
Christian's Responsibility to Government

Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17

Russ Kennedy

Introduction Every two years in the United States of America as in many other participatory governments, we face the privilege and responsibility of selecting those who will govern us. As Americans, we tend to focus on it during the presidential elections – Christians in other nations in different rhythms of politics face the choices in different ways.

We have been given a wonderful opportunity and its accompanying responsibility – we have some say in who is elected. At the end of the day we get the government we picked and usually, the one we deserve. But let us not fool ourselves – our choices and votes are not ultimately determinative. God's purpose, plan and providence are. He will raise up and will tear down in every nation across globe as he sees fit. So once again, we are faced with a tension. We must choose well and we must trust and rely on God.

We are coming up on a time when we will have the opportunity to cast our votes for the men and women we believe ought to govern us. This is an opportunity to think clearly and Biblically about what the Bible requires of us. This is a time when we are deeply concerned, even though we ought to be paying some attention all along.

I am not going to attempt a comprehensive Christian theory of government – I am sure that what I would have to say would be shocking to many. But, we will this morning have clearly defined for us from the Scriptures our responsibility to any government God sees fit to place over us. And, we will think about the additional right and privilege we have in America to vote.

The Biblical Principles

Romans 13:1-4

If we are going to respond Biblically to our government, then we need a Biblical framework. While the whole Bible is needed, Paul in Romans 13 gives us a whole Bible summary of a Theology of Human Government. Paul is writing these words in a time when all Christians would have been living under governments that would not have been influenced at all by Biblical principles. Yet he clearly outlines our attitudes and our responsibilities to human governments as heaven's citizens.

The State as a God Ordained Authority

(v.1-3)

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as an authority ordained by God by His power. The imperative then is that we are to be subject to the governments God place over us. Why are we to do this? Paul gives us several compelling reasons.

1. All authority spheres are defined and described by God. Thus God Himself is the overarching authority within which governments operate – God initiated and installed human government after the great Flood. So governments have authority, not by sheer physical power, but by Divine decree.
2. The authorities that are in place are there by God's design, decree and providential placing. No government comes into place apart from God's sovereign will and all governments that come into being emerge from the decrees of His hidden will. In Acts 17, Paul says that the rise and fall of nations and people groups has God centered reasons behind it.
3. Those who resist and rebel against the governing authorities resist and rebel against God. When we resist and rebel against God, we are subject to the correcting and judging hand of God.

So, Christians are to do good and not evil. Good governments will support and defend its good citizens and restrain and punish its bad ones. Bad governments may not function as they were designed to by God, but that does not give Christians the right to do evil just because the government is bad. Do we trust in our God or do we not? Will we live as citizens of heaven here where we fully expect that fallenness and sin will twist the good design of God into dangerous and despicable powers?

Now it is imperative that this text not be made to stand alone. No authority may command or compel a Christian to disobey God. So Peter and Paul and a long host of Christians have stood before evil rulers and declared that they must obey God. But they were submissive as they bore with joy the punishments meted out, seeing the suffering and martyrdom as a privilege. So while at times we must disobey when ordered to do evil, we will be submissive as we humbly accept the persecution that comes.

The State as a God Employed Servant (v.4)

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as a servant employed by God for His purposes. God has designed the state to carry out certain functions. When the state operates within these functions, they serve God's purpose and the good of their citizens. When they do not, then they can become a danger to a people. One of the primary functions of government is to implement justice and to carry the sword. The state is to punish evildoers even up to capital punishment. It is to carry the sword of public justice. War is a legitimate function of carrying the sword. So Christians who were converted while in the Roman army could stay in the army and fight for Rome. In fact, Paul in verse 4, sees the bearing of the sword by the state as a weapon of God's own wrath. This draws from a rich variety of texts in the Old Testament prophets where God used foreign and evil nations to execute His justice and wrath against both His own people and against other nations.

I want to point out again that Paul is writing under a horribly evil government and to people under a horribly evil government. We cannot therefore say from verse 4 that governments that do not serve God's good are illegitimate and not to be submitted to and possibly even overthrown. So, we are to be subject to the

governing authorities, not just to maintain a clear conscience before God, but also not to put ourselves in the way of God's wrath.

The Universal Precepts

Having therefore a Biblical foundation, what practical implications are drawn from it and applied as Christian responsibilities? These are given both here in Romans, as well as in 1 Peter 2:13-17 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

Moreover, hear me well. We are to respond in a God pleasing way to our government, not because government is of the people, by the people and for the people – but because government is of God, for His purposes and our good. Government is not by the consent of the governed, but by the ordination of God. Watch how this fundamental belief shapes Paul's and Peter's directives.

Submit

1 Peter 2:13-17

We must submit to the government God places over us.

The clear command here, as well as in Romans 13:1, is to be in submission to the government. Peter is careful even to detail a multi-level, bureaucratic government where there are local governments and national governments. He is consistent with Paul in his understanding of the Biblical function of government. (v.14). His aim is that Christians, by their submission even in the face of suffering, will silence foolish ignorance (v.15). Christians, while being free, must not use that freedom to disobey the law but places themselves under the Lordship of Christ as His servants (v.16). In the midst of living out relationships as heavens citizens and the world's neighbors, he commands and commends honoring the emperor (v.17).

Submission in the Bible is not blind, unthinking obedience. It is careful bending to authority. It means that when the authority is functioning properly, to watch over our tendencies to rebel and disobey out of sheer depravity. It means that when an authority commands us to sin, then we make a Biblical appeal, if necessary disobey and then with grace, bear the consequences or flee.

Honor

Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17

We must honor and respect those God places in the government.

This verb used in both of these texts means to show respect, to honor. It is given as a positive command. It means that while we may have to confront and speak critically of evil character or conduct, we do not speak in such a way, with such words or in such a tone that evidences dishonor and disrespect.

What does this mean practically? It means that if we have a president or senator or legislator who is wicked or stands for folly, we may point those things out. But we must not use disrespectful titles, names, labels, jokes, etc. When Mr. Clinton was president, I disagreed with much that he did and stood for – but we don't call him names. And while Mrs. Clinton is a senator, she is to be treated with respect even when we disagree with her sin and folly.

Taxes**Romans 13:6-7**

We must pay our taxes to support the government as God has ordained.

God has ordained that the government be supported through taxes. Their ministry of justice is underwritten by revenues derived from those benefiting from the proper exercise of their governmental functions. To not pay your legitimate taxes is a form of rebellion and disrespect. To pay more than the minimum tax is unwise and poor stewardship. Pay all of as little as is allowed.

By the way, don't get into arguments that not paying illegitimate taxes which are evil either because they are a tax on income or because they are used to fund immoral causes. I do not find exceptions like this anywhere I read in the Scriptures. It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, the tithe was based on income and there was no levying of sales taxes or trade tariffs.

Pray**1 Timothy 2:1-2**

We must pray for the people and government so that they will function as God has intended.

The final responsibility is one of supplication, prayer, intercessions and thanksgiving for all including kings and governors – all those who have the rule over us. We ask God to cause them to function as He has designed – as a support to the good and a scourge to the wicked, to bear the sword of justice properly. What we are seeking in this kind of praying is to live under a government's protection free of the government's interference and opposition. What we seek is to live righteous lives in peace and quiet, godly and dignified in every way.

Therefore, our praying now is to be hugely informed by the purpose, the effect that praying should produce. We will pray for our present government, the coming election and the government that will be in place generally in the same way. But, we will pray with some sense of detail over where that government is failing to serve God's purposes.

Is it possible that the present interference and opposition of local and national governments in private life and church ministry is the direct consequence of our activism on one hand and our lack of praying on another? I leave that question to challenge you in your times of praying.

The Focal Point

We have an unusual responsibility here in America (as do many Christians in other countries). We have the opportunity to vote for and participate in the process of choosing who will be in our government and what kind of government it will be. Those are not two distinct choices, but one – the government will become the people we place in it.

Most Christians today choose who to vote for based on the candidates stand on what are perceived as moral issues. Abortion, gay marriage, social justice, just wars, church-state relations, and state education all list high on people's concerns. The debate rages over whether we should vote for a candidate whose views on an issue are unbiblical.

After teaching US History, Government and Economics for over 9 years, living in 3 countries and reading and thinking a lot about all this for over 30 years, my study in the Scriptures leads me to say, "The issues are not the issue, character is." Issues have their place, but they are secondary.

Israel wanted a king like the nations around them. God gave them a king like the kings around them. God raised up a king after His own heart in His own good time. Yet even that king sinned and failed miserably. Both, however, point us to our great and righteous Ruler, our High King of Heaven who is God's heart, rules in righteousness and will never ever fail. Where Saul and David failed and where Jesus prospers is in character – in the who they are.

Therefore, when you go to the polls to vote this November, your primary focus as a Christian is on the kind of candidate you will vote for. The Bible is quite clear on the character of rulers.

As to their General Conduct

Those who are good leaders in God's sight are ones who:

Rely on wisdom

Proverbs 8:15-16

By me [wisdom] kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.

Good leaders govern through wisdom, the application of truth and principles to the particulars of situations.

Speak righteously

Proverbs 16:10

An oracle is on the lips of a king; his mouth does not sin in judgment.

Good leaders know how to speak righteously even in the midst of pronouncing judgment.

Reject wickedness

Proverbs 16:12

It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness.

Good leaders reject evil in themselves, their counselors, and their policies.

Love righteous lips**Proverbs 16:13**

Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right.

Good leaders love and value people around them committed to speaking truth and speaking it righteously.

Discerns evil**Proverbs 20:8**

A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.

Good leaders know how to see through the veneer and discern the evil in people, issues and situations.

Seeks out truth**Proverbs 25:2**

It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.

Good leaders are committed to investigate and seek out the truth.

Punish the wicked**Proverbs 20:26**

A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.

Good leaders are committed to carrying out justice and wielding the sword as needed with both strength and restraint.

Favor the wise**Proverbs 14:35**

A servant who deals wisely has the king's favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts shamefully.

Good leaders prefer and favor those who demonstrate wisdom and reject those who think, act and speak foolishly and shamefully.

Honor the diligent**Proverbs 22:29**

Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.

Good leaders value and surround themselves with skillful, diligent, hard-working people.

Befriend the good**Proverbs 22:11**

He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend.

Good leaders' friends are good people; their character poises them to choose their friends carefully and wisely.

Are pacified by submission**Proverbs 16:14; 25:15**

A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it.

Good leaders know how to respond to appeals and manage submission.

Not swayed by money**Proverbs 29:4**

By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down.

Good leaders are not swayed by money nor use their power or position to exact money from others.

As to their Rule

Those who are good rulers in God's sight are ones who:

Establish their reign by righteousness and justice

Proverbs 16:12; 29:14

It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness.

If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever.

Good leaders want to govern based on what is right.

Prolong their reign by hating covetousness **Proverbs 28:16**

A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days.

Good leaders want to leave a legacy of doing what is right

As to their Particular Temptations

Those in leadership are specially warned against

Impurity

Proverbs 31:3

Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.

Good leaders are not involved in sexual sin; being faithful to their spouses.

Lying

Proverbs 17:7

Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince.

Good leaders do not lie but realize the value of well-spoken truth.

Harkening to lies

Proverbs 29:12

If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked.

Good leaders do not listen to lies lest he be surrounded by evil men.

Intemperance

Proverbs 31:4,5

It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

Good leaders are not heavy drinkers and are very careful about alcohol (and any other drug as well.)

As we close, I want to suggest some practical applications of these principles.

Conclusion

- Be committed to your heavenly citizenship first, then to your national citizenship. Never confuse the two. Be an advocate and an ambassador of God's kingdom.
- Show proper honor and respect to those leaders God has placed over us. Teach your children and hold other Christians accountable for God-honoring attitudes and talk.
- Fulfill all your responsibilities to your government, with much prayer for them and thanksgiving to God.
- Every one of you register to vote (forms are available on the information table) and vote in the coming election.
- Support and elect good leaders as defined by the Scriptures. DO NOT become a single issue Christian.

Let me close with the words from 1 Timothy 2.

First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.

Amen