

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

SUMMER 2010 'ASK THE PASTOR SERIES'

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Romans 13:1-7

"Government"

Another question in our *Ask The Pastor* series (shortened, as it's a long one): *"Many Christians fear big government, having interpreted the Book of Revelation as cautioning mankind about a corrupt world government in the end days. How can this reaction against government be reconciled to the New Testament command to 'love thy neighbor'?"* The questioner goes on to speak about the need *"to recognize that government can be used as a tool for good"* and believes that large problems and large numbers of people make large government necessary.

Now once again I was not sure I wanted to get into this! I have no time for politics in the pulpit; but this is an issue that stares the US in the face right now, and it seems cowardly to avoid it. So let me say what I think the Bible says, make a few comments on where we are today, and try to reassure you that I am not here to score partisan political points!

1) Jesus, Paul and Peter on Government

The most basic text for Christians thinking about government is of course the one where Jesus is challenged over the "people of God" paying taxes to their Roman occupiers. Seeing the coin with Tiberius Caesar's image on it, Jesus responds that Jews should *"give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* There is no doubt that Jesus endorses the right of the Emperor

to collect taxes, while making clear that some things are beyond Caesar's reach and "belong to God."

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about Christians' attitude toward the authorities in his letter to Roman believers, probably written during the early part of the reign of the Emperor Nero. *"The authorities have been established by God... so it is necessary to submit because of conscience... which is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants."* Whether "the authorities" are good or bad, their authority comes from God, so they are to be respected.

Peter takes up the same theme in his first letter: *"Submit yourself for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men... the king, governors... It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... live as servants of God... love the believers, fear God, honor the king."*

We cannot read these things without realizing that the early Christians saw law and order and civil government as a gift from God, and that government carried his authority and therefore commanded the respect and obedience of Christians. They were not *"free in Christ"* to live as they pleased, or to break all the civil and social boundaries of Israel or of Rome; indeed they should *"live such good lives"* that they would bring no reproach on the Christian community or on the name of Christ.

2) Peter, John and Luke on Government

Were their limits to their obedience? Of course. Jesus made it clear that some things “belong to God” and not to Caesar. Acts 4 and 5 show Peter and other apostles being commanded by the Sanhedrin “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” To this they famously replied “judge for yourselves whether it is right to obey you rather than God.” So they disobeyed, paid the price of arrest, flogging and imprisonment, and came out “rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” of Jesus.

Revelation depicts times of great persecution for Christians, and the emergence of demonic powers who have taken over government and commerce. More than that, they demand worship – “the beast opened his mouth to blaspheme God... and was given power to make war against the saints... and was given authority over every tribe, people and nation...all will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

This is all-out war against belief in the one true God, and a demand for worship of the beast. It “calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.” But eventually “Babylon, the great city” with all her power, sensuality and luxury falls, and God’s people are told to “come out of her.” *Revelation* is subject to many interpretations because of its highly symbolic language and its multiple applications – referring initially to late 1st century Rome, and by extension to every other corrupt regime thereafter. Is this a warning against “big government”? It’s hard to see that it is; the issue is bad, demonic government rather than its size.

3) John Calvin on Government

In our Reformed heritage, no-one has thought or written more carefully about Christians and government than John Calvin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the chapter “On Civil Government” praises

God’s gift of government, and Calvin says “Civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life.” That’s almost unbelievable to us today, who distrust government at every level, but it’s a reminder of an attitude that for hundreds of years motivated good people to “enter public service” as an honorable way of serving other people – and for Christians, of following the calling to “love your neighbor” in practical ways.

Calvin was aghast at Christians of his era who thought their “freedom in Christ” meant “no courts, no laws, no magistrates, should interfere with their liberty.” They were, in his view, “frantic and barbarous men, furiously endeavoring to overturn the order established by God.” He had so much respect for God’s order, that Calvin taught that “even the worst character... invested with public authority, receives the divine power which the Lord has devolved on him...” But he distinguished character from commands: “We are subject only *in the Lord*; if they command anything *against Him*, let us not give regard to it.”

4) Ronald Reagan on Government

So where are we today, as Christians, on government, its scope and authority? I would suggest that the modern disillusion with government in this country dates to the disgrace that President Nixon brought on the Presidency, and then to President Reagan’s Inaugural speech in 1981, when he announced “Government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem.” Reagan was sure that “the majority of Americans want a minimum of government authority.” Famously, he said “the ten most dangerous words in the English language are ‘Hi, I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’ ” (Watching the Hurricane Katrina images again this week, I wondered how those words would have sounded to people

being plucked off rooftops by Coast Guard helicopters!)

The rest, you may say, is history. Reagan's ideas have permeated the political sphere to a degree that today only rarely do issues get debated in an attempt to find the best solutions; rather they are always another test case for either growing or shrinking the size and reach of government. Everything is now about procedure and about power, and rarely about good government. No wonder people are put off; no wonder that we have a lower voter turnout in all elections than any other modern nation.

So I would maintain that Christians should be interested in good or bad government, not in large or small government. I suspect the questioner is right that large issues, which affect millions of people, require large resources to deal with them - big countries, big government! There is no going back to 18th century America; the population of the US in 1800 was 5 million, today it is over 300 million.

But I cannot leave this issue without one more comment on where we have come to today. The 1970s saw not only the disgrace of Richard Nixon and the rise of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency, but also the foundation of The Libertarian Party, whose policies are today suddenly and strangely in much favor. The Libertarian platform and their spokesmen call for the abolition of all federal agencies, especially the FBI, CIA, IRS, SEC, DOE... the end to Social Security, to unemployment payments, to minimum wage laws, to gun control, to all personal and corporate income taxes; the legalization of prostitution, drugs, pornography, suicide and gay marriage. They seek "a world of liberty in which all individuals are sovereign over their own lives," and believe "the only function of government is the protection of individual rights."

I will only say that from my point of view, *we have come a very long way from Jesus, Paul and Peter!* That should perhaps give Christians pause (especially those who call America "a Christian nation"). Maybe we need a thoughtful and prayerful "time-out" before anyone, especially Christians, endorses a recipe for what William F. Buckley called "anarcho-totalitarianism."

Next time you hear Christians complain about the way the government is treating them and "interfering with their lives," ask them if they would prefer to live in China, or India, or North Korea, or Saudi Arabia, or Malaysia, or Zimbabwe, or to return to the Soviet Union under Stalin, or to Rome under Nero.

In the history of the world, never have so many people as we had such personal freedom, opportunity, education, health, wealth, long life, religious freedom, security; the ability to vote their leaders in and out of office without resort to violence; the stability and resources of a large and prosperous country where Christian beliefs dominate and are still expected of anyone who aspires to high public office. We should all be a lot more thankful than we are for the America we have.

And we should rediscover a principle that the military still understands: you "salute the uniform," not the person in it! As Christians we are called to honor, and submit to, and pray for, the people God has placed in authority - whatever we think about them personally, or about their policies, or about the best size for government.

Let us pray...