

## **HOW CHRISTIANS RELATE TO CIVIL AUTHORITY**

As Christians we may often be confused, frustrated, or angered by the actions of civil authority or character of a civil leader. How are Christians supposed to respond to civil authority that disregards God's principles in action or lifestyle? The following information is offered to guide our thinking and actions regarding civil authority. The guidance is drawn from three resources: Scripture, the CRC Church Order, and John Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion" (recognizing there are many others).

### **SCRIPTURE**

We are instructed early in Scripture to "honor our father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). Respect for authority outside of the home, that is civil authority, is clearly stated in Romans 13:1: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

The psalmist tells us in Psalm 47:7, which is echoed throughout Scripture, that "God is king of all the earth" claiming every square inch of creation. Paul continues in Roman 13:2, "Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." In addition to obedience, we are encouraged in Titus 3:1-2 "to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone."

Being peaceable, considerate, and gentle does not mean that Christians individually or collectively should just accept the injustice or evil being committed by any civil authority. As Christians, we have an obligation to speak up for what is right, and if possible, to work with trustworthy civil authorities to make changes for the better.

### **CHURCH ORDER**

As churches, we walk a fine line when we take into consideration any action on civil matters. When civil leaders enact laws and regulation contrary to God's Word, the church may consider how to guide its members in responding to such civil action. Churches normally consider only matters directly related to the church [ref 1]. The church is called to be a light to the world. Christians should reflect not only the light of saving grace, but also "to live as an exhibit of God's healing and reconciling grace." [ref 2] God's healing and reconciling grace is exhibited when the church considers and acts appropriately on political, social, and economical questions that violate the Word of God and the church standards [ref 3].

### **INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION**

In Book 4, Chapter 20 *Of Civil Government*, John Calvin makes the case that while there is a difference between spiritual and civil government, the spiritual kingdom of God is not set at odds with the government of the state. Calvin also makes it very clear that "The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13:1), and that we are to obey even the wicked authorities. In Calvin's words, "that even the most iniquitous kings are appointed by the same decree which establishes all regal authority" (section 27). Recognizing that evil civil authority

can be exhausting, frustrating, and troubling, Calvin assures us that God is in control: “And let us reflect that it belongs not to us to cure these evils, that all that remains for us is to implore the help of the Lord, in whose hands are the hearts of kings, and inclinations of kingdoms.” (section 29)

## CONCLUSION

Sovereign God is King and reigns over all. God has established civil authority on earth, past, present, and future. Some civil leaders are better than others, and God has the Divine power to use every civil leader as He sees fit for His glory, and to further His kingdom. We may not like the person in power, but it is our duty to be obedient to our civil authorities within the boundaries of God’s Word, to pray for them, and deal with them respectfully.

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. How does God use civil authorities at every level of government to further His Kingdom?
2. How do I respond to a civil authority that acts contrary to God’s Word?
3. In history, how have Christians been obedient to God in the face of evil civil authority?

## REFERENCES

[1] Church Order and Its Supplements 2016, Article 28.a

[2] Church Order and Its Supplements 2016, Article 74.a

[3] Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary, 2nd ed, p160, Henry DeMoor