

## **SUBJECTION TO GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY** **Romans 13:1**

**by Dr. Jack L. Arnold**

This section of Scripture deals with the Christian's relationship to his government. Some of the teaching may be new to you, and it may appear controversial. I ask that you study what the Word of God has to say on this matter.

For two thousand years there has been a tendency on the part of some to make the Bible support a certain political system. But God's written Word is not a book of political philosophy, economics or science. It does not deal with the physical and material realms of society but with the spiritual realm. There is no such thing as a Christian government or a Christian nation. There are governments and nations with Christians in them, but the Bible teaches no set political system.

In America there is a tendency to equate the teachings of Christianity with the democratic way of life, but this cannot honestly be done. God is not pro-American. God is not a democrat, or a republican, or a socialist, or a fascist, and he doesn't prescribe free enterprise. As wonderful as the American system of representation and free enterprise might be, it must be remembered that the Bible does not speak for or against any political system. God is for his people, the elect, and his wrath burns hot against all evil, whether in China, Russia, England, France, America, or any other nation. However, it cannot be denied that the teachings of Christ have influenced certain political systems, especially the governments of England and America.

While the Bible is silent as to political systems in different countries, it does set forth some principles concerning the Christian's relationship to government: 1) government is a divine institution; 2) church and state are to be separate; and 3) Christians are to submit to government.

### **DIVINE INSTITUTIONS**

God has established divine institutions for all men so that there will be order for the human race. We are not talking about Christian institutions such as the local church, baptism, and the Lord's table that were given specifically for Christians. Rather, we are talking about institutions that were established in the beginning, long before there was a Christian church. These institutions are: 1) marriage; 2) the family unit; and 3) government for the protection of man. In marriage, the husband rules over the wife.

In the family, parents rule over their children. In government, established law is to rule the people.<sup>1</sup>

## SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

*The universal church is a spiritual nation within the political nations of the world; the church is supernatural:* The true, universal church of Jesus Christ is made up of all who have experienced the new birth through faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour. By his grace, God is supernaturally calling out a people for himself: "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). The church is a supernatural and spiritual entity that is in the world but not of it.

*The church is supernatural:* The universal church is supernatural because it is a spiritual nation within the political nations of the world.

"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

God is no respecter of nations or races, and the church transcends all political and national organizations. Those making up the church are a spiritual nation, and all give allegiance to the same king, Jesus Christ; all observe the same laws, the Bible; and all sing the same national anthem, "God saved the sinner by grace through faith in Christ."

*The Church Is Separate from the State:* Jesus Christ first set forth the principle of separation of church and state:

"Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

The Christian is to obey both God and the state. Both the state and the church have God as their head. God has given the state authority to operate in its realm and the church authority to operate in its realm. Each has its own sphere of operation under God. I strongly uphold the principle of separation of church and state, but I do not endorse the separation of God and the state. God is Lord of the state as much as he is

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<sup>1</sup> While God is not for any particular form of government, he does oppose some systems of government more than others, and certain aspects of all government. For example, communism seeks to abolish all three of the divine institutions mentioned here, and therefore incurs God's condemnation in these respects.

Lord of the church, but his sovereignty over the state is not exercised through religious leaders.

The church exists to preach the gospel to society in order that individuals in society might be changed by the new birth and brought into the church. The church does a *spiritual* work for society. The state exists to protect society from itself and to do a *moral* work for society. The church, which is part of society, prays for and renders obedience to the state, and the state in turn gives protection to the church from society in general. The purpose of the church is to preach the gospel to the world so that some will be saved, and so that these individuals will then affect society and be good citizens of the state.

Communism says, "Change man's environment and you will change the individual." The Christian principle is: "Change the individual by the new birth, and this will change society." These two philosophies are diametrically opposed.

Liberal churches in America, which include many of the major denominations, teach that the church's gospel is social reform — the redemption of society, not the redemption of the individual. This is opposite to what the Bible actually teaches. The true function of the church is the redemption of individuals.

At a conference on Church and Society, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, one group of delegates argued that Christians should accept violence as a valid means of attacking the problems of racism and poverty. These liberals are not teaching real Christianity, and have perverted the true purpose of the church.

### **SUBMISSION TO EXISTING GOVERNMENT - Romans 13:1**

In Romans 13:1, Paul stated the third principle: A Christian is to be in submission to the government that is over him.

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." This is speaking about a Christian's responsibility to government. It is not applicable to the unsaved man. Whatever government a Christian finds himself under, he is to be in submission and obedience to it. This was spoken by Paul who lived under one of the most tyrannical dictatorships of all time, Nero's rule of Rome. It was the Roman government that put Christ to death, and Nero later executed the Apostle Paul:

"As we come to the study of this thirteenth chapter, it is well for us to remember that he who sat upon the throne of the empire when Paul gave this instruction concerning obedience to the powers that be, was one of the vilest beasts in human form who ever occupied a throne — a

sensuous, sensual brute ... an evil, blatant egoist of most despicable character, whose cruelties and injustices beggar all description. And yet God in His providence permitted this demon-controlled wretch to wear the diadem of the greatest empire the world has yet known” (Ironsides, *Romans*, p. 156).

Being subject to government in America includes such things as paying income taxes, accepting jury duty, obeying the law, etc. This same truth is taught by the Apostle Peter:

“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

“For there is no power but of [from] God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” This verse says that the authority behind all government on this earth is God. This is much easier to preach in America today in China or Russia, but the fact remains: all governments that exist have authority from God — the bad as well as the good. Men may abuse this authority, but God is still in control. One thing worse than being under a bad government is being where there is no government at all, where anarchy reigns.

God appoints all rulers to their positions:

“And he [God] changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings” (Dan. 2:21).

“To the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men” (Dan. 4:17).

“I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and have given it unto whom it seemed meet unto me. And now have I given all these lands unto the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son’s son, until the very time of his land come: and then many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of him. And it shall come to pass, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I punish,

saith the Lord, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand” (Jer. 27:5-8).

As one reads through the Old Testament he becomes aware that wicked kings were placed in authority by God as well as good ones. God raised up Pharaoh to sit on the throne of Egypt:

“For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Rom. 9:17).

The Book of Daniel tells us that God placed cold-blooded Nebuchadnezzar on his throne. We are told that Cyrus, that cruel Chaldean king, was God’s servant, raised up by God to scourge Israel. When Pontius Pilate said to Christ, “Do you not know that I have power to crucify you?” (John 19:10), the Lord Jesus looked at him and said, “Thou couldst have no power except it be given thee from above” (John 19:11). Elections and revolutions do not really put governments in power; God does. These are only instruments used by God to work his will. Scripture tells us that God puts in power the men of his choosing, whether they be benevolent rulers or tyrants. Every government that exists is held in the palm of God’s hand; it can only go as far as he wills; it is under his control because he ordained it.

The reason a Christian is to submit to the government over him, whether it be good or bad, is that it is ordained from God. When a Christian is obeying the government he is obeying God. By his obedience, he is a testimony to the government that salvation in Christ makes one a better citizen of the state.

This is a hard concept to grasp, for we would like to think that God is behind governments like America and England, but that he has nothing to do with oppressive and evil governments like that of China. But all governments exist by God’s authority, by his permissive will.

## **THE EXCEPTION TO SUBMISSION**

Under certain conditions a Christian may have to disobey his government. Christians are first heavenly citizens and servants of God; then they are citizens of the state. When the purposes the state conflict with the purposes of Christ, then men must obey God rather than men. A Christian may have to be disobedient for religious purposes but never for political purposes.

When the state takes away the Christian's right for spiritual service — to propagate the gospel, to read God's Word, or to meet with other Christians — then the Christian must disregard the warnings of the state:

“And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20).

“And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him” (Acts 5:27-32).

The state may take away our church buildings, but as long as it allows the church to meet in homes, there is no reason to disobey.

When the state demands that a Christian do an unchristian act, he is to resist. For instance, no Christian had to support Hitler in his mass murder of six million Jews. Neither should the Christian lie or steal for the state. He must stand uncompromisingly for righteousness under whatever government he resides.

A believer in atheistic Russia will not fail to proclaim, “The fool has said in his heart: There is no God.” If his faithfulness to God should be noticed by the authorities and he should be arrested, then he must stand faithfully, even to prison, exile, or martyrdom.

As Christians we are to be law-abiding citizens, but if governments forbid our preaching the gospel, we will disobey and preach anyway. If governments order us to do evil, we must disobey.

## **CONCLUSION**

These verses are written for Christian men and women, and they cannot be applied until a person has come to know Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour.

You cannot be a Christian until you have been born from above. This new birth becomes a reality when one believes that Christ died for his sins and commits his life to Christ for salvation. Until you come to Christ, you will never understand the Christian's relationship to his government.