

Is Rebellion against Rulers Rebellion against God? (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the first segment of a two-part series questioning this popular invention.

I just heard the statement again from the pulpit: “Rebellion against authority is rebellion against God.” Nowadays, some of the greatest apologists for the state are preachers, who frequently invoke the Apostle Paul—himself a martyr due to state tyranny—in support of this notion. What a dramatic change from the “black robe” regiment of the Founding era, where preachers widely advocated and condoned civil disobedience!

In the preacher’s sermon the principal text was 1 Timothy 2:1-2, where the Apostle says: “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.” Taking into account the overarching objective of personal salvation mentioned in the immediate context (verse 4), two reasons for praying for rulers are manifest: (1) that they might be saved from their sins and hell and (2) that they might leave us Christians alone in order that we may serve the Lord quietly and peacefully, along with being spared persecution.

However, most preachers add a third dimension to their prayers for rulers. They ask the Lord to help rulers do their jobs efficiently and effectively. They want rulers to rule well—whatever that means. (Do you think that the Apostle Paul was thinking that Nero was ruling so well that there was no need to mention that third dimension explicitly?) Believing that the state and its rulers are somehow a part of God’s provision on earth for peace, order, and prosperity, these preachers commit an egregious error by thrusting this third, contrived dimension onto the text. And their error is grave, producing far-reaching ramifications. Their error promotes the continued delusion of God’s people with regard to the state, and widespread ignorance regarding the manifestly evil public policies that are recorded in the Bible and secular history.

Moreover, many preachers think that public policy theology is basically irrelevant and something to be taken lightly. Evidently, they believe that thinking about the details regarding a Christian’s relationship to the state, or how an American Christian might properly employ the Second Amendment, or whether or not a Christian ought to disobey edicts regarding compulsory attendance or prohibitions against spanking as a waste of time. With a little thought, one could list many other examples too.

Who cares whether the Founders were in sin when resisting England? Who cares if Christians use welfare state benefits or get state licenses to be married? Just do what everyone else does. What difference does it make that we pledge allegiance to the flag, hoist a national flag in the sanctuary, or receive protections from the state by incorporating the local church? No need to rock the boat. They sweep all these concerns under the rug by throwing out maxims like: “rebellion against authority is rebellion against God”—even though the Bible nowhere makes this statement. Indeed the Scriptures evince just the opposite by means of many examples, rendering the statement a premise based on eisegesis and faulty logic.

For illustration, we might take a similar false deduction: Mary is the mother of Jesus. Jesus is God. Therefore, the Virgin Mary is the mother of God. And no less errant is the following false deduction: According to Romans 13:1-4, God ordains all authority. The state is an authority and God’s servant. Therefore, rebellion against authority is rebellion against God. Here’s another variation off the same stem proposition: God ordains all authority. The state is specifically mentioned as being ordained by God. Therefore, the state is a divine institution, and must be revered much like we must revere our parents.

The three statements are similarly false and presuppose unbiblical elements or twist the Scriptures. Why? First, the fact that God ordains something does *not* mean that to resist what God has ordained is to resist God or His will. The Hebrew midwives, Ehud, and the Magi did not rebel against God because they rebelled against Pharaoh, Eglon, and Herod. Second, the word “servant” in Romans 13:4, 6 (δίακονος) does not imply godliness in the office. All things serve God, even evil things. Cyrus, the anointed shepherd (even “messiah”), is an example of God’s servant (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). So was Balaam. The fact

that God ordains some institution or some person for some purpose does not make the institution or person “divine” in a reverential sense. The Bible nowhere declares that the state is such a divine institution and therefore deserves a different form of reverence than other evil institutions would receive—like the Mormon Church or the devil himself.

Third, there is no reason to believe that resisting authority is the same thing as “resisting what God has ordained” (Romans 13:4). That is, the resulting “judgment” of an authority like the state does not come on account of our rebelling against God but rather for resisting the evil policies of a (generally) wayward state ruler which God has ordained. The two kinds of judgment are different. The text does *not* say that God will judge you here or in eternity if you do not obey the civil ruler that He ordained. On the contrary, God *expects* His people to “rebel” against ungodly decrees as part of our pursuit of holiness. Rulers may judge us on earth, and pour out wrath upon us, but we are not to fear them so long as we are on God’s side. The Bible indicates that in the end the vast majority of rulers will find their place in hell.

Fourth, not all resistance to state authority is rebellion against God. There are times when one must “rebel”, e.g. Daniel and the three young men, Peter and John. Consequently, the state’s word is not God’s Word by any means—except coincidentally at times. So how is it that most contemporary preachers are content to say that rebellion against the state is rebellion against God, *except* when the state does a few things on the short list of big no-nos? Such logic opens Pandora’s Box. Just who decides what is on the short list? The short list becomes arbitrary and capricious. One preacher prays that God would give tax collectors success in their actions against evaders, policemen success in trapping speeders, and Presidents wisdom for conducting war, while another prays that God would spare the world from such encroachments. Instead of sticking to the biblical reasons for praying for rulers, the list becomes long, convoluted, and controversial. And the preacher’s preferences and pet-peeves with respect to public policy, sadly, become sacrosanct.

Clip this article (and the next one). Take it to your preacher and see what he thinks. It might be an eye-opener for you—and perhaps for him too.

Is Rebellion against Rulers Rebellion against God? (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the second segment of a two-part series questioning this popular invention.

A few more words must be spoken against the mainstream preacher’s frequent apologies for the state, its rulers, and its public policies. What would the preacher who tells us that “rebellion against authority is rebellion against God” say about policies that force us to send our kids to a public school or to a foreign war, prevent preachers from making politically incorrect statements from the pulpit, disallow us to spank our kids, or prohibit us from hunting deer on our property (especially in cases when one’s family is hungry)? Ultimately, a preacher gets nowhere fast by making a statement that exceptions to obeying rulers exist without specifying what the exceptions must be. Believers need to know how to live in this “present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) and preachers similar to the one I heard do not help them by making superficial generalities (especially when there is not a good biblical reason to do so).

Yet the preacher basks in ignorance and pounces on any one who asks him questions that make him feel uncomfortable. These preachers believe that such interrogatives must come from “radicals”, after all, and their presence in our churches might frighten some people away. Think of all the good Tories that might become uneasy if we allow church members to contemplate the exigencies of civil disobedience!

Such preachers will not mention the exceptions to obeying rulers because they do not know the extent of these exceptions. It is the non-thinking, easy way out to merely mention the short list of resistance items (e.g., not bowing to idols, not desisting from Gospel preaching, and not killing infants) and

pass over the more analytically arduous questions. And the last thing that a spiritually-focused yet pietistic preacher desires is to be pressed into specifying items qualifying for civil disobedience!

I could probably come up with a list of fifty policies that I would “rebel” against. Another person might only choose to “rebel” against twenty of them. Maybe you and your cousin Joe would accept my fifty and add fifty more. The pietistic preacher might manage to list fifteen things, while his associate pastor might concede thirty and all the deacons go with thirty-five items. So in the end what has the preacher really said about “rebellion” against authority? Would he admonish the men in his flock who go beyond his short list of twenty items as being rebels against God? Would he subject them to church discipline for thinking that way, writing or speaking in support of his views, or challenging the practice of his fellow church members? Without knowing for sure, I would not be surprised to see such an admonition transpire in modern churches. And one thing is certain if a preacher does so: his analytical inconsistency and poor exegesis have led him to cop-out when it comes to preaching the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27), leading him to act in a manner that does not promote the edification of the saints.

God ordains the state for various purposes. The three main reasons found in the Bible are (1) to show his glory and holiness (which obviously overrides all other factors), (2) to bring terrestrial judgment against a disobedient people, and (3) to sanctify His people. (Interestingly, the pertinent phrase “for good”, insofar as it relates to personal growth, occurs both in well-known Romans 8:28 and Romans 13:4 but nowhere else in the New Testament.) In addition, many preachers think that the state also exists to punish people that God thinks are bad and to reward those whom God thinks are good. However, this misapprehension of texts such as Romans 13:1-4 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 should be laid waste by the fact that neither Nero nor virtually any other ruler has done so.

We commonly hear from American pulpits today that most rulers are “just doing their best” as, alas, mere “imperfect and failing men”. But this sentiment is not true. On the contrary, rulers are generally evildoers in God’s sight who reward what *they* think is good and punish what *they* think is evil, regardless of what God thinks. That fact is borne out in the Bible’s theology, biblical history, other history, and supporting theories in scientific disciplines like economics. This fact should not be lightly shrugged off by preachers, although they often unwittingly do so.

God is telling the Roman believers (and us too) that (a) God has allowed the ruler to exist, (b) that the ruler has the power to punish or reward whom he hates or likes, and (c) that if we want to remain unscathed we had better submit to him when he gets in our face. That fact does not preclude self-defense, which the Bible allows, including defending ourselves against a malignant state—particularly when its rulers seek to enslave us and we can avail ourselves of an opportunity to become free (1 Corinthians 7:21-24). Yes, in some cases, even ultimate “rebellion” to rulers (staging a revolution) can be just. An active role in social affairs and engaging our culture along with its public policies are part of the Christian’s role in having “dominion” over the world and “doing business” until Jesus returns (Genesis 1:26-28; Luke 19:13).

We must remember that God ordains Satan too. But resisting Satan is not rebellion against God, even when Satan is working through the state. Satan has used the state for his purposes often in recorded history, not only through men like Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh, but also through Nero and Domitian. For instance, the Bible speaks of Satan casting Christians into prison by means of rulers carrying out malignant public policies (Revelation 2:10). Satan also claimed (and Jesus did not dispute his assertion) to be able to give Jesus all the kingdoms of this world (Matthew 4:8; Luke 4:5)—all of which are said will vainly array themselves against Christ at the end of time. Indeed, we are specifically commanded, in fact, to resist Satan in spite of his authority (James 4:7; cf. Ephesians 4:27; 6:11; Jude 1:9). The state and, in general, its rulers, are hardly a “divine institution” to be revered and eventually redeemed by God—like the family and the church. They are ordained for temporal use in judgment and sanctification and then they will be sloughed off like a body’s dead skin cells.

So is rebellion against authority rebellion against God? Only when an authority’s decrees coincide with God’s; otherwise, rebellion against authority is only rebellion against the ruler that God has appointed. The reality of divine appointment does not elevate the state to an oracle of God that must be re-

vered lest God frown upon us. Of course, any time a Christian has a rebellious attitude, acts foolishly, or behaves in a manner that does not glorify the Lord—within the context of states and rulers or otherwise—he rebels against God. But it is not right to say that, in general, most (or any) resistance or “rebellion” to the authority of the state is automatically rebellion against God.

I would like to encourage preachers (like the one I recently heard) to think about this theme a little more before jumping onto the modern, revitalized, and reshaped divine right of kings bandwagon. The holiness of the church and its effectiveness in the world are too important to simply throw off on account of a faulty public policy theology. And there are plenty of public policies that Christians should shun. The famous preacher C.H. Spurgeon liked to quote Solomon’s quip about the little foxes spoiling the vines (Song of Solomon 2:15). Let us help our pastors hunt foxes.