

God and the Civil Government

JEREMIAH 29:1-7; ROMANS 13:1-7; 1 PETER 2:13-25; BELGIC CONFESSION ARTICLE 36

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Congregation of Christ: “If this country doesn’t give us what we want then we will burn down the system and replace it... And I could be speaking figuratively, I could be speaking literally.” This was a threat made by a Black Lives Matter leader in New York last June during the height of the violence, rioting, looting and murders after the death of George Floyd while he was being arrested by police officers. The violence has not stopped since then.

Many celebrities have imagined violence and even killing the President. The worst of these were a picture of comedian Kathy Griffin holding a fake, decapitated Trump head; Madonna thinking hard about blowing up the White House; and Johnny Depp imagining an actor assassinating the president, alluding to the assassination of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, an actor. And when the President was hospitalized after being infected with Covid-19, many liberal politicians and activities wished him to die. The hatred of liberals against conservatives is unimaginably wicked.

This hatred built up in the last four years and has now come to a head in this election year. But Jesus, Paul and other New Testament writers—and even Old Testament writers—disagree with all of these unlawful actions, teaching us to submit to the civil government. Remember that Paul lived under the cruel, occupying forces of Rome, which was not exactly favorable to Christians. In our readings, Peter calls Christians to do the same. They were not only talking about good governors, but government authorities in general. They command us to be subject to governing authorities because there is no authority except from God. And they have specific examples of what Christians ought to do in relation to the civil government.

Our supplemental reading in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession of Faith summarizes the Scripture’s teaching about the relationship between God and civil government. This confession of faith was written in 1561 by Guido de Brés, a French-speaking pastor in the southern lowlands north of France, present-day Belgium and the Netherlands. At that time, the Roman Catholic Church was severely persecuting the Protestant Reformers with imprisonment, confiscation of property, torture and martyrdom. His purpose in writing this confession was to alleviate this persecution by pointing out two main things about the Reformers. First, the faith of the Reformers is nothing else than what the Scriptures teach and what the early church affirmed. Second, the Reformers were not rebels against the civil government like the radical Anabaptists. This radical wing of the Reformation rejected the civil government as God’s ordained authority, so they refused military service, taking oaths, and paying taxes.

But the Reformers in the lowlands also vowed to be faithful to God’s Word even on the pain of torture and death by the Spanish Inquisition. In the preface to the confession, they declared that they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and

their whole bodies to the fire” for the true gospel of Christ. They were true to their word. About 100,000 Reformed believers were martyred by the Roman Catholic Church in the lowlands.

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession summarizes three teachings of the Scriptures regarding the civil government. The first teaching, which we will study today, says that God himself ordained the civil government. The second teaching concerns the relationship between the church and the civil government. The third and last teaching is about the Christian’s response and duty towards the civil government. We will study the second and third teachings the next two Lord’s Days.

So our theme today is **God and the Civil Government**, under two headings: first, **God Ordained the Civil Government**; and second, **To Maintain Good Order**.

God Ordained the Civil Government

Paul gives the main reason why we ought to be subject to governing authorities: *“for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”* Government is instituted and appointed by God. When a citizen violates the laws of the land, he is condemned by God. Therefore, submitting to the civil government is submitting to God himself (verses 1-5).

Government in general is a blessing to the people. Sometimes God gives good civil authorities who are *“not a terror to good conduct,”* and Christians should thank God when their civil magistrate governs with wisdom, justice and righteousness, and upholds the rule of law. But sometimes, God raises up evil rulers as a means of testing or even punishing nations, as when God’s wrath came upon Judah because of King Hezekiah’s pride (2 Chr 32:24–25).

In the Old Testament, God’s chosen nation Israel was ruled by his appointed kings. Israel was a theocracy, a rule by God through a king, in contrast to a democracy, a rule by the people through elected representatives. Israel’s kings were subject to the Law of Moses, which can be divided into three classes: civil, ceremonial and moral. The civil laws regulated the civil society and were enforced by the kings. The ceremonial laws concerned the religious life of the nation, including regulations for priests, sacrifices and worship, enforced by the priests. The moral laws were mainly the Ten Commandments, which regulated the moral life of the people, enforced by the kings and to a certain extent, by the priests. This system of governing the civil, religious and moral life of the nation was appointed by God through the Law of Moses found mostly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

When Israel was conquered by Assyria and Babylon, this theocracy under the house of King David ended. Israel came under the rule of pagan kings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. Therefore, in the New Testament, Israel was ruled by the Roman kings, but they were still allowed to retain their civil, ceremonial and moral laws under Roman supervision. However, in A.D. 70, Roman forces destroyed the Jerusalem temple which ended the ceremonial laws of the Jews.

We might think that God ordains only good government. But even Israel’s best kings were tainted by sin, e.g., David, Josiah and Hezekiah. God ordains even wicked pagan kings. The best example is King Cyrus II of Persia. When he defeated Babylon, he took over the Jews exiled there. But in 538 B.C., he decreed the return of the exiles to Canaan (Ezra 1:1-4). How did this pagan

king happen to let Israel go back to their homeland? We read about this in Isaiah's prophecy about King Cyrus, almost two centuries before the Persian king came to power. In Isaiah 44:28, God says of Cyrus, *"He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose."* Continuing in Isaiah 45:1-4, we read, *"Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus... I name you, though you do not know me."* And then we read in Ezra 1:1 that *"the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia"* to make this decree. It was the LORD's doing that Cyrus signed the decree. God calls a pagan king his shepherd and his anointed who would fulfill his purpose of restoring his people Israel back to their land.

This is why Proverbs 21:1-2 says, *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart."* The hearts of all men, including kings, are known and subject to God's will.

To Maintain Good Order

God is a God of order. When he created the heavens and the earth, he created everything in good order, and everything in its place. He made the borders between land and sea. He separated day and night. He created birds to fly in the air, fish to swim the sea, animals to walk on land. He created the sun, moon, stars, galaxies and nebulae with their designated fixed courses in the heavens. We will always see majestic and beautiful sunrises and sunsets every day until our Lord returns from heaven. The intricate and minute details of all his creation and their relationships to one another are unfathomable. With all human knowledge, there is no end to scientific and medical discoveries. Therefore, when God finished his creation, he said, "It was very good."

When he established the nation of Israel, he ordered its civil, religious and moral life in great detail with the Law of Moses. There was a system of regulations and specific punishments for specific violations of these regulations. In its religious life, we read of detailed regulations concerning the priesthood, the sacrifices, and temple worship. Every small violation of these laws had specific punishments. When Israel disobeyed these laws, chaos descended on the nation, and God came down against them with judgment. We read about disorder in the nation when there was no righteous king to enforce God's law in Judges 21:25, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."*

And this is what we see today in our nation. Without a moral compass, everyone is doing what is right in his own mind. Our present culture is a culture of anything and everything goes. Whatever one thinks is right is allowed. If a child says, $2+2=5$, he has a right to say that. If a man says he is a woman, then he is a woman, and vice versa. If someone says looting and rioting is justified because of "social injustice," then looting and rioting is right. If a woman says she would not have been so successful if she did not have an abortion, then abortion is a good thing. If an illegal alien says he has a right to stay and work in this country because it is a free country, then open our borders to all illegal aliens. If a fire was started by an arsonist, then the fire was caused by climate change. If CNN and MSNBC report that the coronavirus did not originate from China, then calling it the Chinese plague is racist. If an armed suspect resisted arrest and threatened a police officer and was killed, then go rioting, looting, and defund the police and murder police officers.

If you show support for law and order, those opposed can beat you up. If a pastor preaches against this kind of culture, the state has a right to close down his church and even jail the pastor.

Without the Scriptures and without God, our nation is descending into disorder and anarchy. Black Lives Matter and the Antifa are not just racists, they are anarchists who threaten to create disorder and violence if they do not get what they want. And what do they want? They want Marxist socialism for our nation, disguised in the pious slogan, “social justice”; a system that has never worked in any country and at any time in the history of the world; a system that has fomented disorder, revolution, poverty, immorality, and the slaughter of tens of millions.

What does the Scripture say about God? In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul rebuked the church because of their disorderly and confusing worship. Some were babbling in tongues at the same time, so that if a visitor came to worship with them, he would say that they were insane! So, Paul reminded them, “*God is not a God of confusion but of peace*” (1 Cor 14:23, 33). He is not a God of chaos, disorder and confusion, but of peace and order. He has established his laws to regulate all human civil, religious and moral life. For us Christians, these laws of order are found only in our constitution: The Bible. For unbelievers, God has written his law in their hearts and minds. We call it conscience. Therefore, even if they do not know our Lord Jesus Christ and reject him, they know very well when they violate God’s laws to order their lives. They have no excuse for disobedience.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, all the rulers of the world—presidents, prime ministers, and local officials—are ordained by God. Their authority is given to them by God. God established the civil government to maintain good order in all nations. If there is no civil government, there will be lawlessness and the civil society would disintegrate and the whole world would destroy itself.

Although God does not seem to be sovereign over all rulers, he actually rules over all earthly rulers even now (Dan 2:21). But in the end, God “*shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end*” (Dan 2:44) and Christ shall make “*his enemies ... a footstool for his feet*” (Heb 10:13). The Scriptures command the civil government to put no obstacle to the preaching of the true gospel in the church. But the Word of God also commands all Christians to pray for the civil government and to submit to it because it is God’s instrument to punish evil and reward the good. We will study these two things in the next two Lord’s Days.