



Biblical Ethics:

Selected Resources from the ESV Study Bible

Civil Government - God Established Civil Government

God has established civil government for the good of all people: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ... [T]he one who is in authority ... is God’s servant for your good” ([Rom. 13:1, 3, 4](#)). This indicates that God has established an order of authority regarding civil government: those who are in authority have responsibility to judge right from wrong and to distinguish good from evil by rewarding good behavior and punishing wrongdoing. This means that those in authority should not use power in ways that are arbitrary or that merely serve their own personal advantage. Those who are not in authority are to “be subject” to those who are in authority.

Paul also indicates that God is sovereign over both evil governments and good ones. God not only raises nations up, he also brings them down: “He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away” ([Job 12:23](#); cf. [Ps. 75:7](#)). In fact, he will sometimes use one nation to judge another (cf. [Jer. 25:7–14](#)). [Isaiah 10:5–11](#) says that God raised up Assyria, which he used to judge all of the surrounding nations. But then he judged Assyria as well, at the appropriate time, using another nation. When God allows evil governments to persist, sometimes believers suffer greatly, but in such situations they also glorify God through their courage and faithfulness (cf. [Dan. 3:16–23](#); [Matt. 14:10–11](#); [Acts 5:29, 40–42; 12:2](#); [Heb. 11:35–38](#); [Rev. 2:10; 12:11](#)).

All citizens should obey the laws of the state (for exceptions, see below): [Romans 13:2](#) says, “Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” In other words, those who reject the authority of a civil government reject God’s authority as well. [Romans 13:3–4](#) says,

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

This passage also indicates the purpose of government: it is established by God in order to restrain evil, punish wrongdoers, and promote the order and well-being of society.

[First Peter 2:13–17](#) articulates similar truths: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” ([v. 13](#)), which includes persons in authority like “the emperor,” or “governors,” or, by implication, other officials who are sent “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” ([v. 14](#)). The reason Christians must obey in this way is because “this is the will of God” ([v. 15](#)), and, further, “that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” ([v. 15](#)). This also means that Christians should honor those in authority, show them proper respect, and pray for them (cf. [1 Tim. 2:1–3](#)).

Christian Influence on Governments

Since the moral standards of the Bible come from the God of all creation, who holds all people in all societies accountable to him, Christians should act upon opportunities given them to influence government to make laws consistent with the Bible’s moral standards (cf. [Dan. 4:27](#); [Luke 3:18–19](#); [Acts 24:24–25](#); also the prophetic warnings to pagan nations in [Isaiah 13–23](#); [Ezekiel 25–32](#); [Amos 1–2](#); Obadiah; Jonah; Nahum; [Habakkuk 2](#); [Zephaniah 2](#)). Influencing a government to make good laws is one way of obeying Jesus’

command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” ([Matt. 22:39](#)), for good laws bring many benefits to people. However, civil governments should not make laws enforcing allegiance to, or prohibiting the practice of, any particular religion, for Jesus divided the realms of responsibilities between the things that “are Caesar’s” and the things that “are God’s,” thus establishing two distinct areas or spheres of authority ([Matt. 22:21](#); cf. also [Luke 9:52–55](#); [12:13–14](#); [John 18:36](#)).

When Obedience to Government Is Wrong

Christians should *not* obey the government, however, when obedience would mean disobeying a command of God. This is indicated by several passages showing approval of disobedience to governments. For example, when commanded not to preach the gospel, Peter says, “We must obey God rather than men” ([Acts 5:29](#)). Another example is found in [Daniel 3:13–27](#), where Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to worship the golden statue; they stood firm against the king: “we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” ([Dan. 3:18](#)). God rescued them from the fiery furnace, thus confirming his approval of their stand ([Dan. 3:19–30](#)). Other examples of obeying God through disobedience to civil governments include the Egyptian midwives ([Ex. 1:17, 21](#)), Esther ([Est. 4:16](#)); Daniel ([Dan. 6:10](#)); and the wise men ([Matt. 2:8, 12](#)).

Is Revolution or a War of Independence Ever Right?

Christians have differed over the question of whether God’s people should ever support revolutions against evil governments or wars to gain independence from evil governments. Some Christians argue that [Romans 13:1–5](#) prohibits this, especially where Paul says, “whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.” Others have argued that Paul has in mind here only the conduct of private individuals, but that lower officials who are under a wicked higher official are in a different situation. They argue that lower officials may in fact be obeying God by leading a revolution or fighting a civil war against wicked rulers, in order to protect those whom God has given into their charge, and that thus, in protecting their people, they are fulfilling their responsibility before God to be “not a terror to good conduct, but to bad” ([Rom. 13:3](#)). Biblical examples would be Moses against Pharaoh ([Exodus 1–14](#)), and some of the judges ([Judg. 2:14–16](#); cf. [Heb. 11:33](#)).

Methods of Selecting Leaders for Government

Because the Bible speaks so frequently about kings, for many centuries it was assumed that only a monarchy fit the biblical pattern for civil government. People believed in the “divine right of kings,” by which kings were thought to rule by God’s ordination (an idea that some supported from [Rom. 13:1–2](#)), and the people were thought to be subject to their almost unlimited power. The common method of succession was hereditary monarchy, in which the king’s oldest son would succeed him on the throne.

But over the course of centuries more careful examination of the Bible has brought a widespread recognition among Christians that the Bible does not endorse hereditary monarchy as the only proper form of government. When read in their overall context, the tragic narratives of the hereditary monarchies that followed after David, beginning with Solomon and then continuing in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (see 1–2 Kings), show a progressive turning of these kingdoms away from God and a decline in their circumstances until both Israel and Judah were carried away into exile in disgrace. Though there were a few good kings, most of the kings of Israel and Judah fulfilled Samuel’s dire warnings about the ways in which kings would abuse their powers and eventually enslave the people ([1 Sam. 8:10–18](#)). And many of the pagan kings who opposed God’s people were quite uniformly evil. The overall portrait of monarchies in the Bible is not a positive one (except for the future rule of Jesus, who will one day reign over a renewed world as “King of kings and Lord of lords,” [Rev. 19:16](#)).

But what is the alternative to a hereditary monarchy? Several strands of biblical teaching combine to show the benefits of some sort of system by which (1) government gains legitimacy by the consent of the governed, (2) rulers are selected by the consent of those who are governed, and are accountable to them, and (3) the power of government is divided among several persons and groups in order to provide a check against the tendency of all sinful human beings to abuse power, especially great power. The arguments in favor of such a form of government are these:

1. All human beings share equally the status of being made “in the image of God” (see notes on [Gen. 1:26](#); [1:27](#)). This is a powerful concept that leads to the conclusion that no family should think it has by heredity a “right” to rule over other families and people, or to govern others without their consent.
2. If the government is to be “God’s servant for your good” ([Rom. 13:4](#)), government should exist for the benefit of the people, not for the special benefit of the king and his family (cf. the negative example in [1 Sam. 8:10–18](#) in contrast with the good examples in [1 Sam. 12:3–5](#); [Num. 16:15](#)). But who can best judge what is best for the people of a nation? A good argument can be made that, over the long run, the people themselves are the best judge of what is good for them. To be sure, the people may err, but they are not likely to err as grievously as a non-accountable paternalist ruler, making decisions on their behalf, might be expected to do.
3. Scripture contains several positive examples of rulers seeking the consent of those whom they govern (cf. [Ex. 4:29–31](#); [1 Sam. 7:5–6](#); [10:24](#); [2 Sam. 2:4](#); [1 Kings 1:39–40](#); [12:1](#); and, in the early church, cf. [Acts 6:3](#)).
4. The fact that “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” ([Rom. 13:1](#)) does not require a monarchy, for God can institute governments through a process by which the people are able to select their own leaders and keep a check on their powers.



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