

CIVIL MAGISTRATE

Bible believing Christians in the UK have an excellent record as law-abiding supporters of representative government. We have to go back over three hundred years for examples of Christian involvement in armed resistance against the powers that be and this arose because of tyrannical monarchs who did not accept democratic principles and gravely abused their position. Constitutional revolution has precedent from the deposition of the usurper Queen Athaliah whose tyrannical, unconstitutional reign was resisted by Jehoiada the priest. In an orderly way he enlisted the civil elders and military commanders to overthrow Athaliah the usurper and crown Joash the legitimate heir as king (2 Kings 11). This was necessary in the particular circumstances and in more recent times we hold in honoured memory those of the French Resistance who fought against the Nazi tyranny in France. Paul's rule, however, is the general one, 'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers' (Romans 13.1). What is involved in this?

I. The *authority* of 'the higher powers'

The description is general because applicable to the king as supreme as well as subordinate officers of state, whether, in our modern system, elected legislators, judges, elected ministers of state or police officers. All have their respective office and duties.

A. The duty of submission is clear

'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers' (verse 1a). The command is comprehensive with respect to persons and laws and regulations. In his first epistle, Peter writes, 'Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well' (2.13-14). The command applies to every *ordinance* of every *officer* of state.

B. God is the source of the civil magistrate's authority

This is clear 'for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.' God is the source of all authority of angels and men. Even democracy depends upon the divine and 'the powers that be are ordained of God'. We are not to imagine that the duty of obedience to rulers releases us from obedience to Christ. He is the 'King of kings, and Lord of lords' (Revelation 19.16b), whether or not rulers recognize it. In Psalm 2 rulers are charged to do so for their own good. There we read, ' Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him (verses 10-12).

C. Resistance to rulers is resistance against God

It is because of the divine institution that disobedience is sin. Paul adds, 'Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation' (Verse 2). The Westminster Confession explains, 'God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defence and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil, doers.' (23.1)

II. *Justice* and 'the higher powers'

Paul sees it as just that the insubordinate are punished. He explains as follows: 'For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil' (verses 3-4). It is important to understand what Paul means by good and evil.

A. The fact of conscientious objection

Conscription raised the problem of conscientious objection. Although it is not the Reformed position, there were Christians at the time of the Second World War who objected to military service on the ground that the sixth commandment states, 'Thou shalt not kill'. Some were imprisoned and others allocated non-combat duties. It raised the issue of the voice of conscience being beyond human jurisdiction. Human legislation still raises the problem of conscientious objection. The NHS might expect its staff to be involved in 'legal' abortions in one way or another but there are many in the UK who would not be able to comply on conscientious grounds because God's law states, 'Thou shalt not kill'. In this case the Reformed Faith agrees with the conscientious objector.

B. The law above the law

Paul clearly has in mind a particular type of ruler in connection with his exhortation. For him, what is just is not decided by Parliament or king but by the absolute standard of right and wrong and it is right to be subject to every ordinance of man consistent with God's moral law. Paul the Jew had a frame of reference of good and evil that was not of human definition. We might think of the Ten Commandments, which summarize God's definition of good and evil. Even the Gentiles knew the substance, if not the form, of this law. In Romans 2.14-15, Paul explains, 'For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: *Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts*, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.' Christ as the great prophet of God delivered the Sermon on the Mount. In it we have the Saviour's exposition of the law as spiritual. The Law of God is the only ground of justice. The secularist may plead for natural justice. Natural justice is but the voice of conscience in fallen man, imperfectly affirming the law of God. The civil magistrate must deal with words and deeds but the Saviour deals also with thoughts. Mark his word's, 'Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and

whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.' (Matthew 5.21-22) Being law abiding citizens will not save us.

C. The definition of good and evil

There is a mistaken notion these days, approved of by politicians, that once a law is passed in Parliament by a 51% majority, justice demands punishment if it is not kept. This is to make good and evil depend upon human debate and decision but morality is above legislation, not created by it. The re-definition of marriage by Parliament does not change what marriage is. It remains that union by solemn, public vow of one man and one woman until death should part with a view to procreation, purity and mutual support. Thus, when Paul speaks of good and evil, he speaks according to God's standards not man's. Paul repudiates the proposition, 'Let us do evil, that good may come' as justly deserving damnation (Romans 3.8).

III. Obedience and the powers that be

A. Obedience is necessary

The words, 'Wherefore ye must needs be subject' remind us that good citizenship is a duty. The Saviour was no renegade or tax dodger. In the days of his flesh he honoured his own institution. Even though Pilate was weak and self-serving in his office, the Saviour recognized his divinely bestowed authority when he said, 'Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin' (John 19.11).

B. The Christian's obedience is to have a religious motivation

Although as a minister of God, the civil magistrate is 'a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil', the Christian is not only to be motivated by fear of wrath, but is also to obey 'for conscience sake' (verse 5). Submission is part of our obedience to Christ and

he is our example, who learned obedience through the things which he suffered for us. He is our great high priest and requires nothing of us that he has not perfectly fulfilled and endured himself. Although the capital sentence was totally unjust in its infliction on Christ, it is not so in itself. The civil magistrate bears 'not the sword in vain'. However, the death penalty was unjustly inflicted upon Christ as Peter explained on the Day of Pentecost, saying, 'Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, *and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it' (Acts 2.23-24). Christ was holy, harmless and undefiled and must necessarily be vindicated by God. Praise God, his vindication secures our salvation through faith in his name. He died the substitute for sinners. He bore the curse of the law that believers in him might be forgiven, justified, saved and blessed.

C. Our obedience includes payment of taxes

We are to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's as we read, 'for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour (verses 6-7).

Conclusion

When our laws were in accordance with the Word of God, being law abiding citizens was straightforward. Now that much legislation contradicts the law of God our situation is more complex. The overriding rule, however, is clear. You have it in the words of the apostles to the Jews who would prevent the preaching of the Gospel. Peter and John answered, 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard' (Acts 4.19-20).