

GOD AND GOVERNMENT:  
SHOULD A CHRISTIAN GO TO WAR?  
May 26, 2002

INTRO: We have entered a new era in our series on God and Government. In our last message we observed the transition to this new age and now we are in it. It is the Church age. We saw in our last message that with regard to secular government, Christ brought about no changes. Secular government remained in the hands of the unsaved Gentiles. With regard to sacred government we saw Him, not change, but bypass the Jewish system and bring about something entirely new. Let me add that not all Christians view the Church as something entirely new. However, I view the Church of Acts 2 as an entirely new thing.

We have almost daily reminders that we have now been in this age for over 2000 years. Every time we write down the date we are reminded of this. What we are not so keenly aware of is what has transpired in those 2000 years. That is the task of today's message. We are going to take a very brief look at God and Government in the Church age and what has happened from AD 33-1500. Let me remind you as well, that history is subject to interpretation. You may, or you may not agree with me.

My task this morning, and it is a big one, is to give you an overview of God and Government over a time period of 1500 years of church history. We begin with the early Church which began in Acts chapter 2, around 33 AD. The book of Acts gives us the first 30 years of Church history. Before we proceed, permit me to read a quote from a message I do called, Ten Proofs That The Bible Is The Word Of God, "Sir William Ramsey who was for many years the professor of Humanity at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and the world's most eminent authority on the geography and history of ancient Asia Minor, studied every available early document concerning that period and area. He wrote of the book of Acts that it was 'A highly imaginative and carefully colored account of primitive Christianity.' But after many years of intensive study the absolute historical accuracy of Luke's writings, even in minute details captured both his brain and then his heart. He now wrote this of the book of Acts, 'I take the view that Luke's history is unsurpassed in regard to its trustworthiness...you may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historians' and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment.'"

b. The early church age (33-325)

During the close of Christ's ministry, He continually warned the Jews that the kingdom would be taken from them and given to another people (Matt. 21:33-44, read 40-41). Well, the sacred and secular world went together in opposition against Jesus Christ and crucified Him. The trouble maker had come to an end, or had He? Three days and three nights later, Christ was resurrected, to the great concern of the religious Jewish world (Matt. 28:11-15).

Then something else took place. Forty days after His resurrection He ascended into heaven. But He had told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high. Well, that happened on a very significant day: the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-2). Pentecost is the very day on which a new governing system came into effect in the Old Testament. It was the day the law was given on Mount Sinai. On that day, due to the disobedience of God's people, 3000 people died. But here, at Pentecost a new governing institution is brought into being: the Church. And on this day, due to the obedience of God's people, 3000 people were saved (Acts 2:41).

In the Gospels, the earlier period, the Church was promised. In Acts 2 we have the birth of the Church. A new age has come into being. The Church will become God's primary sacred agent on earth for His purposes for the next 2000 years. It is a very important institution. But with the birth of the Church comes a very important question: What of government? How is the Church to be governed? Who is to govern it? Is the Church responsible for secular government? If not, how are they to live in light of secular government? Well, all those questions are answered in the early church.

The Encyclopedia Britannica, under the topic of *Church and State*, puts the question like this: "The subject of church and state refers to the existence among the same people of two institutions, religious and secular, both claiming the people's loyalty. Theoretically, the loyalty is clearly divided: 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Matt. 22:21): but, in fact, the areas in which the ecclesiastical (sacred) and temporal (secular) powers claim loyalty tend to overlap, offering the possibility of friction" (Mac. IV:590).

You see, the Christian belongs to a certain geographical country (read Acts 22:25-29). But he also belongs to a certain spiritual kingdom (Col. 1:13). And, as the encyclopedia notes, this dual citizenship creates certain problems when they claim loyalty over the same area of life. Such a possibility of question of loyalty comes when the state calls a Christian to go to war. What is the Christian to do? Well, it depends on what the Bible teaches about this matter. We will consider that question later.

So let us begin by looking at the relationship between the believer and secular government in the early Church.

#### 1) Secular

Well, if we have a new institution as we have said, the Church, and we do; does the Lord have anything to say about the believer's relationship to the secular government? Would it not seem that the Lord should instruct this new institution regarding its relationship to the government of secular affairs? Or are we left to figure this out on our own?

Well, I am happy to tell you that the Lord has instructed the Church on its relationship to secular government. And so we begin with this question: what was the Christian's relationship to secular government to be? Well, where do we go to find out? We have two sources. The book of Acts is a history of the early Church. How did they handle this question? The second source is the epistles which are letters of practical instructions to believers and are written directly to various churches.

In the book of Acts, as in the Gospels, the Jewish religious leaders were under the authority of Rome. And Rome sometimes gave considerable freedom of action to the religious leaders. Turn with me to Acts 5:12-21 (read). Here we see that when secular or religious government has made a requirement of believers that overlaps with spiritual matters. The government is requiring one thing, the Lord another. And by the fact that the Lord opens the prison doors and lets them out, we see that God did not approve of the government's decision. (Now read Acts 5:22-28.) Here, secular and sacred law calls on believers to disobey God. No government under heaven is authorized to do that. When a believer, who is part of God's spiritual kingdom, is required by secular or sacred government to do something contrary to divine instruction, then the divine law overrides secular law. Look at Peter's conclusion to this matter (5:29).

Furthermore, from the book of Acts we might determine that one may use the law for one's own defense if one does it lawfully (See Acts 25:1-12). Paul, a Roman citizen, had a right by Roman

law to appeal to Ceasar. When he saw that he would be judged before the Jews in Jerusalem, he appealed to Caesar. Why? The justice of the secular world was much greater than that of the religious leaders in the sacred world. And so Paul used the law when it became necessary.

Now let us consider the instructions given to us in the epistles regarding the Christian's relationship to secular government. I want us to consider the main passages that answer our questions: Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; Romans 13:1-7. Well, in those passages we have a tremendous amount of instruction with regard to the Christian's relationship to secular government!

In light of those passages, and especially Romans 13, we ask: Who was in charge of secular government when Paul wrote these words, Christians or non-Christians? Non-Christians. When Paul penned the book of Romans, Nero, one of the worst of all Roman rulers was in power. I was reading some writings of Eusebius, a church historian who wrote around 300 years after the time of Christ. He says, "...for anyone who knows him can understand that nothing would have been condemned by Nero unless it were supremely good". What Eusebius is saying is that Nero was evil through and through. Yet Paul calls him a minister of God. Chosen by God. You see, the time when God set up the new institution, the Church, the unsaved were in authority over the whole inhabited world. There were no governments living by the spiritual standards of God. The Church was born, subject to unsaved leaders in secular government.

But we must ask another question: How much authority does secular government have? Well, the early church answers that question for us (Acts 4:19-20; 5:27-29).

We will look at the topic of going to war at a later time. In all the NT writings we do not have any example of any Christian entering the political world. They tended to one thing and one thing only: looking after the spiritual lives of people, no matter what geographical location they lived in in the world, the spiritual domain belonged to the Christian alone. The secular belonged to the unsaved. God had given this opportunity to Israel under the kings and they forfeited the right to secular government. God removed it from them, never to restore it again until 1948. And at this time, they are simply a secular government without spiritual life.

## 2) Sacred

But what about sacred matters? Who governs in the spiritual life of the believer? Well, God and the Scriptures are the supreme authority of the believer. However, the Lord has chosen the Church to be His governing authority on earth. (Temple destroyed in 70 AD.)

As I understand church government, two offices exist with regard to governing authority. These offices have been divinely instituted for the government of the spiritual lives of believers. They are pastors and deacons. The pastors are to see to the spiritual well-being of the people and the deacons are to oversee the physical aspects of the Church.

Listen as I read several passages on pastors: 1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of [their] conversation.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that [is] unprofitable for you.

Hebrews 13:24 Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.

We have very little such instruction with regard to deacons. We do have several passages that give the qualifications of deacons. But, with regard to deacons, consider Acts 6:1-4.

Now, it is interesting that the office we know as bishop is not mentioned in the NT. But according to the Church historian, Eusebius, James, the half brother of Jesus became the first bishop of Jerusalem. From that time on, when churches multiplied, the office of bishop came into regular use. A pastor is a bishop, overseer, of one church. A bishop, as we are familiar with, is an overseer of other pastors. So in the early Church, three offices existed: the office of bishop, pastor and deacon.

With regard to the Churches relationship to secular government, for the first 300 years of Church history, the pattern that was followed was that believers were in submission to the secular government unless they were required to walk contrary to the will of God. From the time of the Apostles until 170 A.D. there is no evidence of Christians ever being involved in secular government or the army. However, from 170 A.D. there is evidence of increasing condemnation by preachers regarding Christians becoming soldiers (Bonk 20; GFH 57-58). This indicates two things. First, Christians were entering the army and second, the church leaders of the early church were opposed to this.

But as Christianity grew, even under persecution, more and more people of higher public standing were converted. Eventually Christians became very plentiful and began to enter military service and some were even accepted as church members after they entered the army. However, for the most part the Church opposed military service until 313 A.D. And so, until 313 A.D., Christians continued in the same manner as it had been in the time of Christ and in the time of the apostles.

c. The middle ages (325-1500)

I am not going to spend much time on the middle ages. They are a dark blot on church history which anyone may study for themselves. But let me say that in 313 A.D. an almost unbelievable thing happened. Until now the Roman rulers, by and large, had persecuted Christianity. But now, the Roman ruler by name of Constantine claimed conversion to Christianity.

Eusebius, a Christian historian alive at this time gives us a lot of information of this time period. Constantine invaded Italy with a smaller army than his opponent, Maxentius. As he marched toward Italy he and his army apparently saw a cross of light and then Constantine had a dream in which Christ appeared to him. Constantine then placed himself and his forces under the protection of Christ. The night before the battle, according to another historian, Constantine had a dream and he saw the first two letters of the name of Christ - the *chi* and the *rho*. Then he heard a voice which said, "In this sign conquer." The next morning he and his soldiers painted these letters on their helmets and shields and then went to battle. On October the 28, of 312 they fought the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Constantine won and as someone has said, it was one of the most momentous events in church and secular history.

Eusebius, viewed Constantine's conversion as a great triumph for the Christian church. However, Christian historians are divided as to whether Constantine ever truly became a Christian. Dr. Harold Willmington writes in *Basic Stages In The Book Of Ages*, "In 313 he signed the Edict of Toleration, which granted freedom to Christians. It now became fashionable to join the church. He promised gold pieces and white robes to all converts. Soon pagans had joined the church by the thousands, taking with them their heathen practices. The church then became so worldly and the world so churchy that no difference could be seen!" I read an article recently that said that almost all of Roman Catholicism's wrong teaching can be traced to Constantine.

In my estimation, the impact Constantine's supposed conversion had on the church is

so great and so devastating as to defy description. The time came when the church gained such power that the secular states were subject to the Church. Then, instead of the secular world setting up spiritual leaders, as in the day of Christ, the Church was setting up secular leaders. The church set up secular leaders and deposed of them as they wished. In 1076 Pope Gregory the VII deposed the king of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry the IV. In 1077 deposed King Henry with his wife and son, crossed the Alps mountains in the winter and came to Pope Gregory in Canossa. Gregory, the Pope, let him stand barefoot in the snow outside the gates of the palace on three successive days before he would see Henry. He then released Henry from his excommunication and he was king again (Cairns 229-230).

Throughout this time there were great struggles between church and state, each thinking they had the authority over the other. During this time much blood was shed by supposed Christians and that, in the name of Christ. But as the middle ages drew to a close, the winds of change began to blow, and they blew in Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation. So, in our next message we consider the modern era.

CONCL: Well, we have briefly covered a time period from 30 AD or so to 1500 AD. During the first 170 years of church history we have no record of Christians involved in secular government or in the army. After this time, as the number of Christians multiplied and Christianity grew in popularity, they began to enter the army. Earliest evidence indicates that the preachers of the day voiced their opposition to this. They were opposed to Christians entering the army. But then a most amazing event transpired. The emperor himself claimed allegiance to Jesus Christ. He began to pay people to convert to Christianity and it is easy to see what that would bring about. From that time onward Christians, so called Christians, killed hundreds of thousands of people, as the Church passed

through a time period we know as the dark ages. And truly they were dark ages.

Then between 1400 and 1500 AD a new period began as people began to question the practices of Roman Catholicism. And then came the reformation. What would be the view of the reformers on God and government? What views would they hold and pass on? What views are held in the Church today? That is what we will look at in our next message.