

Are we Christians always to submit to civil authorities?

There is a belief among some Christians that all civil authorities (meaning all domestic and foreign leaders whether at the federal, state or local level) are put in place by God and that God requires the Christian to always submit to and obey such authorities. Let's consider for a moment some of the principal scriptures on which this doctrine is based:-

I Peter 2:13-14 Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.

Rom 13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

What does this mean?

There is no question at face value these scriptures seem to indicate that all human Government is of God and therefore I must always be subject to every civil authority. Of course if I extend this line of reasoning to its inevitable conclusion this means that every wicked and despicable national leader that has ever ruled, including in recent times Hitler Stalin, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein and Bin Laden and the Taliban, were ordained of God and were I to be living at that time or in that country my Christian obligation would be to submit to their leadership.

In other words notwithstanding my relationship to the living God, the leading of His Spirit, the rest of His Word, my state of conscience and my sense of right and wrong, I am to blindly follow wicked leadership all based on a carnal interpretation of certain scriptures? What kind of foolishness is this? It was this kind of thinking that infected many of the German people during the Nazi era who claimed that they were merely "following orders".

In Proverbs 29:2 God says: **When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule the people groan.**

Let's examine the key scriptures that have led to this unfortunate teaching in the light of other scriptures and seeking God's revelation of His own words by His Spirit.

In 3 John 1:11 God says: **Beloved, do not follow that which is evil, but that which is good. He who does good is of God, but he that does evil has not seen God.**

So, he that does good is of God but he who does evil (including leaders) is not of God..

The 1st. Peter passage

I Peter 2:13 **Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;** The key expression here is "ordinance of man". The word translated as "ordinance" in the Greek is ktisis; it is only translated as ordinance once and it is in this scripture, in eighteen other scriptures it is translated as "creation" and in each case the context makes clear that it means "creation of God" in fact in Rev

3:14 that is exactly how it is rendered. The word “of” in “ordinance of man” does not appear in the Greek. So, substituting “ordinance (creation) of God” for “ordinance” and “to” for “of” we get “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of God to man”.

Concerning “whether it be to the king as supreme”, the words “to the” do not appear in the Greek. Since the subject of the sentence is “ordinance” it should perhaps more correctly say “whether it be from the king as supreme”. Since there is only one who is supreme and that is Christ this very well could be a reference to Him. The verse then would read “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of (God to) man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be (directly) from (Christ) the king as supreme,”

1 Peter 2:14 **Or to governors, as to those that are sent by him for the punishment** (to avenge KJV) **of evildoers, and for the praise of those that do good.** Again the “to” in “to governors” is not there in the Greek and perhaps would be better rendered “from”. The word translated “governors” in some versions of Strong’s Concordance is not the usual word used for regional governors, but one that means “reconciler” (reconciliation is the ministry of Christians according to 2 Cor. 5:18). Other versions of Strong’s use a word for governors that is used elsewhere for regional governors but also simply for rulers (see comments below on rulers). If the former rendering is right then the two verses could read “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of (God to) man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be (directly) from (Christ) the king as supreme, or (indirectly) from (God’s) reconcilers as from them that are sent by Him to avenge (carry justice to) those that do evil and to praise those who do good”.

In 2 Cor. 10:6 it is believers who are to avenge every disobedience and not civil authorities. In 1 Cor. 6 believers are asked to keep disputes out of the hands of civil courts. In 1 Cor. 8 God asks the Christian to honor the consciences of weaker believers would He then usurp those consciences in insisting on obedience to all civil authority?

The Romans 13 passage

Romans 13:1 **Let every soul be subject unto the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God: the authorities that exist are appointed by God.**

Romans 13:2 **Therefore whoever resists the authority, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall bring judgment** (damnation KJV) **on themselves.** The key expression here in verse one is “governing authorities” (higher powers KJV). Many have taken this to mean “civil authorities or human government” but does it? The word translated “governing” is the same word that is translated as “supreme” in 1 Peter 2:13. Concerning the word “authorities” in almost all of the many instances when the same word is used elsewhere, it is in the context of spiritual authorities (both Godly and ungodly) and not human powers (see Eph. 3:10, Eph.6:12,). The same word was used by Jesus when he said “all power is given to me in heaven and in earth” Matt. 28:18. The expression therefore “governing authorities” could be read as “higher spiritual authorities” or just simply the “spiritual authorities”.

If resisting civil authorities always brings God’s judgment Peter and the other Apostles

must not have known this when they said to the Jewish authorities in Acts 5:29 **“We must obey God rather than man”**. Other examples in scripture of righteous opposition to civil authority would include Gideon, the three Hebrew Children and Daniel. Recent examples in history would include the War of Independence, the Abolitionist Movement and Christians hiding Jews during World War II.

Verse 3-4 **For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister...**

“Rulers are not a terror to good works” and yet the evidence of history is plain most rulers (as in leaders of nations) are indeed a terror to good works. We don’t have to look beyond the Bible to see God saying with respect to most of the kings that ruled Israel “And he did evil in the sight of the Lord” – see 1 Kings 15:26, 15:34, 16:30, 22:52, 2 Kings 8:18, 13:2 etc. To what rulers is this scripture then referring if its not to national leaders?

Heb 13:7-17 **Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you ... Obey those who rule over you ... for they watch out for your souls ...**

1 Thes 5:12 ... **Recognize those who ... are over you in the Lord...**

Rulers then are those who feed me the word of God and who have been given oversight by God for the welfare of my soul. Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers are the Father’s spiritual authorities who bring the Word of God to me which under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is a sword (Eph 6:17) and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

Not surprisingly Romans 13:4 continues: “For he is the minister of God to you..” On every other occasion in the New Testament where the word “minister” is used, as a translation of the Greek word “Diakonos”, it is a reference to a minister of the gospel – see Col. 1:25, 1 Thes. 3:2, 2 Cor. 3:6. The only exception is in 2 Cor. 11:15 where it refers to the ministers of Satan.

But even when it comes to submitting to spiritual authority it is not a rule that I’m required to obey regardless of who it is or what is being required. No, that would be law and we who are in the Spirit are not under law. Instead my submission should first be to God and then in the fear of (my reverence for) God He may well require me to submit to a spiritual authority that is of Him or simply to submit to another believer who is of Him:

Eph 5:21 **Submitting to one another in the fear of God.**

We as Christians are not our own, we have been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus Christ, our highest service then is to submit ourselves wholly to God as living sacrifices. As we do, we will doubtless find ourselves led to observe all the prevailing civil laws of the land in which we live - to the extent they do not conflict with the righteous will of our Father. If they do conflict, we may well be led through intercessory prayer, the ballot box, or through direct civil, political or military involvement, to seek the removal of such laws or people that are not of the Father. **There is none good but one, that is God** Mar 10:18