

Government Overreach

Over the past 18 months, there has been much debate in our society as well as in the church over the question of the extent of the government's authority. In the wake of the civil authorities' various mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is helpful and necessary for us as Christians to understand what the Bible teaches about this topic. As we move into another cold and flu season, we must maintain a clear and faithful position that honors the Lord. As followers of Christ, our chief aim is to please Him, no matter the cost.

The principal text from which we draw our understanding of civil authority is *Romans 13:1-7*:
1Let 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. 2Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4for 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. 5Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7Pay 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.

Paul reveals several truths in this passage that are relevant to how we are to think and respond to civil authorities.

1. God is the chief *source* of all authorities, including non-Christian civil authority, so everyone, including Christians, are to *submit* to them (1).
2. Resisting God ordained authorities (His servants) is a *sin* not only against man but ultimately against God (2, 4, 6).
3. God has established civil authority for the *promotion* of good and the *prevention* of evil (3-4).
4. Civil authority has been *empowered* by God to *punish* evildoers (4).
5. Submission to civil authorities is an expression of *sanctification* (5).
6. Submission to civil authorities is *limited* to the sphere sovereignty that God has assigned to each authority (6-7).

In following the logic of Paul's argument, it is evident that vv. 6-7 flesh out the principles affirmed in vv. 1-5. In particular, vv. 6-7 demonstrate how vv. 1-5 are to be applied, namely Christians are to submit to the civil authority according to God's *appointment*. However, what may not be apparent in Paul's logic is the biblical assumption that all of God's ordained authorities have limits. All human authorities are bound to the realm in which God has appointed them. This overarching principle maintains God's universal authority and restricts the tendency for totalitarianism.

Jesus, who faithfully submitted to His governing authorities, illustrated this divine truth when He commanded His disciples, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are

God's" (Lk 20:25). Here Jesus clearly distinguishes the sphere of authority between Caesar and God. Because God has appointed the civil authority to levy taxes to perform its duties, it is right for all citizens to pay taxes. However, Jesus also affirms that what belongs to God cannot and must not be given to any other authorities. Civil authorities are to operate within the bounds that God has allotted to them and no further. When an authority demands more of its subjects than what God has appointed, then they are no longer acting as God's servants but as tyrants. The apostles modeled how Christians are to respond to such conflicts. When they were ordered by the high priest not to teach in Jesus's name, they faithfully responded, "We must obey God rather than men" (Ac 5:29). No matter the consequence, the disciples could not submit to man's authority when it usurped God's. God's will must always supersede every human authority.

This precept is especially relevant to the Church of Jesus Christ as it pertains to the overreach of the civil magistrate in any mandate that relates to the worship of God. Above all things, biblical worship belongs to God. God alone is worthy of it and has absolute sovereignty over it. It is a sphere that no human authority must dare to transgress. God has rightly commanded His people to worship Him on the Lord's Day according to the prescription of His Word (*Dt 5:12-15, Heb 10:25, John 4:24; WCF 21.1* "But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy scripture."). God's Word and our Confession command us in all matters of worship. We must not allow any other authority to corrupt or compromise the sacred worship of God. God's righteous jealousy will uphold and guard those who faithfully worship Him and judge those who yield to any other idol (*1 Sam 2:30*). May the Lord grant us His grace that we may be found faithful in our continuing worship of Him!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'S. Y.', located below the main text.

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