

Subjection To Government (1)

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“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who 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...” (Romans 13:1-7).

While the above is the most expansive scripture on our relationship to civil authority, it is not the only one. We are reminded in 1 Peter 2:13-17 to be subject to all authorities, including representatives of kings and magistrates. Paul states in Titus 3:1 to obey rulers and their authority. Even governments that are generally evil are owed our obedience, for *“the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes”* (Daniel 4:32). But is our obedience unqualified? We need to remember a few things:

- *God ordained government, but not its evil practices* – Evil, corruption, greed, and cruelty go hand-in-hand with government at times, and God acknowledges this (Deuteronomy 17:14ff, 1 Samuel 8). There is a hint of this idea even in Romans 13:4, in the phrase *“It is a minister of God to you for good.”* There is no indication anywhere in the Bible that God approves of the evil activities of a government. In fact, the thrust of many messages from the prophets (Amos, Jonah, Nahum) was God’s displeasure with evil practices by the government. *“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees”* (Isaiah 10:1). God may have appointed authorities, but He never approves of their evil.
- *Obedience to government is not unqualified* – It is true that authorities are established by God, and we are commanded to be obedient to them, but not without at least one significant qualifier. *“Judge for yourselves,”* Peter says to the authorities who ordered him to stop preaching the Gospel, *“whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God”* (Acts 4:19). Government should be obeyed as long as it takes its place under God, but not when it takes the place of God.
- *We need not obey the evils of government* – In fact, we should never obey any evil at all. While obedience to evil government is demanded, in general, God never commands that we obey the evils of government. Any government that obtains our obedience above the dictates and expectations of God is idolatry.

What About Revolution?

It is important to note that the only revolution against authority that God ever approved of was a special case (2 Chronicles 23). In commanding the death of Queen Athaliah, God was protecting the only remaining link in the bloodline from David to Christ. It was not for liberty, freedom, or better wages that God ordered her authority overthrown. Other Bible verses remind us of the sinfulness of open rebellion against government: God gave the sword to the government, not to the people (Romans 13:4); Proverbs 24:21 plainly states, *“Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious”*; Aside from the one theocratic revolution specially sanctioned by God for a divine purpose, God consistently condemns revolt (Numbers 16, 2 Samuel 15, 1 Kings 12).

And as for our own American Revolution? *“It is understandable that everyone would like to believe that the revolution in this country was just, even if those in other countries are not. But in all honesty, given the biblical criteria, it is not possible... What then should American Christians do on the Fourth of July? Can they really celebrate independence from Britain? In response, a distinction should be made. There is a difference between what is born and how it*

is born... An American Christian can celebrate what was born of the American Revolution (a great free country) without thereby approving of the way it arrived” (Christian Ethics, Geisler, p. 254). Some may object to this by arguing that without some revolutions, tyranny would reign. This objection, however, forgets that God is sovereign over the affairs of government (Daniel 4:17). Has good come from the American Revolution? Certainly, and we should consider our great country a blessing. But remember that many other revolutions have produced almost entirely negative, destructive results: the English Civil War (1642), the French Revolution (1789), Russia (1917), China (1949). Millions died, many more were persecuted, and great moral upheaval ensued from all of these historic events. So what should a Christian’s response be to oppression?

- *Obey its laws under God* – That is our foremost responsibility to authority (Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13, Romans 13:1).
- *Pray for oppressive regimes* – Paul urged that “*entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life*” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
- *Work peacefully to change it* – We should fight oppression with the ballot not the bullet, with good not guns. There are legal avenues for social and political change (Ecc. 8:5-6).
- *Patiently endure suffering* – When it is impossible to flee from oppressive governments, the Christian’s highest calling is to patiently endure suffering (1 Peter 4:12-13). John writes, “*If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go... this calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints*” (Revelation 13:10).