

AUTHORITY: GOD'S HAND THROUGH GOVERNMENT-Part One  
**Romans 13:1-7**

"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. <sup>4</sup> For government is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience. <sup>6</sup> And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks. <sup>7</sup> Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor."

## INTRODUCTION

Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua, now age 92, has pursued three careers: Catholic priest, revolutionary poet, and Marxist politician. For 60 years, he's been one of the most prominent exponents of Liberation Theology, which seeks to blend Christianity and Communism. One writer quotes Cardenal as stating, "I am above all a revolutionist and as such fight for a socialist country . . . even in moments when one comes to the point of having to execute men for this purpose." In his poem of 1980, *Zero Hour*, he declares,

A world of perfect Communism is the kingdom of God on earth. They are the same thing for me. . . . Through the Gospel I have arrived at revolution; not through Karl Marx, but through Christ. The Gospel caused me to become a Marxist. . . . Let us not forget that the first Christians were the best Christians, i.e. revolutionary and subversive Christians.

Marxism is the fruit of Christianity; without Christianity, Marxism would be impossible; Marx would be unthinkable without the prophets of the Old Testament. Changing the system of production, we can create the new man of the Gospel. . . . For me, the God of the Bible is also the God of Marxism-Leninism. . . .

Do you think few embrace the political and religious convictions of Ernesto Cardenal? Throughout Mexico, and Central and South America, thousands upon thousands of professed followers of **Jesus Christ** hold dearly to such beliefs. Advocates of "Liberation Theology" view **Jesus** as the "Great Liberator" come to free us from all social wrongs. They ask, "Is your government oppressive? Do the rich unfairly exploit the poor? Then **Jesus** will empower and bless you to overthrow your government, even by violent and murderous means if necessary, to install a new social order where God's justice prevails." Is this really what the Bible teaches? Were "the first Christians . . . the best Christians" because they were "revolutionary and subversive Christians"? Today's sermon, the first of two messages on God's Hand through Government, explores the question: When Is It Godly to Obey Government?

## I. WHEN IS IT GODLY TO OBEY GOVERNMENT?

We know how easy it is to make jokes about government in this country, particularly the Federal Government. Political humorist Will Rogers (1879-1935) quipped, "This country has come to feel the same when Congress is in session as when the baby gets hold of a hammer." Everett Dirksen (1896-1969), who served Illinois well as a God-loving, Bible-honoring Republican in the U. S. House and U. S. Senate, observed, "When a member of the House moves over to the Senate, he raises the IQ of both bodies." Then there's a story of a busload of politicians stumping for re-election who were riding down a country road one day. All of a sudden, the bus ran off the road on a sharp curve and crashed head-on into a tree on the edge of an old farmer's field. After seeing what happened, he came over to investigate. He then proceeded to dig a large hole to bury the politicians. A few days later, the local sheriff came out, saw the crashed bus,

and asked the farmer where all the politicians had gone. The old farmer said he'd buried them. The sheriff asked, "The coroner wasn't called. Are you sure they were all dead?" The old farmer replied, "Well, some of them said they weren't, but you know how them politicians lie."

Despite our concerns about the quality of government in our day, please consider the world in which the first Christians found themselves. The thumb of the mighty Roman Empire pressed heavily over most of their homelands. Of the Empire's estimated population of 50-60 million, about 10% were slaves, including many Christians, with no more rights than a master's cattle. Within Italy itself, 35-40% of the population were slaves; often captured when their homelands fell to the Empire and sent to Italy to do most of the work for their conquerors. Yet, to whom did Paul address the letter containing the verses of today's text? The Church at Rome. Only about 10% of the people enjoyed the rights of full citizenship at the time of the Apostle Paul, including the right to vote in Rome, protection from punishment without due process of law, and immunity from some or all taxation. The roughly 80% of the other people within the Empire received some protections and benefits to the extent they submitted to Roman authority. All governing officials over peoples outside of Italy were appointed from the capital of Rome. They could never be voted out of office. Provincial governors held nearly absolute power over their province, as Pontius Pilate held in **Jesus'** day, including the power to kill nearly anyone under their rule. Soldiers could be quartered in most homes at any time at the owner's expense. The tax rate could be increased at will by their Roman masters.

If you'd been born in the 1st century in Greece, Syria, Egypt, or Israel, would it not seem treasonous to your own homeland to promote submission to Roman rule rather than rebellion? In the face of such absolute, enslaving, or often tyrannical government, does it not seem surprising that there is not one line in the New Testament encouraging the violent overthrow of the Roman Empire? Instead, **Romans 13:1-7** promotes peaceful, respectful cooperation: "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. . . . <sup>4</sup> For government is God's servant for your good. . . . <sup>5</sup> Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience. . . . <sup>7</sup> Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor."

Governments exist for one main purpose. Thomas Jefferson eloquently proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men." What is government's main purpose? "to secure" God-given, "unalienable Rights" (rights none can lawfully alter or deny). Government at its best ensures its citizens of a law-abiding community that protects their God-given rights from the lawless and reckless—law enforcement, courts, probation officers, and jails—and provides the most orderly society possible—roads, health & safety inspectors, firefighters, parks & recreation, etc. — to foster "the pursuit of happiness." In these ways, not only are existing governments "instituted by God," and "God's servant for your good," but it is, "for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks." This is why God commands us, "Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935), Civil War veteran, Harvard Law professor, and U. S. Supreme Court Justice, commented, "Taxes are the price we pay for civilization."

To the degree governments become oppressors of our rights rather than protectors, peaceful efforts to change them are blessed by God. It's when government seeks to deny either of our two most unalienable rights—freedom to worship God according to our conscience and freedom to live—that we are justified in taking up arms against a government. Even then, it is only after every other recourse has been exhausted.

Rome forced the land of Israel within its Empire in 63 B.C., somewhat reluctantly. Romans referred to Jews as "porcupines." Even as porcupines, if eaten, make the greatest predators regret this action, Jews had the reputation of being extremely difficult to fight and nearly impossible to govern. All people within the Empire were usually mandated to honor Rome's main gods. But Rome wisely granted Jews an exemption from paying tribute to any god but their own. Christianity, arising within the Jewish faith, enjoyed this same privilege in worship of the Messiah. This remained generally true at the time Paul wrote **Romans** in A. D. 57. This is why Paul and other early Christian leaders could still encourage Christ's followers to honor the ungodly Roman Government, in spite of other injustices they suffered under Rome. Did not Rome still provide them many benefits, including a navy to sweep pirates from the seas, soldiers to protect them and their cities from robber bands or invaders, and the best highway system the world had yet known?

As believers in America today, we face far greater protections of our liberties than did these early Christians, which are still the dream of our brothers and sisters in Christ in much of the world! First Liberty Institute, in its report of May 31, 2017, "Undeniable: The Survey of Hostility to Religion in America," lists over 1200 government-initiated attacks on religion in 2016 alone. These cases are divided into four spheres – the public arena, the schoolhouse, churches & ministries, and the military. Rather than having recourse to godless violence in the face of these assaults on religious liberty, these are godly tools:

**A. The Tool of Purification** (Conversion) — Changing society by cleaning up people from within "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" people experience when they give themselves to Christ to be saved from sin and self (**Titus 3:3-5**, ESV). The lethal mistake of social & political liberals, or communists, is believing *society* is the main source of evil and injustice in our world and transforming society automatically eliminates evil and injustice. As Ernesto Cardenal insists, "Changing the system of production, we can create the new man of the Gospel." But **Jesus** decisively taught in **Mark 7:21-23** (NLT) the main source of evil in the world is not society: "For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you." Transforming hearts one-by-one is the best means to eliminate evil and promote justice within a society. The American Revolution of the 1770s succeeded because of the spiritual revolution of the 1730s & 1740s when several hundred thousand colonials (out of a population under 3 million) were reborn into Christ's Kingdom during what is known as the Great Awakening. **II Corinthians 5:17** testifies: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come."

**B. The Tool of Precedent** (Example)—A picture *is* worth a thousand words. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the present day, wherever individuals, families, or communities have seriously demonstrated by example the social practices promoted in the Bible, societies have been uplifted and transformed! Resolutions of the United Nations and other organizations have not elevated the status of women, children, minorities, or the outcasts worldwide as much as the power of example of **Jesus'** followers. The same cannot be said of any other religious faith. Several years before the first Gulf War of late-1990-to-early-1991, which expelled the occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Barbara Walters did a story on gender roles in Kuwait. She observed women traditionally walked about 10 feet behind their husbands. Years later, Walters returned to Kuwait and discovered men were now walking several yards behind their wives. As a respected investigative reporter, she eagerly approached a woman on the street for an explanation. "This is marvelous," Walters gushed. "What enabled women here to achieve this reversal of roles?" The woman replied, "Land mines!"

**C. The Tool of Petition**—Voicing our concerns as Christians to our elected officials as vigorously as do non-Christians.

**D. The Tool of Participation**—This includes voting, supporting the most God-honoring candidates available, precinct volunteering, or even running for office. Tim LaHaye (co-author of the *Left Behind*

series) served for 25 years as pastor of Scott Memorial Baptist Church in El Cajon, CA (west of San Diego). In the 1970s, his Church went before the City Council to request a zoning change to help broaden their ministry. LaHaye said he hadn't thought much before about involvement with government, but after they received a hostile reaction from these mostly non-Christians, he began to encourage his members to run for office. Within three years, a majority of devout Christians led El Cajon's City Council!

**E. The Tool of Prayer**—We forfeit the right to complain about political leaders or social issues for which we've neglected to pray. **I Timothy 2:1-4** (GNT): "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people; <sup>2</sup> for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct. <sup>3</sup> This is good and it pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth."

## CONCLUSION

Next week, we will continue our look at our responsibilities as followers of **Jesus Christ** toward government. For now, it would be good to underscore it's not within the power of any human government to create or sustain a good, just, and enduring society for its people. It's the responsibility of good and just citizens to create and sustain such a stable and enduring society.

According to Open Doors Ministry, which serves the persecuted church around the world, the officially atheist Chinese Government became so fed up in the 1990s with sky-high rates of crime, drug addiction, and sickness in the Lancang county of Yunnan Province, on its southwestern border with Burma, that they turned for help to the area's only model citizens: Christians. "We had to admit the Lahu people were a dead loss because of their addiction to opium," confessed an official who did not want to be named. "Their addiction made them weak and sick. Then they would go to one of their 'priests,' who required animal sacrifices of such extrava-gance that the people became poor. Because they were so poor, they stole from each other, and law and order deteriorated. It was a vicious cycle no amount of government propaganda could break. We noticed, however, that in some villages in the county, the Lahu were prosperous and peace loving. There was no drug problem, or any stealing or social order problems. Households had a plentiful supply of pigs, oxen, and chickens. So we commissioned a survey to find out why these villages were different. To our astonishment and embarrassment, we discovered the key factor was these villages had a majority of Christians!"

Officials launched a daring experiment in 1998 that would have been unthinkable in China of 10 years previous: they sponsored Christians to go into the troublesome villages and share their faith. They started by picking out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to opium. Christian Lahus were bussed into the village at government expense, and the villagers were herded together by the police and made to listen to the testimonies of the Christians. A year later, there were 17 converts in the village, and they began to prosper because they stopped spending money on drugs. Eight of these 17 converts even saved enough to own sewing machines and start small businesses. By early 2002, 83 of the villagers were Christians and the prosperity had spread. The unnamed government official admitted, "We are delighted with the results and have been extending the tactic to many other villages since then" (The Pastors Connection, Open Doors USA e-mail, August 2002; corroborated by Kelly Callaghan, prayer and courier coordinator, Open Doors USA; [www.PreachingToday.com](http://www.PreachingToday.com)). What transformed these Chinese villagers and their villages: Regulation, education, or Christian inspiration?

These Christians were model citizens even in a country where the government opposed their values, and that's what Christ wants us to be wherever we are, because this brings glory to Him and draws others into our Savior's Kingdom. It's a part of what it means to live in two worlds. It's a part of what it means to live as citizens of Heaven (**Philippians 3:20**) even while we remain citizens here on earth!