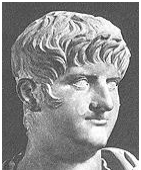


Public Policy Theology in Historical Context (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
June 8, 2005

This column is the first segment of a two-part series dealing with modern application of a biblical theology of public policy.

“Honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17) is Peter’s terse apostolic admonition to first-century Christians, “pilgrims of the dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1), whom Nero had exiled to Asia Minor from Rome. The admonition includes the specific objects and extent of their acquiescence: “submit yourselves to every ordinance of man...to the king as supreme, or to governors...” (1 Peter 2:13-14a). In the same vein, the Apostle Paul wrote in more general terms to the Christians at Rome and Gortys (the capital of the province of Crete), using the language “rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1, cf. Romans 13:1-3). Paul surely had in mind the imperial Caesar Nero, as well as various lesser authorities who ruled Rome’s provinces, such as Herod, Felix, and Agrippa.



Historians refer to the phase of the ancient Roman state in apostolic times as the *Principate*. The Emperor was Caesar and, as such, held autocratic dominion. Although high-handed rule dominated, a number of decentralized forms and conventions still existed—leftovers from the oligarchic self-government of the Roman Republic (which effectively ended in 27BC). Thus, wealthy Plutarchs were called upon by the Emperor to handle various administrative functions in each province of the Empire (totaling 50 million inhabitants). It is important to realize that the Apostles were writing to Christians who lived under an autocratic, brutal state, rather than the famous Roman Republic that had ended some 80 years earlier. Sure, the memory of the old Republic likely filled the imagination of many citizens, but it was no longer a reality. (In the same way that some Romans might have mused about their glorious Republic of old, so some modern American patriots fondly muse about the liberty-loving American republic before 1861.)

The Bible’s political context is important because it profoundly influences our theology of public policy. Yet the clear contextual differences between the political organization and public policies of first century Rome and the present day seems to be missed by many pastors and Christian leaders today. Some of them apparently presume that the Apostles lived under a state similar to ours. However, it is manifestly clear that they did not, and proper biblical interpretation must be tempered accordingly.

Consider the differences in the form of government then and now. We do not have a “king”. While the principle of submitting to those in authority, even in a Constitutional Republic, can rightly be inferred from the passages pertaining to obedience to the state and honoring the king, it is quite possible that structural changes in government can lead to corresponding changes in our response to the state and its policies. Some Bible doctrines are either dependent on or subject to contextual considerations, meaning that with some commands only principles survive without the exact form of obedience.

For example, modern Christians do not literally buy a “sword” for use as a weapon (as Christ says in Luke 22:36); because of technological improvements they can buy a gun. Likewise, Paul commanded Roman, Achaean, and Macedonian Christians to greet each other with a “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26). The command was given four times—one more time than the Apostles commanded Christians to be submissive to state authorities. Yet modern Christians do not have the exact practice of greeting-by-kissing because the culture has changed. Only the principle of affectionate salutation has been retained.

So how should American Christians “honor the king”? They have no monarch. Does that fact invalidate apostolic doctrine about submission to state rulers? No, the *principle* of submission still stands. Culture does not wipe out biblical theology, even if the application of doctrine must be adapted to technological and cultural changes—like swords and holy kisses becoming guns and handshakes.

Other important questions remain however, including the reason *why* Christians should submit and *what* Christians should submit to. I have argued in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* (Alertness Books, 2003) that Christians submit for expedient or pragmatic reasons. The Bible in several places calls believers to exercise practical wisdom—perhaps even insincere and superfi-

cial performances—before rulers (Proverbs 23:1-3; Ecclesiastes 8:2-5; Matthew 17:27). Interpreting Scripture with Scripture, one may conclude that the kind of performance mandated for Nero and his cronies should correspond to those mandated in these other passages.

In America, a case can and should be made that the proper object of submission by Christians is to the *Constitution* and the *Declaration of Independence* since they comprise our formal government. Presidents, Supreme Court justices, and congressmen are not kings. Our political structure is not autocratic but rather a republic based on a contract between “We the People”. The *political* allegiance of an American Christian is not to the President or to Congress, but to the republican contract established by the people. That means that an American Christian can submit to the principles of the *Constitution*, for instance, and still dishonor, condemn, or even—as a last resort—overthrow the government actors who oppose it. This idea would have been unfathomable in the context of the first century, even for those acquainted with the Roman Republic era. Yet it is part and parcel of the American civil society that Providence has decreed.

Public Policy Theology in Historical Context (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 dealing with modern application of a biblical theology of public policy.

How would the statements by the Apostles Paul and Peter (in Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13-17) have differed if they had been modern day Americans rather than living under the Roman state? The study of history, economics, political science, world religions, literary forms, and philosophy are important for proper biblical interpretation. Without a good grasp of these fields of endeavor, the interpreter is prone to make errors in judgment, including errors in applying the doctrinal rules regarding submission to authority under a modern “democracy” (or republic) rather than an autocracy.

For instance, the synoptic gospel accounts say that the death of Christ occurred at the “sixth hour” (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44), while John 19:14 says that He was still with Pilate at that time. How can one reconcile the difference in time? Is the discrepancy proof that the Bible contains errors? By applying knowledge from fields such as history along with deductive reasoning, one will find that John’s Gospel was written much later than the other three accounts—after the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD. That cataclysmic event crushed, among other things, the Jewish manner of keeping time. For a Jew, a day began at 6AM instead of midnight (the latter being both the Roman convention and ours today). Thus, in Jewish time the sixth hour corresponded to noon in Roman time. John would have used Roman time in his gospel and so there is no contradiction in the Bible. Accordingly, biblical interpretation can be facilitated and enhanced by careful utilization of the tools from other disciplines.

That is not to say that all doctrines of the Bible require tools from disciplines like the sciences or the humanities to be well understood. In particular, the doctrine of salvation and the nature and attributes of God may be clearly manifest to even the most uninformed reader. But some theology and specific doctrine requires hard work to flesh out appropriately—including the use of analytical tools and knowledge gleaned from other disciplines. Thus, a good grasp of economics, public policy theory, and history are a great boon in developing a biblical theology of public policy.

The political context of the Apostles differed greatly from the situation of the modern West. Not only do most Western nations not have an autocratic state, the rules of interventionism have changed. Rome had no welfare state. This fact is important for Christians because welfarism is based on the notion of “positive rights”. This political philosophy justifies plundering one group of citizens in order to benefit another, and is therefore an abomination to the Christian faith.

Would the Apostles have encouraged modern Christians in the West to participate in welfare state programs or employment schemes? If we take the Scriptural admonitions against theft seriously, the answer must be “No”. The Bible clearly prohibits theft: “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11), “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15; Matthew 19:18, Romans 13:9), “Let him

who stole steal no longer” (Ephesians 4:28a); and it forbids idleness: “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

The fact that the state legalizes plunder through extortive taxation policy does not justify the theft, nor does the state’s rewarding of idleness excuse complacent joblessness. Recipients may not receive welfare and be innocent any more than a woman or her abortion “doctor” can be guiltless of murder when performing a “legal” abortion. How can a Christian rightly contend that the Apostles would have contradicted their teaching against theft by allowing looting through the political process? The bottom line is that a Christian cannot be righteous while *voluntarily* requesting welfare state benefits like Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, educational grants, or subsidized housing.

Furthermore, the existence of democratic processes under a constitutional republic does *not* alter the malevolent nature of proactive public policies or the bad behavior of government agents. Representative government does *not* preclude Christians from championing causes against bad legislation, evil decrees, or nefarious rulers. Neither does it prevent them from disobeying foul edicts. There is nothing in Scripture that would lead one to believe that state-sponsored extortion or state-sanctioned murder (e.g., abortion and euthanasia) are cleansed (or are no longer wrong) because they have been approved through a representative process. And it is inconsistent for Christian leaders to arbitrarily decry abortion policy but not extortion policies.

The Apostles simply did not envision (and could not have imagined) Christian submission to the state entailing us Christians *voluntarily* participating in thefts, murders, unjustified aggression, fraud, or malice. Had the Apostles been able to foresee what would transpire under modern “democracies” in the name of “the general welfare” or the “public interest”, they would have both condemned the policies as evil and certainly discouraged Christian participation in them. Further, the Apostles would have doubtless called believers to be those who stand up against such evil policies, whenever prudent, as a matter of maintaining integrity in their Christian lifestyles and their commitment to the Truth. Nowadays pastors and church leaders, rather than Apostles, are left with the charge of calling Christians to maintain integrity. The big question is: “Are they willing to do so?”