

# Obedience to Human Authority has its Limits

**W.E. Best**

Obedience to human authority has its limits. Parental authority and civil authority are responsible to God, whether the ones occupying those positions are Christians or non-Christians. As an alien in this country is not free from subordination to our laws, one's spiritual inability as an unregenerate person does not nullify his responsibility to God. Man is responsible for his own depravity by his solidarity with Adam in the fall, and he lacks spiritual ability to do the will of God. Nevertheless, he is accountable to God.

God has two governments during the age of the assembly, the time between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual government for Christ's assembly which He is building; and there is a civil government for the protection of society, which is made up of both elect and non-elect. Paul wrote Romans 13:1-7 to Christians in Rome to inform them concerning their relationship to the civil government where they resided. They were to be subordinate to the authorities of the civil government of Rome. The only exception to such subordination occurs when man's authority contradicts God's supreme authority. What did the "certain Jews" do when Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold and commanded all the people to come to the dedication of the image (Dan. 3:1-25)? Although the King issued a mandate for all the subjects of Babylon to worship the image, the faithful Jews knew the mandate was directly opposed to God who said:

I am the LORD thy God.... Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them.... —Exodus 20:2-5

The lesson in Paul's instruction to the Roman Christians teaches Christians of all time that believers are to be subordinate to governing authorities because there is no authority except from God. However, Christians must not be subordinate to false gods established by governing authorities. To embrace a false god established by a governing authority would be to deny the true God who gave the ruler his authority. Hence, our answer to such authority must be the same as that given by the faithful Jews: 2

...our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. —Daniel 3:17, 18

Christians must be willing, like the "certain Jews," to suffer the consequences of refusing to obey the demands of civil authorities when they set themselves above the supreme authority of God. Three principles are established with respect to the "certain Jews" that Christians must consider: (1) They did not defile themselves by partaking of that which Babylon provided (Dan. 1). The King gave them a tuition-free three-year course in a false religion, but they had a meat to eat that Babylon did not understand. Biblical principles remain unchanged regardless of where God's people live (Dan. 1:4-8). (2) God gave the young men of Israel knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom, thus enabling them to resist false teaching designed to lead them astray. The King knew that the religious nature of men, apart from grace, is easily carried away by anything that stirs their religious feeling. Therefore, as false religion is doing today, the King used Babylon's music for persuasion. Who can deny that music plays a role in the spread of false religion? False religion inspired by false music works on false emotions to respond to a false peace that shall be offered by a false prophet. This indicates that things are speedily shaping up for the manifestation of the antichrist (Dan. 3:1-7). (3) The young men faithfully refused to acknowledge

any god other than the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Dan. 3:13-18). Likewise, Christians in every age will be faithful to God and say with Peter and the apostles that we must be obeying God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Doing the will of God denotes character. Unawed by the presence of King Nebuchadnezzar and unswayed by the terrors of the burning fiery furnace, the faithful remnant refused to bow down and worship the image. In like manner, Christians who purpose in their hearts to please God act in the light of eternity.

The miracle recorded in Daniel 3 is a type of the remnant of Jews preserved by God during the great tribulation of Revelation. Some who profess to be theologians are as confused about the great tribulation as the pastor who preached the funeral of one of his assembly members and referred to him as one who came out of great tribulation. Since the Greek does not have an indefinite article comparable to the English, the absence of the article from the Greek is the equivalent of the indefinite article "a" in the English. The presence of the article in the Greek identifies; the absence of the article qualifies (makes less strong or positive). Therefore, the presence of the Greek article in Revelation 7:14, "...These are the ones who come [coming] out of the great tribulation..." (NASB), distinguishes it from the ordinary tribulations experienced in life.

A correct estimate of human government cannot be formed apart from the Biblical teaching of the future kingdom of Jesus Christ. While one political party will praise and magnify democracy as a Divine institution, another political party will condemn democracy and advocate socialism. There are others, however, who condemn all human government; but this must be denounced because any form of government is better than none. There are those who speak about "the rights of the people," "all people being created equal," "the sovereignty of the people," "the supreme power resting in the body of citizens instituted to vote," etc. The promoters of different political philosophies are trying to influence the world with their ideologies. Therefore, the political battles become so heated that they turn

into political wars. All human authorities must realize that authority does not rest in the policeman's badge, the judge's robe, or the king's crown. It goes back of these symbols to the sovereign God who says to all authorities what Jesus Christ told Pilate: "You could be having no authority against me except it was being given to you from above" (John 19:11—translation).

The different forms of human government in society must be distinguished from the one established form of Divine government for Christ's assemblies. Nothing is stated in Romans 13 or I Peter 2 concerning forms of government. The emphasis is on some established order for the protection of society, which includes both Christians and non-Christians. On the other hand, believers have a divinely established order of government for Christ's assemblies which cannot be altered regardless of the different forms of human government under which the assemblies exist. During the absence of Christ's theocratic kingdom, the divinely established government of Christ's assemblies cannot make the state which is composed of regenerate and unregenerate people subordinate to their principles. However, the assemblies with their one established form of Divine government should be subordinate to different and changing human authorities, except when they oppose God's established will, because Christianity is not controlled by human authority that is opposed to God's revealed will.

The voice of Christianity must not remain silent before civil and political corruption. As the voices of the prophets were heard in the Old Testament, the voices of the elders must be heard proclaiming the same principles and giving the same warnings in New Testament times. Consider the calling and work of such prophets of the Old Testament as Samuel (I Sam. 3:1-21; 7:3-15; 8:6-18), Shemaiah (II Chron. 12:1-12), Micaiah (II Chron. 18), Elijah (I Kings 16-22), the major and minor prophets, and concluding with John the Baptist. John, like Elijah before him, knew he was asking for trouble when he rebuked the one who sat on the throne: "...It is not lawful for thee to have her [his brother Philip's wife]" (Matt. 14:4). John

the Baptist was not the last messenger to die for the cause of Christ. (See Matt. 24:9; John 16:2; 21:19; Acts 7:59-60; 12:1-2; Rev. 2:13.) The messengers of God must never compromise the principles of eternal truth regardless of the consequences.

The assembly of Christ should never be affiliated with any political party. However, this in no way excludes Christians from their responsibility to civil authority and their payment of taxes to the human authority under which they live. Since political and social structures of human authorities frown upon the perfected theocratic government under the Son of Man, the Son of David, Christians cannot endorse one form of humanism over another. Hence, a Christian is not justified in saying, "I have chosen the lesser of two or more evil parties." All human authorities accuse Christians of being too occupied with the other world, but all informed believers know that no one can properly understand his duty to the present without regarding it in the light of eternity. Therefore, chaos and confusion in society and Christendom are the fruit of rhetoric among politicians and religionists concerning a better society apart from the Biblical concept of the theocratic kingdom. Hence, the result prior to Christ's second advent will always be circumstances described by Jesus Christ:

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. —Matthew 24:4-8

Paul did not manifest any resentment toward the government under which the providence of God placed him. Therefore, he had no conflict between his rendering to Caesar the things that belonged to him and surrendering to God the things that belonged to Him. Because Christians revere the authority of God, they make better citizens of Caesar's domain

than those who are strangers to God's grace. Since all nature is submissive to God's laws, Christians should submit to God's providence by submitting our hearts that are prone to carnality to God's holiness, arrogance to His mercy, and rebellion to His sovereignty in providence. Some of the Roman believers to whom Paul wrote needed Paul's counsel concerning submission:

Whosoever therefore resisteth [αντιτασσομενος, present middle participle of αντιτασσο, which means oppose or resist] the power [εξουσια, which means authority, ruling power, or government], resisteth [αντηεστεκεν, perfect active indicative of αντηιστεμι, which means resist, oppose, set against, or withstand—has opposed and is in a state of opposition] the ordinance [διαταγε, which means decree or ordinance] of God: and they that resist [αντηεστεκοτεσ, perfect active participle of αντηιστεμι, which means having opposed and are in a state of opposition] shall receive to themselves damnation [κριμα, which means judgment or punishment]. —Romans 13:2

Although wicked Nero was on the throne at the time Paul wrote this letter, the believers in Rome were to be subordinate to God and to the ruling authority as Solomon in his wisdom instructed: "My son, fear thou the LORD and the king: and meddle [interfere] not with them that are given to change" (Prov. 24:21). Note the order of "the LORD and the king."

Contrary to Jesus Christ and the apostles, who never sought to overthrow human government, many religionists are trying to cause the downfall of some form of human government. Christians are living on a higher plane than any earthly ruler; furthermore, this is not the time for Christians to reign. We look forward to the time when we shall judge the world (I Cor. 6:2). Our judging the world will occur when we shall rule and reign with Jesus Christ. Therefore, the role of Christians during the absence of Christ's theocratic rule in His kingdom is submission to the rule of the sovereign God and to continually changing human government as long as it does not demand opposition to God's revealed will.

There are principles that bear on the right or wrong of revolution. Christians must not identify themselves with political associations to oppose or subvert the government of their country. Every age has its political and social tastes, but reverence for God is not one of the most popular virtues of any age, especially the one in which we live. Man without reverence sees no greatness in God's universe which transcends himself. Knowing God through Jesus Christ is necessary for one to act reverently. The attitude of deep respect is compatible with love. Our age of existentialism has produced a generation in which there is very little reverence or respect for anyone or anything. Existentialism is a high-sounding title for humanism which makes human experience the norm for judging reality. Since man is doing that which is right in his own eyes, he judges everything by his own standard.

There are three important things to understand about human government: (1) It is necessary in order to prevent anarchy. Any kind of government is better than no government. Lawlessness would abound in a nation without some form of human authority. (2) Human government, as far as its character is concerned, is not asserted to be acceptable to God. It may be described as a "beast" (Dan. 7; Rev. 13; 17). The four beasts of Daniel 7 are the world empires of history. Their moral character is described, and the fourth kingdom is so terrible that there is no beast to describe it. The order is reversed in Revelation 13 because Daniel was looking forward, but John was looking backward. The "MOTHER OF HARLOTS" riding the beast of Revelation 17 speaks of her dependence on and confidence in him to whom she is united. Since no nation is ever called a harlot, she represents the false assembly which claims relationship with God while being allied elsewhere. The false assembly will be used by the beast's authority until she has served his purpose, and then she will be destroyed. (3) Human government, like everything ministered by men, is always imperfect. The authorities which exist are not viewed in Scripture as having intelligence of a spiritual order.

Christians have no form of government, civil or ecclesiastical, to impose on a nation. They are to pray for those in authority in order that they might lead a peaceful and quiet life in godliness and respectability (I Tim. 2:1, 2). The Christian, like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, desires to pass his life of pilgrimage on earth in peace (Num. 21:22), serving God in the path of the just that shines brighter and brighter until the perfect day (Prov. 4:18). That which Shines brighter and brighter does not refer to a better path of life brought into being through political and ecclesiastical influences on human authorities. One must not discount the fact that political and religious propaganda will bring the deceived to say, "Peace and safety," but then sudden destruction shall come upon them (I Thess. 5:1-3).

There is no authority except from God. The God-given authority of civil government is affirmed in Romans 13:1-7. But unlimited power over people under a particular form of human government is not awarded to men. The authority of human government and the obedience of the governed are limited. Since God is sovereign, no human government has the authority to violate God's commandments and principles. When human authority approves and practices that which God condemns, Christians must obey God rather than men and be willing to suffer the consequences of having obeyed God (Acts 5:29). Biblical examples of obedience to God while disobeying civil government are given: (1) The King of Egypt requested that all the Hebrew male children be killed, but Moses' parents disobeyed this command (Ex. 1:16, 22; 2:1-3). Their obedience to God is recorded in Hebrews 11:23. (2) Rahab, a converted prostitute, appears among the heroes of faith because of a courageous act of civil disobedience (Josh. 2; 6). By this act, she was justified by her work (James 2:25). (3) In disobedience to the rulers during the time of Ahab and Jezebel, Obadiah hid 100 prophets in caves to protect them from the authorities (I Kings 18:13). (4) The three Hebrew children refused to obey King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:17, 18), and their faith is spoken of in Hebrews 11:34. (5) Daniel refused to comply with a royal decree that he must not pray to his God three times a day with his face toward Jerusalem. His faith is recorded in Hebrews 11:33.

Civil government is a human institution that formulates law without direct reference to Scripture for temporal welfare and prosperity, and it applies to all its subjects. Assembly authority is based on Scripture for the eternal good of believers whose subordination to God takes priority over civil government, and they must never compromise Divine authority. Civil government has definite limitation. It cannot intrude into assembly government and command Christians to disobey God. Assembly government cannot intrude into civil government and command unbelievers to live a Christian life which they are unable to do. Biblical principles cannot be imposed on unregenerate people. That does not indicate that unregenerate people are not responsible to God. God is the supreme authority. The assembly intensifies her influence by keeping separate from the state. The role of the assembly in the world is not to dabble in politics but to keep separated from politics and be in a position by a life of separation to condemn everything that is contrary to the purpose and command of Almighty God. Christians must obey authority that does not disobey God, the supreme authority. We must be honest in dealing with our fellow men, owe no man anything, and live clean lives without compromise.

God rules in the governments of men by giving authority to whom He will (Prov. 21:1; Dan. 4:17). Some rulers may consider themselves absolute and unaccountable to any, but they are overruled by God who is higher than the highest. The king's heart being in the hand of the Lord does not mean that the Lord is in his heart. Whether regenerate or unregenerate, the king's heart is in the hand of the sovereign God (I Sam. 2:6-10; Acts 17:28). The quality of the ruler's heart is not changed if he is unregenerate, but the path of its actions runs under God's guidance and subservient to His pleasure for the fulfillment of His purpose. The Christian goes beyond the reasoning of the natural man to see God sending Joseph to preserve many people alive (Gen. 50:18-20), sending Shimei to curse David (II Sam. 16:10), and delivering Jesus Christ to wicked men for crucifixion (Acts 2:23). Job expressed his belief in (1) the truth of God's agency—"he taketh away," (2)

the sovereignty of His dominion—"who can hinder him," and (3) the justice of His conduct—"who will say unto him, What doest thou?" (Job 9:12).

The following are three important questions for consideration: (1) Does the New Testament set boundaries between civil and assembly jurisdictions? (2) Does the New Testament suggest the union of assembly and state, in other words, a theocracy of sort? (3) Does Christ expect the assembly to fulfill the commission by legislation? (Study Luke 12:1 3-15.)