

Lecture One
 “God’s People and Civil Government in Biblical History”
 Sept. 19 - KTH

Course Introduction: In this study we consider the relationship of God’s People to civil government. The course has four parts. Part one will be a survey of Biblical history. Part two will examine the relation of church and state up to the Protestant Reformation. Changes in church and state relations after the conversion of Emperor Constantine will receive attention. The third part will consider the Reformation and post-Reformation years with special attention to developments in Scotland. We will pay close attention to the role of Covenanters and Reformed Presbyterians in Scotland and North America. We seek a better understanding of what church and civil government relations have been and perhaps gain some insight into what they should be. We believe that the purpose of the Godly is to live to the glory and enjoyment of God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ through faith and obedience to Him in all things without exception.

The Beginnings of Civil Government

Many date the Divine institution of civil government shortly after the Great Flood. Others hold that it is a development of God’s Creation mandate to man. He is to exercise dominion over the Creation as God’s vice regent.

Flood history is recorded in chapters six through nine of Genesis. Prior to the Flood, wickedness had overtaken the inhabited world since the Fall. Tyranny and violence were universal. The population of the Godly was reduced to eight persons in one family. The situation is described in verse five of chapter six, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time”. In consequence God announced His intention to Godly Noah to “wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth”. Although not said explicitly, there is a suggestion that Noah, like Abraham of a later day, prayed that Godly Righteous be spared. In any case Noah found favor with God. He with his family was spared.

God’s instructions for the post-Flood world are found in chapter nine. We need not concern ourselves with all of them, but there is one which we note in connection with civil government. In verse five of chapter nine God is quoted saying, “from each man I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man”. Continuing in verse six, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man”. Here we discover the distinctive mark of civil government after the Flood. Civil government is appointed to avenge and protect human life by execution of murderers. God granted authority to human agents to execute men who unjustly kill other men. Whether this is the date when civil government was instituted or not, this grant marks a Divine enhancement of its power and a radical change of its nature. Ultimately God is the owner of life and the avenger of the innocent, but civil government is authorized to act in His name since the Deluge.

Notice that this grant of authority is ministerial authority; not original. All authority belongs to God. God is jealous of human life. Any attack on a man not authorized by God, even by an animal, is understood as an attack upon God. Man is the image bearer of God. An attack on the image bearer is an attack on God. In response to such attacks, God has delegated human ministerial powers to execute murderers. Whether this Divine authorization is a bare permission to be used with discretion, or an unavoidable obligation is often debated. We need not go into that now. What we presently need to make clear is that civil government is authorized to use violence against murderers. By extension of the principle, civil government is authorized to use force to restrain activities which tend to the loss of human life. This power of the sword distinguishes civil government from all other forms of government. In particular it marks a difference between the spiritual and moral

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government exercised by the church over its members and the civil government which has jurisdiction over all persons within the territory it rules..

While we may date the birth of post Fall civil government from the time after Noah, murder and violence have been in the world since the time of Cain. Cain killed his brother. Organized gangs of violent men were *de facto* governments everywhere before the Flood. Society in the hands of the wicked was government by men in rebellion against the sovereign authority of God. Killing without divine warrant enforced the unjust demands of the powerful against the weak. By cruel force the wicked dominated society and enriched themselves. All of this was a major factor in the demoralization and decline of the righteous. The Godly were frightened by the terror and seduced by the wealth of the wicked. In consequence, the children of the Godly married the children of the wicked. Increasingly the People of God were corrupted and reduced to a single family.¹ (Later in course we will consider a practice know as political dissent on the Godly seeking to avoid incorporation with the wicked. However note now that the first and fundamental dissent of the Godly from incorporation with the wicked is dissent from intermarriage. This is dissent on a much larger scale.)

It appears from the Genesis account that men were not authorized to use violence to enforce God’s law against murder prior to the Flood. God Himself was the avenger of blood and the Flood was God’s avenging judgement. After the Flood God altered the arrangement. God promised, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood”. The nature of man did not change. Man is still an evil doing creature who fills the earth with wickedness and death if not restrained. Therefore, if the righteousness are to survive, some effective restraint of the wicked is required. If God does not intervene directly, as at the Flood, the righteous need a means of defense against the predations of the wicked. The evil which resides in the hearts of men must be kept from bursting forth in murderous tyranny. Since God has forsworn elimination of human wickedness in the present age, there must be some appointed human agency for the preservation of a Godly People on the earth. This is not to say that God may not still act in a providential way or that evil does not have a certain self-liquidating character..

The suppression of murder is to the advantage of the greater part of the human race. Even those who contemplate evil in their hearts profit from the restraint of violence against life. Thus the self interest of men, including those who do not fear God, encourages them to accept limitations on the practice of iniquity. In this connection, naturalism goes so far as to claim self interest as the origin of civil government. However, God’s People understand its origin and development from a redemptive standpoint. They understand that in order for a redeemed people to be gathered out of many generations of man, the race needs preservation from its self-destructive ways. A witness to God needs to be preserved in the earth. Otherwise the wicked would surely have destroyed both the witness and themselves since the wicked are fools.

Babel

¹1. Some translations give the reason for the intermarriage of the Godly line of Seth with the wicked line of Cain as the beauty of the daughters of Cain. The Hebrew word, *tov*, sometimes indicates physical beauty but more generally it indicates *good or a good thing*. In this place a better translation would be *desirable*. The daughters of the wicked were desirable for the several benefits which could be temporarily (see v. 3) gained by alliance with the wicked.

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There is little information in the Biblical record concerning the People of God, their habitations and the societies in which they lived between the time of Noah and the time of Abraham. Chapters ten and part of eleven of Genesis pass quickly over this long period. We learn that a Godly people was preserved in the line of Shem who was one of the sons of Noah. This does not preclude the existence of other believing families outside that line, but if they existed, we do not know about them. Their lines eventually turned away from the true God and they disappear for the most part from redemptive history.

It seems that after the Flood the growth of the human race was rapid and the territory it occupied was expanded. The direction of this expansion was towards the southeast from where The Ark landed. There people found a fertile plain which is approximately the land we know as Babylon. At this men were united by a common language. However, the race was beginning to lose its unity. Those who entertain wickedness in their hearts can not maintain unity. This is evident in chapter eleven of Genesis. Yet the human heart craves unity and there are numerous practical advantages, at least to those who rule. A project was begun designed to strengthen the bonds between the families of men. It is called Babel and we might see in it a prototypical United Nations. The need for a unifying device indicates that already divisive forces were at work. The proposed scheme for promotion of unity was to build a magnificent religious shrine. As all eyes turned towards a temple of renown, human solidarity would be maintained..

It is demonstrable that a common religion and the culture flowing out of it is an effective means to unity. No more efficient bond has ever been discovered. Civil governments are well aware of this, and they use religion for their own preservation and power. Even atheistic governments know that some source of moral authority is advantageous. Actually it is necessary. Civil government is limited in what it can compel by violence and the threat of violence. Warlords are eventually overthrown by the rebellions of enslaved people often with the assistance of external aggressors. Rulers need subjects who are bound together in obedience to themselves by a moral conscience. No satisfactory substitute for religion has been found. Therefore pragmatic civil governments support and promote a unifying religion among their subjects. In modern times the unifying principle(s) may not be called religion but it takes on the character of religion. It is secular religion. It is deemed absolute, morally inviolate, the truth. The religions which civil governments support are not always, in fact seldom, the true religion. In many cases civil governments have designed a religion which conditions the people to accept their rule no matter how unjust.

Babel was designed to promote unity by creating a visible, geographical religious center. The government which controlled the center would then control the people. Whether the project was conceived to advance brotherhood or empire may be debated. There may have been some of both motives present. Whatever the case, human invention of idolatrous religion and the building of temples to false gods is not acceptable to the true God. It is better, although we would not say that it is ideal, for nations and communities to separate than to unite in a conspiracy of evil. God does not allow evil schemes to stand indefinitely. When civil government instituted to restrain evil becomes an evil doer, its days are numbered. When the wicked conspire to break free from the bonds of God, to be autonomous, to be their own gods; God laughs in derision.² Shrines, pilgrimages, splendid temples, beautiful liturgies, will not achieve the brotherhood of man or preserve governments.

² Psalm 2

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Empires built on a common but false religion will not endure. Regimes held in place by fraudulent religion aided by force may succeed for a time but not permanently. When man in Adam sinned, the race was driven from Eden. Messianic civil government can not restore Paradise.

There is a great amount of power to unite in common language. It facilitates both cultural advance to the benefit of the society, and also evil conspiracy. But even common language can not fully unite people. The evil hearts of men have taught them to curse God and their brothers in every language. Language breaks down in a multiplicity of tongues and dialects when confronted with the evil, selfishness, warfare, dispersion and isolation which controls men apart from the grace of God. Even if Babel had succeeded and God had not prevented its completion by a confusion of tongues, it would have eventually failed. The only commonality which can unite men in peace is true religion: that faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ. In Christ the children of men find unity in principle and practice. Today, Christians are separated by language and custom and distance and rulers, but they are one in Christ. Though they speak many languages, they have a heart for one another. Pentecost, the pouring out of the Spirit of God, achieves what Babel could not. Christ’s People are subject to many civil governments around the world, but they are united and ruled by the Lord Jesus. When they come to the Table and celebrate the Cross of Christ they commune as one. “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.”³

Abraham

Abraham was called out of the City of Ur. He became both an ethnic and religious father. Of the two, the second fatherhood was the goal of the first. God created a nation out of the loins of Abraham. This was not God’s ultimate purpose. In fact the ethnic aspect is essentially a thing of the past although of great importance in history of redemption. Abraham was called to be the Father of the Faithful: a people drawn from all the tongues and nations of men. His natural descendants were raised up to serve as a cradle nation out of which in due time the Redeemer of Men would arise. The Children of Abraham were called to prepare the world for the full and final revelation of God’s plan for a redeemed people. Thus God kept the promise made to Eve.⁴ God’s promise to Abraham is, “in you shall all the nations be blessed”.⁵

Moses the Mosaic Coverant

We hasten over the centuries between the calling of Abraham and the establishment of Israel as an independent nation in the Land of Canaan. After many years, great increase in number, and the severe burdens of Egyptian salvery, God brought the family of Abraham, out of Egypt. Israel became, as promised, a free people with its own civil government. As an independent nation, Israel like any other nation, required a civil magistracy and civil law. Israel’s civil government is both an instructive example and a frequent stumbling block for Christians as they

³Rev. 5:9-12

⁴Gen. 3:15

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endeavor to develop a post-Israelite Biblical theology of civil government.

The life of the Israelite nation can not be understood without understanding its Covenant. Through Moses God gave and Israel received a national covenant. The place of its giving and receiving was Sinai from which it has taken one of its names. Today it is commonly called the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant. This Covenant was not a new covenant. It was a development, fulfillment, administration and expansion of the Covenant made with Abraham four centuries earlier. The Covenant with Abraham was in turn a development and new administration of the primitive redemptive covenant made with Adam and Eve after the Fall.

The Sinai Covenant bound Israel to the one true God, Elohim/ Jehovah, as its Creator, Lord, Preserver and Redeemer. The Covenant encompassed every aspect of Israel’s life: social and personal; civil and religious. It served as Israel’s national constitution both civil and ecclesiastical. The Law of the Covenant, sometimes simply called The Law and at other times The Covenant, regulated all elements of the nation’s existence. Israel was constituted as a civil theocracy. Jehovah was recognized as the supreme ruler, lawgiver and judge of Israel. Civil government was not sovereign. Its office was a ministry in God’s government. Its law was an implementation of the moral law as it pertained to civil affairs in that time and place and consonant with Israel’s redemptive calling and mission. However, its civil sphere of ministry did not take up the totality of Israel’s life. The priests and Levites were given the ministry of worship and Covenant instruction. Priests, judges and kings and all the people were subject to God under the Covenant.

What was the form of theocratic civil government under the Sinai Covenant? In its earliest days it was centralized under Moses. Moses was prophet, priest and king in Israel. He mediated God’s covenant with Israel. As such he was typical of Christ, the Mediator to come. After Moses, no one was allowed to assume both the office of king and the office of priest.

The Judges

In the “Song of Moses we read these words; “Moses commanded a law for us, a heritage of the congregation of Jacob. And he was king in Jeshurun”.⁶ However, as to be expected in even a small nation such as Israel, the details of civil government were too much for one man to administer. Accepting the prudent suggestion of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses enlisted the assistance of the elders of the tribes of Israel. Thus a hierarchal judicial system was established with Moses continuing as supreme judge. The law of the Covenant remained as the ground of all judging and judgments. Thus Jehovah continued as supreme lawgiver and judge. Moses died before Israel occupied Canaan. He was replaced by Joshua who led the conquest of The Land. Joshua was the first of the Judges of Israel. This form of government served God and the nation for a long period of time. Samuel was the last of the Judges.

After Moses civil government in Israel was much less centralized as the tribes scattered to take up their inheritances in Canaan. We see the beginnings of this while Moses was still alive. The appointment of inferior courts as suggested by Jethro, was a step in this direction. The

⁶Deut. 33:54&5

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appointment of Aaron as High Priest and the Levite tribe as Covenant instructors and administrators of religious affairs was another. Civil rulers were forbidden to exercise the office of priest. This division of responsibilities might be likened to a modern separation of church and state and often is. However, both priests and civil rulers were bound by The Covenant Law and both were required to co-operate in the leadership of the nation. It is not always easy for us today to clearly separate the civil and ecclesiastical law as it was in the Sinai Covenant. This sharp division owes more to modern political theory than to the thinking of the ancient Israelites. In any case, Jehovah was King. Neither priest nor king could legitimately assume totalitarian authority in his own sphere or lord it over the other sphere.

Reviewing the history of the Judges, we learn of times when there was no Judge in Israel. During these times what civil authority there was fell into the hands of tribal and family heads. Also during the time of the Judges, their administrations were not as inclusive of all national affairs as during the time of Moses. As the Israelites occupied the Land and were dispersed into many villages and towns, local administration of civil affairs became primary. National Judges were raised up by God in times of emergency when Israel’s existence was in danger of extinction and greater unity of action was required. The first service of the Judge in these times was as the leader of the army. These emergencies were occasioned by God’s judgment on Israel for its disobedience of the Law of the Covenant.⁷ The aggression of surrounding nations was His instrument for disciplining Israel. It follows then that the Judges also served to call Israel back from idolatry and led reform of Israelite society according to the Covenant.

During the time of the Judges the nation was obviously dependent on the providential government of God. The condition of God’s blessing was faithfulness of the people to the Law of the Covenant. Whether civil government was localized or more centralized in times of emergency, the national security of Israel depended on Covenant obedience. Safety and prosperity required that Israel trust and obey Jehovah. In crisis times, more centralization was a practical requirement. However, centralization of civil rule and efficient administration could never achieve the salvation of the nation. Jehovah was the Savior from whom Israel could not escape. Only through trust in God displayed in Covenant obedience could secure Israel’s independence and prosperity. Over and above military leadership, the greater service of the Judges was to call the people back to Jehovah and the Covenant.

The Kings

Eventually, in the time of Samuel, the people voiced their dissatisfaction with dependence upon God under a irregular system of Judges. They were determined to have a king like the nations around them. They were not satisfied with a system which amounted to temporary kings and armies of civilian soldiers raised in emergencies. They wanted what they believed would be greater security through a form of government with arranged continuity and permanent centralization. Perhaps they envisioned a hereditary monarch as was common in the nations around them. If not a hereditary king, at least an established mechanism for choosing a new king immediately after the death of the old one.

There was another feature of civil government commonly found in the nations around Israel. In these nations the king was more than a civil

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ruler. He was also the high priest of the national god. It was not unusual for the king to claim divinity. Thus the voice of the king was the voice of god. God was near and visible in the person of the king. In this we see a psychological principle which underlies idolatry. Rather than a spiritual awareness and trust of God at home in the heart; One who speaks to them through the words of His covenant; men crave a material, visible, audible revelation of God. Such a system fully implemented is humanistic, totalitarian, and tyrannical.

A third characteristic of civil government in the surrounding nations was maintenance of a standing army controlled by the king. The Israelites considered this to be a prudent measure enhancing national security. An instant response to aggression could be mounted. However, there are costs and risks for such security. Samuel brought these costs to Israel’s attention when they demanded a king like the nations around them. Permanent support of a king and his army is a heavy burden on the resources of a nation. It also brings the constant threat that the king will use the army to enslave his own people; impoverishing them to enrich himself. The nation may, at least for a time, be more secure from enslavement by external enemies, but often it is eventually enslaved by its own government. The costs may be worth paying and the risks worth assuming, but the dangers should be understood.

However the greatest danger is that the nation will trust in its army rather than God.⁸ Then all security is lost.

How did the Samuel respond to the request of the people. He took it as a rejection of himself. Samuel had been a great Judge and faithful to God, but Samuel was old and Israel would soon need a new leader. Samuel had good reason to think that the request was a rejection of himself. He had already shifted some of his duties to his sons, but his sons were bribe takers. The people did not want them. Corrupt government as well as pride is fatal to a nation’s security. However, this corruption was minor matter compared to the people’s real motive. This motive comes to our attention in God’s replay to Samuel. God said, “They have not rejected you. They have rejected me.” This was the heart of the matter. Israel’s sin was not that it desired more honest and efficient government. Israel’s sin lay in failure to trust God. It did not believe that their true security and prosperity lay in keeping the Covenant of their God. They put their trust in men. This is a futile trust. No nation is saved by its civil government whatever its form and resources. The Lord “does not delight in the strength of the horse; He takes no pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy.”⁹

Israel’s desire for a more centralized and efficient government was not unreasonable. In fact it had been anticipated long before in the time of Moses. In Deut. 17:15-20, God had revealed the Covenant requirements for the office of king in Israel. As you read them you will discover the basic requirements for good government in any age whatever its form.

The outcome of the people’s request for a king was that God instructed Samuel to grant what they desired. Saul from the tribe of Benjamin was chosen as Israel’s first king. In some ways Israel prospered under his rule, but he did not obey the Lord, and God took the kingdom from

⁸Ps. 33: 16-19

⁹Psalms 147: 10&11

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him. Saul did not heed the Covenant restriction placed on the king and this was his undoing. In particular he violated the separation of the king’s office from the priest’s office and offered sacrifice.¹⁰ We see that the separation of the civil office from the religious office is a very ancient law and found in God’s Covenant with Israel. This is instructive for the constitution of modern civil governments.

David from the tribe of Judah was chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to follow Saul . The rise of a king from the tribe of Judah was anticipated in the deathbed blessings of Jacob sons.¹¹ Jacob prophesied, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes.”

Who is Shiloh? The answer to this question is disputed. The root meaning of the word is “peace” or “rest”. Judah had led the Israelites in war until they came to their rest in the Land of Canaan. Eventually David of the Tribe of Judah, a man of war, united the tribes under his rule, subdued Israel’s enemies and extended its borders. Then Israel enjoyed peace and rest. David was a sinner and on occasion sinned grievously, yet he loved God. He sought to keep the Covenant. God loved David and promised that “if his sons would keep the Covenant the throne would not depart from his house.”¹² But with the promise there was a prophetic warning. God warned that David’s sons would not keep the Covenant.¹³ This prophecy was soon realized after David’s death

David’s son, Solomon, did not fully keep the Covenant. He reigned in the manner of the kings of the nations around him.¹⁴ Accordingly, when Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, came to the throne, the kingdom was divided. Only two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, remained with the House of David.¹⁵ Afterwards, the Southern Kingdom under the House of David had a checkered history. Some of the royal descendants were very wicked. Others were good kings and effected at least partial reformations. At last the Covenant disobedience of the king and people was punished with the “rod of men”. Judah was conquered by Babylon, a nation more wicked than itself. Many, including the king were carried into Babylon as captives.

The Babylonian Captivity

Judah’s captivity in Babylon was a time of development and relative prosperity as God’s people waited for Shiloh. Jeremiah had counseled

¹⁰I Sam. 13: 1-15

¹¹Gen. 49: 8-12

¹² II Sam. 7:16; Ps. 132: 11 & 12

¹³ II Sam. 7:14

¹⁴ I Kings 11: 1-13

¹⁵ Three as Simeon had been absorbed by Judah .

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the Kings of Judah from the Lord. They were advised to submit to Babylon and wait patiently for God’s deliverance promised after seventy years. God’s People were to trust God for it and wait patiently. For this counsel Jeremiah was called a traitor and persecuted. In due time, the promise was kept and some of the Jews returned to Palestine. Many others were prosperous and at home in Babylon. They did not return. Those who did return occupied some but not all of Israel’s former territory. Nor did they return as a free and independent people. They lived as a vassal nation under a succession of foreign kings.¹⁶

Were those who stayed behind unfaithful to God? Many of those who returned believed this. The returners to Palestine thought of themselves as more righteous and loyal to God. However those who stayed behind in Babylon did not become idolaters and their religious scholars made great contributions to Jewish religion and culture. Gradually the Jewish people became scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Jews outside the Holy Land became known as the Diaspora. They established synagogues for the worship of the true God in many cities. Synagogue schools were supported to instruction in Covenant Law. Yet always Jewish hearts and minds turned to Jerusalem and the Temple as their spiritual home.

Dispersion a School for the Christian Church

In many respects the Captivity and Diaspora were providential preparations for the Christian church. The People of God learned to worship God in a spiritual way far away from the Temple. They learned to be a faithful people, Keepers of the Covenant, while living in pagan nations under ungodly civil rulers. In the process many Gentiles came to know the God of Abraham. Some trusted in Jehovah and sought to keep His Law. Some joined God’s People in a formal way becoming naturalized Jews. Others were content to be adherents without formal inclusion in the Jewish nation. In Christ the promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed began to be realized in a significant way even before the birth of Jesus. Christ was about to replace the Temple and its High Priest, the New Testament Church the Israelite national church, and the Christian synagogue the Jewish synagogue. The spiritual eyes of the catholic church, church in the nations, turned from Jerusalem and the Temple to the Temple above where Christ the High Priest intercedes for his people on the ground of His sacrifice for them.¹⁷

Life for God’s People in the Diaspora was frequently hard. They were ridiculed for their peculiarity and often persecuted. They longed for Shiloh. They dreamed dreams of the Messiah who would conquer the nations and give them rest in their own nation. Messiah would be their own Covenant Keeping Ruler. His great dominion would make them secure and prosperous, masters of the lands. The refusal of Jesus to fulfill these dreams led, at least in part, to his rejection by the Jews and his deliverance into hands of the Romans.

¹⁶They returned under the Persians. After Alexander the Great and division of his territories by his generals they were alternately ruled from Syria and Egypt. Sometimes the rule was relatively benign and other times severe. Under the Maccabees brief periods of independence were won but eventually alliance with Rome was sought and by the time of Christ Rome was dominant.

¹⁷ John 4: 21-24

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Questions for Christians

Christ’s refusal to fulfill popular Jewish political expectations raises important questions and doctrinal issues, and practice for Christians today. Does it mean that Christians in this age to abandon any advocacy or attempt to organize Christian civil government? Is the vision Christian civil government foreclosed?

Several New Testament texts have been interpreted to justify this conclusion. The one most often quoted is a saying of Jesus, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” This saying is found in Matt. 22:21. It is also quoted in Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25. The text is the answer of Jesus replying to the question, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The question was asked with the intention of trapping Jesus. No matter what answer he gave, whether he said “yes” or “no” he would be in trouble with someone. If he said that it was not lawful, he would be in trouble with the Roman authorities. If he said it was lawful, he would lose support among pious, patriotic Jews. However, the answer of Jesus was more cleverly conceived than the question.

The Roman government had imposed a poll or head tax paid each year by every adult male in Judah. The amount of the tax was one denarius. This coin carried the image of Tiberius Caesar. The script on the coin identified Tiberius as “Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of the divine Augustus.” The reverse side pictured Caesar seated on a throne wearing the clothes of a high priest. The writing read, “Pontiff Maxim” which translated means “High Priest”. The coin with its images and inscriptions was clearly blasphemous in Jewish eyes. Therefore, many pious and patriotic Jews questioned whether it was right for God’s people to use the coin to pay the tax. In fact, at the time the tax was first imposed, Julius of Galilee had pronounced the paying of it high treason against God.¹⁸

How did Jesus avoid the trap set for him? In essence he said that it was not a question which required a “yes” or “no” answer. His answer is a guide for today. He asked his questioners to show him a denarius, the idolatrous coin with which the tax was paid. The blasphemous coin was produced. This production demonstrated from their own practice the ground of Christ’s answer. Obviously they were making use of the civil service which Caesar provided by his coinage. By providing a stable and uniform currency, Caesar was facilitating commerce and the convenient exchange of goods. It is difficult to overestimate the value of such service. Caesar provided other services as well: civil order, protection against criminals, roads and more. Caesar deserved some respect and payment for the services he provided which they were enjoying. So the answer in part was, “Yes, pay the tax. You owe it to Caesar for the service he provides”. However the “yes” was not an unqualified “yes” as will be noted.

It is lawful for God’s people to pay taxes to civil governors even to those who blaspheme and who do not rule in the fear of God. It is their moral responsibility. As Christians we owe this when rulers provide the benefits which civil government supplies.¹⁹ But this is not to say that God’s People should meet every demand of civil government. They are not to give Caesar what they owe to God and which they must give to

¹⁸ Josephus, *Jewish War II*. 117,118; *Jewish Antiquities XVII*, 1-10. See also Acts 5:37

¹⁹ I Tim. 2:2; I Peter 2:17

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no one but God. All men owe to God love and obedience. They also owe some material tribute for the support of the church, the advance of His kingdom, and alms for the poor. Those who love the true God will surely not give to man what they owe to God no matter how man may insist.

In the background to the question was Jewish payment of the Temple tax. This tax was established for the support of the Temple. It was to be paid with a Jewish coin, the shekel. Thus the Jews piously avoided placing a blasphemous coin in the Temple treasury. It was a testimony to their conviction that God alone was to be worshiped. Jesus by his answer shows that for the most part, the Jews were already following the principle he taught. Pay the denarius into the treasury of the house of Caesar. Pay the shekel into the treasury of the Temple, the House of God. Give to Caesar his just due and to God what is His alone.

We see then that this text says nothing one way or another about whether Christians ought to have the goal of establishing Christian civil governments. What it does say and say it in a clear and unambiguous way is that when living under any government, secular, pagan or Christian, Christians must not give the honor and obedience which belongs to God to the civil ruler. It is of great importance to understand that Christians, even if they have the blessing of living under Christian rulers, must be careful to honor God. His place must not be given to any man. Governments constituted as Christian governments may and often have demanded more than their due. We must not be careless or complacent about our duty to God simply because we have a Christian ruler. We must not assume that because civil government has been constituted in Christ and seeks to follow His law that therefore we may or should give it unrestricted obedience.

Very early in the history of the New Testament church, the Apostles declared that when the commandments of men are contrary to the commandments of God, God must be obeyed whatever the cost.²⁰ This is the rule for God’s people without regard to the religious or moral character of their rulers. Furthermore Jesus made it plain that the demands of civil government which do not require us to disobey God are to be met. The wicked character of the civil government does not void our obligation to obey the civil ruler in things lawful. Since God’s People throughout history have more often lived under wicked rulers than otherwise, this is a very important guide for their relations with civil government.

I believe that it is accurate to say that the New Testament data answering the question of whether Christians should seek establishment Christian civil government is meager. At least there are not many texts by way of explicit statement or example. However, there is the requirement that Christians are to live to the glory of God in every respect. The Apostle Paul taught that ordinarily Christians should continue in the vocations they were in when called to Christ.²¹ If a person at the time of conversion is a civil ruler he is not required to resign as though his occupation is an evil one. He may and perhaps should continue, but he is called to conduct his office in harmony with God’s commandments. Of course, if he is involved in a government which does not allow him to obey God, that is another matter.

²⁰ Acts 4:19 &20

²¹ I Cor. 7: 17-24 This passage concerns of two states in particular: circumcised or uncircumcised and slave or free. The thought expands to mean that becoming a Christian does not require a change of vocation but that in the vocation one obey the commands of God.

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It seems strange to me that many Christians argue that civil government should not be constituted in Christ. If all other vocations are to be reformed to a Christian standard and practice, why should the vocation of governor and judge be an exception? This is especially so when I learn from Scripture that civil government is an institution of God. One can point to examples in the New Testament of Christian converts continuing in civil government. The Phillippian jailer and Sergius Paulus, proconsul in Cyprus come quickly to mind.

There is another New Testament doctrine which points us in the direction of seeking Christian civil government. Jesus said that he has been given all authority by God. Christ is Lord. It is not that He ought to be but that He is. He rules whether men will have it so or not. This being the case, ought not wise rulers acknowledge this and proceed to rule in His fear and obedience? When the Gospel spreads and a people calls a Christian to be its ruler, should they expect the ruler to rule according to any moral standard other than God’s?

Clearly we are not to seek establishment of Christian civil government by means of violent conquest or revolution. We preach the Gospel and if it is Christ’s will that sufficient conversions take place making Christian civil government peacefully possible, then we ought to seize the opportunity. All human authority and government is by the leave of Christ to whom the Father has given all authority in heaven and on earth.²² This authority ought to be recognized by all governments and surely it must be recognized by those governments which have come into the hands of Christians. If it falls into our lap so to speak, should we throw it in the trash?

When at last Constantine, Emperor of Rome, was converted, he attempted to rule as a Christian emperor. However much some may believe that he lacked a saving faith in Christ, the hard fact is that his government was slowly conformed to a Christian standard. He sought the advice and instruction of the church. Although there have been many errors and sins along the way, Christian civil government since Constantine has proved a great blessing to much of the world. We have learned many lessons about the Godly practice of civil government. Today these lessons are cast aside in favor of humanistic secularism even by Christians. Christendom despises its birthright. For its foolishness it will experience and is now experiencing many sorrows.

“Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing?

The kings of earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed, saying, let us break their bonds in pieces and cast away their cords from us.

He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure:

Yet I have set My King on my holy hill of Zion.”

²² Matt. 28:18

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Lord Jesus, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Son of David is now King in Zion and rules the world from His throne.

“Now therefore, be wise, O Kings. Be instructed you judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”²³

End

²³ Excerpts from Psalm 2