

Of the Civil Magistrate (Part 1)

Romans 13:1-7; WCF 23.1-23.2

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 11 October 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This is the first sermon in a series of three about the Christian's position under his/her government or civil magistrate.

This sermon has four points.

- God Ordains Rulers
- The Sword
- Christians in Government
- Just Wars

God Ordains Rulers

Rom 13:1 says, "...*there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.*"²

Now, when we hear these words, we must remember who God is: He owns this world; the earth is His domain; in fact, the whole universe is His kingdom.

What does that then mean?

Well, does it not mean that God is supreme *Lord* and *King* – the supreme Authority? See why the Old Testament often calls God "Lord" and "King" (in Hebrew "Adonai" and "Melek")!?

And see why the New Testament tells us that Christ ascended into heaven and that He sits at the right hand of God?

God Triune rules as the Supreme Authority of the universe!

So, it is God as Supreme Authority who calls and orders some people to be kings and rulers and people of authority in a world under His authority!

Yes, you & I may struggle to think that God casts the deciding vote in our national elections (even in the current round of elections)! We may also find it hard to think that it was God who appointed Adolf Hitler to be the chancellor of Germany and Joseph Stalin to rule over Russia and Chairman Mao over China. But what Paul is saying, of course, is that all government is under God's authority! And the Bible *says* it – also in Daniel 4:25, "...*the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.*"³

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2007. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 3: *The State, the Family, the Church, and Last Things* (Chapters 23-33 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 281p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ro 13:1). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

³ Dan 4:25, *You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes* (NIV84).

My brother & sister, look, if God, in His sovereign government of this planet, installs a despicable person, that does not mean that God therefore approves everything such corrupt official does!⁴

You ask, “But why does God then put such rulers in place?”

Well, God uses even evil powers to achieve His own righteous goals. I mean, did He not, for example, use Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and many others to discipline His own people?⁵

See how, at least *at some level*, all human beings in authority have been appointed (established, instituted, ordained)⁶ by God?⁷

And here is the most amazing thing, i.e. that when Paul was writing Rm 13:1 and said that “**Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities . . .**,”⁸ he wrote it to Christians who would within a few years be ruled by the tyrant Nero – the one under whose rule Paul himself would be beheaded!

Submit to the governing authorities!

Who are included by the words *governing authorities*?

Well, the Apostle Peter gives us the full range when he says (in 1 Pt 2:13 & 14), “**Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.**”⁹

In Peter’s first-century world, it meant every person in authority – from the emperor at the top, down to every police officer on the street.

Now think with me: If all human beings in authority received their positions by the gracious allowance of the Ultimate Authority, i.e. by God, does it then not follow that they are to promote God’s glory and the public good – and that they are not to selfishly boost their own prestige, privileges or financial enrichment, and that they are not to make laws that are unjust?

After all, God has delegated the right and authority to enact laws to lesser magistrates – i.e. human rulers who rule by His grace! God has not delegated to them to enact unjust laws! God never gives anybody the right to do wrong or evil!

⁴ My adaptation of the words of Sproul (ibid:3)

⁵ My adaptation of the words of Sproul (ibid:3).

⁶ These are the different words by which most English versions have tried to do justice to the Greek verb which, in Rom 13:1, is *tetagmenai* (τεταγμέναι), a Perfect Passive Participle Feminine Plural Nominative of *tassō* (τάσσω) “... ① to bring about an order of things by arranging, *arrange, put in place*.... ② to give instructions as to what must be done, *order, fix, determine, appoint*...” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [*A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*](#) (3rd ed., p. 991). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

⁷ “Peter exhorts the believers to live in submission “to every authority instituted among men.” What he has in mind is either the “institution” itself (government as a human arrangement or, as in Rom. 13:1–7, as a divinely appointed human arrangement) or the person so instituted. The odd combination of “creation” and “human” leads one to suspect that Peter sees the institution of government as supervised and appointed by God *at some level*” (Italics mine; cf. McKnight, S. (1996). [*1 Peter*](#) (pp. 142–162). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Ro 13:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ NIV84 (Emphasis mine)

And history has shown us how every time when a governing authority tried to work independently from God, there was huge disaster & crisis, e.g. with Hitler's rule, and with that of Stalin, and that of Mao Zedong – and also with that of King Ahab!

And here's the sad thing: when Western governments in our day & age hear the words "state and church should be separate," they think it means that the civil government should not be under God at all, but totally independent of Him.¹⁰

Well, if that's how they decide to govern, then disaster will eventually follow just as it did in Ahab's days and in the days of other God-less rulers!

My brother & sister, the main reason why Christians are called to be good citizens, is so that by their good behaviour they will glorify God, honour Christ, and be good advertisements for the Gospel!

The Sword

Well, it is a sad reality that many people refuse to obey even the best of governments. Yes, they refuse to, *for the Lord's sake, submit to every authority instituted among men* (1 Pt 2:13).¹¹

Thus, because God's desire is for His glory and for the public good – and because many of us don't have that same desire – God has permitted governments to carry weapons. As Rm 13:4 says, they have been given the power of the swords as *servants* and *agents* of God!¹²

Now, of course, the government can use the sword to defend its people – in which case such defending encourages those who are good.

But government can also use the sword to punish.

And, sure, it is not always easy to determine the scale & conditions of legitimate defence and punishment. However, the idea that both defence and punishment must be administered by government is beyond question!¹³

Christians in Government

Here is a sad reality: There have always been many governments that have been unwilling to follow God's instructions.

To some degree, our current government here in New Zealand is also guilty of that!

So, here's the question: How should Christians respond to a government that's unwilling to do what God says?

Well, throughout the centuries, Christians have responded to this problem in various ways – many of which have been unsuccessful, for here is the reality: in this world/life, it will never happen that all citizens in a country will be heartfelt Christians! No, we know – and the Bible tells us – that there will always be two main groups: God's elect and those who are not His elect. So, how will the Christian in this life ever find himself under the perfect God-fearing government!?

You see, right through history, Christian sects have tried to deal with government in one of two ways:

- either by totally overpowering (taking over) government, or
- by totally separating themselves from government.

¹⁰ Cf. Sproul (ibid:3)

¹¹ 1 Pt 2:13-14 ***Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right*** (NIV84).

¹² Rm 13:4 ***For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*** (NIV84).

¹³ My adaptation of the words of Van Dixhoorn (ibid:308)

However, both these ways have failed.

Here's an example of the first such way – when the church completely took over the government (a so-called theocracy). This happened, e.g. in the 1530's when radical anabaptists tried to force all citizens of the German town of Münster to come under the rule of their handful of spiritual leaders who would start the Lord's thousand-year kingdom on earth. Soon those leaders started to proclaim that the Bible called for the absolute equality of man in all matters including the distribution of wealth. So, those leaders distributed pamphlets throughout northern Germany, by which they managed to successfully get all the poor of the region to join the citizens of Münster and to come share in the wealth of the town and benefit spiritually from being the elect of Heaven. All property of every citizen was to be held in common so that the leaders could distribute it evenly among the people. They also made a rule that every person who had been baptised as a baby had to be rebaptised.¹⁴ One of their leaders, Jan of Leiden, claimed that he had new revelations from God who told him that he was allowed to introduce the Old Testament practice of polygamy.¹⁵ Well, such false teaching and religious fanaticism were a recipe for disaster. No wonder that that attempt to a theocracy lasted only for sixteen months.

In modern times – yes even up to the present time – certain Christian sects are still trying to establish God's government on earth, so , e.g. the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, and certain strange cults that tend to thrive in Utah and Texas.¹⁶

These are all examples of Christian sects who have tried (are trying) to take total control of government – to establish a theocracy – the first way in which Christians have tried to deal with government.

Here's the second way – that of total separation!

This was exactly what the Anabaptists did in the 1500's in Europe. They refused to serve in the army or in the government. They would have nothing to do with the evil in the secular state.

Well, none of these attempts is satisfactory – neither the theocracy attempt nor the total separation of church and state.

Why?

Because both of them miss the thrust of Romans 13.

After all, Rm 13 tells us that, "...*there is no authority except from God...*"¹⁷

Indeed, Rm 13:4 goes so far as to say that the civil government is a servant/agent from God.¹⁸

¹⁴ For a brief overview of events, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCnster_rebellion

¹⁵ Cf. Shelley, B. 1995. Church History in Plain Language. Dallas, TX : Word Books. p. 252.

¹⁶ For a mention of these, cf. Van Dixhoorn (ibid:309).

Also cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Resistance_Army

¹⁷ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ro 13:1). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹⁸ Rm 13:4 *For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer* (NIV84; emphasis mine).

And in Proverbs 8:15 & 16 God says, “**By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth.**”¹⁹

So, here’s the point: If God calls people to this task, then surely Christians ought to see that it is probably desirable and definitely ‘lawful for Christians to hold public office in a secular government when called to it.’²⁰

Thus, instead of having a theocracy in which the church becomes the civil government, and instead of having the church and state/government totally separated, here is the answer: that the *civil* government should have *Christians* working *among their number* – Christians who have been called to public office under God to manage their tasks in such a way that they maintain piety, justice and peace! Yes, this is especially true of Christians in government!

My brother & sister, if anyone of us ever works for parliament (and I think we have [have had] some members in this category), let him/her remember God’s warning of Ps 2:10-12, **Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.**²¹

So, what do we see?

Well, that, according to Rm 13, God appoints rulers. And in His Word, He tells them how to live.

What’s more, God also exhorts you & me (and every Christian) to pray for kings and all who are in authority (1 Tim 2:2). Yes, it’s on us to pray that also our New Zealand government will abide by God’s Word and by the *wholesome laws*²² of this country. In general, the Christian can pray in the words of Ps 82:3,4 **Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.**²³ After all, there are many countries (and many times in this country) when the weak and needy suffer at the hand of the wicked – as currently in South Africa, my country of birth in which vulnerable white farmers are gruesomely tortured then murdered – not for the sake of theft, but just out of sheer sadistic motives!

My brother & sister, what do you & I want?

Well, we want political leaders who rule justly in the fear of the Lord. Look, is that not what 2 Sam 23:3-4 says? **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.’**²⁴

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Pr 8:15–16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁰ WCF 23.2 “It is lawful for Christians to hold public office when called to it. In such office they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth. For that purpose they may now, under the new testament, lawfully wage war upon just and necessary occasion” (Italics mine).

²¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 2:10–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² Cf. WCF 23.2

²³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 82:3–4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Sa 23:3–4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Thus, if Christians are called to serve in politics, they should grab it with both hands, for if our political leaders are gifted Christians fully equipped for the task, that could be no problem for the Christian church – only a blessing!

Just Wars

I'm sure that no-one in our church likes war!

Some Christians and sects have refused to participate in wars – among these were the Anabaptists of the 1500's and the Jehovah's Witnesses!

Now, although my *heart* is with them, my *mind* tells me (and so does reality) that, sad as it is in this sin-marred world, the Christian may not always be able to avoid participating in a war.

And so, it should be said that governments under God can at times take up weapons not simply to police a nation, but also to wage war!

In the Old Testament, Israel waged war by the direct command of God, while they were carrying out God's divine justice on the nations.

However, in New-Testament times (i.e. also our times), no nation or church may claim the same authority.

Yet, there is such a thing as a just war – a war that has actually become necessary. In such circumstances a nation may engage in war – and even Christians in that nation may have to serve in that war!

After all, the evil in this sin-infected world is real! In fact, in a certain way, just wars on earth are a vivid reminder (and illustration) of the great behind-the-scenes spiritual battles that will continue to rage until our Lord returns!²⁵

We are talking of *just* wars – not any war!

And so, no Christian can hide behind the axiom/slogan which says, "My country, right or wrong, my country!"

Why not?

Well, because this axiom/slogan assumes that our country is always right!²⁶

But we're talking of *just* wars!

Yet, here's a warning! You see, many people have, by their conscience, *thought* that their cause was just, but, in fact, they were wrong! Some Christians have even fought in Hitler's army thinking they were fighting for a just cause!

Pray that we will never do the same!

Question: Does the New Testament give us any indication that, whether the Christian likes it or not, he may participate in war?

Well, some have referred to the way John the Baptist once answered the soldiers of his day. You see, various groups of people came to John and asked him what message he had for them. So, the *tax collectors* came and asked him what he had to say for them. And so, too, did the *soldiers* come and asked him what message he had for them. Well, then, instead of saying to them, "Leave your vocations – stop being soldiers," here is what John

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Rv 17:14-18 *They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.*"

¹⁵ *Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. ¹⁶ The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. ¹⁸ The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."*

²⁶ My adaptation of the words of Sproul (ibid:14).

told them: “*Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.*”²⁷

Then, in Rm 13, Paul tells Christians to submit to government, for government *is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing.*²⁸

Now, there’s every reason to think that, with the word “sword,” Paul did not just have the police in mind, but also soldiers!

What else does the New Testament say about soldiers?

Well, there is that incident (in Mt 8:9-10) when our Lord Jesus praised a Roman centurion, saying that he had more faith than any Israelite!²⁹

Then, of course, the New Testament also describes how another Roman centurion, a man by the name of *Cornelius*, was a God-fearing man – a man who received the Holy Spirit when he received Christ as his Saviour and Lord!³⁰

My brother & sister, I wish it was different – that there were no wars, and that Christians did not have to go to war. However, as long as we are in this world fallen in sin, there will be wars and rumours of war – and these must continue until our Lord returns!

We pray that He will return soon, and that, until then, He will give us righteous civil governments!

AMEN (2,689 words excluding footnotes)

²⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Lk 3:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ro 13:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁹ Mt 8:9-10 *For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

¹⁰ *When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”*

³⁰ Acts 10:1-2, *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*