

Fundamentals, Study 24. The Civil Government (Rom 13:1-7)

by BS Poh

o What is the relationship between church and state? Lack of clarity leads to great perplexity.

1. The civil government is ordained by God, although this is not recognised by everyone. By His providence (i.e. control over all things), God has allowed the government to come into power, regardless of whether it is a *monarchy* (i.e. rule by a king/queen) or a *republic* (i.e. rule by the people), a *democracy* (i.e. rule by popular vote) or an *autocracy* (i.e. absolute rule by one person), *free* (in which individual rights are recognised) or *totalitarian* (in which the community is treated as one, with no possibility of dissent). (Here, we have considered a country from the perspectives of *who* rules, *how* rule is carried out, and *what* effect rule has on the citizens.) God has given the civil authority the power and right to use force, for the defence and encouragement of those who do good, and for the punishment of evil-doers.¹ This includes capital punishment (i.e. the death penalty), meted out to those who deserve it.² (1. Rom 13:1-4; 2. Gen 9:6.)

2. Christians ought to submit themselves to, and obey, all those laws of the nation which do not contradict the laws of God. We do so not merely to avoid punishment, but because of our desire to please God. For that reason, we will pay all taxes due to the government, and will not engage in illegal activities such as smuggling.³ If any law of the country is against the law of God, we will choose to obey God rather than men. Boldness, wisdom, and perseverance are needed. For example, a law that forbids parents from caning their children is not of the same order of importance as a law that forbids Christians from evangelising.⁴ In the first case, the law is directed at all, regardless of their faith. We would still discipline our children in other ways, without caning. In the second case, the law is directed at our faith. We would have to boldly and wisely evangelise, at the risk of being punished for it. However, if the punishment is disproportionately severe, we might have to withdraw and preach to others.⁵ We ought also to pray for rulers and all who are in authority, that under them we may live a quiet and peaceful life, so that the gospel may be freely propagated.⁵ (3. Rom 13:5-7; Matt 22:21; 4. Acts 4:19-20; 5:29; 5. Matt 10:14, 16, 23; 6. 1 Pet 2:17; 1 Tim 2:1-2.)

3. It is lawful for Christians to hold public office, e.g. to be a government minister, a judge, or a police officer. In their office they are particularly responsible for maintaining justice and peace by applying the right and beneficial laws of the nation.⁷ Also, they may lawfully engage in war if it is just and necessary.⁸ Our view of the Christian's responsibility to the state arises from the Bible's teaching that the church and the state are two co-equal and independent powers, each with its own sphere of power and authority. This view has been called *Voluntaryism*. The Christian is a member of the church at the same time that he is the citizen of the country. He has responsibilities towards the church and towards the country.⁹ Not every citizen of the country, however, is a member of the church. Gospel work should be done by Christians only, although it is not wrong to employ non-Christians, or to accept their offer of help, in the supportive works involved in the propagation of the gospel.¹⁰ (7. 2 Sam 23:3; Psalm 82:3-4; 8. Luke 3:14; 9. Matt 22:21; 10. 1 Cor 5:9-10; 2 Cor 6:14-16)

4. *Voluntaryism* is different from *Separatism*, which maintains that the Christian must not have anything to do with the state - whether to help the state or to be helped by the state. This view of the Anabaptists is still held by some in Christian circles today. Another view is *Co-operatism*, which teaches that help from the state should be sought in the furtherance of the gospel. This was the position of the original Westminster Confession of Faith, no longer held by many Presbyterians today. There are two other views on church-state relationship. One view, called *Papism*, maintains that the church has authority over the state. The Roman Catholic Church teaches this. Another view, called *Erastianism*, teaches that the state has authority over the church. The Church of England teaches this.¹¹ (11. Matt 22:21; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1-2)

= Let us submit ourselves to the authority of Christ.

Review Questions

1. For what purpose has God given the power and right to use force to civil government?
2. Why do Christians obey the laws of the nation?
3. What will a Christian do if the law of the nation is against the law of God?
4. Why do we pray for rulers and those in authority?
5. What is the particular responsibility of the Christian who is in public office?
6. What does *Separatism* teach?
7. What does *Co-operatism* teach?
8. What does *Voluntaryism* teach?
9. What does *Papism* teach?
10. What does *Erastianism* teach?

Assignment/Discussion

Other systems of civil government are but variations of the main ones we have considered, the names of which only seek to emphasise certain characteristics. Discuss *socialism*, *communism*, and *oligarchy*. How does *anarchy* fit into all this (cf. Judges 21:25)?

Memory Passage (Matt 22:21)

And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

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