

# The Kingship of Christ and Secular Government ... or A Discussion of Dissent

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As Christians, we have been given a mandate to submit our natural inclinations to the will of God and to follow His commands which are revealed to us in the Word. But because we are sinners and, of ourselves, can only do that which is evil and perverse, God's will has become contradictory to the nature of the old man that is within us. Each of us knows how many times during the course of a single day we are called upon to choose between right and wrong. We also know how easy it is to choose the latter. The conflicts and decisions which we are called upon to resolve often are solved in a negative manner: this is wrong to do rather than this is what should be done. At times like these we often wonder why is it so easy to sin when we are supposed to be leading regenerated lives to the honor and glory of our God? The answer goes much deeper than just a few words but it amounts to the fact that we will be comforted only when we realize that we are not our own masters and that it is Christ who, working through the Holy Spirit, causes us to seek that which is right. Along with this goes the fact that God has not made our conflicts as difficult and complex as we imagine them. God does not place his children in situations where they can be tempted. James 1:13, says, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." God has made our lives very simple by saying that in everything we do we should serve His name's honor and glory. If through the Holy Spirit, we make this the test of our actions, then our lives will be very uncomplicated.

One of the conflicts which Christians have faced through history and more subtly in contemporary times involves the Christian's obedience to a government which seems at times to be diametrically opposed to the Church. Today many young people are rebelling against our government because they feel that it is morally wrong in continuing the Asian conflict. They feel that there is no creditability in politics and that politicians deliberately deceive the people. But we know that according to Romans 13, God has ordained the rulers which are in high places and has given them His charge. Also, we know that we are to serve Christ as the head of the Church of God. What we have then, which presents a paradox to some people, is two realms of government, one civil and one spiritual, which both, by God's command, deserve our complete allegiance.

To begin our discussion of this subject, a quote by Calvin from the *Institutes* is quite appropriate. "... let us first consider that there is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the 'spiritual' and the 'temporal' jurisdiction by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life — not only with food and clothing but with laying down laws whereby a man may live his life among other men holily, honorably, and temperately. For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom. Now these two, as we have divided them, must always be examined separately; and while one is being considered, we

must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other. There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us first consider the spiritual realm of government. Calvin says in this realm we are instructed in piety and in reverencing God. This instruction comes from the Church of which Christ is the spiritual head. What does it mean that Christ is the head or king of the Church? It means that God the Father in his eternal sovereignty has seen fit to make Jesus Christ the anointed head of the Church. This follows directly from the fact that all of Scripture points only to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and without Him we cannot approach God in righteousness nor are we deserving of eternal life. Because of this, Christ has been logically set up as the spiritual head, the shepherd, and the guardian of the Church. We must remember that this does not infer a physical sovereign sitting upon a magnificent throne but refers to a spiritual entity who rules and instructs his flock and about whom his people gather in trusting fellowship. But lest we err in thinking that Christ was anointed only superficially and rules in the same way, we should examine Scripture. According to John 1:32 and Luke 3:22, at the time when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit hovered about His head in the likeness of a dove. This was a concrete symbol of the sacred anointing. Paul in Ephesians 1:20-23 says, “Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” These texts seem to point to the fact that God has indeed set His Son up as the head of the Church and as our spiritual leader.

R. B. Kuiper, in *The Glorious Body of Christ*, points out that Christ is the head of the Church in three distinct ways. First of all, as the “legal head,” because even as Adam was our representative leading us into sin so Christ is our representative who by His perfect obedience merits eternal life for His people. Second, as the “organic head,” which means “that the church was originated not only by Christ, but also from Him, and cannot continue to exist for even a moment apart from Him. It means that the Church in all of its members lives and operates only through Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Third, Christ is the “ruling head” of the Church. This means that the members of the Church are responsible to Him for their actions and look to Him for guidance in all matters. In these three, very distinct ways does the kingship of Christ show forth, and although it is spiritual it is real and effective.

The authority of Christ is made manifest through the Word and the Spirit. We are called and instructed by the Word to all good works. In fact we are called to serve God in our every word, action, and thought. Our whole life is supposed to be filled with praise for our God, and when we stray from this path our consciences are pricked by the Spirit. Because we are imperfect creatures and often do stray, the “legal” aspect of Christ’s kingship is made manifest. Christ has made the supreme sacrifice and thereby has freed us from the consequences of the law. So we can see that the kingship of Christ is not a superficial or shallow concept but is thoroughly interwoven in the life of every Christian.

Just as we have shown the ground for the kingship of Christ, we must also show how the “temporal” jurisdiction is exerted. God has made everything and sustains all by His eternal council. God has instituted government and has placed magistrates in authority. There is considerable scriptural basis for this claim but the most well known is Romans 13 which begins, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisted the ordinance of

God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” Men which are placed in authority are not there by mere chance but are truly chosen of God. God has conferred unto their persons every manner of honorable title and in Romans 13:4, Paul says, For he is the minister of God to thee for good.”

Government and governors have been instituted “to cherish and protect the outward worship of God; to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church; to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another and to promote general peace and tranquility.”<sup>3</sup>

The persons who are required to fulfill this mandate are chosen by God to an office which is not only holy and lawful but also is a position deserving honor. Paul tells Timothy to pray for these persons in order that we may lead a peaceful life under their authority. Our duty toward the office of the magistrate then is to give reverence to the office and along with this obedience which proceeds from this respect.

But lest this discussion become one-sided, we should acknowledge there have been some very ungodly rulers throughout history. With the multitude of armed conflicts raging on the face of the earth and with race relations the way they are, it would seem logical to say that governments today are not godly. Most attempts by leaders at giving religion any perspective, end up as mere tokens. Young people must face up to the draft, death in Vietnam and armed nuclear conflict. Their response to these confrontations has been dissent and many times in a violent nature. They no longer trust the authorities. But we must remember that as God’s chosen people our answers cannot be emotional but must be based on Scripture. When Romans 13:1 commands that everyone should be subject to the higher powers; there is no discernment of good and bad powers; just a command to subjection. This may seem like a harsh command, but when we look to Scripture, we see that God has cursed wicked kingdoms with wicked rulers and has declared that they have their authority from Him. Job 34:30 and Deuteronomy 28:29 refer to this fact. In Jeremiah 29 the prophet urges Israel to obey Nebuchadnezzar and to pray for him in order that they might live more peacefully in captivity. Samuel, in I Samuel 8, warned the Israelites that because of their sins they would be required to suffer various calamities from certain kings. Again in Proverbs 28:2 we are warned that because of the iniquity of the land there are many princes. Therefore it is clearly evident from Scripture that a bad king is a judgment of God and we must not look at the oppressiveness of the particular sovereign but we must search ourselves for our own sin.

No one should mistake this judgment as a case of God forsaking His people. God always cares for His people and in the past, when oppressive rulers have prevailed, He has raised up such persons as Moses and Othniel to deliver His people. Also there have been written into most governments a system of checks and balances whereby rulers can legally be restrained. Calvin calls it a sin for princes to ignore these checks when they can be used. But he is also as severe in condemning intervention by private individuals when he says, “. . . I include the restraint which private citizens ought to bid themselves keep in public, that they may not deliberately intrude in public affairs, or pointlessly invade the magistrate’s office, or undertake anything at all politically.”<sup>4</sup> We should always strive for obedience and remember, by faith, that God will provide for His people during the times of Hitler and Breznev as well as He did in the times of David and Solomon. One other consideration, which must be included in any discussion of this sort, involves the fact that obedience to a sovereign should never cause disobedience to our God. We would be naive to assume that we will always be allowed to worship God as freely as we do at the present time. Revelation points to the fact that during the time of the Anti-Christ,

Christians will be given a mark on their foreheads and, because of their beliefs, will be subjected to much tribulation. This situation is not, nor has it been restricted to the latter days. During the captivity in Babylon, religious persecution was an affliction that the Israelites had to endure. Daniel and his three friends disobeyed a direct command of their sovereign lest they commit idolatry before God. But we must not be preoccupied with a knowledge that there will be wicked rulers and look for the opportunity to disobey under the pretense that we are serving God. Through an enduring trust in our God, we will be led by the Holy Spirit to good works in these matters.

In conclusion, we should remember, in any discussion concerning responsibility to the law, that although we have been freed from bondage to the law we still are required to live within the realm of civil, moral, and social government. In the past few years a way of thinking has emerged, primarily among young people, which flatters their basic instincts and tells them to act in the most natural way. The first criteria of action by this type of person seems not to be whether it is within the law, but whether it flows easy from a given personality. Undoubtedly, most everyone has heard the expression “do your own thing.” Realizing that this could be used in different contexts, this expression usually reflects the above type of thinking. It does not mean to do what is right or legal but what a certain person feels like doing at a given moment. We must remember that what we naturally feel like doing is from the Devil and is not a product of a regenerated man. So the next time someone tells you to “be yourself,” “do your own thing,” or “let your hair down,” be guided by the mandate that we are to serve God’s will and not our own. Freed from the constraint of the law and serving God whole-heartedly, we will experience lasting spiritual joy.

Footnotes:

1. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill, 2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, (1967) pg. 847.
2. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., (from a series of articles) pg. 94.
3. Calvin, 1487.
4. Calvin, 1511.

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