

Should a Christian Always Obey Government Authorities?

Romans 13

When one lives in the same city for thirty years, people will get to know you, and you get to know them. The mayor of this city and I are friends, as are the city manager and several commissioners. Our two U.S. Senators and several U.S. Congressmen have each come to Enid to speak at my invitation.

That is why it probably stung a little when I came out against Emergency Orders issued by our state and local government leaders in the summer of 2020. I had spoken with all of them privately about my feelings of government overreach in schools and churches, but I came out publicly against Emergency Orders at a city council meeting when I discovered that our local leaders were pressured by outside forces.

My opposition to an Emergency Order is not personal; *it is based upon principle*. There are three major issues that I have with the government issuing Emergency Orders (closing churches and businesses, masking people and arresting those non-compliant, and demanding obedience to government officials):

1. An inalienable right is "a right that can't be restrained or repealed by human laws," because it is a right given by God to humans at Creation. The First Amendment provides that "Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or *prohibiting its free exercise*."

2. A Christian is obligated by God to disobey government authorities when government commands that which God forbids or forbids that which God commands (Matthew 5). Jesus repeatedly said, "You have heard it said.... but I say unto you..."

3. An individual Christian sees no Person but Christ as His Head, and disobedience to government officials is a decision that must be respected by others in Christ's body. We should also allow our brothers and sisters in Christ to come to different conclusions about the best political actions. "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. ... The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" (I Corinthians 12:15-26).

Doesn't Romans 13 Tell Christians to Always Obey the Government Authorities?

No. The Scripture nowhere teaches that Christians are to obey leaders. *We are called to respect them.*

Howard Zinn (1922-2010), a socialist leader in the Civil Rights movement, once made this accurate observation: "Historically, the most terrible things: war, genocide, and slavery, have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience."

But Romans 13:1 sounds very clear, "**Everyone must submit to the governing authorities.**" Most Christians wrongly think that the word "submit" means "obey." It doesn't. The Apostle Paul wrote Romans 13:1. He had been living in the city of Damascus, Syria. A local governor issued an order for Paul's arrest. Paul found out about the order to turn himself in. Did Paul obey the government order?

No. He hid in a basket as friends lowered him down from atop the city wall, and Paul escaped (see **Acts 9:23-31**). That does not sound like "obedience" to government.

The Apostle Peter wrote something similar to Paul. "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men*" (I Peter 2:13). Yet Peter, arrested by King Herod for "crimes against the state" and ordered to stand trial, escaped from jail the night prior to the trial. Does that sound like obedience to government authorities? Are Paul and Peter hypocrites? No, they are not.

The word submit used in **Romans 13:1** and **I Peter 2:13** does not mean "*to obey*." It's the same word used in Ephesians 5:21 when Christians are called to submit to "one another," and in Ephesians 5:22, "wives (submit) to husbands." Christian men and women, Christian husbands and wives, are to submit to one another like Christians are to submit to governing authorities.

The Greek word translated submit is *hupotasso*. It literally means to arrange stuff respectfully in an "orderly manner underneath." Submission means I am respectful to those that God places in my life, voluntarily yielding to them when I am persuaded by their arguments.

Christian husbands must persuade their wives and Christian wives must persuade their husbands. Likewise, governments must persuade their subjects. Submit means that Christians respect those placed in their lives by God for the purpose of social order, but it never means blind obedience. Submission involves a voluntary act of one's will.

A Christian can submit to authority while disobeying authority.

For obedience to occur, a Christian must be convinced of the *propriety, legality, and beneficiality* of an action. "To obey" is completely different than "to submit."

Respectful Dissent and the Willingness to Pay the Price Is Submission

A Christian activist may protest a law, ordinance, or Emergency Order through a social media campaign, a sit-in, or outright disobedience.

For a Christian to submit (Romans 13:1) while disobeying government authorities means that the Christian is respectful and civil, but unconvinced of the morality of the action demanded, and is willing to pay the price for the dissent.

The Christian understands authorities may wish to arrest him. The Christian doesn't fear losing friends who don't understand because he's protesting for the betterment of his friends and other people, not himself. The Christian does not worry about being shut out from future honors or appointments. The Christian always speaks kindly of those who disagree. That is submission.

*Submission is a respectful attitude, an engaged mind, and a **willing** participation.*

Blind obedience is the opposite of Christian living, whether it be blind obedience at your church, in your home, or participating in your civic duty.

Blind obedience is, in fact, detrimental to society and harmful personally. Tyranny forces to obedience. Liberty persuades to compliance. Government officials are appointed by God to bring about order and we respect them for their role. But there may come a time in our lives when we, *based on principle*, may disobey governing authorities. Let's all be submissive about it when we do.