

The Role of Government and the Responsibility of Christian Citizens – a Biblical Perspective

Government is given by God to keep order for our good and Christians should pray for and be obedient to their rulers¹.

But we need to unpack the Bible if we are really to understand what good government looks like, and what obedience means.

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS

Let's begin with Genesis 1-3. Every human being is made in the image of God, with innate value and dignity. We are created to be in relationship with God and with one another. Human beings have been given responsibility to rule, to care for the world, to work and create together, to marry, have children and care for one another. We have freedom to choose between right and wrong. We have capacity for great love and goodness but also of great evil.

So good government should take into account all of these things. Rulers should not interfere in any way with all the God-given rights and responsibilities people have. Rather, they should protect them and restrain evil. If we remember the potential for sin in every human heart, we will also choose to spread power as widely as possible, and ensure accountability for all rulers.

OLD TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES

In the Old Testament, we see both good and bad government structures and leaders in Israel. Early on, the people of God were organised into families, clans and tribes with a central leader like Moses, and later with judges. God gave laws to be followed, with leaders expected to obey as well as uphold these laws².

¹ Romans 13: 1-7, 1 Timothy 2:3-4.

² Rulers had to write out by hand their own personal copy of the Mosaic Law! See Deuteronomy 17:18.

Later, Israel wanted to be like other nations by having a King. The Lord warned them that giving too much power to one person by appointing a king was bound to lead to trouble³. He gave them what they wanted, but ensured that kings had prophets to remind them that they were not above the law⁴.

Some of King David's last words show us what good government looks like.

*"The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me, "When one rules over men in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise, on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth.""*⁵

Rulers are supposed to be a blessing! They are to *"speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute,"*⁶ and ensure peace and justice.

GOVERNMENT AND AUTHORITIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is challenging because Christians are exhorted to obey government in a context of brutal occupation and dictatorship – the Roman Empire.

Jesus knew that His followers longed for Him to lead a political revolution but, to stay focused on His calling, He avoided politicians. When He stood before Pilate, Jesus made it clear that He had no earthly political ambition. But, of course, Jesus was still passionate about good government. He reminded Pilate that he only ruled because God let him do so. Jesus taught Kingdom values of justice and righteousness and pointed out any hypocrisy. When He said *"Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's,"*⁷ He was explaining that political government should stay within its God-given sphere.

Both Paul and Peter told Christians to submit to rulers because they are God's servants for our good⁸. They highlighted their core role - to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. Governments may not acknowledge

³ 1 Samuel 8:1-22.

⁴ E.g. Nathan challenged David 2 Samuel 12:1-14. Elijah challenged Ahab 1 Kings 21:1-19.

⁵ 2 Samuel 23:3-4.

⁶ Proverbs 31:8-9.

⁷ Mark 12:13-17.

⁸ 1 Peter 2:13-14. Titus 3:1. Romans 13:1-7.

they are under the Lord's authority and must follow His law, not overstepping their task. But it is still true. And citizens are to obey.

IS IT EVER RIGHT TO DISOBEY?

What if rulers are not doing their job properly? The Roman Empire was far from a righteous, God-fearing authority focused on promoting human flourishing, at least not for non-Roman citizens.

The Acts of the Apostles only give us a partial opt-out from obedience to rulers. When Paul and Silas were arrested and treated badly by the Romans, Paul complained, demanding not just freedom but a full apology⁹. When the apostles were told by the Sanhedrin to stop talking about Jesus, they said "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to Him?"¹⁰ They knew they must keep preaching.

There is a wonderful story about authority in Acts 23. Paul had been arrested by the Jewish leaders, and the High Priest ordered him to be hit. Paul let out a burst of insults against him, pointing out how the High Priest, tasked with maintaining obedience to God's law, was breaking that very law. There was a furious reaction. How could Paul dare to insult the High Priest? This is Paul's reply. "Brothers I did not realise that he was the High Priest, for it is written "Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people."

Of course Paul had recognised the High Priest! The man was famous. He was wearing special robes. Everyone was deferring to him. Surely Paul meant he had not recognised him because the High Priest had not behaved as the High Priest should. The office of High Priest was one Paul was willing to respect. But he expected the holder of that office to behave as the role dictated.

So what do we conclude about obeying government? Clearly, it is the default duty of citizens to obey, whether or not we like the government or believe it is fulfilling its God-given job. But, there is occasionally a place for civil disobedience¹¹ or to play the role of prophet, speaking up when politicians do wrong.

⁹ Acts 16: 22-40.

¹⁰ Acts 4:18-20. See a similar story in Acts 5:28-29.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer felt compelled to plot the assassination of Hitler. Christians were at the heart of the revolutions which overthrew communism in 1989. But this disobedience was preceded by much prayer and reflection.

We are called to respect political office but we do not necessarily always have to respect the holder of the office. However, Paul commands us to pray anyway¹² and to obey. We should also remember Jesus' command that we must love our enemies¹³. This command is found in the Sermon on the Mount, which make it crystal clear that Christians are called to live holy lives, no matter what governments or those around us are doing.

SUMMING UP

We have seen that rulers are not meant to have absolute power. Their task, under God's law, is to restrain evil and promote justice and righteousness, with special concern for the vulnerable. They are not to interfere with human flourishing. They do not grant human rights since these freedoms come from God. Rather, they are responsible before the King of Kings for protecting those rights.

In New Testament times, there was no democracy. As a result, there was much oppression, and there was little point in Christians engaging in politics. But, Christians now have more capacity to hold governments to account, to engage in dialogue, campaigning or journalism, to demonstrate and protest and to ask questions. We can potentially become politicians, party workers or civil servants. And our most powerful tool is intercession.

We have a responsibility for the political health of our nations, for ensuring that power is spread wisely, that there is accountability. So may all Christians pray, vote and work for good government. May we be model citizens, contributing to the common good, respecting the law, promoting truth, justice and righteousness.

¹² 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

¹³ Matthew 5: 43-48.