

I have a vision of the church of our Lord Jesus as a people who are sojourners, strangers, exiles and refugees in this world as the scriptures describe in Hebrews chapter 11 and 1 Peter,

-S- “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.” (1 Peter 2:11) The church should be a happy, peaceful, loving people who swear allegiance to a foreign king, Jesus Christ, and to no other. The church is made up of people who reside in every nation, but whose true citizenship is in heaven and from heaven. Heaven bound citizens who eagerly await the return of their King and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Saints who are exiles, but who are serving others in Christ’s stead until He returns. I have a vision of the church as the freest of all peoples in the world. Free from ignorance, fear, greed and the power of sin because the kingdom to which we belong cannot be shaken, as it is written, **-S-** “Since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.” (Hebrews 12:28) As followers of our Lord Jesus we **-S-** “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:16) We too, like Isaac and Jacob, are **-S-** “looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) I see the church as a free people because our minds are not conformed to this age but are transformed by the mercies of God so that fashion, fad, whims of men or any other form of covetousness does not enslave us. I have a vision of the church with strong desires not shaped by the human persuaders of this world but shaped by the messages coming from our King. O, for a church with a single and radical allegiance to the King who said, **-S-** “My kingdom is

not of this world.” (John 18:36)

-S- Culture, Politics, and Christianity

One of the crucial issues before the church in America today is - **-S-** shall we be American with a pinch of Christ flavoring? Or, **-S-** shall we be Christ's people with a pinch of American flavoring? I think this issue is crucial because there are many in our churches who have not seriously and earnestly asked themselves, **-S-** “Am I more American than I am Christian?” We have to admit that there are influences in our society, which define us in the world as Americans and which influence us daily, but these are incompatible with the Christ-like-life and the cross-life? Do we not seem many constantly being shaped by forces in our culture, which make it almost impossible for the world to see any difference in our values?” If we are ever going to appear to the world as aliens and exiles on the earth, as people who are holy and set apart by God, then we are going to have to go back and renew the declaration of allegiance by which we became Christians, namely, we are slaves to Jesus as Lord! We are going to have to wake up to the fact that being Christian is a cultural and political statement as well as a way of life. It is a radical declaration of independence from our culture and of absolute allegiance to a foreign king, Jesus. Therefore, the point of my message today is to call us to submit to Christ alone as king; and whatever other submission to man we render, to do it within the limits of the lordship of Christ and always for the sake of His glory.

Paul's first paragraph to the Romans in chapter 13 has often been used to justify an unseemly conformity to the status quo in this country and in others. It could be used to keep the church docile to the issue of slavery in America, and to impede the efforts of those in America who worked for equal rights for black people fifty years

ago. I want us to look at this text in order to see what the apostle was really teaching.

Let me begin by reading Romans 13, beginning in verse 1, **-S-** “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. ² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³ 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; ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ 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.”

Paul's argument has three main steps. Step one is found in the second half of verse 1, **-S-** “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” If there is a government, God put it there. Step two is found in verse 2, **-S-** “whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God.” A person who resists authority experiences two things: one is pangs of conscience that he is really opposing God, and the other is punishment that the authorities mete out to those who oppose them. To avoid these two experiences, verse 5 concludes with step three: to avoid wrath and a bad conscience, **-S-** “Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection.” In summary then, from this passage states God appoints governing

authorities; therefore, it appears that to oppose them is to oppose God and to incur punishment. Do not oppose the government, but be subject to the government.

I believe **-S-** “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) That includes this text in Romans 13. But it also includes many other texts, which do not seem compatible with Romans 13. So if we want to honor the whole Bible as God's Word, we have to ask how Romans 13 fits in with other verses and passages of Scripture.

-S- Civil Disobedience in Biblical History

For example, there is a long and respected tradition of civil disobedience in biblical history, which God not only allows but also praises. It starts in Exodus chapter 1, the Israelites had lived in Egypt under the rule of the Pharaohs for several centuries. They became very numerous, so the king or Pharaoh of Egypt commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all the boy babies born to the Israelites in verse 16. But verse 17 says, **-S-** “But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live.” Verse 20 adds, **-S-** “So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty.” Because the midwives feared God, he gave them families and they continued to grow in number. It seems clear to me that these women were not subject to the governing authorities. In fact, they saw the command of the Egyptian king not as a command of God, but contrary to God's command. So they disobeyed the civil authorities for God's sake, and God was pleased.

Two other instances are found in Daniel. **-S-** King Nebuchadnezzar made a royal decree that all who heard his music must fall down and worship the golden image of

his god. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey the edict as can read in Daniel chapter 3, verses 16–18. So they were thrown into the fiery furnace, and God miraculously saved them and thus put his stamp of approval on their civil disobedience.

Then in the sixth chapter of Daniel, **-S-** Darius the king establishes an edict that for thirty days no one can make a petition to any god or man other than Darius himself in chapter 6, verse 7. We know Daniel was one of Darius' three chief commissioners or high royal officials from verse 2, but verse 10 says, **-S-** “Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (*now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem*); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing *previously.*” The result was that Daniel was thrown to the lions. But, again God shows His approval of Daniel's disobedience by saving him from the lion's mouth.

Godly civil disobedience is found in the New Testament. When Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities and commanded not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, they answered, **-S-** “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) So they went on teaching in public and were arrested again. The high priest said to them, **-S-** “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your *teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.*” (Acts 5:28) Peter and the apostles answered the high priest, **-S-** “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

All of this makes it very hard to say that the Bible teaches that since all governing authority is from God, it must, therefore, be blindly obeyed. Such stories as these

make Paul's teaching appear on the surface incredibly naïve. How could Paul say in verse 3, for example, **-S-** “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil.” Which is followed with Paul saying, **-S-** “Do what is good and you will have praise from the same.” If it weren't for some of the other things Paul wrote, we might think that he lived in an idealistic dream world where good is always rewarded and evil always punished by the governing authorities.

-S- All Existing Authority Is Set Up by God

At the same time we know for a fact that Paul was not so naïve. For example, he said, **-S-** “*the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*” (1 Corinthians 2:8) Paul was keenly aware that the death of Jesus was the ultimate breach of justice—that the governing authorities did not praise the good and punish the wrong. They did just the opposite. Paul knew from his own missionary journeys that the ruling authorities could be a menace to his own ministry. Men **-S-** “seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates” they wanted compensation for their lost of profit from the demon possessed girl. (Acts 16:19-20)

What then are we to make of Romans 13:1-7, which calls for subjection to governing authorities? Is the basic premise wrong? **-S-** Are all governing authorities really instituted by God? **-S-** Is all authority from God? Or does God institute only just and good governments? I would say that, given Paul's view of God's sovereign sway over history, he would not give up this truth under any circumstances. The answer then is, **-S-** “Yes”, God has set up all authority, which exists.

The evidence for this outside of Paul's writings is found in Daniel and John. Even

though Daniel describes the deeds of very evil kings, he says in 2:21 that it is God who **-S-** “removes kings and establishes kings” and in 4:32, **-S-** “the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.” So, according to Daniel even wicked kings should, but do not, acknowledge that they have their position and authority only from God. The same thing is taught in the Gospel of John. Pilate, who by his authority crucified Jesus, was a governing authority set and ordained by God. (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28) Pilate said to Jesus, **-S-** “Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10) Jesus answered, **-S-** “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:11) Therefore, if Pilate, Nebuchadnezzar, and Darius were set in their places and given authority by God, even though they did much evil, then we have no reason to deny Paul's assertion that **-S-** “there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” (Romans 13:1)

-S- What Being Subject to Governing Authorities

How do we put verse 3 in perspective? In view of what Paul knows about the miscarriage of justice in the death of Jesus, he can't have meant it to be an absolute fact with no exceptions when he said in verse 3, **-S-** “For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior ... Do what is good and you will have praise from the same.” This verse and the next one must be a general statement of how governments should and often do function. Paul simply does not have in view the problem of evil governments. Instead he has in view a good government in which doing good deeds will generally find approval and doing evil will generally be punished.

If this is correct, then it will no longer be possible to insist that Christians should always be subject to the governing authorities. As long as authorities punish only what is evil and praise only what is good, submission to God will always conform to

submission to the authorities. But if the authorities ever begin to punish the good and reward the bad, *as has repeatedly happened in church history and as we now at this time are beginning to see in America*, then submission to God will bring us into conflict with the authorities. So the command to be subject in verses 1 and 5 is not absolute; it depends on whether subjection will involve us in doing wrong. The ultimate criteria of right and wrong, is not whether a ruling authority commands it, but whether God commands it. The fact that God has ordained all authority does not mean all authority should be obeyed. It is right to resist what God has appointed in order to obey what God has commanded. His appointment of Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Pilate, Bloody Mary, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin and Obama may be for our testing. In Deuteronomy it is written, **-S-**¹ “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder,² and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.⁴ You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.” (Deuteronomy 13:1-4) As Peter was so crystal clear when he said, **-S-** “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29) We are to obey God even at the risk of our mortal lives.

When verse 5 says we are to be subject in order to avoid wrath, it means the punishment that comes from wrongdoing, not from obedience to Christ. Peter again defines what is proper behavior, **-S-** “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if *anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.*” (1 Peter 4:15-16) In other words, strive to avoid incurring wrath for wrongdoing, but if doing what

Christ demands brings wrath, don't have a guilty conscience, for you glorify God.

Let me sum this all up. **-S-** 1) There is no authority except from God. The greatest human ruler should humbly confess he is where he is by virtue of God's sovereign appointment. **-S-** 2) Nevertheless, some rulers and governments are good, and some are bad. Some reward the right and punish the wrong. Others do the reverse. Most do some of both. **-S-** 3) Therefore, the demand for subjection is relative, not absolute. It depends on whether the demands of the governing authorities require us to disobey Jesus. If they do, we will not be subject at that point to governments, but will say with Peter, **-S-** [“We must obey God rather than men.”](#) (Acts 5:29) We will honor God above the state.

But if the demands of the state do not require us to disobey Jesus (as with speed limits, stop signs, income taxes, curfews, building codes, fishing licenses, and many other laws), we will be subject for the Lord's sake. As Peter made clear, **-S-** [“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.”](#) (1 Peter 2:13-14) It is important we submit to authority and be an example of people who live honest, truthful and obedient lives as a witness to the Lordship of Christ and His power in our lives. But, it is very important to stress that, just as we may have to disobey the civil authorities for Christ's sake, so all our obedience should be for His sake as well. We are to never have two masters. All our submission to man is not only limited by the lordship of Christ; it is also an expression of our yielding to that lordship. Every time we say yes to any law, it should be a yes to Jesus. If Jesus means that much to us, then my vision for the church as a holy, happy, peaceful, loving group of aliens and exiles in the world will become a reality. That's my prayer for all churches, but especially

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