of obeying the law and acting as good citizens. And if we do not, then the people we have placed in authority have the job of fulfilling their roles and executing their responsibilities. They are agents of the government tasked with maintaining order and providing actual justice. In that respect, we are to follow Paul's and Peter's admonitions in Scripture – not as subjects to be dictated to, but as good stewards who take their stewardship responsibilities seriously.

How Should American Christians Act Politically?

So, how should American Christians act politically? In a nutshell ... as good stewards. The first business of a good steward is to be obedient to the law. The law exists for the purpose of providing society with order and justice so that the work of God can be accomplished in society. Beyond that, God has put us in a position where we are responsible for selecting our representatives. We are God's stewards in the political arena and are responsible before Him to manage the political system. As to how that works out specifically in the life of any particular individual,

there will be differences according to God's leading.

God calls some to actually be involved in various ways as a part of the government structure. Some might sense God's leading to enter the political arena and strive for elective office. These will be people who work from the inside as various government leaders.

There will be others who might feel led to enter government service in other capacities – in the judicial arena or as a part of the government bureaucracy. Still others might sense God's leading to work as advocates for His purposes from outside the halls of government – perhaps as lobbyists, or advocates for various godly causes. This could be done either privately or as part of a non-profit or service organization.

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But those kinds of work are not for everyone. While God does lead some people into those arenas, everyone is God's steward of the political process, and at the very least must be informed, faithful voters. Since America is a democratic republic, it is the citizens who are responsible for selecting representatives who will represent them. Voting is the ultimate way Christians are able to express their stewardship responsibility, and not being active in this way makes us disobedient to God.

Since God has ordained government as the institution responsible for keeping order in society and insuring justice, Christians, as His faithful servants, need to be good citizens both by obeying the law and by being responsible stewards of the political system. It is by being faithful in this area that we are able to partner with God to create the kind of societal environment that allows His purposes to prevail.