

The Apostles and Christian Nationalism (continued)

The 2020-2021 Covid-19 epidemic was a stress test for the beliefs and health of our churches, ending with some shepherds separated from their flocks, and many congregations divided over how they should respond. The controversy challenged beliefs regarding science and medicine but also about the authority of government in a nationwide crisis. And many a church was found to be in ill spiritual health as brothers and sisters, leaders and congregants, could not see their way clear to agree to disagree. That period and its issues offer an opportunity to reflect on these important issues, especially the matter of church-government relations.

[Note: The following was presented at a pastors conference in 2023]

Thesis: *Churches should seek to cooperate with the governments to which they are subject to the greatest degree possible, due to biblical and evangelistic requirements.*

I. Biblical Requirements

A. Government is God's Idea.

1. The Dominion Mandate

We learn something of what the *imago Dei* means from the particular words used for it in Gen 1:26: "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (NASB 1995). The word *image* refers to "representation." The God who is spirit creates a representative in physical form. Vlach explains:

Just as an ancient king would place an image of himself in an area of his realm to show his sovereignty, God makes man in his image to represent him in the newly created world. Thus, "image" has kingship implications. Yet in this case these representations are living, breathing human beings, not lifeless statues. While God is the King, he created man as a king, a vice-regent and mediator over the creation. The term "likeness" indicates man is in relationship with God; he is a son of God. Because man is a son of God, he is able to represent God. So sonship is closely connected to rulership.¹

The assignment that humanity received in Adam was to serve as God's vice-regents on earth. Adam was told to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen 1:28). This "dominion mandate" was given by the King of creation to all humanity. That is, this mandate was not required of Adam and Eve alone, but rather as they are "fruitful," "increase in number," and "fill the earth," it will be taken up by their posterity.

¹ Vlach, Michael, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (n.p.: Lampion House, 2020), chap. 4, Kindle.

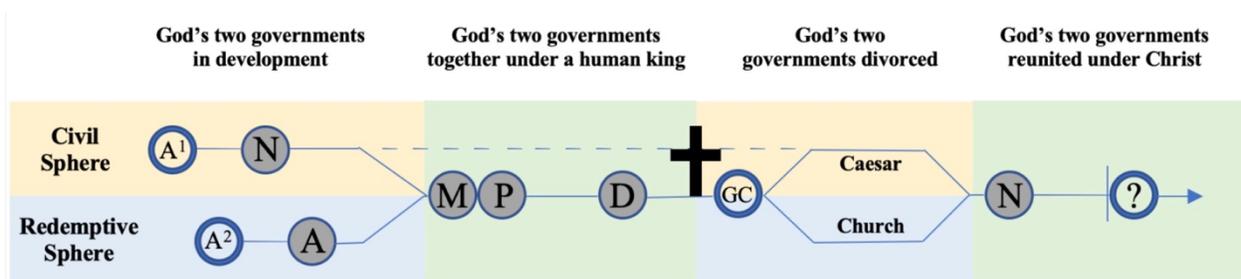
The Hebrew word for “rule” (*rādāh*) in Gen 1:28 is the same as that used in Ps 110:2 of the future reign of the Messiah: “The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, ‘Rule in the midst of your enemies!’” The word for “subdue” (*kābas*) speaks of the work of a king (cf. 2 Sam 8:11).² Vlach summarizes well the connection between the *imago Dei* and dominion: “This relationship between the image of God and ruling over the creation is so close that some have concluded that the image of God is the function of ruling. But the function of ruling is probably a *consequence* of man being in the image of God. The main point is that man is God’s image bearer created to rule the earth on God’s behalf.”³

Cf. Psalm 8:4-8; Hebrews 2:5-9

2. The Noahic Covenant

The first formal arrangement explicitly called a covenant came centuries after Adam and Eve left the scene, and it formalizes God’s expectations for the civil sphere. In the wake of Noah’s Flood, God institutes a unilateral, universal, promissory covenant (N)—a covenant imposed upon “all flesh,” for all time, and without any human consent: God alone enters into covenant, swearing an oath to that effect with the token of a rainbow (Gen 9:1-7). The most notable feature of this covenant is God’s institution of a collective form of civil polity that features collective man ruling his fellow men according to a robust system of crime and punishment that, remarkably, includes capital authority.⁴

3. The Mosaic Covenant – Merger of Civil and Redemptive Spheres



4. The Great Commission – Separation of Church and State

B. Government is God’s Servant.

Cf. Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Snoeberger in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series) (p. 168). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

[In Romans 13] there is a general command at the beginning of the passage: Everyone must submit to the government. This command is universal. All people must submit, though the audience of Paul's letter and, thus, his focus is believers. Those to whom believers are to be subject are people in positions of authority in the government.

Paul then provides two reasons for this command. The first is given in the remainder of verse 1 and verse 2: Government is instituted by God. All authority, including government, is ultimately put in place or ordained by God. This truth is found throughout Scripture: God raised up Pharaoh (Ex 9:16), Cyrus (Is 44:28; 45:1), Nebuchadnezzar (and other kings) (Dan 2:21; 4:32) and Pilate (Jn 19:11). Since God orchestrates the periods and boundaries of nations, it is clear that all governments are set in place under his sovereign will (Acts 17:26).

Since government has been instituted by God, Paul draws the conclusion in verse 2 that those who resist government are resisting God. If someone is in a state of rebellion against government, he is rebelling against God and will receive judgment for his rebellion. That judgment likely includes both temporal punishment from the government as God's servant and, potentially, ultimate condemnation by God himself.

The second reason for the command is found in verses 3 and 4: Government bears the sword as God's servant. Government is designed to maintain order in society. Generally speaking, you do not need to fear the government if you do what is right (e.g., you do not get as nervous seeing a police officer if you are not speeding). Instead, you can expect a measure of commendation from the government for doing what is good.

That is because Christians should see government officials as God's servants for their good. Often the officials are unaware that they are serving God, but they are accomplishing his purposes to allow society to properly function.

The flip side is that government has also been given the ability to punish those who do wrong ("the sword" probably indicates the punishment goes up to and includes capital punishment). Government officials can serve God as an avenger that works to carry out God's wrath in the present age. As Paul reminded the church in Romans 12:19, individuals are not to carry out personal revenge since God is the ultimate one responsible for righting wrongs. And he often does so today through the governments he has instituted.

In verse 5 Paul restates the general command and the two reasons. One must be in subjection (command) to avoid God's wrath (second reason) and for the sake of conscience (first reason). The conscience here is not focused on a sense of guilt that comes from disobeying, but a sense of obligation that proactively recognizes the responsibility to submit to authorities God has put in place. Even if you are not going to be punished (because the government will not see or discover your wrongdoing), it is still sinful not to submit.

In verses 6 and 7, Paul finishes with a final appeal and command: Taxes are being and should be paid in light of government's purpose and role. When he says, "you also pay taxes," it is not a command but a statement: you are currently doing this. That fact demonstrates that you already recognize the truth that government is the servant of God and, therefore, needs to be supported through taxation in order to carry out its necessary function. Paul concludes with a set of commands to give what is owed to government officials—whether taxes, respect, or honor.

We could summarize Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1-7 like this: **Believers must submit to and support government as a God-ordained institution designed to commend good and punish evil.**⁵

"The United States was actually born out of a violation of New Testament principles, and any blessings that God has bestowed on America have come in spite of that disobedience by the Founding Fathers." (John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You*, 2000, p. 6).

"We must obey the government (1) unless the government explicitly tells us to disobey God, or (2) unless the government exceeds its jurisdiction so as to speak authoritatively into a sphere regulated by another, God-instituted authority."⁶

II. Evangelistic Requirements

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Col. 4:2-6)

Excerpt of a letter to the congregation of Community Bible Church, September 2020:

Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty." While we are extremely thankful for the patience and maturity demonstrated by our church family during the six months of this pandemic, we anticipate the next several months will present challenges as the season changes, politics rears its head with the November election, and the virus persists and possibly gets worse. While we can't control the seasons or the politicians, we can seek to ensure that all members of our congregation understand our thinking and direction on the virus, and solicit your continued cooperation as we traverse this untrammelled path. To that end we offer these guiding principles and applications, and ask that every CBCer reads them, and/or watches this week's "That's a Good Question" episode which is devoted to this topic.

This article is long so there is a summary at the beginning so that you get the gist and can hopefully review the details when you have the time.

⁵ <https://dbts.edu/2021/09/17/how-should-believers-view-government/>

⁶ <https://dbts.edu/2020/09/23/how-can-we-simultaneously-submit-to-every-ordinance-of-man-and-obey-god-rather-than-men/>

Summary

Our perspective is guided first by biblical principles and then by our understanding of the facts surrounding the virus. With regard to biblical principles, we believe Scripture teaches that regular gathering is a significant factor in spiritual health (Hebrews 10:25), yet it also requires that we cooperate with the government as fully and as long as possible (Romans

13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17), and that we consider our love for and witness to the community in our decisions (Matthew 22:39; Colossians 4:5).

We believe that Covid-19 is a once-in-a-lifetime virus that has killed over 200,000 people in under six months, that this extraordinary number would be much higher were it not for the unprecedented measures taken this year, and that it may well get worse in the fall and flu seasons. We believe healthy people under 70 are extremely unlikely to die from the virus, but that everyone – including children, teens, and young adults – are potential carriers, and therefore compliance with safety measures is required to reduce the spread and protect the vulnerable.

All things considered, we believe it is best for us to participate with the rest of the community in minimizing the virus's impact, until a solution is found. However, this cannot go on indefinitely without harming the spiritual wellbeing of at least some, and perhaps many, of our members. Therefore, we will continue to leave our doors open on Sundays (with protocols in place), while also offering the temporary alternatives of livestreaming and FM radio. As time goes on we anticipate more will avail themselves of in-person worship, and we'll seek to expand in-person ministries in the days and weeks ahead, seeking to offer both in-person and online options for each, so that all in our church family are well-served.

We believe that it is quite possible for our church to become MORE unified in the midst of this challenge, IF we agree to focus on our mutual commitment to please the Lord in the way we handle it. That is, even if we cannot be fully together, we can still band together and rise to this occasion. Our willingness to recommend a hard path over the past several months is due in large part to our confidence in the strength of our congregation. The CBC family has demonstrated great maturity to this point, and we have full confidence that it will do so going forward.