

Introduction

On December 22, 1820, the renowned statesman and orator Daniel Webster spoke at the bicentennial celebration of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. In his speech, he declared: **"No government can be secure which is not supported by moral habits . . . whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens."** Notice that Webster linked two things closely together, Christianity and citizenship, and he was right in doing so. "Good Christian – bad citizen" is an oxymoron. Good Christians are always good citizens. And the text I read earlier, Romans 13:1-7, helps us be just that, good citizens. It teaches us several essential truths about our government and the part that we, as good Christians and citizens, play in it.

God Ordains Government

This text is about what verse 1 calls **"the governing authorities."** That refers to governments. Paul himself lived under an autocratic form of government. It was a dictatorship in which one man, the Roman emperor, wielded all the political power. But there are many other forms including monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, theocracy, and republic. The government of the United States is a specific type of republic, a constitutional republic. In it, citizens elect political leaders as their representatives. Those representatives must then govern according to constitutional law, which limits their power over the citizens.

Now, notice what Paul says about **"governing authorities"** or governments in verse 1. They are **"from God"** and **"are established by God."** That means that they are divine institutions with God-given authority over their citizens. That is true of all governments, including the Roman dictatorship under which Paul himself lived. All governments are God-ordained. That doesn't mean, however, that some forms aren't better than others because some are. And it just may be that America's is the best of all.

In 1989, a brilliant scholar, Francis Fukuyama, wrote an essay that stirred America's academic circles. Here is a summary of what he wrote. Ideas are the driving force of history. A nation takes hold of a great idea and organizes its institutions and life around it. That nation then becomes a "lead society." It takes center stage in the world and becomes the dominant force in history. But this leadership role is only temporary. Eventually another nation takes hold of a better idea and it becomes the lead society. This happens again and again and the cycle continues on. Thus, history is nothing more than a succession of nations, each taking hold of a better idea than the one before it. History unfolded this way until America was born. What happened was that America came up with the best possible idea. There are no ideas left that are better than the one it articulated and achieved. It, therefore, marks the end of history. It is a permanent lead society. It will never be replaced. It is the future. The future will be what it is now.

I don't know if America's idea is the best that **will be** achieved. I do know that it's the best that **has been** achieved. Lawyers tease physicians that while they were still bleeding people with leeches, lawyers were drafting the greatest political document in history, the United States Constitution. Our Constitution is a sheer work of genius. It sets up the best form of government that God has ever ordained.

Why God Ordains Government

But Paul not only tells us that God ordains government. He also tells us why He does. He says in verse 4 that it is "**a minister of God to you for good.**" Its ministry, according to verses 3 and 4, is to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. Its purpose, in other words, is to protect its citizens by creating law and order.

Government is God's response to man's fallen nature. It can't redeem people, can't transform their character. But it can set boundaries on their behavior. It isn't a remedy for sin. But it is a means to restrain it. People often criticize certain laws by saying, "You can't legislate

morality.” But that isn’t what laws purpose to do. What they purpose to do instead is to curb immorality so that you and I can live in peace.

Ohio Revised Code section 2911.12 (A)(3), for instance, defines and prohibits burglary. It also establishes penalties for committing it. It’s a third degree felony punishable by 1 to 5 years in prison. My wife and I have been married for 36 years. During that time, our homes have only been burglarized twice. But how many times do you suppose they would have been burglarized if there were no criminal statute prohibiting it? I don’t know exactly but I practiced enough criminal law to know it would be a lot more than twice. My wife and I don’t fear being burglarized. We leave our home without giving it even a second thought. Why? It’s because our state government restrains evil and protects us.

Paul explains what the ultimate aim of government doing that is in 1 Timothy 2:1-2. It’s that you and I “**may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.**” C.S. Lewis said it differently but the meaning is the same. It’s that we might have the simple freedom to enjoy a cup of tea by the fire with our family. He’s right. Government’s role is to protect us so that we can live peaceful, stable, and godly lives.

Or as Paul says it, it’s a minister of God to us for good.

Obey Government

Well, because it is, notice what we should do in verse 7, “**Render to all (politicians) what is due them.**” That’s our responsibility as citizens. Give our government what is due it. Which raises the question, “What is due it?” It’s many things, two of which Paul reveals here.

The first, in verses 1 and 5, is that we must obey it. Paul commands us to “**be in subjection**” to our governing authorities. Be law-abiding citizens in other words. Our federal, state, and local governments have God-given authority over us and thus, we should obey their laws. Poland Village, for instance, requires a permit to have a garage sale and allows only one garage sale a year? Those of us who live in the village should obey that. I’ve been tempted several times on the freeway, when I

missed my exit, to turn around on one of those emergency vehicle roads. But the state prohibits it and so I shouldn't. You get the idea. We should obey our federal, state, and local governments.

Our motives for doing so are found in verse 5. One is "**because of wrath.**" We know we'll be punished if we disobey. The other is "**for conscience' sake.**" We know we're immoral if disobey. So knowing both of those things, we obey.

But our obedience to our government isn't absolute. Our first loyalty isn't to our government. It's to our God. Consequently, we should always disobey government's laws when they clash with God's. Peter said it well in Acts 5:29, "**We must obey God rather than men.**"

The underground railroad illustrates what I mean. The government had passed fugitive slave laws requiring people to return runaway slaves to their owners. But many law-abiding citizens believed those laws were morally wrong and disobeyed them. They formed the Underground Railroad to help escaped slaves get to freedom in Canada. A Quaker in fact, Levi Coffin, was called the "president of the underground railroad." For 30 years, from 1833 to 1863, his wife and he helped an average of 100 slaves a year find their freedom.

Levi and his wife were Christians first, citizens second. They obeyed their government's laws when they didn't clash with God's. They disobeyed them when they did. And so should we.

Participate in Government

Our government is due a second thing. Participate in it.

Look at verses 6-7. Paul mentions "taxes" and "customs", which were indirect taxes. None of us like to pay taxes but it's Biblical nonetheless to do so. Paul's argument in verse 6 is this. Government is God's servant. But it can't exist and serve well unless its citizens pay for it. And they pay for it through taxes. Paul goes on to point out though that government needs more from its citizens than just taxes. According to the last half of verse 7, it needs their fear and honor as well.

Paul's general concern here is clear. It's that we give our government whatever it requires to exist and serve well. The things he mentions – taxes, fear, and honor – are common requirements of all governments. But all governments also have specific requirements that are unique to them, their nature, including ours.

Ours, as I said, is a constitutional republic. As such, the power resides in the people. Because it does, the people must participate in the political processes that run the government. What that participation is depends on the circumstances. It may be that we lobby, protest, practice civil disobedience, or yes, even run for office. People have been having tea parties around the country protesting taxes, which are going to increase for us all. That's participation. I am against the cap and trade bill that the House just passed. So, I wrote my United States Senators from Ohio and told them so. That is participation. But the first and most obvious thing that participation means is that we vote. Its citizens voting intelligently is foundational to a constitutional republic. We must vote intelligently, therefore, to be good citizens.

Now, participating in all those ways requires certain things of us, the very first of which is this. We must think clearly. I can't emphasize that enough. Participating wisely and effectively requires thinking clearly. I'd be so bold as to say this in fact. Our very first obligation as good citizens in a constitutional republic is to think clearly. I wonder though. Are the masses in America doing that? I fear "not."

Listen to what Adolph Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*: **"Since the masses have only a poor acquaintance with abstract ideas, their reactions lie in the domain of the feelings . . . Such being the case, all effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare necessities and then must be expressed in a few stereotyped formulas."** Hitler claimed that emotion more than reason moved the masses to vote for and yield to politicians and he was right. That's how he rose to power in fact. He made the masses feel instead of think.

And so it is today. The political responses of the masses in America

lie primarily in the domain of feeling. Feeling more than thought determines what they decide and do politically. Emotion more than reason moves them to vote for the candidates and support the issues they do. That's why modern candidates and issue groups do what Hitler did - rely on emotive slogans and campaigns that make people feel, not think.

Good Christians and citizens, however, aren't sucked in by all that. They don't vote for candidates or support issues because of how their slogans or campaigns makes them feel. Thought not feeling determines what they decide and do politically. Reason more than emotion moves them to vote for the politicians and support the issues they do.

So be a good Christian and citizen and think clearly. Give the candidates and issues deeper thought. First, get informed by learning as many facts about them as you can. Second, analyze the facts in terms of your values and beliefs. And third, use good logic to draw valid conclusions from your analysis.

I have always opposed the sin tax on cigarettes, for example. History shows that the federal government is ever expanding and always looking for new sources of revenue. Placing a sin tax on cigarettes, therefore, opens the door - to government placing it on anything it deems harmful to us, which it's likely to do. Sure enough, the Senate Finance Committee is now considering several new revenue streams, including a sin tax on sugared beverages such as soda, fruit drinks, and flavored coffee. Whether you agree or disagree with my position on sin taxes, my larger point is this. I've given it careful thought. And that's our first obligation as participating citizens. Think clearly.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with this thought. Citizenship is discipleship. Discipleship to Jesus encompasses every aspect of our lives, including our citizenship. It really is true that whatever makes people good Christians makes them good citizens. So honor Jesus first and America second by being both - good Christians, good citizens.