

Justice For All

[Psalms 33:10-22](#); [Romans 13:1-7](#)

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Back in the sixties, our family lived within ten miles of America's most hallowed ground: the Concord Bridge, where "the shot was fired heard 'round the world;" the Lexington Green, where Minutemen fell mortally wounded; Bunker Hill, Old North Church, Faneuil Hall, the Boston tea party. For a couple of Californians, reared so far from our nation's birthplace, it was like walking into the pages of history and experiencing first hand the agony and ecstasy of the American Revolution. Yet we have so glorified the Revolution that we may forget the colonists who did not fight because they considered the Revolution to be rebellion against lawful authority. No doubt they quoted today's text: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." And since George III was the governing authority, they remained loyal to the Crown. Yet there were tens of thousands, many of them Presbyterians, who were not only not subject to the governing authorities; they took up arms against the authorities. In fact there were so many Presbyterians at the forefront of the American Revolution that in England it was known as the Presbyterian Rebellion! Did they do wrong? Were they disobedient, not only to George III but to God? And must we as Christians obey today's government in any and all circumstances?

Let's begin where Paul begins: GOVERNMENT RESTS ON DIVINE AUTHORITY. He underscores this no fewer than four times in today's text. Verse 1: "There is no authority except from God." Verse 2: "Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed." Verse 4: The ruler "is God's servant for your good." And verse 6: "Authorities are God's servants." Nothing could be more plain: government rests on divine authority.

If we lived in the best of all possible worlds we would have no need of legislators and laws, police and judges, speed limits and radar traps. But we do not live in such a world. Eleven years ago a drunk driver snuffed out the life of one of our sons-in-law. In an instant, on a quiet country road, our daughter and her three children were robbed of their husband and father, because one person refused to live under the law. And the frightening crime statistics we hear on every telecast are ample proof that, far from living in the best of all possible worlds, we live in a fallen world. Some people are driven by a pride that says, "I'll live any way I want to, ingest any substance that makes me feel good, drive any speed I please, even if I injure, maim, and kill." And because we live in a fallen world God has given government authority to hold history together, however precariously; to curb violence, however defectively, and to protect life, however imperfectly.

But does this mean that government can do whatever it pleases? Has God given presidents and prime ministers carte blanche in civil affairs? Seventy years ago, the German church said "yes" to that question when Adolph Hitler came to power. "If Hitler is in power," said the church, "God wills it so, and we must obey God's minister." And within ten years six million Jews, 600,000 gypsies, and countless others died at Treblinka, Auschwitz, and a hundred other death camps, and the world was dragged to the edge of the abyss in World War Two. When Paul commands, "let every person be subject to the governing authorities," does he include Hitler and Stalin, Saddam Hussein and the current government in Sudan where hundreds of thousands are being killed as we speak? Paul answers that question in verses 3 and 4: "Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer." So, yes: government rests on divine authority and the proper function of government is to approve what is good and to punish what is evil. In other words, GOVERNMENT RULES TO ADMINISTER JUSTICE.

We're hearing a lot these days about law and order. To curb gangs we tighten our curfew laws. To stop muggings, we hire more police. To catch burglars, we deploy helicopters. And that's all well and good, but if we take our cue from the Bible, law and order by themselves are not enough. Adolph Hitler maintained

law and order in the Third Reich, but would anyone claim that Hitler was a minister of God? Saddam Hussein maintained law and order in Iraq, but would anyone assert that his government was ordained by God? No, because while there may have been law and order in those regimes, there was very little justice. And because there was so little justice, law and order could be enforced only by intimidation, torture, concentration camps, and death. As one German writer put it, "Hitler's government punished the good and rewarded the evil, and was therefore reversing its God-given mandate." And by reversing God's mandate it ceased to be an authority instituted by God. On October 18, 1945, following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the German Church published the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt. In it, they admitted that Hitler could never have perpetrated his demonic crimes against humanity had Christians taken more seriously their duty to resist injustice when it began.

From the biblical perspective, the function of government is not simply to give us law and order, but to give us order, based on laws that are just laws, laws that reward the good and punish the evil; laws that honor the dignity and rights of all human beings, in other words that are just laws.

Government rests on divine authority; government rules to administer justice. And thirdly, GOVERNMENT REQUIRES OUR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION. And that is especially true in America where we are the government. If Paul could call on Christians to support Nero's government where people had so little to say about how they were governed, we, of all people, must participate in government. And I know you do. You serve on election boards, and you're active in political parties. You occupy elective office or you work for those who do. Jury duty occasionally taps you on the shoulder, and many of you are active reservists or serving in the armed forces. Government has a right to expect our participation, for Jesus commanded, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." And Paul wrote, "Pay to all what is due them, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." We owe our government active support because the government, as Abe Lincoln put it, is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Speaking of the Gettysburg Address, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam gave the annual Memorial Day address at the Gettysburg National Monument several years ago. He ended his speech by quoting the Gettysburg Address, and thought he had done a good job until a very old man approached him after the program. "Son," he said, "you made an awful mess of Lincoln's speech." Oxnam was shocked. He said, "But I quoted Lincoln word for word; here, look at my notes." "Oh, I don't need your notes," the man replied. "I know it by heart. You see, I heard it the first time around." So Oxnam asked how his recitation differed from Lincoln's. "Abe put his hands out over the people like a benediction when he said, 'That the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, should not perish from the earth.' You got the words right, son, but you missed the message. You emphasized government; Lincoln talked about people."

There has perhaps never been a nation like ours, with such great potential for creating a thoroughly just society for all its people. Our Constitution calls for justice. Our consciences call for justice. Our Christ, through his apostle Paul, calls for justice. So, as Christian citizens, let us pray for our nation and for its leaders. Let us protest, when necessary, our nation's injustices. And let us participate in making our nation all that it was intended to be, a nation that offers and delivers "liberty and justice for all."