

Text: Rom. 13:1-7

Title: "The Christian and His Country"

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Introduction - I sat in an Economics class at Western CT State University in Danbury, CT one evening, when our professor came in noticeably agitated. His name was Dr. Collins, a Fordham graduate, and a self-identifying northeastern Kennedy liberal. What had irritated him so before coming to class was that President George H. W. Bush had told the press that day that he felt it was very important to begin his day in prayer.

Dr. Collins explained to our class that what irritated him about Bush's prayers was that they were a violation of the separation of church and state. At the time, I was the Assistant Pastor at The Baptist Church of Danbury, which was founded in 1790 and traced its heritage back to the days when Thomas Jefferson coined the phrase *wall of separation between church and state* in a letter to the Danbury Baptists. I did my best to explain to the class why a praying president was not a violation after all.

So on the extreme left I have heard that Presidents must not pray while in office. And on the extreme right, I have heard that there should be no separation of church and state. In between these extremes, Romans 13 teaches a true Bible doctrine of the relationship between the Christian and his country.

The Bible doctrine of the believer's relationship to the state can be summarized with three truths from this chapter: (1) God is sovereign over both the church and the state; (2) God is the Creator of the conscious of a man and holds it directly responsible to Himself (individual soul liberty); (3) God's will for the church and His will for the state are separate and distinct (the separation of church and state).

Paul was not a great American patriot. He was not a constitutional conservative, nor a progressive liberal. But what he

teaches in this passage about the relationship of the Christian to his country applies to us as American believers who have just celebrated our Independence Day, just as it did to Paul and the Roman church under the tyranny of Nero.

I. God is sovereign over the state, just like He is over the church (vv. 1-4).

Illustration: When Dr. Collins of WestConn became upset over the prayers of George Bush as our president, he demonstrated that he knew nothing of this truth. What he claimed was the doctrine of the separation of church and state conflicts with the Bible doctrine on this point. Paul would respond, "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4). The truth that God is sovereign over both the church and the state has two important ramifications for the civil governments of every nation.

1. Because God is sovereign over civil governments, they derive their authority from Him, just as churches do (Rom. 13:1-2).

Application: *Authority* is not a popular word today, but it is a word that appears four times in the first three verses of Romans 13 (*power* is *exousia* here not *dunamis*). Written authority is *law*, and that word occurs twice in the chapter (vv. 8, 10). Clearly, Paul focuses here on the Christian's responsibility before civil government. Subjection to civil authority and law is a command from God, which the justified life in Christ must obey as an important part of his testimony and sanctification. As believers, we must not see civil authority and law as inhibitors to true happiness. Instead, we must be supporters of the rule of law and law enforcement officials who maintain that rule.

Illustration: I will always remember the very early morning our fire department came to our men's breakfast here at the church. They had heard we were cooking bacon (because our fire alarm went off when we did). We did not need their help, but I am thankful that the New Boston fire department will respond to

our aid when they think we do. But that also means that we must be willing to conform to fire codes and building codes.

Sometimes this obedience is not something we enjoy. Our town has an ordinance about road signs, so we had to get approval to put out signs advertising our Summer Bible Camp, and there is a fee that goes along with that approval. Subjection even to the civil authority we find undesirable is an important part of a Christian testimony.

God was the one who established the governments that we must obey, and Paul gives us some specifics about this obedience (vv. 6-7). In Paul's Rome, Nero had his tax collectors. We have the IRS. Paul calls both God's ministers here. The same is true for our police and elected officials. Paul also taught us that we must pray for civil servants, and we endeavor to do that once a quarter at our 1 Timothy 2 prayer times (vv. 1-2).

2. Because God is sovereign over civil governments, they must answer to Him, just like churches must (Rom. 13:3-4).

Application: In relation to us, civil governments are our authority. In relation to our God, civil governments are His servants (*ministers* = *diakonos*, the word for *deacon* or *table-waiter*). Our founding fathers emphasized this second principle about the derivation of the authority of government from God.

Verse 3 tells us that civil authorities are bound to God's definition of good and evil, to enforce the good and to punish the evil. Civil governments must answer to God about whether they have done so as His ministers.

Under the influence of John Locke, our founding fathers took this principle a bit further. They said that since civil governments must answer to God's authority, and since God created man with inalienable rights, governments are legitimate only to the degree that they secure those rights.

Our *Declaration of Independence* declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable [non-transferable] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." Rom. 13:3 is foundational to the understanding of civil government expressed there.

Paul never envisioned such a declaration of independence from Nero's Rome, although we do see the importance of the consent of the governed in Scripture in the exodus of Israel from Egypt and in the rebellion of Jeroboam from Rehoboam. But Paul would have agreed that whatever inalienable rights a citizen has, he has them because they have come from the Creator-God of the Bible, who ordains civil governments as His ministers to promote His definition of good, resisting evil. They must answer to Him in the protection of inalienable human rights.

But the primary application of these verses is that Christians must submit to civil authority ordained by God, and that we need not fear threats from civil government because our God is in charge. In so far as civil governments rebel against their Sovereign, our God, they do so imagining a vain thing (Psalm 2). We must live with confidence in the King of kings, even when our nation seems to be losing its claim on the blessing of the King of kings, which it has enjoyed so bountifully in her past. God is sovereign over both the church and the state. Just as we are subject to the state, so the state is to Him.

II. God is the Creator of the conscious of a man and holds it directly responsible to Himself (v. 5).

Application: This is the Baptist doctrine of individual soul liberty. Paul tells us to obey government “not only for wrath, but for conscience sake.” Wrath is a motivation from without generated by the state, but conscience is a motivation from within generated by the soul’s sense of its direct responsibility to God.

Illustration: The massive second panel on the wall of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. records text from his famous Virginia statute, *A Bill for the Establishing of Religious Freedom* (1789). It reads in part: “Almighty God hath created the mind free. All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.”

The America of our day has seen a revival of suffering on account of religious opinion and belief. Business enterprises and religious ministries opposed to the sins of abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism have endured that kind of suffering at the hands of our governments. Perhaps this reflects the loss of an acceptance of that “one code of morality for men,” which Jefferson so confidently assumed. Perhaps it reflects the fact that a U.S. president can no longer speak accurately of his nation with the phrase, “the Holy Author of *our* religion.”

Whatever the source of this revival of tyranny over an individual’s conscience in our time, one Jeffersonian truth remains enduringly true: “Almighty God hath created the mind free.” Though we may suffer, we must never fear those who destroy the body, but only that One who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28).

III. God’s will for the church and His will for the state are separate and distinct (vv. 6-7).

Application: God's plan for Israel did not include the separation of Israel and the state—His will for Israel and the state were the same thing, because Israel was a nation-state; there is even a sense in which Israel and the family were combined as descendants of the patriarchs.

Today, however, God is working a different plan. Paul never speaks of local church members paying "tribute" to their church. These verses tell us how to be a godly citizen of the state, whereas chapter 12 tells us how to be something entirely separate, a godly church member. God's will today for the family member, the member of the local church, and the citizen of a nation are separate and distinct in a way they were not for his people Israel under the Old Testament economy.

Illustration: One of the first Americans to advocate for this truth from Scripture was the Baptist colonialist Isaac Backus.

Backus was born in 1724 in Norwich, CT and baptized as an infant in the First Congregational Church of Norwich. He was saved under the influence of our nation's First Great Awakening as part of a group of Congregationalists that became known as the "New Lights." They separated from establishment Puritans over concerns about half-way-covenant apostasy.

After years of difficult persecution in the ministry as a separatist, Backus first took up his pen to write about the Bible doctrine of the separation of church and state in 1789 in a pamphlet he titled, "A Fish Caught in His Own Net." The *Fish* was the Reverend Joseph Fish of Stonington, CT, whose congregation had lost two-thirds of its membership to the Separates and Baptists, and who had decried the stand of the Separates and Baptists as unbiblical in nine published sermons.

Application: What is somewhat ironic and instructive for us today is the truth that our forefathers' struggle for the separation of church and state was both a battle against the encroachment of the civil government upon Separate and Baptist

congregations and a battle against the encroachment of the establishment church upon the functions of civil government. What Backus realized is that it is important for the state to not get involved in the God-given role of the church, and also that the church not get involved in the God-given role of the state. In his pamphlet, Backus mentions four biblical separations between church and state.

1. The legislation of the church and of the state are separate (1 Pet. 2:13). Backus: "The Holy Ghost calls the orders and laws of civil states *ordinances of man*, 1 Pet. 2:13. But all the rules and orders of divine worship are *ordinances of God*, and it defiles the earth under its inhabitants when these laws are transgressed and ordinances changed [i.e., exchanged]" (McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism*, p. 191).

2. The methodology of the church and of the state are separate (Matt. 20:25-28). Civil authorities work for political power. Churches work for the service of gospel ministry.

3. The jurisdiction of the church and of the state are separate (Matt. 10:28). The jurisdiction of the state is limited to the physical body. They cannot touch the soul. State-sponsored education forgets this. The church ministers to both body and soul.

4. The mission of the church and of the state are separate (Phil. 1:27-28). Backus: "The work of Gospel Ministers is to labor to open men's eyes and to turn them from darkens unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, Acts 26, 18. And as any kind of force tends to shut the eyes rather than open them, therefore Christ's special orders to his first ministers were, Freely ye have received, freely give" (p. 191).

Conclusion: As Independence Day has come and gone, we need both to be thankful for the blessings of our freedom and to commit ourselves to our responsibilities to our country as Christians. We must obey government as ordained of God. We must pray for them as answerable to God. We must live with a

conscience that is fearlessly free and directly responsible to God, not man, no matter the cost. And we must recognize the importance of our separate roles in both church and state.

If you are an illegal alien, become a legal citizen or go back to the nation of your citizenship and fulfill your responsibility to your country there. If you are not a church member, become a church member, and as a church member, live the life of someone who desires to strive together for the faith of the gospel.

And if you are a citizen of this great nation, where God has ordained a civil government of the people, by the people, and for the people, vote and be active in making our civil governments, communities, and nation more pleasing to Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We too shall answer to Him.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*