

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Since publishing my e-teachings earlier this year on the moral issues of abortion and government theft, I've been involved in some very interesting conversations regarding the proper role of Christians in politics and government. Christians definitely do not all agree on the subject, and to my utter astonishment, do not all agree with me! (Imagine that.) Some of my friendly detractors have provoked me to re-examine my own convictions and dig more deeply into Scripture. This e-teaching is a result of that deeper dig.

First, it goes without saying that the gospel is superior to the government in the matter of changing people's behavior. The gospel has power to transform sinners into people who don't need laws to restrain them from crimes such as thievery and murder. No one is arguing about that. You may have noticed, however, that not everyone is receptive to the gospel that has the power to transform them. Most people continue all of their lives in their rebellion and unbelief. And as God patiently hopes and waits for rebels to respond and be transformed by His grace, He uses a secondary means to restrain them from sin, and that means is human government. Laws established by human governments not only serve to restrain unregenerate people from doing evil, but they also function as standards whereby those who are not restrained by the law can be judged, punished, and hopefully reformed to a degree.

This being so, Christians who belittle the idea of Christian involvement in human governments because of the obvious superiority of the gospel as a means of transformation should take note that human government is an institution created by God and one that serves a crucial purpose. Without it, we'd have chaos and anarchy. I'm living in a country where one out of every thirty-seven adults is currently in prison or has served time in prison. Thank God for human governments!

If we claim that Christians should not be involved in politics or human governments based on the fact that we have a superior means of transforming people through the gospel, we might as well also claim that Christians should not discipline their children because we have a superior means of making them into good persons through the gospel. The gospel God gave us was not intended to supplant the need for human government.

Human governments are divinely established, just like the church and the family are divinely established. Why would it be honorable for Christians to participate in the divinely-given institutions of families and churches but dishonorable to participate in the divinely-given institution of human governments? Is there something inherently evil about human government? Certainly not. It is sinful people who corrupt government and make it evil, just as sinful people also corrupt families and churches. Should Christians abandon their involvement in the God-created institutions of family and church just because sinners have corrupted both? If no, then why abandon their involvement in the God-created institution of human government?

Supporting these truths is a key scripture which I referred to last month, found in Romans 13:1-7. It is a classic passage regarding God's establishment of human government and the delegation of His supreme authority to earthly rulers. Please read it closely once again, and then let's consider all of its ramifications, some of which can be quite surprising.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience's sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor (Rom. 13:1-7).

It is sometimes argued, based on these verses, that Christians should not vote, be politically involved, or run for political office. We are simply called to submit to earthly rulers, regardless of whether we agree with them or not, because God has given them their authority. To resist them is to resist God, according to Paul. If we, for example, vote against those whom God has put in power, or work against them using political means, we are rebelling against God.

That particular view, of course, presents a fundamental moral dilemma, as it seems strange to think that God

would want us to submit to rulers who abuse their God-given authority. Yet some maintain that it makes no difference. Paul's words are plain. He makes no distinction between good or evil rulers. In fact, many rulers in his day were quite evil. Thus, our responsibility is simply to submit to governing authorities because they are all established by God.

This is, I believe, a prime example of the most common error that is made when it comes to interpreting Scripture, the error of ignoring context. Romans 13:1-7 contains seven important verses, but they are found within thirty-one thousand other important verses that make up the Bible. Is it possible that there are other relevant biblical passages that might help us understand what God expects of His people in regard to submission to governing authorities? Certainly there are.

Scripture, of course, consistently affirms that God is sovereign over earthly rulers. If they are in power, it can be rightly stated that He either put them in power or permitted them to be in power. Since very few earthly rulers arise to power without some effort on their own part or the part of others, it is probably usually more accurate to say that God permits them to be in power. Still, He actively engages in exalting some whom He chooses, such as Pharaoh during the time of Moses, or Nebuchadnezzar during the time of Daniel. God sometimes even exalts evil rulers as a means of bringing His wrath upon wicked nations. And He is certainly able to remove any leader from power any time He wants to, as demonstrated by His humiliation of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:1-37), and His killing Herod via worms (Acts 12:20-23). All of this is to say that those rulers who are in power today around the world would not be in power apart from God's permission. Thus, they are "established by God," just as Paul affirmed (Rom. 13:1).

But because all earthly rulers are established by God, are Christians obligated to submit to rulers if and when those rulers require us to do what is wrong? The answer to that question is an unequivocal no. Why would God require that we submit to earthly authorities if those earthly authorities require that we rebel against Him? He is the Highest Authority and the One who gave them their authority! If an earthly authority forbids me to believe in and follow Jesus, should I submit to him as an expression of my submission to God in accordance to Romans 13:1-7? What a zany idea! I'll submit to God by not submitting to God!

Note that Paul's reason why Christians should submit to earthly authorities is two-fold. First, because all earthly authorities are established by God, thus they serve as an extension of His authority. Second, because "rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil" (Rom. 13:3). That is generally true, but we know it is not always true. But take note that Paul continues to advocate submission to earthly rulers for that same second reason:

Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience's sake (Rom. 13:3-5, emphasis added).

Again, notice how Paul appeals to the fact that rulers represent God well as they bring wrath upon evildoers and praise those who do what is right. It makes perfect sense that we should submit to such earthly authorities who serve well as an extension of God's authority. Clearly, however, Paul was not advocating that Christians should submit to earthly authorities who punish those who do what is right and praise those who do wrong.

So we see that in Romans 13:1-7, Paul was stating what is generally true and what Christians generally should do. Generally speaking, earthly authorities represent God well when they bring wrath on evildoers and praise those who do good. No one can debate that is true of most earthly authorities. Police generally go after bad guys. Judges generally convict criminals. Prisons are generally full of people who have done wrong. Legislators generally make laws that reflect righteousness.

But we all know that sometimes those who have been given authority by God abuse their authority. They don't fit the description that Paul paints of rulers in Romans 13:1-7. And therefore, no one has an obligation to submit when such rulers expect those they rule to sin. God certainly does not expect us to submit to earthly authorities if such submission requires that we rebel against Him, the Highest Authority, the One who has granted all earthly rulers their authority. Scripture repeatedly affirms this.

For example, the Bible tells us about certain Hebrew midwives who were commanded by the earthly Egyptian authorities to kill all the newborn Hebrew boys. But the Hebrew midwives refused to submit to them, knowing that they would have to answer to a Higher Authority if they did. Scripture says, "Because the midwives feared

God, He established households for them" (Ex. 1:21). Obviously, God didn't want the Hebrew midwives to submit to earthly authorities, even though it could be rightly said that those earthly authorities were established by God.

Daniel was commanded to stop praying to God for thirty days by the decree of a king who was established by God. He did not submit to the king's decree. Rather, he rebelled. God blessed him for it and delivered him from the lion's den (Dan. 6).

Peter and James were commanded by God-established authorities to preach no more in Jesus' name. They realized that when earthly authorities abused their power, requiring disobedience to God, they were under no obligation to submit. Rather, they were under obligation to rebel. They declared to the Jewish authorities, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20, emphasis added).

Jesus is yet another example of civil disobedience, to both religious and political leaders. He didn't submit to them, even though they had been granted their authority by God. Remember that Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). Jesus obeyed God rather than men, and the earthly authorities killed Him.

There is coming a time in the future concerning which God has already warned us not to obey the governing authorities. If you are alive during the time of the antichrist and are told you must take the mark of the beast, I recommend that you not submit to the authorities. I recommend that you rebel. It may cost you your life, but you'll be glad in the end that you didn't listen to someone's narrow interpretation of Romans 13:1-7!

All of this is to say that, when we look at the whole of Scripture, we don't conclude that Paul was advocating in Romans 13:1-7 that Christians submit to earthly authorities who would have them disobey heavenly authority. Moreover, there is no warrant for the claim that Romans 13:1-7 prohibits Christians from voting against God-established earthly rulers, or from being politically active. If you live under a representative form of government, your leaders are bound by law to allow you to vote against them in an attempt to remove them from office. You are not rebelling against God-established leaders when you exercise your rights as a citizen. Although the apostle Paul never possessed the right to vote for rulers in the Roman Empire, you may recall that he exercised his rights as a Roman citizen on at least two occasions in order to escape harm he was about to suffer under God-established rulers (see Acts 22:25-29, 25:11). If all authority is from God, and if the authorities who rule grant us rights as citizens that are not in contradiction to God's Word, those rights are granted to us by God.

Can Christians Rule?

From this foundation found in Romans 13, we can answer another related question: Should Christians ever serve as earthly rulers? Some Christians would answer in the negative. Politics is no place for followers of Christ, they say. It is a dirty business fit only for the unregenerate. God would never want any of His people to be earthly rulers.

If that were true, however, then we must wonder why God, the one who establishes all earthly rulers, would give political authority only to unrepentant, unsaved people. Even more strange, we must wonder why He would only give authority to the unrepentant in light of the fact that He expects them to (1) "be a cause for fear for those who do evil," (2) "bring wrath upon evildoers," and (3) "praise those who do what is right," all to such a degree that they can rightly be considered to be "ministers of God," as Paul twice refers to them in the Romans 13 passage. Why would such a holy calling be given only to those who are generally unholy? It seems strange that unrepentant, unregenerate sinners are the only ones entitled to serve as "ministers of God" and as extensions of His authority, while such a privilege is completely off-limits to those who have repented and been born again, those who, incidentally, will one day judge angels and reign with Christ (1 Cor. 6:3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:6). If God expects earthly rulers to rule righteously, it would seem quite foolish of Him to grant such authority exclusively to the unrighteous, withholding it from those who are the best equipped to rule according to His desires. Shall we pray that our current unregenerate earthly leaders don't come to repentance and saving faith in Christ lest they disqualify themselves from holding office?

The Bible that all Christians claim to believe contains stories of righteous people whom God exalted to positions of great political authority in secular kingdoms, such as Joseph and Daniel, not to mention the good Israelite kings, such as David and Hezekiah, and various judges whom He exalted to rule over Israel. The Bible declares, "When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, people groan" (Prov.

29:2).

So where have Christians ever come up with the idea that followers of Christ have no place in human governments? In light of Romans 13:1-7, it would seem safer to conclude that Christians, above all other people on our planet, should be involved in human governments.

Granted, there have been and are inherently evil governments under which virtually no Christian has any hope of being a political influence. (One of those places seemed to be Communist Eastern Europe, by the way, until brave souls started speaking and emboldened the citizenry.) But if you are reading these words right now, chances are, you live in a nation that allows you some political expression. You can vote, you can endorse candidates, and you can run for office. Now read slowly so you don't miss this: Your God-established government, an extension of God's authority, gives you some authority. Thus, according to Romans 13:1-7, God has given you some political authority. What are you doing with it?

It is interesting that Christians will quickly say of governmental leaders, "God is going to hold them accountable," but we rarely see ourselves as equally accountable to God for the political authority He has entrusted to each of us.

Our most basic, God-given bit of political authority is to vote in elections which determine who will represent and lead us. When we vote for candidates who are pro-abortion (as many professing Christians do), we vote for the death of babies. Will God not hold us accountable? When we vote for candidates who are in favor of stealing our grandchildren's future earnings to pay for our exclusive current benefits, we are culpable in the theft of our grandchildren. And when we don't vote in an election, we abdicate our God-given authority, making ourselves no different than the congressman who doesn't attend a congressional session during a crucial vote.

Should you run for political office? Many of us (including myself) are not qualified, but if you are qualified and are able, why not? Indeed, running for office requires wisdom, intelligence, hard work, a tough skin, and often a high degree of courage, stamina and self-discipline. Surely there are such Christians who at times think to themselves concerning current political office holders, "If I had that position, I could do a better job at serving the people than they are doing." There may well be others who would agree with you. So why not at least pray about running for election?

Now don't wait for God to miraculously exalt you. He has established a governmental system for us where leaders are elected by the voting citizens. If you are to hold office, you'll have to be elected, which means you have to persuade voters. The system God has given us is designed so that if there are enough good people who vote, good people can be elected to office. The system also seems to be designed so that God's wrath is built right into it. Wicked people will elect wicked people, and everyone suffers for it. I've sometimes thought that God is judging our nation through our bad leaders. Perhaps He is, but could an alternative reason be that a lot of good people who are more qualified to hold office are not running for office, and many other good people aren't politically involved to any degree, to the point of not even voting? As Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." If enough good people ran for office, and enough good people voted for those good candidates, it might not seem as if God is judging our nation through bad leaders.

Some say that politicians must compromise moral principles, and that is why no Christian should strive to hold a public office. The truth is, however, that there are times when politicians do compromise moral principles, but they never have to compromise.

Is This Really Important?

What difference can earthly political activity really make? Part of the answer is found in the prayer that many of us pray every day: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). God desires that His will be done on the earth. As an extension of His authority, governments have a unique capacity to help or hinder God's will to be done on the earth, which is one reason we are told in Scripture to pray for political leaders (see 1 Tim. 2:1-2). Government policies can hinder or help the spread of the gospel, deter or strengthen evil, promote or inhibit justice, encourage or suppress immorality, invigorate or stifle productivity, and create wealth or breed poverty, all of which not only determine the quality of life on earth, but which can have consequences in eternity.

Having ministered in over fifty nations and traveled in more, it has become quite obvious to me that, more than any other human institution, governments affect the quality of people's lives and their level of exposure to the

gospel. As a prime example, take a look at the difference between North and South Korea, consisting of the same people, culture and general geographical location, but having very different governments. Since the division of Korea in 1948, South Korea has prospered, while millions of North Koreans have starved. South Korea boasts the world's largest evangelical congregation, and millions of South Koreans have been born again over the past few decades. South Korean missionaries have been sent all over the world. During the same time, however, North Korea's government has worked to eradicate Christianity, and the tiny minority of Christians struggle to hold fast under persecution. Tens of thousands languish in prison camps. If they are ever to be free it will be because of political changes in North Korea.

When British Parliamentarian William Wilberforce, a follower of Christ, was contemplating abandoning his political career to become a pastor, abolitionist John Newton---composer of the classic hymn Amazing Grace---strongly advised him against it. Newton believed that Wilberforce could bear greater fruit for God's kingdom as a Christian statesman. Together, they persevered year after year to build a consensus to outlaw the slave trade, and finally to outlaw slavery itself throughout the British Empire, which opened the floodgates of freedom for the rest of the world. What might our lives be like today had those two men believed that politics was no place for Christians?

It is tragic that God has given most of us a system of government that the unrighteous often exploit for their selfish and perverted ends, while the people who claim to serve the God who established our government (and who are called to be salt and light) opt out---as we moan about our leaders and wait for the rapture. So let's continue to preach the gospel, but let's also vote based on moral conviction. Let's support moral candidates. Let's work to remove immoral leaders. If you are qualified, pray about running for public office so that you can promote righteousness. We need you now more than ever.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble (Luke 1:52).

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men (Matt. 5:13).