

Rendering unto Caesar and unto God

“Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this and whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’ ”
(Matt. 22: 18-21).

When Jesus’ enemies attempted to trap him, they approached with an age-old question. “What’s the relation between church and state?” In this case, it was a question designed to entrap Jesus between two parties -- those loyal to Rome and the Zealot party seeking its overthrow. His answer was ingenious. The Roman coin could not be used in temple offerings because it contained an image which the Jews viewed as profane or idolatrous. These coins had to be changed to a non-image-bearing coin before they were suitable for the temple (F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 1969, p.180). Caesar had a right to his own coin, Jesus replied. His answer established the concept of the co-existence of civil and spiritual rule.

What does the Bible say about the relationship of Christians to civil government? Here are some important things to remember.

1) Civil government exists by the command and permission of God and we are to recognize its authority.

In Paul’s epistle to the Romans we are told “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God”(Rom. 13:1). Giving recognition and honor to legitimately established government is a Christian duty. Jesus told Pilate “You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above” (John 19:11). So, it is God “who brings down one and exalts another” (Ps. 75:7). This applies even to Christians living under unfriendly governments, such as the believers during the age of the persecuting Caesars.

2) Christians are called to pray for leaders of civil government.

“I urge, then, *first of all*, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone --- for kings and all those in authority”(I Tim. 2:1-2). Prayer has tremendous power to affect the decisions and actions of those in authority. “The king’s hand is in the heart of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Prov. 21:1). In our system, prayer can certainly affect the outcome of elections. We should offer thanks for the system of government we have inherited and participate as we each have opportunity.

3) Christians are called to honor civil authorities.

“Give everyone what you owe him if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Rom. 13:7). All civil authorities are entitled to honor according to this verse. Honor does not mean approval. We may honor one’s position without condoning their policies or actions. In fact, many of the freedoms we cherish were won during the struggles of the Protestant Church in England as they expressed dissent from the policies supported by the state

Church. Freedom of speech and press became contested battlegrounds at this time. Cruel and unusual punishment was often a means of silencing the Puritan believers. “Writers who reflected on episcopacy were savagely punished; Alexander Leighton was whipped, branded in the face, had his ears cut off and his nose slit, and was then imprisoned in revolting conditions for publishing his *Sion’s Plea against the Prelacy* in 1628” (Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* 1965, p. 123). It was against the background of such conflicts that our nation’s founders came to cherish and to establish the freedoms we now enjoy.

4) Civil governments are temporal in nature.

“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever” (Daniel 2:44). Here the prophet tells us that God’s kingdom is distinct from all earthly kingdoms. In 410 A.D. after ‘Eternal Rome’ was sacked by the Vandal tribe, its citizens were in shock. Augustine, bishop of Hippo Regius wrote the classic of western civilization *The City of God*. In it he explained that believers have dual citizenship. They are citizens of two kingdoms, one temporal and one eternal. All earthly kingdoms, including then the Roman Empire, exist by God’s permission and for his purpose. They are limited in duration and purpose. No earthly kingdom could be equated with the kingdom of God, the true eternal kingdom. Yet Christians were to see themselves as citizens of both the City of God and the City of Man.

5) The purpose of civil government is to restrain evil and reward good.

“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong” (Rom. 13:3). “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men . . . to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (I Peter 2:13-14). Civil government is designed to restrain evil. It’s role exists as a consequence of the Fall. If we were not a sinful race, there would be no need for a restraining power. As it is, good government preserves us from chaos which is readily observable wherever the civil government breaks down. Witness the looting in Iraq after the fall of Baghdad, or some of the chaos after natural disasters cause a breakdown in civil order. Fear, violence, and disorder reign where God’s gift of good government breaks down.

6) Civil government may be moral or immoral.

“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it” (Jer. 18: 7-9). God sees nations as obedient to His moral law or turning from it and practicing evil. By His will He establishes or removes nations from power. Of course, He uses all the complex deliberations and actions of earthly rulers to work “out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

7) Citizenship in the City of God may involve conflict with earthly government.

On some occasions our allegiance to the teachings of Christ may conflict with the requirements of earthly rulers. In such exceptional cases we are permitted to imitate Peter and John who asked the Sanhedrin, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:19). We are blessed to live in a country that guarantees our right to practice our faith even at times when it conflicts with otherwise established practice.

We do well in this election year to remember our duties toward our government. We are called to pray for our leaders. Here in the United States we should be thankful for the freedom to participate in the governmental process. At the very least we must remember to pray and to vote. Others have greater opportunities available to them such as running for office or communicating with those in government. A carefully worded letter to a representative, or a letter to a newspaper editor may be a way of exercising your freedoms for godly purposes. As we fulfill our duties of citizenship we render unto Caesar . . . and unto God.