

CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT

*For the Participants of the
Wednesday Evening Bible Study at
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Spring Lake Park, Minnesota
Summer 2023*

CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it
Should be Obeyed*

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FOREWORD

Recent events within the world have once again raised the question as to the relationship of Christians to the governments of the countries in which they live. The coronavirus pandemic (2019-23) occasioned the government-mandated reduction of the number of people who could assemble in one place, effectively bringing Christian worship in churches in many places to a standstill. Regulations having to do with the vaccine produced in response to the pandemic also raised concerns of conscience, with individual Christians refusing to allow themselves to be vaccinated. And in the midst of the general confusion and concern in the consideration of these matters, election challenges that followed the presidential election of 2020 resulted in some Christians taking part in the events at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, as the prevention of the certification of the results of that election was attempted. Also of note is the killing of George Floyd (May 25th, 2020) by a police officer in Minneapolis, setting off world-wide protests, and calls for the abolishment of policing. And not to be forgotten: Already in June of 2015, the Supreme Court had made same-sex marriage legal across the country (*Obergefell v. Hodges*).

So how should Christians think about the government? Does it really have authority over individuals? What about

if it acts wrongly or creates a law promoting or allowing evil? Must it always be obeyed? Can it be legitimately overthrown? These were the questions being asked throughout the pandemic and its accompanying events.

And yet these are not new questions. Those growing up in the Viet Nam War era in the United States (ca. 1964-73) grappled with the question of the legitimacy of a government-mandated draft of men. Governmental authority over women was also challenged via the supreme court decision *Roe vs. Wade* (1973). The legal structure of marriage was altered as divorce laws were relaxed. And government-regulated racial discrimination in the South was condemned and abandoned. Most ignominiously government corruption at the highest level came to light with the Watergate scandal (1972-74). Then as now questions were raised as to the role of government and its authority.

But where does government actually come from? Isn't it simply a creation of man? Of man's reason? And what about authority? Who really has the right to do anything to anyone else? Is government even needed? Can't people police themselves?

And what about Christians? Must they be obedient to government or can they simply ignore it? Can they follow Christ by humbly serving as government officials or in the military? Or should Christ's example lead them to avoid government or military service altogether? Should Christians simply take over the government?

These are the questions that Martin Luther tackles in the following work.

Paul Strawn

1

GOD ESTABLISHES LEGAL ORDER

Legal order and its authority within the world exist by God's will and command. So Scripture: "Let everyone be subject to authority and government. For there is no authority except from God. But authority everywhere is ordained by God. So those who resist authority resist God's order.

And those who resist God's order will bring condemnation upon themselves" (Romans 13:1-2).

Likewise 1 Peter 2:13-14: "Be

subject to every human order, be it the king as supreme, or the governors as those sent by him to visit vengeance on

***Be subject to every
human order***

evil and praise the good.”

Such legal order and its authority have been in the world from its very creation. When Cain killed his brother Abel, Cain feared that he would be executed.

But God stayed Cain’s execution, overriding the authority of the legal order, so that no one would kill Cain. Cain would not have had such fear of punishment if he had not learned from Adam that murderers should be killed.

God expressly instituted and confirmed the authority of the legal order of the world once again after the Flood when he said: “If you shed the blood of someone, by someone will your blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6). This should not be understood to refer to some sort of plague or punishment that God pours out upon murderers. For many murderers continue to live by repentance or grace and die without the authority of the legal order being used against them.

Rather Genesis 9:6 refers to the authority of the legal order. That a murderer is indeed guilty of death. And that he can be lawfully executed by means of that authority.

Holy Scripture does not err if the authority of the legal order is somehow hindered. Or if that authority acts so slowly that a murderer dies a natural death. For Scripture still says: “If you shed someone’s blood, by someone will your blood be shed.”

So people themselves are to blame if such a law, commanded by God, is not carried out. For other commandments of God are broken in just the same way.

This legal order within the world was confirmed later by the law of Moses, Exodus 21:14: “You are to tear away from my altar those who intentionally kill someone in order to

kill them.” Likewise in Exodus 21:24-25: “Pain for pain, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, foot for foot, hand for hand, wound for wound, blow for blow.”

Christ also confirmed such a legal order when he said to Peter in the garden: “Those who take the sword shall die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). These words are to be understood according to Genesis 9:6: “If you shed someone’s blood” etc. Without a doubt, Christ refers to Genesis 9:6 by what he says to Peter, thereby introducing and confirming this verse.

***Christ also
confirmed such
a legal order***

John the Baptist also taught the same thing. When soldiers asked him what they should do, he said to them: “Do not inflict violence and injustice on anyone and be content with your pay” (Luke 3:14). If the usage of the authority of the legal order within the world was not divinely established, John would have told those soldiers to stop using their authority. John’s purpose, after all, was to make the people perfect and instruct them in a truly Christian manner.

So it is sufficiently certain and clear that God’s will is to use the legal order of the world and its authority to punish evil and to protect the good.

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1. Who established legal order on the earth?
 2. Who do those who resist authority actually resist?
 3. Has legal order always been within the world?

4. Why was Cain fearful after killing Abel?
5. Is it God's will to use the authority of the legal order to punish evil and protect good?