

## ***The function of government according to the Bible***

We must understand what role government is to play according to the teaching of Scripture. If we understand the place of government, then perhaps we will not expect more of government than we ought. The place where most people turn is Romans 13. It is in Romans 13.1 where Paul states: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” We must therefore understand that every civil authority, whether we deem it good or bad, has been instituted by God. That means that democratic, communist, totalitarian, monarchial, republican, socialist, and fascist governments have been instituted by God. This may seem like an unbelievable statement but when we survey redemptive history, we see that God is the one who sets up kingdoms. Whether it is the rule of Pharaoh, King David, Nebuchadnezzar, God has ordained the rule of all authority. Regardless, then, of the type of government, man, especially the people of God, have the responsibility to submit to the authority of the civil government that God has established. To be sure, we are not required to submit to any law that is contrary to the commands of God (e.g., Dan 3). Nevertheless, the government need not be Christian or moral—Christians must submit to the authority of the government that God has placed over them. If we resist the authority of the government, then Paul says that “those who resist will incur judgment” (Rom 13.2). To execute judgment, God has given the State the sword: “For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13.4). The one who obeys the laws of the State, need not fear its punishment. Paul goes on to give an example of submission to authority in the verses that follow.

Paul writes that, “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (Rom. 13.5-7). Paul explains that we are required to obey the law: if the government requires the payment of taxes, then we are to obey and pay our taxes. The historical backdrop of Paul’s statements make his teaching all the more amazing. He writes all of these things not simply in abstract but specifically against the backdrop of the rule of Rome, the rule of Emperor Nero, one of the most wicked political rulers ever known to man. This is important data to take into consideration. It is important because it shows that the Church can function in a hostile environment. Moreover, it also shows that Christians must submit to authority, even non-Christian and ungodly men.

When Daniel and his three friends were in Babylon, they submitted to the authority of king Nebuchadnezzar and even served in his court. Only when Nebuchadnezzar issued the decree requiring idol worship did Daniel’s three friends disobey the king’s authority. John Calvin observes that, “If it has seemed good to God to set kings over kingdoms, senates or municipal officers over free cities, it is our duty to show ourselves compliant and obedient to whomever he sets over the places where we live” (*Institutes* 4.20.8).

Why would God have us submit to civil authority, even if it is ungodly? The answer to this question comes in the purpose of government.

Remember what purpose government is to serve: to preserve order and punish evil doers. Notice that government has none of the responsibilities of the Church. The government does not preach or teach the gospel, administer the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, or administer church discipline. Paul explains that within the Church, indeed, God-fearing and godly elders must oversee the government of the church and its calling (1 Tim 3.1-7). What practical import does this teaching therefore have for the Church and the upcoming presidential election? There are two primary areas of impact.

First, regardless of who is elected this year, the Church must submit to the authority of the president because he will be God's appointed servant to preserve order and punish evil doers. Even if the president does not meet with our moral, theological, or political approval, we still owe our obedience, honor, and taxes to the government.

Second, regardless of who is elected this year, we have an obligation to pray for him. Paul writes: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup> for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2.1-2). Will we pray for the next president, even if we disagree with him?

Keeping these two things in mind, as well as the over all teaching of Scripture regarding the role of government, will hopefully give us an important perspective in this year's presidential election.