

The Christian and Civil Government

In order to properly understand the relationship of the Christian to the civil government, it is necessary to briefly consider the function of governments in the overall scheme of divine redemption, as viewed in the context of the Bible as a whole. There are great principles which must be carefully considered by way of introduction to this important theme. It is commonly believed that there are three institutions of divine origin: the home, civil government, and the church. I do not believe that is an absolutely accurate concept. Certainly both the home and the church are of divine origin, but did civil government actually commence with divine approval?

The Origin of Civil Government – The first civil government of which one reads in the Bible was founded by Nimrod: “the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar” (Gen. 10:10). Nimrod, whose name signifies, “Let us rebel,”¹ was a mighty hunter before Jehovah (10:9). Of this passage Clarke notes: “The word *tsayid*, which we render *hunter* signifies *prey*; and is applied in the Scriptures to the *hunting of men* by persecution, oppression, and tyranny. Hence, it is likely that Nimrod, having acquired power, used it in tyranny and oppression; and by rapine and violence founded that dominion which was the first distinguished by the name of a *kingdom* of the face of the earth.”²

Human civil government was thus founded in rebellion to God. Centuries later, when the Israelites requested a monarch that they might “be like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5, 20), though Jehovah gave them a king in his anger (Hos. 13:11), their desire for such a ruler clearly reflected a rejection of the Lord’s arrangement for them (1 Sam. 8:7).

If civil government was originally initiated in rebellion to God, then it is not of divine origin. In starting human governments, men surrendered the control of their affairs to Satan, hence, the devil is said to be the prince of this world (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In fact, Christ clearly referred to his impending arrest by the civil authorities when he said: “...the prince of the world cometh: and he hath

nothing in me” (Jn. 14:30). Moreover, in the wilderness temptation, Satan showed Christ “all the kingdoms of the world” and promised, upon the condition that the Lord would worship him, “To thee will I give all this authority, and the glory of them: for it hath been delivered (Grk. – *paradedotai*, perfect tense – past action with abiding results) unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it” (Lk. 4:6). It need hardly be pointed out that if Christ had known that Satan was merely lying, *there would have been no temptation in the diabolic suggestion!* I am fully aware that elsewhere the Bible says that “the higher powers are ordained of God,” and that will be considered presently.

God’s Sovereignty in the World – “The term ‘sovereignty’ connotes a situation in which a person, from his innate dignity, exercises supreme power, with no areas of his province outside his jurisdiction.”³ God is the sovereign of the universe. He is in control of all things ultimately! Now it is a fact that Jehovah desires that all men serve him by *voluntary submission*, but when they do not, he can, and does, take charge of earthly affairs to bring about his own redemptive purpose. The Bible is literally filled with examples of this truth. Observe the following.

(1) *God exercises providential control over the nations of the world.* Daniel informs us that ultimately it is “the Most High” that “ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the lowest of men” (Dan. 4:17). The Almighty removes kings and sets up kings (Dan. 2:21). Indeed, “he is ruler over the nations” (Psa. 22:28). Of world powers Paul says that God determines their appointed seasons (i.e., the duration of their administrations) and the bounds of their habitations (the extent of their conquests) (Acts 17:26). Christ plainly said that Pilate could have exercised no authority against him except by divine permission (Jn. 19:11).

(2) *God can, consistent with his own holiness, use evil men to providentially bring about ultimate good in his world.* Here is a tremendous Bible principle that needs to be recognized: the Lord can take wicked men, who are in absolute rebellion to him, and use them as instruments of vengeance to punish other evil people, or to maintain order in society. Note: (a) When Israel became deeply involved in idolatry, Jehovah raised up Assyrians to be ‘the rod of

mine anger,' he said (Isa. 10:5). He sent the haughty Assyrians against profane Israel, and yet, amazingly, the Assyrians had no idea that they were accomplishing Heaven's will ["Howbeit he meaneth not so..." 10:7]. (b) When Assyria needed to be punished (Isa. 10:12, 24,25), God exalted the Chaldeans [Babylonians] to overthrow them, and to subdue the kingdom of Judah (Hab. 1:5 ff). The evil Nebuchadnezzar, whom the Lord called "my servant" (Jer. 25:9), was employed as an instrument to this end. (c) Then, the Babylonians, by the decree of God, were conquered by the Medes and Persians, whom the Lord denominated his "consecrated ones" (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). (d) Under Jehovah's direction, the Medes and Persians were subdued by the Greeks, led by the "rough he-goat," Alexander the Great (Dan. 8:5, 21; cf. 2:39). (e) The Greeks were eventually destroyed by the Roman armies [God's armies (Mt. 22:7)] to punish Jerusalem and the Jews.

The Function of Civil Government – Romans 13:1-7 sets forth the function of civil government. Let us studiously consider this context. *First*, the "higher powers" are identified as the "rulers" of civil government (1,3). *Second*, they are said to be "ordained of God" (1). Exactly what does that expression mean? The word "ordained" translates the Greek term *tetagmenai* [a perfect, passive participle form of *tasso*]. The word simply means, as Arndt and Gingrich observe, to "appoint to or establish in an office ... (the authorities) who are now in power are instituted by God – Rom. 13:1."⁴ The word itself says nothing whatever about the *character* of the *spiritual nature* of the subject involved. The word is not some sort of "sanctified" term which would necessarily suggest that a child of God could function, with the Lord's approval, in that capacity. A form of the word, for instance, is used in Acts 18:2 of Claudius' edict (*diatasso*) which banished all Jews from Rome. *Third*, those who resist the rulers withstand the ordinance (i.e., that which has been appointed) of God and shall thus receive judgment. *Forth*, rulers are appointed to be a terror (i.e., to produce fear) to those who would do evil in society. *Fifth*, the civil authority serves as a "minister of God" for good on behalf of the Christian. "Minister" translates the Greek *diaonos*, meaning "servant;" but, again, with no necessary indication of character suggested. Remember, the evil Nebuchadnezzar was God's "servant" (Jer. 25:9) to chastise Judah; then the Lord punished that king! Moreover, at the time this Roman epistle was penned, Caesar Nero, that wicked, homosexual tyrant, was one of those rulers

who is here called a “minister of God.” The point is this: *just because a function is in some sense a ministry or service to God, does some sense a ministry or service to God, does not necessarily mean that a Christian may serve in that capacity with divine approval!* Also, observe that in Romans 13:4 the roles of the ruler and the Christian are clearly distinguished by the use of the third person and second person pronouns. “...he is a minister of God to thee...” Nowhere in this context is the Christian commissioned to function in the role of an instrument of God’s wrath. *Sixth*, the ruler is said to “bear the sword” as a temporal “avenger of wrath” upon evil doers. Christians are clearly instructed not to avenge themselves (Rom. 12:19); God will render vengeance for them; ultimately – in the judgment (Lk. 18:8). The use of force is necessary to maintain order in this sinful world. Let the civil agents function as *ministers of wrath* in society; let Christians use themselves *as ministers of reconciliation* (II Cor. 5:17-21), employing the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17).

The Christian’s Duty to Government – The Christian’s duty to civil government may be set forth under a three-fold heading: pray, pay, and obey.

(1) Pray – Scripture exhorts us to pray “for kings and all that are in high place; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity” (1 Tim. 2:1,2). Note, though, that the real purpose of the prayer is for the Christian’s benefit.

(2) Pay – Because we do derive benefits from the government for services rendered, it is only right that we: “Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Rom. 13:7). Some have suggested that a Christian may withhold his tax money if the government is involved in immoral enterprises. No, that is not the case. Governments have always promoted wickedness to some extent. The Roman governments may promote wars, finance abortions, etc., the child of God is not implicated in such evils simply because he pays taxes.

(3) Obey – Finally, the Lord’s people have the obligation to “be in subjection to the higher powers” (Rom. 13:1, 5; 1 Pet. 2:13, 14). We must be respectful and obedient to the rulers under which we live. The Christian should be the best possible citizen. However, out

obligations to the government are not without limitations; governmental powers are not unrestricted.

The Limitations of Government – In these times in which we live, it is very probably that there will be increasing conflict between the church of the Lord and human government. We must consider, therefore, how far we may, or may not, go in yielding to the pressures of government. Let us reflect upon the following principles.

(1) *No government has the right to prohibit that which is right.* When the apostles were charged to refrain from speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus, they informed the authorities that they had a greater obligation to a higher power (Acts 4:19, 20; 5:29). Some countries do not allow the importations of Bibles, but a Christian could take God's word to the lost anyhow! In some places it is against the law for a parent to spank his child; could not the child of God, however, lovingly administer discipline according to the principles of the Bible (Prov. 22:15; 23:13, 14)? In California one cannot legally obtain a divorce specifically on the ground of fornication, yet the Lord certainly allowed this for the innocent part in an adulterated marriage (Mt. 5:32; 19:9).

(2) *No government has the right to authorize that which is wrong.* A nation may legalize an act, thus making it optional; yet, the act may be immoral and so not permissible. In 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion upon demand, but that does not make the bloody act moral. Drunkenness is legal, but not right. The law of the land allows divorce for every excuse imaginable, but God still permits it only on the basis of fornication (Mt. 19:9).

(3) *No government has the right to force the Christian to violate a divine command or a biblical principle.* Suppose that a civil power, upon the basis of a law that forbids sexual discrimination in employment, issues an edict requiring the Lord's church to employ women preachers? What shall we do? We will, of course, obey God, not man. Or suppose you are a Christian employer in Berkeley, California, and you have a position open in your business establishment. Two people apply for the job. One is a Christian who is reasonably qualified for the work, but the other is a homosexual who happens to be better qualified. The law says you must hire the homosexual, but what would you do? I would not hesitate to violate

such a law. Recently I read an interesting article concerning how the Communists of Russia are training young men to infiltrate Western Europe for the purpose of subversively obtaining information which would be valuable in defense of that nation. The plan is for these men to form illicit sexual relationships with lonely secretaries and other female government workers and thereby to extract from the classified information. Could a Christian, in the "line of duty," in the interest of national defense, commit fornication with divine approval? The concept is simply unthinkable. While we doubtless have little difficulty with the foregoing examples, for many years there has been considerable controversy in the brotherhood of Christ over whether or not the Christian may, with impunity, deliberately take the life of another human being in interest of society – either national or local. And so, we must briefly address this matter.

The Christian and Carnal Warfare – May a Christian, with God's blessing, take human life in defense of his nation? The great restoration preacher, Moses E. Lard, has expressed my viewpoint exactly: "... where a State is engaged in war and commands a Christian subject to bear arms and fight, what is his duty? My opinion is that he must refuse obedience to the command of the State, even at the expense of his life. For no Christian man, can according to the New Testament, bear arms and take human life."⁵ My reasons for this conviction are:

(1) *The Christian is never authorized to function as a punitive agent for the civil powers.* While it is true, as we have observed already, that God does providentially use the powers that be to administer the sword of justice in a lawless world, he, nevertheless, has not commissioned his children to bear that sword of wrath. When Peter sought to correct the injustice of Christ's arrest by the use of the sword, Jesus told him to put it away for "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Mt. 26:52). Guy N. Woods has well-commented: "When Peter sought to defend the Lord with a sword he was rebuked for his pains; and in bidding him sheath it, he forevermore made it clear that his followers are not to fight with carnal weapons in his behalf. But if men are forbidden to fight in *his* defense, in whose defense may they properly fight?"⁶

(2) *Carnal warfare is contrary to the New Testament principles of love and peace.* Any view of Romans 13:1-7 which contradicts, or negates the force of, dozens of New Testament passages obligating Christians to love and to be at peace with all men, is obviously incorrect [cf. Mt. 5:21, 22; 38-47; 26:52; Jn. 13:35; 18:36; Rom. 12:19-21; 14:17, 19; I Cor. 7:15; II Cor. 13:11; Gal. 5:14; Eph. 4:2, 3; 31, 32; Col. 3:8; I Thess. 5:13, 15; 4:9; I Tim. 6:11; II Tim. 2:24; Tit. 3:2; Heb. 12:14; 13:1; I Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 3:8,9; I Jn. 3:16,18]. Followers of the “Prince of Peace” are to love their brothers (I Pet. 1:22); their neighbors (Mt. 22:39), and their enemies (Mt. 5:44; Rom. 12:20). Love (i.e., the Greek *agape*) always seeks nothing but the highest good of others.⁷

If it is argued that God loves, yet he will destroy His enemies, it may be replied: God’s destruction of His enemies will be a matter of His *judgmental justice* upon those who have rejected His love! He has not, however, assigned that role to us (cf. Mt. 13:28-30). If the Christian thus loves his brethren, neighbors, and enemies – with whom else shall he war?

(3) *If a Christian can engage in carnal warfare, the kingdom of God is subordinate to human governments.* Before Pilate, Jesus laid down this logical argument concerning the nature of his kingdom. (a) If my kingdom were of the world, my servants could fight in its defense (cf. Jn. 18:36). (b) But my kingdom is not of this world. (c) Therefore, [implied conclusion] my servants cannot fight in defense of my kingdom.

In connection with this point, we may note the following. There is a type of argument frequently employed in the New Testament known as the *a fortiori* principle. When there are two similar propositions to be proved, if one establishes the more difficult first, the other automatically stands proved.⁸ New this: if a Christian cannot fight for the Lord’s kingdom (the greater), how in the name of reason could he war for the kingdoms of men (the lesser), which are coming to naught anyway (cf. I Cor. 2:6)?!

(4) *Carnal warfare is specifically forbidden the Christian.* Paul writes: “Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds)...” (II Cor. 10:4). Our

battle is “not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12); rather, it is spiritual. And, in it, we employ the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), not an instrument of blood.

Opposing Viewpoints Considered – Several arguments are advanced by sincere advocates of the carnal warfare position. We will consider the most prominent of these.

(1) *The centurion (Mt. 8), Cornelius (Acts 10), the jailor (Acts 16), etc., were not told to abandon their military professions; such, thus, must be acceptable to God.* This argument is based solely upon silence and those who advance it will not stand with their own logic. The centurion was not instructed to free his slaves (Mt. 8:8,9). Are we to assume that the Lord approves of one human being owning another? Where is it specifically recorded that Rahab was commanded to forsake her harlotry (Josh. 2), or Simon his sorcery (Acts 8)?

The truth is, the Old Testament prophesied that those who entered the kingdom of Christ would become peace-makers (Isa. 2:4; 11:6-9; 60:18; Hos. 2:8; Zech. 9:10), not war-makers. We must assume, therefore, that sincere converts to the Savior, as they learned the principles of the gospel, forsook all occupations inconsistent with discipleship of Jesus Christ. And, as we shall subsequently point out, history bears this out.

(2) *God's children fought wars in the Old Testament era with His approval; thus, it could not be morally wrong today.* The nation of Israel was a theocracy (a religious-political system), and so the Lord used his people as instruments of wrath upon alien nations, and upon offenders within their own ranks as well [who will argue for the church using the death penalty for wayward members today?!]. The New Testament church is not a theocracy. God's people are not vessels of wrath today. Besides, many of the wars of the Old Testament period were strictly offensive, not defensive. Yet, most today would allow the Christian to fight only in a defensive encounter. No serious student of church history should fail to read J. W. McGarvey's essay, “Jewish Wars As Precedents for Modern Wars,” which appeared in Lard's Quarterly, Vol. 5, April, 1868, pp. 113-126.

(3) *The government is authorized to bear the sword; it cannot be right for the government and yet wrong for the Christian.* While it is true that Jehovah does use human rulers to keep order in His world, (violent men for violent jobs), this does not mean that these individuals are blameless. Observe this point please.

Christ was delivered up according to the divine plan (Acts 2:23). But, Judas was the instrument of that deliverance (cf. Mt. 10:4 ASV fn). Hence, he was a necessary component in Jehovah's divine program. Yet, though he was used by God in this role (because of his character), his involvement was sinful (Mt. 27:4), and he was held accountable for it (cf. Jn, 17:12). Look at another matter. The destruction of Jerusalem [A.D. 70] by the Romans was clearly the work of God. In one of his parables, Christ said that the king [God] would send His armies [the Romans] to destroy the Jews and burn their city (Mt. 22:7) Was it right that God do this? Certainly. One might assume, therefore, on the basis of the argument stated above, that Christians could, and should, have joined with the Romans in Jerusalem's slaughter. After all, how could it be "right" for God to do it, and, at the same time, "wrong" for the Christian to participate? But such conclusion is clearly erroneous, for the disciples of the Lord were specifically warned to avoid that conflict; indeed, they were to flee to the mountains (Mt. 25:15ff). Those who advocate the Christian's participation in an armed defense of the nation simply cannot reconcile this New Testament example with their viewpoint.

The Testimony of History – Historically, most Christian leaders have opposed participation in carnal warfare. The non-Christian historian, Edward Gibbon, wrote the following.

"...nor could their [the Christian's] humane ignorance be convinced that it was lawful on any occasion to shed the blood of our fellow-creatures, wither by the sword of justice or by that of war, even through their criminal or hostile attempts should threaten the peace and safety of the Hewish constitution had been exercised with the approbation of Heaven, by inspired prophets and by anointed kings, The Christians felt and confessed that such institutions might be necessary for the present system of the world, and they cheerfully submitted to the authority of their Pagan governors. But while they inculcated the maxims of passive obedience, they refused to take any

active part in the civil administration or the military defense of the empire.”⁹

Noted historian Philip Schaff wrote: “Then, too, the conscientious refusal of the Christians to pay divine honors to the emperor and his statue, and to take part in any idolatrous ceremonies at public festivities, their aversion to the imperial military service, their disregard for politics and depreciation of all civil and temporal affairs as compared with the spiritual and eternal interests of man, their close brotherly union and frequent meetings, drew upon them the suspicion of hostility to the Caesars and the Roman people, and the unpardonable crime of conspiracy against the state.”¹⁰

Another careful writer has observed: “Early second-century literature gives no direct evidence in regard to Christian participation in military service. The general statements which do occur imply a negative attitude. They reflect the Christian abhorrence of bloodshed and a general Christian affirmation about peace...Only in the early 170’s do we find the first explicit evidence since apostolic times to the presence of Christians in the military service...”¹¹

It is sometimes argued that the reason the early saints declined military service was mainly because of the government’s involvement with idolatry. That is not the reason given by the ancient opponents of Christian military service. They contend that God’s people ought not to be involved in military activity because it is wrong for a Christian to kill!¹²

Later, within our own American restoration movement, the list of names of those who opposed the Christian’s participation in carnal warfare reads like a *Who’s Who* of the brotherhood. Men like Alexander Campbell, Tolbert Fanning, P. S. Fall, B.U. Watkins, Moses Lard, J. W. McGarvey, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Milligan, W. K. Pendleton, T. M. Allen, David Lipscomb, Jacob Creath, Jr., and H. Leo Boles spoke out strongly for pacifism. Bill Humble states: “Except for Walter Scott, all the early restoration leaders had been pacifists.”¹³ A little later, Earl West comments, “On the side of those who felt Christian participation permissible, there were a few leading brethren.”¹⁴

Conclusion – Christians are engaged in the greatest possible conflict – a war against Satan for the souls of men. Let us not, therefore, degrade ourselves by becoming entangled in the carnal conflicts of this world (cf. II Tim. 2:4) – which frequently result, in fact, in the wholesale destruction of souls.

ENDNOTES

1. Melancthon Jacobus, *Notes on the Book of Genesis*, 1, p. 204; cf. Gesenius, *Hebrews-Chaldee Lexicon*, p. 552.
2. Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, 1, p. 36.
3. *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, p. 498.
4. Arndt & Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 813.
5. Moses Lard, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 399, 400.
6. Guy N. Woods, *Commentary on Peter, John, and Jude*, p. 385.
7. See William Barclay's excellent discussion of agape in his *New Testament Words*, pp. 174ff.
8. See Matt. 6:26; Rom. 8:32; there is a brief but good discussion of this type of argument in John Broadus', *On The Preparation And Delivery of Sermons*, p. 184.
9. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, p. 416.
10. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, p. 416.
11. Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, pp. 221, 222.
12. *Ibid.*, 226, 227.
13. Bill J. Humble, *The Story of the Restoration*, p.44.
14. Earl L. West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, Vol. 1, p. 338.

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