

God, Government, and the Christian

1 Peter 2:13-17

Introduction: The idea of “civil disobedience,” the refusal by persons in a country to obey commands or laws of a government or occupying power, without resorting to violence, has a long history for the people of God. Warrant for civil disobedience is easily located in the Bible. David Helm notes the job of the preacher or teacher of Scripture actually is pretty easy. He writes, “All the preacher would need to do is turn up some of the great biblical passages that deal with this theme. He could tell of the Egyptian midwives who rightly disobeyed Pharaoh out of the fear of God; the gallant Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who doggedly refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s statue out of reverence for Yahweh; Daniel, who faithfully refused to follow legislation that prohibited prayer to the Most High; finally, the preacher could wax eloquently on Peter and John, who stood defiant in the face of authorities when ordered to stop preaching in Jesus’ name.” (*1&2 Peter and Jude, Preach the Word, 89-90*).

The Bible’s position is clear. There are situations in life when the people of God must say “no” to the government in order to say “yes” to God. Peter and the apostles were crystal clear about this in Acts 5:29 when they stood before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court and said, “We must obey God rather than

people.” And yet, the general teaching of the Bible actually points us in a different direction. Surprisingly, and it is a surprise for many, the Bible’s basic orientation is towards civil obedience, even when the governing authorities are ungodly and unjust. Keep this in mind! Nero (A.D. 54-68) was the emperor when Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1-2, and when Peter penned 1 Peter 2:13-17. Peter in the text before us will teach us that God’s rationale for such a command is both theological and apologetic. It honors the sovereign providence of God, and it helps our witness to the lost.

Now, before we dive into these five verses, let’s provide a biblical framework. My friend and colleague Daniel Heimbach is a respected Christian ethicist. His book *Fundamental Christian Ethics* (2022) is becoming a standard in the field.

Heimbach believes the book of Daniel “provides more on God relating to sinners governing sinners than any other book in the Bible and does so in universal terms not affected by shifting politics” (p. 412). He then provides 23 biblical truths to help us understand the relationship Christians are to have, and understand, as we rightly relate to the government.

- God does not expect compliance with policies interfering with godliness (Dan. 1:8).
- Godly people should respect those governing while avoiding compromise (Dan. 1:8; 6:21).

- God controls all wisdom and power affecting government (Dan. 2:20).
- God controls the rise and fall of political history (Dan 2:21).
- God controls wisdom and knowledge needed by political advisors (Dan. 2:21).
- God gives wisdom and power to political advisors who seek it from him (Dan. 2:23).
- God knows what will happen and has a plan for political history (Dan. 2:28).
- God controls whatever sovereignty, power, strength, and glory rulers have (Dan. 2:37).
- God controls what rulers are able to rule (Dan. 2:38).
- When pushed, godly people obey God rather than human rulers (Dan. 3:18, 28; 6:10).
- The sovereignty of God over human governing is everlasting (Dan. 4:3, 35; 6:26).
- The sovereignty of God over human governing is universal (Dan. 4:25, 32; 5:21).
- The sovereignty of God over human governing cannot be destroyed (Dan. 6:26).
- God bestows ruling power on anyone he wants (Dan. 4:25, 32; 5:21).

- God wants rulers to accept being accountable to him for how they rule (Dan. 4:26).
- No human governing limits God’s supremacy over it (Dan 4:35).
- The sovereignty of God over human governing is eternally true and just (Dan. 4:37).
- God never loses control and can always humble rulers who resist him (Dan. 4:37).
- God sets himself against rulers who set themselves against God (Dan. 5:23).
- The life breath of every human ruler depends on God (Dan. 5:23).
- God controls the course in life taken by every human ruler (Dan. 5:23).
- All should fear “the living God,” including all human rulers and governments (Dan. 6:26).
- God is able to rescue anyone out of the hands of wicker rulers (Dan. 5:27).
(pgs. 412-413).

With this helpful framework in place, let’s consider Peter’s counsel on this very important issue. At the conclusion, we will provide a summation to help guide us no matter what government we live under.

I. Submit to divinely ordained authorities

2:13-16

The God of the Bible is the divine Sovereign of the universe. He has absolute authority over all things. In His providence, He has established three institutions on earth: 1) family, 2) government, and 3) church. He also has provided guidance and instruction for all three institutions. Government is given significant attention in the book of Daniel; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 3:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Jesus, Himself, provided the basic foundation for our interaction with government in Matthew 22:21 when He said, “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Thus, it is clear God has established humanly ordained authorities under His Kingship. And, what is our responsibility to the divinely ordained authority of government? In a word: “submit” (an imperative or word of command). In v. 13 four more imperatives will appear in v. 17.

Now, it is important to clear up a matter that our world and even many Christians balk at, the idea of submission. The bottom line, from a biblical perspective, is this: submission is not a bad word, it is a biblical word. A quick survey of the Bible drives home this point.

- Jesus was submissive (and children are to be submissive) to his parents (Luke 2:52; see Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20)
- We are to be submissive to one another (Eph. 5:21)

- Wives are to be submissive to their husbands (Eph. 5:21-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1-7)
- Christians are to be submissive to their church leaders (1 Cor. 16:16; Heb. 13:17)
- Slaves are to be submissive to their masters (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Pet. 2:18-20)
- Christians are to be submissive to God (Jam 4:7)
- The church is to be submissive to Christ (Eph. 5:24)

Finally, and decisively, the Son in His incarnate state was submissive to the Father (John 5:19, 30, 36; 14:28)

So, if submission is so clearly taught in the Bible, why is it that so many think the word submission is a “dirty word?” First, we live in a radically self-centered, self-autonomous age when the self is at the center of a person’s reality and world. Second, we do not have a biblical understanding of submission. We think submission means inferiority when the Bible never teaches this. Third, some in positions of authority abuse that authority and that drives us away from the biblical beauty of the idea. Therefore, what is biblical submission? I love the way Richard Foster puts it in his book *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*. He writes: “Submission is the spiritual discipline that frees us from the everlasting burden of always needing to get our own way. In submission we are learning to

hold things lightly. We are also learning to diligently watch over the spirit in which we hold others – honoring them, preferring them, loving them....

The touchstone for the Christian understanding of submission is Jesus's astonishing statement, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mark 8:34)." This call of Jesus to "self-denial" is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. It has nothing to do with self-contempt or self-hatred. It does not mean the loss of our identity or our individuality. It means quite simply the freedom to give way to others. It means to hold the interests of others above our own. It means freedom from self-pity and self-absorption....

All the spiritual disciplines have the potential to become destructive if misused, but submission is especially susceptible to this problem. As a result, we need to be clear regarding its limits. The limits of the discipline of submission are at the points at which it becomes destructive. It then becomes a denial of the law of love as taught by Jesus and is an affront to genuine Christian submission. These limits are not always easy to define. Often, we are forced to deal with complicated issues simply because human relationships are complicated. But deal with them we must. And we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us through the discernment process."

(Foster, Nathan. *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey from Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines*. Baker Publishing Group).

(George Matheson, “Make Me a Captive, Lord,” in *Sacred Songs*. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1890).

So, God calls us to joyfully and willingly yield in our will to his divinely ordained authority, which in this instance is the government. Being human, it clearly is not perfect. But, and this is very important, even bad government is better than no government! As John Calvin wisely put it, “some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy” (*1 Peter*, vol. XXII, 83). Now, why do what God tells us to do, as if that in itself is not enough?! Peter provides three reasons for our instruction.

1) It is the will of God

2:13-15

Peter admonishes us in 2:12 to live honorably among the nations that we might bear a good gospel witness. He will now begin to apply that teaching to various relationships in life beginning with the government. His directive is straight forward: “Submit to every human authority.” Why? “Because of the Lord.” (v. 13). We honor Jesus and His Lordship over us. Ultimately, my submission to governing authorities is submission to the Lordship of King

Jesus. Peter then specifies in verses 13-14 the governing authorities with selective examples. We submit “whether to the emperor” (or king), “the supreme [earthly] authority or to governors as those sent out by him,” sent out by the emperor. Keep in mind there was no concept of modern democracy in the ancient world.

The governing authorities of the world have a clear-cut assignment, they are “sent out by him [the emperor] to punish those who do what is evil and to praise [NIV, “commend”] those who do what is good” (v. 14). Schreiner writes, “Rulers help maintain order in society by commending good citizens” (p. 130). Alan Stibbs says, “such rulers have a divinely appointed responsibility to preserve law and order, to prevent anarchy and moral corruption, and to promote and encourage good conduct” (*The First Epistle General of Peter*, TNTC, 108).

Submitting to and honoring this God-ordained authority honors Christ and is in accord with “God’s will” (v. 15). The only exception is if we are called to disobey and dishonor our God. Then and only then, may be civilly disobey.

2) It will provide a good witness

2:15

We submit to the government and its servants because it honors Christ and is the will of God. We also do it because we will “silence the ignorance of

foolish people by doing good” (v. 15). We have one ultimate King and that King is Christ! And when we honor and obey Him, we become better citizens not worse. Wiersbe says it well, “God has willed that we silence the critics by doing good, not by opposing the authority” (*Be Hopeful*, 72). We muzzle our critics and silence the ignorant and foolish by “doing good” which, in the context, means obeying the law and our governing officials top to bottom. But, I think there is more. Because of our radical allegiance to Christ as the true King, Christians potentially open themselves to the charge of sedition. Peter says we can put such foolish talk to silence by our public conduct in obeying king and law. Further, “be a blessing” to the place where you live. Be known for your acts of charity and kindness. Don’t separate and live like a monk! Live out among the lost a positive Christian witness. Care for orphans and widows (James 1:26-27). Help the poor (Prov. 19:17). Rescue the weak and needy and the oppressed (Ps. 82:3-4). Be known for the good things you do. Follow the example of Jesus and put the gospel on beautiful display for all to see!

3) It reveals we are free in Christ and slaves to God 2:16

“Submit” is better than “live” (the *ESV* translation) in v. 16 in my judgment. The verb has to be supplied because there is not one in the original Greek text. The *CSB* rightly picks up the main verb in v. 13. We “submit as free people”

because we are free in Christ. Sin is no longer our master. Christ is! We are now “free to chose to live in a way that honors the God whom [we] serve before the eyes of a pagan society” (Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT, 177). And yet, there is a paradox. Calvin says, “it is a free servitude, and a serving freedom” (p. 84). We have been set free from slavery to sin, Satan, and this world that we might be slaves of our God. Freedom in Christ will not lead us to “use our freedom as a cover-up for evil.” Freedom in Christ does not lead to indulging in sin but in glorifying God by doing good. Praise God we now have the supernatural ability to do what we ought to. And amazingly, it now lines up with what I want to do! I want to serve my King Jesus with a life that puts on marvelous display His redeeming love and amazing grace. Pastor John Piper says it perfectly in my mind: “What this verse teaches is that we belong to God and not the American government. We are slaves of God and not man (1 Corinthians 7:22-23). We do not submit to human institutions as slaves to those institutions but as God’s free people. We submit in freedom for his sake. Not in bondage for the king’s sake.

God has transferred us in one profound sense from this age to the kingdom of his Son. We have passed from death to life. But then for a season he sends us back into this age, as it were, not as we were once – as slaves to sin and guilt and the whims of this age and its institutions – but as free people, as aliens

who live by other values and other standards and goals and priorities. We do submit. But we submit freely, not cowering before human authorities, but gladly obeying our one true King – God....

As Martin Luther said in his wonderful little treatise called “The Freedom of a Christian”: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The key to that paradox is God. Freed by God from slavery to all human institutions; and sent by God freely and submissively into those institutions – for his sake! (“Slaves of God: Free From All to Honor All,” 2-29-94).

II. Respect and honor everyone

2:17

Verse 17 is comprised of four concise imperatival statements and serves as an appropriate conclusion to this section. Schreiner notes, “Two of the commands remind us of Proverbs 24:21, “Fear the Lord and the king,” though Peter reserves fear for God alone” (p. 132). We will briefly examine the four statements. Vaughn and Lea note we may have two couplets: “Honor all men; love the brotherhood. Fear God; honor the king” (p. 61).

1) Honor everyone

We are commanded to honor everyone without exception. Notice honor

begins and ends the verse. To honor is to show someone respect or regard.

We value them as an imager of God and someone for whom Christ died. They have worth, regardless of external considerations. Piper says, “The way you respect a scoundrel like Judas and the way you respect a saint like John will be different. But there is a way.”

2) Love the Christian family

Peter says second to “love the brothers and sisters (*ESV*, “brotherhood”). We are called by God to love all people including our enemies (Matt. 5:44). But, there is a unique and special love we are to have for the family of God. Spirit is thicker than blood or skin! We rightly respect and honor all persons, but there is a tender bond and affection that exists between Christians that can only be described as familial or family love. Surprisingly, Peter feels the need to command us to do this. Perhaps there is a gentle reminder that some may not be all that lovable, but we will strive to love them nevertheless because they are family.

3) Fear God

This command recalls 1:17. Schreiner says, “Peter may have been taking a swipe at the emperor cult here.” (p. 133). If so, it is a reminder that we are to fear with reverent awe no one other than our Sovereign Lord and King. The

adulations given to some politicians in our day I find particularly nauseating. I suspect the judgment of our God is ever harsher. God belongs in a category of respect, awe, fear, and worship than right belongs only to Him. He will accept no competition.

4) Honor the emperor

We have come full circle. We submit to the emperor, king, or president (v. 13). And, we honor the emperor, king or president. Further, we are commanded to pray for them in 1 Timothy 2:1-2. These commands are not only for the ones we like or agree with. It is for all of them. It may not be easy, but it is right. Express your disappointment and disagreement in your government and its leaders? Sure! Go ahead! But remember, do it respectfully. Avoid hatred and cheap shots. Don't join the baying hounds of the media, social media and partisan politics. Remember: you represent King Jesus. It will temper your tongue and fan your fingers!

Conclusion: All governments are ordained and established by God. They are to be honored, respected and obeyed. However, obedience to earthly governments is not absolute. Such allegiance rightly is given only to God, to the Savior who is our King. But, while we live as "strangers and exiles" in this world, what are some basic principles to guide us in how we think and act? I have found an article by

my friend Sam Storms to be especially helpful. It is concise and clear. I have made only slight adaptations to this excellent article.

*10 Things You Should Know About the Christian's
Responsibility to Human Government
(February 10, 2020 by Sam Storms)*

- 1) *All governmental authority comes from God (Romans 13:1, 4, 6). Those in authority are therefore rightly called God's "ministers" (Rom. 13:4) and "servants" (Rom 13:6), This is not referring to their spiritual condition. This is their function under God's sovereignty. They "serve" God and his purposes, even if they are oblivious to his influence over their lives.*
- 2) *Because all governmental authority comes from God, all Christians are to live in subjection to it (Romans 13:1, 5; 1 Peter 2:13-17). That does not mean we must obey everything that our government commands or requires. There are certain exceptions.*
- 3) *Because all governmental authority comes from God, to resist "it" is to resist God (Rom. 13:2). Simply put, a crime against the state is a sin against God. Our obedience to the law of the land is based first and foremost on principle: obedience to God, and only secondarily because of the consequences it may bring.*
- 4) *The purpose of government (the state) is two-fold; first, to promote and praise good, and second, to punish and prohibit evil (Romans 13:3-4; 1 Peter 2:14). It is not the purpose of the state to promote or preach the gospel and we should oppose any law that seeks to utilize the state for that purpose. It is the responsibility of the Church to preach the gospel.*
- 5) *Paul [and Peter] was not oblivious to the fact that sometimes governments do the very opposite: they promote and praise evil and punish and prohibit good. The Apostle Peter knew what it was like to live under tyranny and barbarism. He lived and ministered during the reigns of the Emperor Augustus, Herod the Great (who ordered the slaughter of the male infants in and around Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the new-born Jesus), Herod Antipas (who executed John the Baptist and not only presided over the mock trial of Jesus but joined with the soldiers under his authority to torment and ridicule our Lord), Pontius Pilate, Herod Agrippa (who executed James, the brother of John, and arrested Peter with the intent of doing the same to him), and Nero.*

- 6) *It is the right of government to levy taxes and the obligation of its citizen to pay them (Rom. 13:6-7). But also note that simply paying our taxes isn't enough; we must also show the respect and honor due unto the agencies and agents of the state for fulfilling their God-ordained responsibilities.*
- 7) *Neither Paul nor any other biblical author ever endorses a particular form of government. We must remember that the Roman state was pagan and dictatorial; yet Christians functioned and even flourished under it. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author knew anything of democracy. [As an aside, I do think democracy, though not perfect, is the best form of government in a fallen world].*
- 8) *Are Christians ever free to publicly criticize their government and its officials? Yes! The church is the conscience of the state and therefore must call it to account when it fails to fulfill its role as God's minister for good. [This is the danger of the church aligning itself too closely with any government or political party. It loses its prophetic voice].*
- 9) *So, are Christians ever free to engage in civil disobedience? Yes. Neither the authority given to the state nor the obligation of the Christian to obey it is absolute. The best example of this is in Acts 5:27-29. [We obey God over any human authority].*
- 10) *Under what circumstances or on what grounds may a Christian engage in civil disobedience? Answer: When the state prohibits us from doing what the Bible commands, or commands us to do what the Bible prohibits (again see Acts 5:27-29). John Jefferson Davis (*Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 1993) provides us with some guidelines to determine when certain laws of the land demand that we disobey:*
- First, "the law being resisted must be unjust and immoral, clearly contrary to the will of God", and not just inconvenient or burdensome (216).*
- Second, "the legal means of changing the unjust situation should have been exhausted. Civil disobedience should be seen as a method not of first resort, but rather of last resort, when legal channels have already been pursued" (217).*
- Third, "the act of disobedience must be public rather than clandestine" (217).*
- Fourth, "there should be some likelihood of success, particularly when the intent is to produce changes in laws and institutions (217).*
- Finally, "those who consider civil disobedience should be willing to accept the penalty for breaking the law" (218).*