

# **Ecclesiastical and Human Government**

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## **Romans 13:1-7**

Christ rules now through the "powers that be" (Rom. 13:1-7), but the "powers that be" do not constitute a theocracy. The Greek text of Romans 13:1, *Pasa psuche exousiais huperechousais hupotassestho*, is translated "Let every soul be subordinate to governing authorities." The participle *huperechousais* is a present active form of the verb *huperecho*, which means to have power over, be highly placed, those in high position, or governing authorities. The imperative, *hupotassestho*, is a present passive form of *hupotasso*, which means to be in subjection or subordinate. Peter spoke of submitting to "every ordinance [*ktisei*, dative feminine singular of *ktisis*, which means human authority] of man [*anthropine*, dative feminine singular of the adjective *anthropinos*, which means human or belongs to man]" (I Pet. 2:13). Human authority does not mean that it is any less God's authority; but it is delegated authority, unless it is opposed to God's revealed will. The word "human" denotes the means through which the authority operates. An example of this is the delegated authority of elders in local assemblies (I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

Obedience to human authority has its limits. Parental authority and civil authority are responsible to God, whether the ones occupying those positions are Christians or non-Christians. As an alien in this country is not free from subordination to our laws, one's spiritual inability as an unregenerate person does not nullify his responsibility to God. Man is responsible for his own depravity by his solidarity with Adam in the fall, and he lacks spiritual ability to do the will of God. Nevertheless, he is accountable to God.

God has two governments during the age of the assembly, the time between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual government for Christ's assembly which He is building; and there is a civil

government for the protection of society, which is made up of both elect and non-elect. Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7 to Christians in Rome to inform them concerning their relationship to the civil government where they resided. They were to be subordinate to the authorities of the civil government of Rome. The only exception to such subordination occurs when man's authority contradicts God's supreme authority. What did the "certain Jews" do when Nebuchadnezzar made 2 an image of gold and commanded all the people to come to the dedication of the image (Dan. 3:1-25)? Although the King issued a mandate for all the subjects of Babylon to worship the image, the faithful Jews knew the mandate was directly opposed to God who said:

I am the LORD thy God.... Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them.... —Exodus 20:2-5

The lesson in Paul's instruction to the Roman Christians teaches Christians of all time that believers are to be subordinate to governing authorities because there is no authority except from God. However, Christians must not be subordinate to false gods established by governing authorities. To embrace a false god established by a governing authority would be to deny the true God who gave the ruler his authority. Hence, our answer to such authority must be the same as that given by the faithful Jews:

*...our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. —Daniel 3:17, 18*

Christians must be willing, like the "certain Jews," to suffer the consequences of refusing to obey the demands of civil authorities when they set themselves above the supreme authority of God. Three principles are established with respect to the "certain Jews" that Christians must consider: (1) They did not defile themselves by partaking of that which Babylon

provided (Dan. 1). The King gave them a tuition-free three-year course in a false religion, but they had a meat to eat that Babylon did not understand. Biblical principles remain unchanged regardless of where God's people live (Dan. 1:4-8). (2) God gave the young men of Israel knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom, thus enabling them to resist false teaching designed to lead them astray. The King knew that the religious nature of men, apart from grace, is easily carried away by anything that stirs their religious feeling. Therefore, as false religion is doing today, the King used Babylon's music for persuasion. Who can deny that music plays a role in the spread of false religion? False religion inspired by false music works on false emotions to respond to a false peace that shall be offered by a false prophet. This indicates that things are speedily shaping up for the manifestation of the antichrist (Dan. 3:1-7). (3) The young men faithfully refused to acknowledge any god other than the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Dan. 3:13- 18). Likewise, Christians in every age will be faithful to God and say with Peter and the apostles that we must be obeying God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Doing the will of God denotes character. Unawed by the presence of King Nebuchadnezzar and unswayed by the terrors of the burning fiery furnace, the faithful remnant refused to bow down and worship the image. In like manner, Christians who purpose in their hearts to please God act in the light of eternity.

The miracle recorded in Daniel 3 is a type of the remnant of Jews preserved by God during the great tribulation of Revelation. Some who profess to be theologians are as confused about the great tribulation as the pastor who preached the funeral of one of his assembly members and referred to him as one who came out of great tribulation. Since the Greek does not have an indefinite article comparable to the English, the absence of the article from the Greek is the equivalent of the indefinite article "a" in the English. The presence of the article in the Greek identifies; the absence of the article qualifies (makes less strong or positive). Therefore, the presence of the Greek article in Revelation 7:14, "...These are the ones who come

[coming] out of the great tribulation..." distinguishes it from the ordinary tribulations experienced in life.

A correct estimate of human government cannot be formed apart from the Biblical teaching of the future kingdom of Jesus Christ. While one political party will praise and magnify democracy as a Divine institution, another political party will condemn democracy and advocate socialism. There are others, however, who condemn all human government; but this must be denounced because any form of government is better than none. There are those who speak about "the rights of the people," "all people being created equal," "the sovereignty of the people," "the supreme power resting in the body of citizens instituted to vote," etc. The promoters of different political philosophies are trying to influence the world with their ideologies. Therefore, the political battles become so heated that they turn into political wars. All human authorities must realize that authority does not rest in the policeman's badge, the judge's robe, or the king's crown. It goes back of these symbols to the sovereign God who says to all authorities what Jesus Christ told Pilate: "You could be having no authority against me except it was being given to you from above" (John 19:11—translation).

The different forms of human government in society must be distinguished from the one established form of Divine government for Christ's assemblies. Nothing is stated in Romans 13 or I Peter 2 concerning forms of government. The emphasis is on some established order for the protection of society, which includes both Christians and non-Christians. On the other hand, believers have a Divinely established order of government for Christ's assemblies which cannot be altered regardless of the different forms of human government under which the assemblies exist. During the absence of Christ's theocratic kingdom, the Divinely established government of Christ's assemblies cannot make the state which is composed of regenerate and unregenerate people subordinate to their principles. However, the assemblies with their one established form of Divine government should be subordinate to different and changing human

authorities, except when they oppose God's established will, because Christianity is not controlled by human authority that is opposed to God's revealed will.

The voice of Christianity must not remain silent before civil and political corruption. As the voices of the prophets were heard in the Old Testament, the voices of the elders must be heard proclaiming the same principles and giving the same warnings in New Testament times. Consider the calling and work of such prophets of the Old Testament as Samuel (I Sam. 3:1-21; 7:3-15; 8:6-18), Shemaiah (II Chron. 12:1-12), Micaiah (II Chron. 18), Elijah (I Kings 16-22), the major and minor prophets, and concluding with John the Baptist. John, like Elijah before him, knew he was asking for trouble when he rebuked the one who sat on the throne: "...It is not lawful for thee to have her [his brother Philip's wife]" (Matt. 14:4). John the Baptist was not the last messenger to die for the cause of Christ. (See Matt. 24:9; John 16:2; 21:19; Acts 7:59-60; 12:1-2; Rev. 2:13.) The messengers of God must never compromise the principles of eternal truth regardless of the consequences.

The assembly of Christ should never be affiliated with any political party. However, this in no way excludes Christians from their responsibility to civil authority and their payment of taxes to the human authority under which they live. Since political and social structures of human authorities frown upon the perfected theocratic government under the Son of Man, the Son of David, Christians cannot endorse one form of humanism over another. Hence, a Christian is not justified in saying, "I have chosen the lesser of two or more evil parties." All human authorities accuse Christians of being too occupied with the other world, but all informed believers know that no one can properly understand his duty to the present without regarding it in the light of eternity. Therefore, chaos and confusion in society and Christendom are the fruit of rhetoric among politicians and religionists concerning a better society apart from the Biblical concept of the theocratic

kingdom. Hence, the result prior to Christ's second advent will always be circumstances described by Jesus Christ:

*And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. —Matthew 24:4-8*

Paul did not manifest any resentment toward the government under which the providence of God placed him. Therefore, he had no conflict between his rendering to Caesar the things that belonged to him and surrendering to God the things that belonged to Him. Because Christians revere the authority of God, they make better citizens of Caesar's domain than those who are strangers to God's grace. Since all nature is submissive to God's laws, Christians should submit to God's providence by submitting our hearts that are prone to carnality to God's holiness, arrogance to His mercy, and rebellion to His sovereignty in providence. Some of the Roman believers to whom Paul wrote needed Paul's counsel concerning submission:

*Whosoever therefore resisteth [antitassomenos, present middle participle of antitasso, which means oppose or resist] the power [exousia, which means authority, ruling power, or government], resisteth [antheisteken, perfect active indicative of anthistemi, which means resist, oppose, set against, or withstand— has opposed and is in a state of opposition] the ordinance [diatage, which means decree or ordinance] of God: and they that resist [antheistekotes, perfect active participle of anthistemi, which means having opposed and are in a state of opposition] shall receive to themselves damnation [krima, which means judgment or punishment]. —Romans 13:2*

Although wicked Nero was on the throne at the time Paul wrote this letter, the believers in Rome were to be subordinate to God and to the ruling authority as Solomon in his wisdom instructed: "My son, fear thou the LORD and the king: and meddle [interfere] not with them that are given to change" (Prov. 24:21). Note the order of "the LORD and the king."

There are three important things to understand about human government: (1) It is necessary in order to prevent anarchy. (2) Human government, as far as its character is concerned, is not asserted to be acceptable to God. (3) Human government, like everything ministered by men, is always imperfect.

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