

GOD AND COUNTRY

Scriptures: Romans 13:1-10; Acts 5:17-29

In his book *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham tells about Abraham Lincoln running for the House of Representatives from Illinois. His opponent was a Methodist evangelist named Peter Cartwright. During the campaign Lincoln attended a sermon delivered by Cartwright during which Cartwright said to the audience, “All who do not wish to go to hell will stand.” Everyone stood except Lincoln. Glowering at him, Cartwright said, “May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where you are going?” Lincoln replied, “I am going to Congress” (p. 13).

In America there has always been a certain tension between hell and Congress—between God and government. Meacham tells another story about the 1800 election between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. A newspaper of the time endorsed John Adams with this headline: “GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT or ... JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD” (p. 104).

People have often tried to use God to influence the government, but notice what a strange reverse of that Paul describes in our second scripture lesson. In Romans 13:1 Paul does not tell the Christians to organize in order to take over the government; he says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

The governing authority at the time Paul wrote these words was the Emperor Nero. Nero was the Adolph Hitler of the ancient world. According ancient sources outside the Bible, he arrested Christians and then, for the amusement of his guests, he covered them with pitch and lit them as torches to light his palace gardens at night. That is the governing authority about which Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God” Are you kidding?

Our first scripture lesson gives us a much more realistic view of governing authorities. The disciples of Jesus are arrested by the Sanhedrin, which was the governing counsel for the Jewish people of Jerusalem. They order the disciples to quit preaching about Jesus, but Peter says, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

That sounds more American. This country was founded by people who did not trust the government, who wanted to get away from some of its laws that they considered wrong, especially when it came to religion. Even today if you did a survey of all the preachers who have shows on talk radio or television I bet you would find more preachers saying that God is opposed to something the government did than would say “Be subject to the governing authorities because they were put there by God.”

So why does Paul say we should be subject to the governing authorities? What does that mean?

Take a pew Bible and turn to I Corinthians 16:15 (NT, p. 178). In this verse Paul talks about a man named Stephanas and his family who were among the first Christian converts in

Greece. Now look at verse 16. Paul says, “I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them.” That phrase: “put yourselves at the service” of such people translates the same Greek word used in Romans 13:1 where it says “be subject” to the governing authorities. (This is why they make us learn Greek in seminary.) To be subject means to put yourselves at the service of someone.

Is that the same as going along with anything the governing authorities want to do? Not necessarily. In Romans 13:3 Paul says, “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval.” Notice: Paul does not say, “Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do whatever it tells you.” Paul would have certainly agreed with Peter in our first scripture lesson: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” Our first allegiance is always to God. But part of our allegiance to God is to put ourselves at the service of our community and nation. And that is why Paul says, “Then do what is good.” If we do what is good, we need not be afraid of the governing authorities, no matter what they do to us, because in the end the governing authorities are under an even higher authority, which is God.

In all of the sermons we have had this winter and spring, we keep coming back to the same point. Serving Jesus does not mean turning your back on your family or your job or your community. It means serving Jesus precisely in those places. We serve Jesus by serving others in our families, in our jobs, in our community, and even in our country.

You will notice that one of the examples Paul uses is paying taxes. I was not thinking of that three months ago when I chose this particular scripture passage for this Sunday, but maybe that is God’s ironic sense of timing. But here is God’s word, friends: As followers of Jesus we should be the most faithful of all people in paying our taxes. I am sure you did not come to hear that, but hey, I didn’t write this stuff. As Christians we of all people should be the most faithful about paying our taxes. As Christians we of all people should be the most faithful about not cheating on tests or being dishonest in our business practices. As Christians we of all people should be the most faithful about obeying traffic laws or copyright laws or laws against underage drinking or smoking. As Christians we of all people should be the most faithful about observing the laws of our community and nation, not because we are afraid of being fined or punished but because we want to serve Jesus the best we can in our world.

As Christians we should be loyal to our country precisely because we have a higher loyalty. Our higher loyalty is to God. Jesus was once asked whether people should pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman Emperor. He replied, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Paul echoes that statement of Jesus in verse 7 when he says, “Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” We pay taxes and respect our government, but our ultimately loyalty, our ultimate duty, is always to God.

It is like playing in a basketball game. I have used this analogy before, but I can’t help bringing it out again during March Madness. Being a follower of Jesus is like a coach putting you into the game with instructions to score as many points as possible for both teams. Now think about that for a minute. Would a player like that be a good person to have on your team?

In some ways, yes. No one would work harder to score points for you team. No one would practice harder to make free throws. No one would be more selfless about passing the ball and looking for the open player. No one would hustle faster down the court or crash the boards with more determination. No one would work harder to help your team score points.

That's how it should be for a follower of Christ. No one should work harder to help our community and our country be a good and safe place.

But there might be a question about team loyalty when we are discovered scoring points for the other team. That is where Christians sometimes get into trouble. We are loyal citizens of our country, but that is not our only loyalty. Our ultimate loyalty is to the God who sent us into the game to play for the whole world, to help every nation be a good and safe place for its people. So when followers of Christ look at issues like globalization, we cannot ask only about what is good for us. We have to ask what is good for God's world, especially the people in it who are the most vulnerable. And when we look at issues like taxes, we have to ask not only about what is good for us, but what is good for all people, especially those most vulnerable. And when we ask about government spending, we have to ask not only about what is good for us but what is good for everyone, especially those most vulnerable.

You have been sent into the game to score as many points as possible for both teams. That is what the Bible means in verse 8 when it says, "Owe no one anything except to love one another." Our job in the world is to help people of all nations have the life God intended for us through Jesus Christ. When we do that, we are not being disloyal to our country. We are fulfilling the purpose for which God put us in this country and in the world.

- Ken Onstot
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