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Christians & the State

Robert C. Newman

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Introduction

This is a time of increasing tension between Christians and the government:

- Local
- State
- Federal



Some of the Tensions

- Public schools vs Xn schools for declining number of students
- State oversight of Xn schools
- Tax exemption for Xn organizations
- Prayer & Bible reading in public schools
- Religious interest groups using public school property
- Growing pluralism in US, with pressure for gay rights, etc.

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Two Major Areas of Concern

- (1) What is the right thing to do in each of these cases?
- (2) Who has authority and how much?

We want to concentrate on the 2nd area here:

- What does the Bible say about the relationship of believers to the state?

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Old Testament Background

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Creation (Genesis 1 & 2)

- God has created both earth & mankind, so He owns them to use as He sees fit.
- Humans do not absolutely own themselves or anything else, but hold these things as property in trust from God.
- Biblical view contrasts with:
 - Statism – state has absolute authority
 - Individualism – individual has absolute authority



God's Worldwide Covenants

Adamic (Genesis 1:28; 2:15-25)

- Mankind is given authority over earth, plants & animals.
- Family authority is also established.
- The Fall did not nullify this disposition, but made it more difficult.
- Here we have the origin of human authority, property, crime.
- Nothing explicit on government beyond the family.

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God's Worldwide Covenants

Noachian (Genesis 9:1-17)

- This apparently extends man's authority over other humans, when compared with cases of Cain, Lamech earlier.
- Looks like some sort of government is instituted with power of life & death to punish sin.



God's Limitations on Mankind in These Covenants

Seen in God's Judgments:

- Flood (Gen 6-8) – for general wickedness
- Babel (Gen 11) – for pride, disobedience
- Sodom & Gomorrah (Gen 18-19) – for great wickedness, sodomy, misuse of wealth
 - Note protective function of righteous

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God's Limitations on Mankind in These Covenants

Denounced by Prophets:

- Amos against various nations
 - Damascus – ‘threshing’ Gilead
 - Philistia, Tyre – deportation
 - Edom – warfare, cruelty, vengeance
 - Ammon – aggression, atrocities
 - Moab – murder, desecration

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God's Limitations on Mankind in These Covenants

Denounced by Prophets:

- Jonah & Nahum on Nineveh
 - Wickedness
 - Enmity toward God
 - Afflicting Judah & others
- Daniel on Babylonian Kings
 - Nebuchadnezzar – pride
 - Belshazzar – pride, mocking God

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God's Covenants w / Israel

- Previous covenants were made with all people, may still be in force even where Gospel has not penetrated.
- Following covenants apply to restricted groups (Israel & church), though probably to be broadened in the Millennium.

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God's Covenants w/ Israel

Abrahamic (Genesis 12-22)

- No explicit form of government established.
- Promises of blessing are developed.

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God's Covenants w/ Israel

Mosaic (Exodus-Deuteronomy)

- Offices of prophet, priest, king established, with latter two kept separate.
 - Prophet (Dt 18:15-22) – chosen by God individually; put to death if false (presumably by govt); act as ‘advisors’ to govt.

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God's Covenants w / Israel

- Offices of prophet, priest, king
 - Priest (Ex 28-29) – chosen by God as dynasty, clearly specified by law (enforced by whom?); no govt functions
 - King (Dt 17) – chosen by God, to be set up by people later (becomes dynasty under Davidic covenant) w / restrictions on race, military power, wives, wealth
- Period of Judges suggests some ambivalence re / form of government.

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Interactions of Individuals & Officers

- Individual & King:
 - Ehud & Eglon (Judges 3)
 - David & Saul (1 Sam 18-2 Sam 2)
 - Contrast Hazael (2 Kings 8)
- King & Prophet:
 - Obeying: Rehoboam (1 Kings 12)
 - Resisting: Jeroboam (1 Kings 13)
 - Testing: Ahab (1 Kings 22)
 - Killing: Joash (2 Chron 24)

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Interactions of Individuals & Officers

- King & Priest:
 - Uzziah & Azariah (2 Chr 26)
 - Athaliah & Jehoida (2 Kings 11)

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Proverbs on Duties

- King
 - 16:10-15
 - 25:2
 - 29: 4,12,14
 - 31:2-9
- Citizen
 - 16:13-14; 20:2; 25:15
 - 24:21-22
 - 25:6-7

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Duties of King

- Proverbs 16:10-15 (NIV) The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice. 11 Honest scales and balances are from the LORD; all the weights in the bag are of his making. 12 Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness. 13 Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth. 14 A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it. 15 When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.
- Divine commission, concern with truth, punishment

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Duties of King

- Prov 25:2 (NIV) It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.
- Prov 29:4 (NIV) By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.
- Prov 29:12 (NIV) If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked.
- Prov 29:14 (NIV) If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure.



Duties of King

Prov 31:2-9 (NIV) "O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows, 3 do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings. 4 "It is not for kings, O Lemuel-- not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, 5 lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. 6 Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; 7 let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. 8 "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. 9 Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

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Duties of citizen

- Prov 16:13 (NIV) Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth. 14 A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it.
- Prov 20:2 (NIV) A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life.
- Prov 25:15 (NIV) Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

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Duties of citizen

- Prov 24:21 (NIV) Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious, 22 for those two will send sudden destruction upon them, and who knows what calamities they can bring?

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Duties of citizen

- Prov 25:6 (NIV) Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; 7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman...

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New Testament Teaching

Basic Passages

Matthew 22:15-22

Matt 22:15 (NIV) Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" 21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

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Background on Passage

- Palestine conquered by Romans 63 BC
- Rule thru Herod the Great 37-4 BC
- Then a series of Roman governors after AD 6
- At time of this incident, Pilate was governor
 - Incidents with Roman standards
 - Temple money to build aqueduct
 - Killing Galileans while sacrificing

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Background on Passage

- Jewish views a wide spectrum:
 - Sadducees, Herodians – cooperate
 - Pharisees – grudging obedience
 - Zealots – revolt
- Taxation:
 - High
 - Imposed
 - Corruption

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Background on Passage

- Coinage:
 - Images
 - Inscriptions
- The dilemma posed by Jesus' opponents to put him on spot:
 - Allow payment: collaboration, condoning emperor's claims → discredited with crowd
 - Forbid payment: treason → discredited with government



Jesus' Answer

- Gets coin from opponents.
- Since they have one, they have left themselves open & demonstrated hypocrisy.
- Jesus tells them (on basis of OT law) that, since the coin belongs to Caesar, give it back to him!

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Teaching on Government

- Two spheres clearly indicated:
 - God
 - Caesar
- Relationship not indicated:
 - Separate?
 - God's sphere includes govt?
 - Note Jesus' terminology:
 - "God & Caesar"
 - Not "temple & Caesar"



Teaching on Government

- Clearly Jesus teaches responsibility to both.
- He does not, however, teach equality of authority.
- He hardly pictures God as excluded from Caesar's sphere.

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Romans 13:1-7

Romans 13:1-7 (NIV) Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 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. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.



Romans 13:1-7

- (verse 1) God is the source not only of authority in general, but of every particular authority as well.
- (verse 2) Therefore we disobey God in resisting authorities.
- (3-4) Government authority is intended to limit evil (& succeeds); it serves God by rewarding righteous & punishing wicked.
- (5) Therefore we submit both to obey God & avoid govt punishment.
- (6-7) We must pay taxes, even tribute money to govt, respect its officers, submit to them.

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1 Peter 2:11-17

1 Peter 2:11-17 (NIV) Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 13 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. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. 16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. 17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.



1 Peter 2:11-17

- (vv 11-12) We are 'strangers' here on earth, so we must resist living like 'natives'; we are to have a 'beautiful lifestyle.'
- (13-14) This lifestyle involves submission to govt authorities for God's sake as they are intended to reward the righteous & punish wicked.
- (15) God's purpose in this is for us to "put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."
- (16-17) Summary: Don't use your Xn freedom as pretext for wickedness; honor all, love Xns, fear God, honor the king.

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New Testament Teaching

Some Specific Examples



Some Examples

- John the Baptist & Herod Antipas (Mk 6) – John publicly rebukes political leader; no attempt to organize revolt.
- Peter & John vs temple authorities (Acts 4 & 5) – P & J refuse to obey authorities when they forbid what God demands; but they take consequences rather than organize a revolt; non-violent resistance.

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Some Examples

- Paul & Sanhedrin (Acts 23) – Paul seems to be uneasy about his remarks to High Priest & his splitting Sanhedrin; this suggests our responsibility to show respect even when undeserved.
- Paul & Felix (Acts 24) – Paul appeals to evidence , witnesses; uses opportunities to present Gospel; apparently refuses to pay bribe.

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Some Examples

- Paul w/ Festus (Acts 25) – appeals to evidence; admits right of tribunal to put him to death; uses available legal remedies.
- Paul w/ Festus & Agrippa (Acts 26) – again uses opportunity to present Gospel.

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Conclusions

- Limits to State & Religious Authority
 - No humans are given ‘blank check’ from God.
 - Prophets are closest, but they are closely tested & have no political power.
 - The authority of religious leaders over political is persuasive & moral only.

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Conclusions

- Obedience to God Takes Precedence.
 - Individuals or groups must obey their own consciences, but this does not exempt them from political penalties.
 - Leaders have greater responsibilities, as they have authority to punish.

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Conclusions

- No Automatic Right to Rebel
 - Disobedience of leaders does not cancel their authority over subordinates, though subordinates may need to disobey in particular points.
 - Case of Ehud suggests that rebellion may need explicit revelation; no evidence for different NT ethic here.



The End

Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar,
but give God what belongs to God.