

The Christian and the Civil Government

Psalm 146:1-4; Romans 13:1-7; Belgic Confession of Faith Article 36

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Congregation of Christ: On Easter Sunday in 1534, a group of radical “Protestants” attacked the Roman Catholic bishop’s residence in Münster, Germany, but they were repelled. This radical group belonged to a sect called Anabaptists, which means “re-baptizers,” because they believed that only adults should be baptized even if they had been baptized as infants. They rejected the civil government as God’s ordained authority, so they refused military service, taking oaths, and paying taxes. They believed in “speaking in tongues,” which were mostly gibberish, and prophetic dreams, just as Pentecostals do today. They also did not believe in salvation by faith alone, but salvation by faith and works.

Previous to this attack against the bishop, these radicals took control of the city and imposed “common ownership of goods,” including land and homes. They were the forerunners of Communism. Those who resisted were imprisoned, tortured and put to death. They believed that the Second Coming of Christ was at hand, and Münster was to be the New Jerusalem, where Christ would reign for a thousand years. This “millennium” was rejected by the Protestant Reformers. Jan Matthys, their leader, believed himself to be the second Enoch.

After Matthys was killed, another deranged man, Jan van Leyden, took over the city. He declared himself king, and began his reign running naked and wild in the city streets. He started a reign of terror, murdering opponents, and installed wild innovations including polygamy. He lived in wild excesses while the people lived in poverty.

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession summarizes three teachings of the Scriptures—especially Romans 13:1-7—regarding the civil government. The first teaching is that God himself ordained the civil government. Last Sunday, we looked at the relationship between the church and the civil government. Today, we will meditate on the third and last teaching about the Christian’s response and duty towards the civil government. Paragraph 7 condemns these 16th century radical Anabaptists, saying, “We denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.”

So our theme today is **The Christian and the Civil Government**, under three headings: first, **The Civil Government’s Task of Doing Justice**; second, **The Christian’s Response to the Civil Government**; and third, **The Kingdom of Christ is the Christian’s Only Hope**.

The Civil Government’s Tasks of Doing Justice

Romans 13:1-7 begins with the command to every Christian to “*be subject to the governing authorities.*” What does “be subject” mean? It means that we must submit to and obey recognized

civil authorities. In the same way that the church is “subject to” Christ as its head (Eph 5:24), we must be “subject to” the civil authorities. Why are we subject to the government? Paul grounds his command in his next statements, *“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”*

Paul calls civil authorities God’s “servants” and “ministers” because he is their head. If citizens are subject to the civil authorities, they in turn are subject and accountable to God. Therefore, God has appointed them to promote justice and act justly for the well-being of its citizens. They enact laws “so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings” (BC 36 Par 1). Paul says that God appointed the authorities to be *“not a terror to good conduct, but to bad”* (v 3). When they punish evildoers, they are acting as God’s servants and avengers who pour out God’s wrath on them. When they reward the good, they pronounce God’s approval of their good deeds.

God has also given civil authorities the privilege and the right to bear the “sword.” What does this mean? The “sword” refers to the death penalty for premeditated murder or other heinous crimes. Though there is much opposition to the death penalty, it goes all the way back to the re-creation after Noah’s flood, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image”* (Gen 9:6). Six times in Deuteronomy (13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21; 24:7), God also commanded Israel, *“You shall purge the evil man from your midst.”* Even our Fifth Amendment assumes the death penalty, saying that no person shall be “deprived of life . . . without due process of law.”

The civil government must act to do justice for the well-being of its citizens. What then is our Christian response to the civil government?

The Christian’s Response to the Civil Government

Paul lists some responses to the civil government as God’s appointed servants. We might be thinking that it is so unfair for us to respond positively to civil authorities if they are unjust and even evil. But we have learned that Paul wrote these instructions while he and all other Christians were being persecuted and martyred by evil Roman and Jewish authorities.

The first response, as we have discussed above, is that Christians must submit themselves to the government. The second response is, *“do what is good, and you will receive his approval.”* When we are law-abiding citizens, we do not have to fear judgment by the civil authorities. For example, if we do not cheat on our taxes, we will not be afraid of getting a letter from the IRS. If we do not go speeding on the freeway, we will not always be looking out for the flashing lights of a CHP patrol car. Therefore, if we are law-abiding citizens, our reward is *“a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”* (1 Tim 2:2).

Third, we must pay taxes and whatever is due to the government. This comes from Jesus’ own teaching about paying taxes, *“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”* (Mark 12:17). But what if you do not want the National Park Service to spend \$65,473 to

figure out what bugs do near a light bulb? Or the National Institutes of Health spending \$3.4 million to have hamsters fight each other in cage matches to examine their “aggression and anxiety”? Worst of all, the federal government gives \$600 million a year to Planned Parenthood to murder 350,000 unborn infants every year. Do you want your taxes spent in these horrible and ridiculous ways? However, remember that there is no government—even the best—which does not spend your tax money on immoral, evil and ridiculous things like these. If you say you do not want to finance these evil things, then you should not pay a single cent to the government. Then you violate the Bible’s command, and worse, you may even go to prison.

Fourth, we must give “*respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*” Since the civil authorities are God’s servants and ministers, we must give them proper respect and honor. Peter also affirms, “*Honor the emperor*” (1 Pet 2:17). All of us, including myself, are guilty of violating this command, especially when we do not agree with the authorities’ policies or laws. But this does not mean that we are to be like meek, silent sheep even when our civil authorities are doing evil. As Christians, we are “prophets” proclaiming the truths of God’s Word. The prophets and apostles of old spoke the truth about the corruption and evil deeds of their civil authorities. Many of them therefore were persecuted and martyred for speaking the truth in love.

Fifth, Christians must pray for their civil government, “*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions*” (1 Tim 2:1-2). We must pray that they may have “wisdom, righteousness, and strength to know and to do God’s will.” Pray that God will “rule their hearts that they, knowing whose servants they are, may above all things seek Your honor and glory.” Pray that they may restrain wickedness and vice, promote justice and virtue, and remove every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and divine worship (BC 36 Par 2). Pray also for their health and protection from the enemies of our nation.

Sixth, Christians may seek civil office, even high offices. Remember that Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai and Nehemiah held high civil offices, even in foreign nations. Matthew, Zaccheus, Cornelius and a Roman proconsul became Christians, but still held on to their civil positions. Today, we have many Christians in civil government: senators, representatives, justices, governors, mayors and other local officials. They have a “salt and light” effect on our nation.

Seventh and last, participate in elections. On Tuesday, we have the privilege as citizens of a democratic republic to choose our highest government officials. Let us vote wisely so we may contribute to the good of our nation and live peaceable lives in all godliness and honor. As we vote, bear in mind that all those men and women running for office are flawed, sinful people. The former editor of *Christianity Today* said that he will vote according to a person’s obedience to the Ten Commandments. He is hopelessly mistaken, because we are not electing a national pastor or an elder of a church, who must be “*above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money*” (1 Tim 3:2-3). Who among the candidates has obeyed the whole Ten Commandments? None, not even one, not even close. All are wretched sinners, even the prophets and the apostles.

If this is the case, then how do we choose our civil government? We choose according to their stated policies, not on the merits and personal character of the candidate. Remember that God used evil rulers like the Pharaoh of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Cyrus of Persia, and Constantine of Rome for the good of his people, even for the promotion of godly and righteous laws. Let us now consider a few of the most important issues facing us today and compare it with what the Bible teaches.

First and foremost is abortion. Abortion is murder, period. It is a capital crime. At conception, a human being is created by God. We read David's prayer in Psalm 139:13–16, *“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance.”* Abortion started with the first trimester of pregnancy, but now has progressed to the day of delivery, and even after delivery. This is blatant murder in the first degree!

Second, socialism and a welfare society. Many people clamor for free health care, free education, and many other handouts. The Bible condemns laziness (Prv 19:15). Paul even says that those who do not want to work should not eat (2 Thess 3:10). Just like the Anabaptists, they want a common ownership of goods and properties. In Acts 4 and 5, the apostles introduced this innovation—*“they had everything in common”*—but it failed right from the beginning, and was never mentioned again (Acts 4:32-5:11). Why does socialism never work? Because all of us are sinful.

Third, high taxation and big government. Remember how Israel was divided into two kingdoms after Solomon died? His son Rehoboam became king, and he imposed a heavy tax burden on the people, heavier than the heavy tax burden Solomon left him. So, Jeroboam, an official of Solomon, led a rebellion of the ten of the twelve tribes that succeeded in separating from Rehoboam's kingdom (1 Kgs 12:12-20). All evil rulers always use heavy taxes to enrich themselves and their nations. In 1 Samuel 8:10-18, we read that Israel asked God for a king. But Samuel warned them that their kings would impose a heavy tax burden on them, so they would cry out to God because of their evil kings.

Fourth, law and order. These last six months have been a period of anarchy, rioting, looting and violence in many big cities. Several of our civil authorities have actually condoned them, some just remained silent on the matter. Just as the Anabaptists did, they are trying to take over cities by violent revolution, and they have vowed to continue after the election. Most of those who have been arrested have been released to continue their violence. These civil authorities have “subverted justice” (BC 36). God condemns lying and violence (Rom 3:15-18; 2 Tim 3:1-5), especially when committed by his people Israel (Gen 9:5-6; Exo 20:13; Ezk 45:9; Hos 4:2).

Fifth, homosexual relationships. The Bible says this is an abomination before God (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). Those who advocate this has “corrupted the moral order that God has established among human beings” (BC 36). This moral order was established by God way back in creation when he created man as male and female and installed marriage between a man and a woman. This is his creation mandate from beginning to the end.

Sixth, illegal aliens and open borders. From the Tower of Babel, people with different languages separated from one another, establishing nations. Nations have borders. There has never been a time when nations do not have borders. Before an alien enters a nation, he has to ask permission from the civil authorities. Israel did, when they asked the King of Edom if they could pass through his land on their way to Canaan, but they were refused (Num 20:14-21). Since our nation is the most prosperous nation on earth, if we opened our borders, there will be a flood of tens of millions of aliens rampaging into our country. And some of them will surely be violent criminals and terrorists. Many murders and other violent crimes have been committed repeatedly by illegal aliens who have been deported multiple times.

Seventh and last, “climate change.” Climate change is a hoax. Since the 1960s, there have been countless predictions of the destruction of the earth because of “global warming.” The polar ice caps would melt and flood the world. It would be so hot that there would be no winters and children would not know what snow is. In 2006, climate expert Al Gore predicted the end of the world in ten years, but we’re still here four years later. And just last year, some politicians have predicted the end of the world in 12 years. Therefore, according to them, we must get rid of our oil and gas industries and our cars and stop eating hamburgers. Only God can cause “climate change” (Psa 18:12; 105:32; 107:25; 147:16148:8). The winds and the waves obeyed Jesus (Mark 4:39).

First, the civil government must act to do justice for the well-being of its citizens. Second, the Christian must submit to and pray for the civil government and participate in civil affairs. Third, the Christian’s only hope is not the kingdoms of the world, but the Kingdom of Christ.

Conclusion: The Kingdom of Christ is the Christian’s Only Hope

When we look at our nation with all its problems, chaos, violence and divisions, we may think that we have no hope. Some people trust in revolutions or socialism, or economic progress, or human goodness, or military might. And many people still trust in the present civil government.

But there is hope. There is hope for a kingdom of law and order. There is hope for one nation with no borders. There is hope for a leader who is perfectly righteous. This kingdom is the Kingdom of Christ, a kingdom of justice and righteousness whose King, our Lord Jesus Christ is perfectly just and righteous. It would be the kingdom of the new heaven and new earth, where there would be no more death, mourning, crying or pain because of sin (Rev 21:4). And though this kingdom will have walls and gates, its gates will always be open because no sinner will be able to enter in. They will all be imprisoned in the eternal lake of torment (Rev 21:25-27).

Therefore, as the psalmist says, *“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish”* (Psa 146:3-4). We may elect good civil authorities who would rule our nation in justice and righteousness. But all earthly kingdoms are temporary and flawed, even the best ones. Our hope rests in God’s promise that he will hold all unbelieving civil authorities accountable for mistreating his people. So, we must put our ultimate trust in the kingdom of God and Christ, the only perfect, everlasting and heavenly kingdom.