

The Christian and Civil Government (4th)

(In our study today, we begin looking at the place of civil government as taught in the Scriptures and the role of the Christians related to this government.)

In our previous podcast, we closed by saying we are going to direct our attention to what the Scriptures teach regarding this subject. We further said that we must essentially direct our attention to the New Testament because we are now under the new covenant that is a “better covenant” that is “established upon better promises,” Hebrews 8:6. There is no question but that Israel was under a theocracy whereby God joined the priesthood with judging over the civil affairs of Israel. Therefore, it is imperative that we maintain a distinction regarding this under the New Testament economy as we do with the dietary laws, animal sacrifices, and other similar aspects of the kingdom of God today. There are times when we may draw lessons from the Old Testament economy, but there are clear differences between the worship and practice of the Old Testament and how those actions are to be carried out in the New Testament congregation. We also noted in previous podcasts that the difference between the Baptists and the Protestants lay essentially in the third article of the confessions. However, in order to more fully understand the role of civil government and its relation to the believer and to the congregation of God, I believe it is needful to review the other articles of the confessions somewhat. I also believe it is important to note three passages of Scripture that are essential and fundamental to the whole subject matter. I am not intending an order of importance in the arrangement of the list. It is likely they are of equal importance.

The *first* is in Matthew 22:21 when Jesus said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” In this Jesus clearly distinguished a difference or separation regarding civil government and the kingdom of God. The *second* passage is when Christ was before Pilate as recorded in John 18:36. He said, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” Again we find a dichotomy between the kingdom of God and the world which includes civil government. Christ equally affirmed that His kingdom was not to be established or maintained with the sword. The *third* essential principle or code to be maintained is Acts 5:29 when the apostles addressed the Jewish rulers who demanded that they stop preaching and said to them “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Here we see that when man seeks to stop the Christian from obeying the commands of God, the Christian is under the higher law to God to obey Him. And because of the sinful nature of man, we must be certain that it is the command of God that we are doing and not some private preference or idea. As a quick example, in Matthew 17:24-27, we find where Christ plainly said that according to the regular law of tribute He and Peter should not have to pay the tax in question, but to avoid offending the tax collectors or government Peter was to go fishing and get the money to pay the tax. While it was a violation to extort the tax from them, it did not break any commandment of God to pay the unjust tax. There are times when a fine line of distinction may be as to when we are to take such a stand or not. Nevertheless, the law or commandment of God is first in the life of the Christian in every area of life which includes civil government. Therefore, we must remember that (1) Caesar has no authority over the things that belong to God; (2) the kingdom of God is not of this world; and, (3) obedience to God is paramount to obeying man.

Since all of the confessions reference Romans chapter thirteen to support the first article, we will begin by studying it. It reads as follows:

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a

terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore *ye* must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."

There are several things taught in this passage which clearly affirms that not only is civil government a valid authority but it is ordained of God. In fact, all authority is of God which is a principle that this generation has rejected. We find that not only Christians, but "every soul" is to be in submission to all authority and this includes civil government. Furthermore, we see that when one resists any authority, even civil government, he is resisting "the ordinance of God" and is to receive judgment. The word damnation is used here because of the church/state belief of the Church of England and the translators believed that violators of civil government (especially when religion was involved) were under the ultimate judgment of God. This passage also defines the role and purpose of rulers or civil government. Rulers are never to conduct themselves so that the citizenry who are living godly lives are to be terrorized. On the other hand, those who are violators of the civil laws should not only be afraid but they are to receive the proper and just punishment for the crime committed. The apostle Paul affirmed this principle when standing before the civil ruler Festus and said, "For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die." He further declared that he was being held unjustly and should not be in judgment before the civil powers by saying, "but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them." Because he was not getting a fair hearing, Paul appealed to the highest court—to that of Caesar. See Acts 25:11.

If there is one thing that is clear from Romans 13:3-4, it is that civil government is established by God for the purpose of good for those that do good works. Those who do that which is right are not to be afraid of the powers in authority. It is equally clear that civil government is to punish with the sword (which includes capital punishment) those who do evil. In fact, civil government is the justice of God when it justly executes wrath on the evil doer. Conversely, when civil government violates this principle it falls under the judgment of God as (I believe) we are witnessing in our country today. Romans 13:5 instructs the Christian that he is not to obey the powers that be from only a fear of judgment, but he is to obey the authority from a conscious of obedience toward God. Obviously, if the authority requires the Christian to violate the Scriptures, he must obey God; that is, the Scriptures. But it is clear that a believer is one who seeks to obey civil government because his conscience is affected by God because of his regeneration. It is contrary to the Scriptures when a professing Christian can violate the speed limits, cheat on his income taxes, and other civil laws and it not bother his conscience. If this is the case, one must question if he is really a Christian at all. When the Lord gives spiritual life to an individual, his heart and will are so changed that he desires to be submissive to authority, even civil authority.

Romans 13:6 informs us that taxes (tribute) must be collected to support civil government because they are "God's ministers." While some taxes may be unjust (cf. Matthew 17:24-27 as noted above), there is a valid reason for some taxes and the support of civil government is one just and lawful reason. They are God's servants. However, their role of ministering is solely within civil affairs and their functions do not include anything within the framework of the congregation of the Lord.

Other lessons may be derived from this passage, but overall we see that the Scriptures plainly teach that there is a valid place for civil government and that the Christian is required by God to submit to this authority as long as it does not require him to violate the plain and obvious laws of God.

However, our time is up for today. The Lord willing we will look more passages regarding this subject matter in future studies.