

HOW CHRISTIANS RELATE TO THE GOVERNMENT

CBC Position Paper & Shepherd's Guide

Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to outline what we believe is the biblical position on the purpose, role, and responsibility of the government and how believers should then relate to government. The clear Biblical foundation is understanding the authority given to government by God, the limits God assigns to that authority, and then apply practical principles of wisdom to guide believers in relating to and responding to the government in various situations. Our desire is that we be equipped to be responsible citizens where God has placed us in this world and most importantly take our direction from our King, The Lord Jesus Christ in whose Kingdom is our ultimate citizenship

I. Biblical principles for how believers relate to governing authorities.

A. Biblical categories of God-ordained authority.

- Personal authority: as human beings created by God in the image of God each person is a responsible moral agent to His Creator. Every person will give an account of himself to Christ for what he did, what he thought, what he believed and what he said over the course of his life. Nobody will be able to blame anyone else or claim ignorance. Each person exercises authority over himself.
- Family authority: the husband is the head of the wife, so wives are to be subject to their own husbands (Eph 5:22-24). Parents have authority over their children with fathers having the lead role in this (Eph 6:4). Thus, children are to obey their parents (Eph 6:1).
- Work related authority: In New Testament times, masters exercised authority over their slaves, so slaves were encouraged to obey their masters, while masters were exhorted to treat their slaves fairly (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1). These verses demonstrate the general principle of rightful authority within the workplace. God established the creation ordinance that human beings are to rule and subdue the earth (work) and as such has established order to the enterprise.
- Church authority: elders have authority to rule and oversee the church (1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:2-3) and shepherd the flock (1 Pet 5:2-3). God's people are to submit to their elders and esteem them highly in love (1 Thess 5:12-13; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5).
- Government authority (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17).
- Christ's authority: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him by the Father (Matt 28:18). Jesus is both Head of the Church and King of the Universe (Eph 1:22-23).
- God's authority: God is sovereign over all. All are accountable to him (Rom 3:19). God made everything, sustains everything and governs over everything (Dan 4:32-35).

B. Biblical exposition on how believers are to relate to the government.

1. Christians are to submit to every human institution. (1 Peter 2:13-17)

Context: In 1 Peter 2:13-17, Peter is answering how believers relate to governing authorities to bring glory to God and be a godly witness to an unbelieving world. This paragraph is in the larger context where Peter addresses how believers live as

aliens in a hostile world, bringing glory to God (2:11 - 4:11)¹. Believers please God by submitting to those in authority, so unbelievers will glorify God and repent and believe. The central theme and command in the immediate passage is: Christians are to submit to every human institution (see verse 13).

a. Why Christians submit to governing authorities: for the Lord's sake.

The ultimate reason for Christians to submit to authorities is because Christ is their Lord; he is the true sovereign (2:13). Submission is a willing obedience to the authorities the Lord puts over believers. This submission does not rule out exceptions, for God alone is the ultimate authority. However, the point is: in most situations, Christians should be inclined to submit and obey rulers.² Submission portrays the Spirit of Christ in his people.³

b. Whom Christians submit to. Peter then gives examples of who believers are to submit to: **the king or to governors sent by the king**. The king has authority to rule given to him by God. Governors have authority derived from the king who sent them. So, believers should not only submit to the highest authority (the king) but to all those who are in authority.

c. Why Christians submit to governing authorities: their God-intended purpose. Peter explains why Christians are to submit to governing authorities by defining their God-intended purpose. God has established governments **to punish evil doers and praise those who do right** as God defines what is evil and what is right (see verse 17). In other words, the government's role is defined as protecting its citizens—negatively, in deterring crime, and positively, in ensuring the freedom for each citizen to love his or her neighbor. This purpose helps define the sphere of government. (By sphere, we mean the God-intended jurisdiction within which the government has the right to operate as God designed.) The word *punish* means to avenge or enact justice. By punishing evil doers, the government prevents anarchy—everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. Peter is not saying governments always fulfill their purpose, but in general the role of government is to hold evil in check to some extent.

Believers are called to “**do right**,” which should result in praise from the governing authorities if that government is fulfilling its God appointed role. Doing right brings glory to God and is a testimony of Christ to unbelievers. By giving the sphere or jurisdiction of government's authority, believers are given clarity as to the legitimate boundaries in which God intended that it exercise its authority.

Peter further elaborates that Christians submit because this is **the will of God**. (This again does not mean believers do everything the government says.) By doing right, Christians silence the ignorance of foolish men (see

¹ The first section of Peter's letter (1:1-2:10) addresses the believer's relationship to God in salvation and to one another. Peter's next two sections of his letter begin with “beloved” (2:11; 4:12). In the third section Peter addresses the theme of suffering. In this second section, Peter shows how believers relate to outsiders.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 127.

³ D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1992), 163.

verse 12). Good behavior will minimize slanderous attacks on Christians and thus is a good witness for Christ. Peter seems to assume that by doing good, the ruling authorities will look with favor upon them or at least not trouble them (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-2). In this text, the government is viewed as positively fulfilling God's expected role to grant praise to those who do right in God's sight, or at least not interfere with or prevent believers from doing that which is good.

- d. **How you are to submit.** Peter then gets to the motives that should govern the believers' submission (2:16). The implied verb is "submit" from verse thirteen, rather than "act" as the NASB renders it. Believers are to submit because of their freedom in Christ. Jesus has freed believers from enslavement to sin, so their submission to authority is not servile or out of weakness. As those who are free, they are not to use their freedom in Christ as a covering for evil. Genuine freedom liberates believers to do what is good, which includes submission to authority. Because believers are now slaves of God, they exercise their freedom by submitting to authority. Christian freedom is not an escape from service but is rooted in a change of master. Having been freed from sin, they are free to choose to live in a way that honors God. [See the example of Christ in 1 Peter 2:21-24] Peter finishes this paragraph with four commands that refer to all contexts in which a Christian lives: social (honor all people), church (love the brotherhood), spiritual (fear God), political (honor the king). "Christians must live well by giving each type of relationship its due." Christ provides a good example of giving each relationship its due when he answered the question of Caesar's poll-tax. "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

2. Christians are to be subject to governing authorities. (Romans 13:1-7)

Context: Paul is writing to believers in Rome. After recounting the glorious mercies of God in salvation in chapters 1-11, Paul now addresses the implications for the Christian. In chapter 12, he exhorts the Roman believers to be humble and loving, even amidst persecution, not paying back evil, but leaving vengeance to the Lord. While there is no direct grammatical connection, the instruction on governing authorities seems particularly related to the way God uses human authority to deal with evil. Additionally, Paul's mention of taxes in 13:6-7 suggests there may be a particular temptation among the Roman believers to reject paying taxes to the government.

Summary: Paul gives a command to be subject to governing authorities based on two reasons with two implications and then addresses the immediate need to pay taxes.

- a. **Whom Christians submit to.** The authorities being addressed here is simply "governing authorities", which speaks generally of any authority having power or in control. The passage extends to every existing authority because it states, "there is no authority except from God." God establishes every authority as sovereignly appointed by him. Therefore, Christians should generally be inclined to submit to their governing authorities.

b. Why Christians submit to governing authorities.

Reason 1: There is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God (13:1b-c).

- This passage seems to be correcting a mindset which says, “there is no authority except God,” with, “there is no authority except *from* God”
- While God is the ultimate authority, He is not the only authority that deserves submission. God exercises His authority through the differing authorities He appoints to govern over the sphere He has assigned as outlined in I.A. above.
- Paul is calling those with a rebellious spirit to recognize the legitimate authority God has given to human government.

Implication 1: Resisting authority is resisting God. Those that resist should expect condemnation (13:2).

c. Why Christians submit to governing authorities: their God-intended purpose. Reason 2: God has established rulers to punish evil and praise good (13:3).

- Paul explains God's general legitimate role of government: punish evil and praise good.
- When the government is operating within this sphere (though not perfectly), God calls his people to submit.

Implication 2: Do good and you will have no reason to fear; do evil and expect the consequences (13:4).

The “good” and “evil” in the passage does not refer to what the governing authority deems “good” or “evil” but rather according to God’s definition. Just as in 1 Peter, Paul is not saying that the government always upholds their purpose of praising good and punishing evil, but that this is their purpose and sphere of authority. The Christian is called to pursue what God deems good which includes submission to authority as they operate within their God-given sphere.

d. How you are to submit. Submit for the sake of consequences and conscience (13:5). God’s people are to submit not only because of the consequences of not submitting, but also because submission is what God calls them to do. One practical area of submission is paying taxes (13:6). Taxes are a legitimate outworking of the government’s role to punish evil and praise good, so they should be paid. Therefore, the larger principle is to submit by rendering to all what is due: taxes, custom, fear, honor (13:7). When there are appropriate obligations due like those mentioned in verse seven, because of the government’s God-given role, these obligations should be met. Christians ought to be quick to submit and cultivate an attitude of submission. Christians should be especially careful of using their obedience to God as an excuse for rebellion against authority.

Responding in love (Rom 13:8-10). Paul ends this section with an obligation that is due to all people at all times: love one another (13:8). Loving one’s neighbor is the essence and fulfillment of the Law (9-10). The dominant principle in all the believer’s conduct is what is most loving to my neighbor, whether believer or unbeliever. Of course, love must be

biblically, not culturally, defined. Paul emphasizes commands to put off self-focus and be others-centered (adultery, murder, stealing, coveting). On the heels of the discussion on authority, Paul reveals that the believer's submission to government must not be a self-centered matter, but an expression of love for all people. Therefore, a fundamental question for the gray areas of submission must be: What is most loving for my neighbor?

C. Biblical limitations to submitting to the government. There are limits to submitting to the government.

- 1. God limits those in authority and limits submission to authority.** God alone is the ultimate authority; he is the one who gives rulers authority, and he puts limits on their authority (Psalm 22:28, Daniel 2:21-22, Proverbs 21:1). God has given the government a sphere of authority, which is to punish evil doers and praise those who do right. God has also given authority to fathers, husbands, and elders. Each is to exercise their authority within their given sphere. Once any of those step out of their sphere, they have no authority. For example, a father has no authority over someone else's child. Fathers are to bring up their own children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). Elders do not have authority over unbelievers to judge them; they only have authority to judge those within the church (1 Cor 5:12-13). Elders also do not have authority over things in the home that are the authority of parents (like what time the children go to bed). God also puts limits on submission to authority. Wives are to be subject to their own husbands (Eph 5:22), not someone else's husband. Children are to obey their own parents (Eph 6:1). The church is to obey its own leaders and submit to them (Heb 13:17).
- 2. Clear situations where it would be wrong (sin) to submit to the government:** if the government commands people to do something that God forbids (Exodus 1:15-22; Daniel 3:9-13, 6:10) or if the government forbids people from doing something God command (Acts 4:18-21, 5:17-29). For example, if the government commends something as right, when it is evil (abortion, same sex marriage), then God's people cannot submit. Or if the government says something is wrong, when it is right (lovingly disciplining your child), believers must fear and obey God.

For example, if the government says that the Church may not preach the biblical doctrine that marriage is between one man and one woman for life and that it is God who assigns gender at conception as either biological male or female, then we must disobey the government's evil edict and proclaim God's truth for Christ's glory. We must obey God and represent Him accurately.

While certain situations are clear, there are other situations that make it challenging for Christians to know if they should submit to the government or not. The next section will present some biblical truths to help Christians discern what would be a God-honoring decision in these situations.

D. Less clear situations where a believer may or may not submit to the government. It may be less clear because the government's sphere of authority is overlapping or overstepping another sphere of authority from God, the authority of the home or the

authority of the church. It may be unclear because a person may have trouble discerning whether a law is moral or immoral.

One clear example of overlapping authority is the way the church and government may respond to a father's conduct in the home. God says that a man is the head of his home, however this does not mean he may do whatever he pleases. Ideally, the church and the government will hold the man accountable for how he treats his wife and children. Therefore, if a man abuses his wife, the church may excommunicate the man, and the government may throw him in prison. Both are appropriate actions based on their sphere of authority, and the father should submit to both.

But, there may be other times where overlapping authority makes the appropriate response not as clear. The point is that there can be overlapping spheres of authority and sometimes the church or the individual will need to determine when to submit to the government or not. It may be less clear whether to submit or not because of a temporary situation. For example, the government may temporarily put restrictions on the church because it sees this as a greater good, e.g., a health issue.

Each authority may make recommendations in the areas of legitimate overlap but to overstep and infringe upon a sphere of rule which God has not assigned is a breach and should be rebuked by the appropriately assigned authority.

1. What should be our posture in less clear situations? God has given believers and churches some principles to guide them in these situations.

- Believers should do all that they do for the glory of God, which means submitting to what God has said in his word (1 Cor 10:31; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17)
- Believers should exercise humility and be ready and willing to submit. Knowing our natural sinful tendency is to resist authority, believers should have a posture of humility. (Rom 13:2; 1 Pet 2:13)
- Believers must have love for their neighbor, which is the fulfillment of the law. Therefore, even if we do not believe we have to submit in a certain situation, love may dictate that we do. (Rom 13:8-10)
- Believers should desire to have a good witness for Christ. Therefore, they may choose to submit in an unclear situation. (1 Pet 2:13, 16-17)
- Believers should redeem all of life which includes fulfilling their calling as citizens of both worlds, earthly and heavenly. (Eph 5:15-16; Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11-12) Believers should have a robust understanding of each sphere of authority and the directions God has given to that respective sphere.
- Believers must weigh in and examine other commands of God that may affect this situation. Some of God's commands are weightier than others, and those must be taken into consideration. (Matt 22:36-40; 23:23)

2. How should the believer respond to less clear situations?

There are at least two potentially appropriate responses. First, depending on the situation, there may be a season where the church is temporarily hindered from doing the things which God requires (like regularly assembling together) and they willingly comply with the governing authority's requests. Second, there may come a time when the church decides it must not submit to the government in a specific area whenever it discerns that government prohibitions are directly or

indirectly hindering the essential and God-ordained spiritual care among its members. These responses require wisdom from God. Questions that weigh into our decision:

- Why is the government asking us to do this?
- How long is the government asking us to do this?
- Is the government accurate in its assessment of the seriousness of the issue? Are government officials telling the truth? How do you know?
- Is the government's response causing other serious problems? (eg. an increase in suicides, domestic violence, child abuse, drunkenness, drug abuse, etc.)
- Are all levels of government in agreement? If not which one is most closely aligned with their God-given sphere of punishing evil and praising doing good?
- Are government officials themselves in submission to the established rule of law that they have taken an oath of office to uphold? As public servants are they in submission to the written law already in operation?
- Is prolonged submission to the government affecting the church's mission and the spiritual well-being of people?

So, we could see situations where we might submit for a season to the government and not do specific things God commands out of love for our neighbor and submission to the government. However, after a certain amount of time, we may decide it is worse for the church to continue to submit to the government. The point is: we as the church decide these issues because we are under Christ's Headship of ecclesiastical authority.

II. Practical Application for how believers are to relate to governing authorities.

Question: How did we apply these texts and principles in response to past governmental restrictions?

A. Singing

Governing authorities released guidelines for indoor worship which restricted singing. Scripture is clear concerning worshipping in song. God commands believers to sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Psalm 95:1-2, 100:1-2). Therefore, in the area of singing in worship, we determined we must obey God rather than men.

B. Worshipping Indoors

Governing authorities restricted churches from meeting indoors for a time and recommended that religious service be conducted outdoors. The restriction of meeting outdoors did not have in mind the greater spiritual good of the church to gather. It was clear that after meeting outside for many weeks, experiencing smoke from fires, unexpected lightning storms, intense heat, intense cold, and distracting un-edifying environment, that assembling outside either prohibited the church from gathering, or inhibited the edifying focus of the assembly. (I Corinthians 14:26; I Thessalonians 5:11). Therefore, after some time, we decided to return indoors.

C. Limits Indoors

Governing authorities followed a colored tier system which greatly restricted the number of people allowed indoors for religious service based on the tier. Limiting the capacity of indoor services in that way inhibited our local church from benefiting from each other's gifts as described in Scripture. (Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians

12:12; Ephesians 4:16). The elders believed following the exact restrictions did not have in mind the greater spiritual good of the church to gather. Therefore, after some time, we decided to not uphold the restrictions of indoor limits but did take a number of precautions described in point E below as we thought was best for our church family.

D. Masks

Governing authorities required masks for indoor services. We believed that wearing a mask or not is an area of freedom. Each person has the freedom to make their own biblical conviction on whether it is right before God to wear a mask during the assembly. We recognize there are legitimate biblical convictions that would bind Christians to not wear a mask. Romans 14 tells us that each must be “fully convinced in his own mind” and that “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” Therefore, it would be against God’s Word to force Christians to act contrary to their biblical convictions. (Romans 14:13-23, 15:2; Philippians 2:2-5). Therefore, we decided not to require nor police mask-wearing in services.

E. Precautions taken

Our mission as a church is to exalt Christ by making disciples locally and globally. We believe the biblical means to achieve the mission is by proclaiming the excellencies of Christ (1 Peter 2:9). Though we must never stop proclaiming the excellencies of Christ together, it is important for us to do so in a way that seeks to retain a good testimony among the world while not compromising on the priority of the mission and other biblical principles (Matthew 5:16; Mark 12:31; John 13:35). For this reason, we have implemented many precautions at different times for the safety of people and our testimony before the world. These precautions included: encouraging masks, exercising caution in physical contact, arranging distancing between seats, and providing different venues to gather, such as an outdoor area and mask-only room. In the future, we will employ appropriate precautions for the good and safety of the church and as a testimony to a watching world.

Conclusion

Although The Word of God never changes and stands as unbending truth for all generations, our understanding and wisdom in applying the truth does indeed grow. What we have written here reflects our current understanding to which we will not compromise, but as lovers of the truth who are ever growing in being sanctified by that truth our hope is to yet make progress in further sharpening our convictions on the purpose, role and responsibilities of government and citizenship.