

Should Christians Submit to GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY?

Should you always obey civil authority? Does the Bible ever endorse breaking man's laws? When man's laws are in conflict with God's laws, which have precedence? Must Christians pay taxes? Do Christians have a duty to reform the governments of men? Many are confused about these issues. Here are the answers!

by David C. Pack

LOOK AROUND YOU! Disrespect for authority has probably never been greater than it is now. It seems to grow worse daily. General lawlessness is growing on a worldwide scale!

More than ever, civilization is now driven by the spirit of rebellion, and the pursuit of "personal freedoms" and "individual rights." Many in society are actively and systematically tearing down institutions one by one, in a visible and growing trend toward anarchy on *every* level—social, political, civil, moral, economic, religious and domestic.

Why? Because human nature *hates* government (Rom. 8:7)—in *every* form! It hates being told what to do. It naturally tries to find "loopholes" in instructions—and law. People have grown to be almost entirely concerned about whether their freedoms and rights are being violated. Few are concerned about the growing chaos and confusion threatening more and more people and nations.

None of the humanly-devised governments on earth are perfect. They are filled with corruption, inefficiency, inconsistency and, often, outright injustice! Most ministers teach that it is a Christian's duty to "make the world a better place." They believe that, through the "efforts of good people, all working together," the world and its governments can find peace, prosperity and happiness for all.

Is this true? Do Christians have a spiritual duty to make this world's governments better? Does Christ want you to "write your Congressman" about issues you want addressed?

A Christian is one who follows Jesus Christ—and obeys God. Christ continually spoke about God's government being established on earth. Christians yield to and obey—submit themselves to—THIS government! (Read our booklet *What Is the Kingdom of God?* to learn more about this future, world-ruling government.)

But must Christians also obey the governments of *men*? What should your relationship be to your country's government? Do you have a responsibility to reform it? Are Christians free to speak evil of individuals in authority if they do not like what they do? What about taxes? Does God require that they be paid?

All Christians live in a physical country on earth. Every country has some form of human government. There is no escaping the need to address how and whether a Christian is required to obey man's laws, statutes and ordinances.

So what does the Bible say? What did Christ teach about submitting to government authority? What did He *do*? The apostle Peter stated, "Judgment must begin *at the house of God*" (I Pet. 4:17). Christians must understand this subject—for God shall judge them on it.

The Bible Teaching

The Bible has much to say on this matter. We will see God's instructions are clear.

First, we need to understand basic instruction about the Christian calling. A Christian is not of this world or its systems. Regarding the religious and political systems of men—Babylon—God instructs, "Come out of her, MY PEOPLE, that you be not partakers of her sins" (Rev. 18:4). Babylon means *confusion*. The true servants of God have come

out of this world, its governments and its confusion (I Cor. 14:33).

The night before Christ was crucified, He explained, through prayer, an important principle to His disciples: "I pray not that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil. They are *not of the world*, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through *Your truth: YOUR WORD IS TRUTH*" (John 17:15-17).

A Christian is one who believes and follows the truth. This sets him apart (sanctifies him) from all those around him. He is not *of* the world and its ways, customs, and traditions.

Of course, a Christian cannot live on Mars or in a cave. He cannot leave Planet Earth or live as a hermit on a mountaintop. Christ did not mean for us to come out of the *physical* world. He meant that we are to come out of its systems of governments and religions. So, Christians do have contact with, and live under, human governments. How does God tell them to view those governments?

Here is what the apostle Paul wrote: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are *ORDAINED OF GOD*. Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the *ORDINANCE OF GOD*: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be *afraid of the power*? Do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil. *Wherefore you must needs be subject*, not only for wrath, but also for

conscience sake. For this cause pay you tribute [taxes] 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; honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:1-7).

These verses contain much to consider. They leave no question that all people ("every soul")—including Christians—are subject to the "higher powers," because they are "ordained of God." To resist them, God says, is to "resist... God." That is serious! God asks, "Will you then not be *afraid* of the *power*?" Many are not, but they *should be*!

Christians honor those who deserve honor. They pay taxes (tribute). They are subject to the government, and "Render...their dues" to all that are in authority. This is not the way most people conduct themselves today. Yet, these are the words of the Creator God.

But do not be confused! Notice that Christians are *not* told to be afraid of the actual men in the office, but rather "of the power" these men hold. Since they only have this power by the permission of God, then it is really the POWER OF GOD we are to fear.

The Real Authority Behind Men's Governments

Have you ever wondered who selects the leaders of the countries on earth? Do men ultimately select kings, presidents, prime ministers and other rulers, the human leaders of the nations today?

Benjamin Franklin once said, "The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of man; and if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?" This is truer than Franklin probably ever understood. Here is proof.

We need to read Daniel 4:17. This amazing scripture is found in the middle of a remarkable story and partly explains why more talented people are leaving politics than ever before: "This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that *the Most High rules in the kingdom of men*, and gives it to whomsoever He will, and *sets up over it the basest of men*." Also, Daniel 2:21 states, "He [God] removes kings, and sets up kings." There is no misunderstanding the plain-

ness of this verse. *God* establishes and removes kings and kingdoms. If God chooses to place the weakest and "basest" (base means bottom—like a basement) of humans in office, because He may feel this is who the people deserve, then it is His prerogative to do so.

When Christ was on trial for His life before Pontius Pilate, He clarified the real source of Pilate's authority over the outcome of the trial. Notice: "Then said Pilate unto Him, Speak You not unto me? Know You not that I have power to crucify You, and have power to release You? Jesus answered, You *could have no power* at all against Me, *except it were given you from above*: therefore he that delivered Me unto you has the greater sin" (John 19:10-11).

Men may come to power in many different ways, including nepotism, bribery, revolution, deceit, or even murder. But these are all things that God allows for His great, overall purpose.

Some who cite Daniel 4:17 miss the point when they say, "God is working in this election and good Christians everywhere, if we can get out the vote, can put godly men in office." This literally puts them in a position to fight God's purpose. Many religious leaders misunderstand this verse, believing that it is, somehow, their job to guide Christians to reform men's governments—to somehow "make them better." Again, many are taught that it is their "Christian duty."

Consider: You and I do not know whom God has selected in advance—the "winner" that *He* wants in office. To cast a vote for someone other than the one God has already selected for victory is to potentially *fight God's purpose*! That is serious business—and the Bible says that it is possible to do this (Acts 5:39)! In a democracy, where leaders are installed through elections, God determines the winners in advance. In the end, the "will of the people" has no power or effect, because God is in charge of the outcome of elections. (Read our booklet *Should Christians Vote?* to learn more.)

God is working out a plan that encompasses 7,000 years. He is allowing mankind to find out that its own ways, governments, values, religions and purposes do not work, and never will. God has already picked the leaders that best work toward the fulfillment of His plan of salvation for all mankind. The powers that be are truly "ordained of God."

But do not misunderstand. While the Bible reveals that it is God who sets up and removes rulers, and that governments only have power as long as God permits it, the kingdoms of this world are *not* God's kingdoms!

What If Leaders are Hypocritical?

If leaders lie, cheat, steal and evidence corruption, are Christians "off the hook" in their requirement to obey them? Must their conduct always command respect? Are individuals free to decide who is, and who is not, worthy of honor?

Christ answered these questions when He gave His disciples important instruction about the hypocrisy and terrible conduct of certain religious leaders who held power over the Jews: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore *whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not you after their works*: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matt. 23:2-4).

Regardless of how leaders conduct themselves, either in their personal lives or in carrying out their official duties, they must be obeyed. But their ungodly examples are *not* to be copied.

By respecting those who hold offices through the authority and permission of God, we actually show respect to God Himself. While their personal conduct may be far from praiseworthy, even to the point where some corrupt the very government that they represent, they are still appointed by God to preserve order and punish law-breakers and wrongdoers. Make no mistake, those who are preserving order and exercising authority within man's governments are doing it on God's behalf. He is working out a purpose that is probably far different than what any personal agenda for "improvement" would solve. When leaders are self-serving—or even outright devilish—it is God's responsibility to remove them—NOT OURS!

Speak No Evil of Leaders

Peter spoke of those who "despise government. Presumptuous are they, self-willed, they are *not afraid to speak evil of dignities*" (II Pet. 2:10). Some people utter outrageous slander against those in authority—for real or imagined wrongs.

They “presume” that it is alright to do this, lacking the fear (“are not afraid”) necessary to hold them back in their attacks against dignitaries (dignities). Such people, themselves, lack even normal human dignity in this regard.

Have you heard the saying, “A little bird told me”? Wise King Solomon warned all to “*Curse not the king*, no not in your thought; and curse not the rich in your bedchamber: for *a bird of the air shall carry the voice*, and that which has wings shall tell the matter” (Ecc. 10:20). Besides the fact that slander is wrong, it is also foolish. Eventually, the “king,” or any leader, will hear what was said.

Paul wrote, “Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men” (Titus 3:1-2). Does this verse describe you? Or do you reflect cynicism, bitterness, anger and accusation toward others? The instruction is all-encompassing—“Speak evil of NO MAN.”

Be careful what you say and do, because God also inspired Solomon to record, “An *ungodly* man digs up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire” (Prov. 16:27). I have seen many people who traffic in gossip, innuendo, slander, storytelling and relentless character assassination of leaders of all kinds. They spew “fire” all over those that they attack, seeking to consume them. They presume that they are acting with impunity, even though God says they should fear speaking such evil (Rom. 13:4). They will not get away with this defamation!

Submit Yourself

Peter also gave important instruction about what God expects of Christians in their responsibility toward civil governments. He wrote, “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. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men...Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:13-15, 17).

“Submit yourselves”—this is what we should do. The term, “for the Lord’s

sake,” clarifies that it is God who wishes us to submit to “every ordinance” of men’s governments.

Note that Peter did not state, “OBEY every ordinance.” Why? Because some laws are contrary to God’s direct instructions and cannot be obeyed. The following account from the book of Acts illustrates this important point. The apostles had been commanded by the authorities (4:16-18) to no longer preach anything about Christ—or to invoke His authority.

Here is how they responded: “But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge you” (vs. 19). The account continues in the next chapter, after the disciples had been arrested, imprisoned and called to account for disregarding the command to cease preaching Christ’s name. Acts 5:29 states, “Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, WE OUGHT TO OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN.”

A conversation ensued. Gamaliel, a respected leader, urged the Council to stop further harassment of the apostles. The account continues, “And to him [Gamaliel] they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, *and beaten them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (vs. 40). The apostles certainly submitted to the beating. Also, they did not lash out and hurl accusations and epithets of every conceivable kind against those who had so unjustly dealt with them. They willingly accepted the consequences of putting God’s way before the wrong-headed instructions of blinded men. They obeyed God rather than men.

In giving instructions for such circumstances, Paul wrote, “So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:6). Should you ever be faced with the decision to “obey God rather than men,” keep this encouraging verse close to heart.

Should You Pay Taxes?

Various popular “movements” have arisen, teaching the idea that “we do not really have to pay taxes,” or “paying income tax is unconstitutional.” Usually, this is accompanied by some kind of theological explanation for why this is really what God approves. It is NOT!

Here is what Christ said when asked this question. He was plain—impossi-

ble to misunderstand: “Tell us therefore, What think you? Is it lawful to give tribute [taxes] unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their *wickedness*, and said, Why tempt you Me, you *hypocrites*? Show Me the tribute money. And they brought unto Him a penny. And He said unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto Him, Caesar’s. Then said He unto them, *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s*; and unto God the things that are God’s. When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left Him, and went their way” (Matt. 22:17-22).

Christ labeled the attitude of seeking to get around paying taxes as hypocritical and wicked. Those who cheat the government are absolute *thieves*! Of course, anyone can make a simple mistake. That is different. However, those who seek not to pay taxes are directly disobeying Christ’s plain instructions.

Sometimes it seems as though there is not enough money to pay all the bills. It takes faith to pay both the taxes of men and the tithes that belong to God. You have to rely on God to help you pay what you owe to both Him and man. Notice the following account: “And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Does not your Master pay tribute? He said, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What think you, Simon? Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? Of their own children, or of strangers? Peter said unto him, Of strangers. Jesus said unto him, Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go you to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first comes up; and when you have opened his mouth, you shall find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for Me and you” (Matt. 17:24-27).

The point? God has the power to give you enough money to satisfy the tax collectors. He is unlimited in what He can do—or how He does it. This includes putting money into the mouth of a fish to supply your financial needs. (None has ever had to experience *this* in order to pay their taxes!) The one who relies on God never needs to worry. God will keep His promise to provide for him. (To learn more, read our booklets *End All Your Financial Worries* and *What Is Real Faith?*)

It is also important to never pay these taxes grudgingly. God commands that we pay taxes—therefore, we should do this as willingly as we follow any other of His commands!

An Important Responsibility

The Christian's responsibility does not end with mere *obedience* to government authority. Paul actually tells us to *pray* for those in authority—and includes a specific reason. He states, "I EXHORT therefore, that, first of all, *supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks*, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; THAT WE MAY LEAD A QUIET AND PEACEABLE LIFE in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:1-2).

Of course, if times of persecution and difficulty in society grow worse, then it is far harder to lead a life of peace, godliness and honesty. Prayers for those in authority can cause God to bring relief to those who are striving to obey Him. It is important that we never forget this responsibility.

Do Not Suffer as "Evildoers"

Christ said that Christians are to be the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13-16). They are always to shine as outstanding examples to the world. This includes a humble willingness to cheerfully obey all civil governments under which they find themselves.

When persecution comes as a direct result of obeying God's commands, Peter instructs, "If you be reproached for the name of Christ, *happy are you*; for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you: on their part He is evil spoken of, but on your part He is glorified" (I Pet. 4:14). However, he makes a clear distinction between suffering for the name of Jesus Christ and suffering as a lawbreaker. The next verse continues, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters" (vs. 15).

During my thirty-plus year ministry, I have known many people who sought to get around the laws of men. Sometimes, when they were brought to justice, they even found a way to claim that they were really being persecuted for their religious convictions. They also supposed that they could "get away with" what they did without being caught—or that what they were doing was not really wrong,

because they were merely breaking the laws of *men*. But God commands us to always keep the laws of men—unless they are contrary to *His* laws, directly or indirectly.

During these years, I have visited and known of many who were either in jail or prison, or had previously been there. Almost none of them thought that they were guilty of the crime that had put them behind bars. They nearly always seemed to see themselves as *victims* of someone, or something else.

I have watched people break men's laws (and sometimes God's laws at the same time) and proclaim themselves victims of injustice, the system, betrayal, the police, bad lawyers, a frame-up, stress, depression, drugs, alcohol, medication, disease, racism, circumstances (including poverty), a bad childhood, broken home, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, etc. Rarely did I find people who did not believe that their crimes were "someone else's fault." It is nearly impossible to help such people see their own guilt. And, unfortunately, since most people naturally root for the underdog, such people seem to easily sway others into believing that they are victims.

Jesus said that one of the signs that we would be near the end of the age (Matt. 24:3) would be that "iniquity [lawlessness] would abound" (vs. 12). We have certainly entered that time.

We live in an age of "anti-heroes," when lawbreakers can be seen as virtuous, or courageous. Foolish people often see them as modern-day "Robin Hoods." The truth is, Robin Hood committed *crimes* in order to give to the poor!

Do not fall for this—either in your own thinking or the thinking of others! Submit yourself to all of the ordinances of men as though you were directly obeying God Himself—because that is exactly what you are doing when you obey men's laws. Do not break men's laws and try to

assert that you are in some way actually serving God (John 16:2).

Also, when courts make final rulings, on any matter, they are to be obeyed. To defy them is sin—and either a civil or criminal offense! Never let human reasoning fool you with its endless excuses for why this is not really wrong!

No Power But of God

In a Member/Co-worker letter, regarding submission to government authority, Herbert W. Armstrong wrote,

"...Romans 13...says, 'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God.'

"Stop and analyze that before proceeding. 'There is NO power but of God.' Where does Satan get his power? God gave it to him at a time when he was 'perfect in all his ways...till iniquity was found in him.' (Ezek. 28). In Ephesians 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.' (Eph. 6:12)...These demonic invisible powers of Satan SWAY and lead those in high places in human government! Nevertheless, this Scripture does tell us, speaking about our several individual lives to 'BE SUBJECT UNTO' these higher powers OF MEN, even though elsewhere God shows they are powers of 'THIS EVIL WORLD,' and deceived and misled by Satan. But 'be subject unto' does not always mean OBEY. When it would be a matter of DISOBEYING GOD, we are to obey God, and still be 'subject to' whatever punishment the powers of man inflict.

"There can be NO power, of ANY government, except what God allows. This passage is instruction to us in our INDIVIDUAL PERSONAL LIFE! And our people indeed are a law-abiding, patriotic people."

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The Restored Church of God

P.O. Box 23295
Wadsworth, OH 44282
USA

P.O. Box 4064
St. Catharines, ONT L2R 7S3
CANADA

Phone: (330) 334-2266
Fax: (330) 334-6513
E-mail: info@thercg.org
Web: www.thercg.org