

What God “Ordained” With respect To Civil Government

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Bible students have long differed over the nature and role of civil government. The Bible tells us to “*be subject to the higher powers*” and to “*submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake*” (Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13), but it also tells us that, “*we ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). On the one hand, we are obligated to obey civil authorities, but on the other hand, civil authorities are not always right, and cannot always be obeyed.

- Following the birth of Christ, Roman authorities killed all male babies two years old and younger in the region of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). In compliance with God’s instructions, the parents of Jesus took Jesus to Egypt to prevent His death.
- The Jesus story reminds us of Pharaoh’s actions against the male babies of the Hebrews. He first ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all male babies upon the birthing stools (*a form of partial birth abortion*, Exodus 1:15). The midwives refused to obey Pharaoh’s orders and God rewarded them with their own families. Pharaoh then ordered that all Hebrew male babies be thrown into the river (Exodus 1:22). “*By faith*” (Hebrews 11:23), the parents of Moses refused to comply with Pharaoh’s orders. They hid their son and took actions to preserve his life.
- The Babylonian government of Daniel’s time ordered the execution of any person who refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s idol god. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey the king’s orders, and were miraculously delivered by God (Daniel 3).
- The Medo-Persian king, Darius, was convinced by Daniel’s political enemies to sign a law that forbade prayer to any man or god except Darius. The penalty was execution. Daniel deliberately disobeyed the injunction, but was miraculously delivered by God (Daniel 6).
- According to John, God cast down the civil government described as “*the great whore of Babylon*,” for persecuting and executing saints (Revelation 17:6; 18:24; 6:9-11).
- With the help and support of the Jews and their officials, the Roman government tortured and crucified the very Son of God.
- There are dozens of other Bible examples of godless and inhumane civil governments, and their nefarious practices. In the 2000 years since the completion of the Bible, hundreds of additional godless governments have

slaughtered tens of millions of innocent people. Given this reality, and considering what is now happening in the US and other countries, it is wise for us to consider what the Bible teaches about civil government.

Romans 13: What God “Ordained”

A proper understanding of Romans 13 is essential to a proper understanding of civil government. At the heart of this understanding is a proper understanding of what God has “*ordained*” with respect to civil government. Many Bible students fall prey to Calvinistic errors with regard to “providence” when they read Romans 13:1. This error causes them to falsely conclude that God “appoints” specific leaders, administrations or regimes. They believe the ordination of such leaders to be a *personal and direct act of God*. This view is both false and dangerous. It leads people to conclude that one must not question or challenge civil officials regardless of their policies, lest one “be found even to fight against God,” to use the words of Gamaliel (Acts 5:39).

The context of Romans 13 shows that God ordains, not the *style* of government, or the *personnel* of government, but the **function** of government. This is easily seen from the *context* of Romans 13:1. Paul explains both the purpose and function of civil government:

“Let 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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For 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. For 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”(Romans 13:1-4).

People see the word “instituted” or “ordained” and automatically think of *direct* divine appointment of civil rulers. Some reach this conclusion because of their false views of providence and predestination. Others simply fail to distinguish between the dispensations of the Old and New Testaments. They attempt to interpret Romans 13:1 in a way that harmonizes with God’s governing methods during the Old Testament Jewish *theocracy*. Of course, the Old Covenant has been replaced with the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:7-13; 9:15-17; 10:15-20), and the Law of Moses has been replaced with the Law of Christ (Hebrews 7:12; Colossians 2:14). We are not under a theocratic system of governance today. As Jesus said, new wine cannot be stored in old wineskins.

Many people think instantly of Daniel 4:32 when they think of Romans 13:1 (*governing authorities are ordained of God*). Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that he

needed to learn the lesson that, “...*the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.*” The phrases may sound similar, but the context is quite different. Babylon sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried the Israelites away into captivity because God had “summoned” Babylon as His “bird of prey” (Isaiah 46:11) to execute His vengeance upon apostate Judah. Again, the Jewish religion was theocratic. The Jewish people were God’s “chosen” and “peculiar” nation (Exodus 19:5, 6). God intervened *directly* and *miraculously* at different times in both their preservation and their punishment. Those who believe that God continues to work through nations as He did under the Jewish theocracy need to answer this question: Which “nation” is now being directly and miraculously managed by God? Which “nation” is now God’s *chosen* and *peculiar* nation? None can be cited, because in this dispensation the *church* is God’s *holy nation* and *peculiar people* (1 Peter 2:9). The church is a *spiritual*, not a *civic* kingdom. It is “*not of this world*” (John 18:36). Paul’s instructions in Romans 13:1-4 address *civic* matters, not *spiritual* ones.

Implications For Other Institutions

Civil government is not the only divine institution. God also instituted the *home* and the *church*. If being “ordained” of God necessarily implies direct divine appointment of particular individuals in government, as some argue from Romans 13:1, then the institution of the home would imply direct divine selection of *marriage partners*, and the institution of the church would imply direct divine selection of *church members* (the individual “election” of Calvinistic predestination). Interestingly, some who *reject* Calvinistic election with respect to salvation *accept* it with respect to the appointment of civil authorities!

In instituting “the home,” God instituted the *function and purpose* of the home. In instituting the church, God instituted the *function and purpose* of the church. In instituting civil government, God instituted the *function and purpose* of civil government.

The God-Ordained Function Of Civil Government

If Romans 13:1 means direct [miraculous] divine installment of specific leaders or regimes, then God personally installed *Hirohito* as emperor of Japan, *Mao Tse Tung* as communist leader of China, *Joseph Stalin* as dictator of the Soviet Union, *Pol Pot* as communist leader of Cambodia, *Adolf Hitler* as fascist leader of Germany and *Benito Mussolini* as fascist leader of Italy. One would also have to say that God raised these men up for them to do what they did, which was to capriciously kill one hundred million people. God did not “ordain” state sponsored persecution and slaughter of Christians, as was done by Rome (Acts 12:1-3; Rev. 17:6; 18:24). He does not “ordain” the indiscriminate slaughter of people based

upon their ethnicity, as done by Stalin, Hitler, Hussein, and Milosevic, nor does He ordain the current ethnic cleansing occurring in Mindanao, Philippines, the Sudan and elsewhere. God does not “ordain” the cruel and merciless slaughter of 1.5 million human babies every year in the US, and millions more each year in China and elsewhere. He does not “ordain” the passage of laws authorizing gay marriage and other godless behavior.

Some say that God directly appoints civil leaders, but that He does not cause or approve their actions. This won't fit with their use of Daniel 4:32, for God *did* ordain the function of the Babylonians and the Assyrians as instruments of His wrath. Assyria was “dispatched” by God in order to subjugate Israel, as Babylon was later “summoned” against Judah. Assyria served as “*a rod*” in God's “*hand*” against the northern kingdom of Israel (Isaiah 10:5, 6). Those who believe the “ordaining” of Romans 13:1 to be defined by God's actions with respect to Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and Sennacherib, must understand that God raised these men up because of what they would do as His punishing “servants” (Isaiah 46:11; 44:28; 45:1; 10:5). The *functions* of these men were as ordained as the men themselves.

So, what function does God have in mind for *today's* civil authorities? The New Testament answers this question. It sets forth the *divinely approved model* of civil government. The purpose of government, as stated by the apostles (Romans 13:3, 4; 1 Peter 2:14), is to *punish evildoers and approve those who do what is right*. It is a government that is “*not a terror to good works, but to evil.*” It “*praises*” those who “*do that which is good*” (Rom. 13:3). Peter wrote, “*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well*” (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

God tells us to pray for civil authorities that we may lead “*a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty*” (1 Tim. 2:2). The word translated “quiet” is a word that emphasizes tranquility arising from the absence of outward disturbance. The word translated “peaceable” emphasizes a tranquility arising from within (See W.E. Vine). While this is primarily a *prayer* passage, we learn from it an important function of civil rulers: They are to provide peaceful and secure conditions in which citizens are *free* to live lives according to divinely revealed principles of conduct and behavior.

The God-ordained model of government is one that:

- Provides for the safety and security of its citizens (1 Tim. 2:2).
- Provides an atmosphere in which its citizens may live peacefully, mind their own affairs, and work with their own hands, doing what is right for

themselves, their families and their neighbors (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:8; Rom. 13:1-10).

- Punishes those whose actions are harmful and detrimental to the divinely ordained function of society.

Any government that fails or refuses to follow this model cannot be classified as a God-ordained government.

An Observation About Taxation

Upon defining a God-ordained government, Paul said, “*This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing*” (Rom. 13:6). There is linkage between one’s duty to pay taxes, and the function of his government. Taxes are to be paid to support a God-ordained government – that is, a government that meets the above described qualifications. This begs the question: What if one’s government begins executing citizens whom it deems “unproductive” to society? Should its “productive” citizens pay tax dollars to fund such executions? No, for just three verses later (Rom. 13:9), Paul condemns murder.

Some object to this, saying that Paul commanded Christians to pay their taxes even though Rome was killing innocent people. This argument overlooks two things: 1. Rome’s downfall was being divinely orchestrated even as Paul penned the Roman epistle, and 2. The argument assumes that the Roman government fits the paradigm of a *God-ordained government*, which it did not.

Others like to point out that Jesus paid taxes (Matthew 17:24-27). Of course, that tax was a *Jewish tax* that was exacted for the maintenance of the Temple (Ex. 30:11-16). And while Jesus did pay the Temple tax, He did so in order to avoid offense, and He miraculously fabricated the money that He used (Matthew 17:27). As for Matthew 22:17-21, Jesus answered the tax question by pointing out that the money belonged to the organization that printed it. Roman currency contained Caesar’s image and superscription, thus Jesus instructed, “*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” His comments were intended to distinguish between two completely different and often-conflicting realms of activity – human government and divine. Rome was the fourth and final world empire of Daniel’s prophecy (Daniel 2). Again, its demise was already under way, and Jesus had certain knowledge of its fate.

Conclusion

Paul concludes his comments about civil government by explaining how [civil] laws are fulfilled when people fulfill “the royal law” or “second great commandment,” which is to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (James 2:8;

Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:8). He cites certain civil laws and explains how they are “briefly summarized” in the action of loving one’s neighbor. “*Love does no harm to his neighbor: therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law*” (Romans 13:10). Thus, the need for civil law is eliminated when citizens behave according to divine principles.

Solomon said, “*Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people*” (Prov. 14:34). “Righteousness” involves one’s treatment of his fellow man. When exercised by the members of any nation, the principles of righteousness will elevate that nation. Honesty, integrity, justice, fairness, generosity, personal responsibility and respect for others are just a few of the qualities that are embodied in righteousness. History tells us that as long as the people of a nation abide by these principles their nation is exalted.

Obviously, not all governments function according to the God-ordained model. When governments ignore or depart from their divinely specified function, they soon begin to infringe upon citizen's rights, hindering their freedoms, crushing their spirits, and stifling their productivity. As we have seen, some governments become so wicked that they slaughter their own people. According to history, governments have committed ninety percent of the violence that has been inflicted upon mankind.

Because of their knowledge of biblical principles of conduct, Bible students are those who are best qualified to speak and act in ways that best influence government and society. Let us not be afraid to say and do what is necessary to cultivate a God-ordained government.

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