

Respect for Authorities



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:13-16, 22:15-21, Acts 5:29, Rom. 13:1-5, 1 Pet. 2:13-15.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience” (*Romans 13:5, NIV*).

One of the greatest questions facing the church is the issue of political involvement. How do people in the world but “not of the world” (*John 17:14*) relate to the political challenges presented by the world? History is replete with examples of churches that have kept silent during times of great moral and political crises; history, however, also bears a sad witness to what happens when churches take upon themselves political prerogatives that place them decidedly upon the side of evil.

This week we look at the complex and often difficult question of how Christians are to relate to the political issues of the day. Because Christians exist in all sorts of political environments, we can look only at broad principles; in fact, the Bible gives us only broad principles. Perhaps that’s because the Lord, knowing the various and often delicate situations His people would be facing through the centuries, revealed principles broad enough to be used in any environment.

The Week at a Glance: What kind of influence should Christians have in society? How should Christians relate to the political process? Should Christians be in government? What principles should we follow in seeking to balance our obligations as citizens with our obligations to the Lord?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 14.*

Sanctified Caution (Matt. 5:13-16).

Many Christians believe we should give up on the world. The world is so evil, so confused, and so estranged from God's original purpose that there is no hope of turning the situation around. Plus, the more we are involved with the world, the greater the chances we will become even more contaminated by it. Withdrawal is the only option for those who want to remain faithful to the Lord. This argument may sound plausible, but is it biblical?

What role does God expect a Christian to play in society? Matt. 5:13-16.

Christians must do all they can to make a difference in society. They are called to give a more pleasant taste to the world around them and to provide spiritual light. As someone once said: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!"

In early Adventism, the question was often asked whether it would be right for an Adventist Christian to go to the ballot box. Today, most Seventh-day Adventists do recognize that it is their privilege to cast their vote in democratic elections and referendums in an attempt to help promote an agenda that is closest to upholding kingdom values. How we do this, of course, isn't always easy; much depends not only upon our political and social environment, which can vary greatly from country to country, but also on what individual members believe regarding which agenda best upholds *kingdom values*. Because these questions can be so fraught with many potential hazards, as believers we should always proceed with *sanctified caution* when it comes to dealing with social and political issues.

How do you balance the verses quoted above in Matthew with texts such as 2 Corinthians 6:17 or James 4:4?

The issue for most Christians isn't that we should seek to better whatever society we find ourselves in, but rather, How do we best do that in a way that doesn't compromise our witness or our obligations to the Lord? As with so many things, we need to strike a correct balance, which is not always easy. At such times, when these questions can have a very powerful impact for good or evil upon the church or upon society as a whole, members, more than ever, need to seek the guidance of the Lord and the counsel of others in how to best proceed.

Key Text: *Romans 13:5.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To understand the extent of the Christian's involvement in government.
2. To know that the Christian's duty to respect earthly authorities is a part of his or her larger duty to respect God's authority.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Christian in Government.

- A. Christians need to pray for divine wisdom and guidance when dealing with social and political issues.
- B. In addition to Daniel, the Bible has many examples of God-fearing people serving in government.
- C. Right now Seventh-day Adventist Christians are serving in governmental positions worldwide.

II. The Obedience Question.

- A. Peter offers a fail-safe principle to guide all our decisions in areas of conflict between church and state: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (*Acts 5:29*).
- B. Biblically, Christians are to obey the laws of their country and strive to be model citizens.
- C. When the laws of men conflict with God's law, we are to obey God.

III. Christian Values Promoted in Government.

- A. God chose Queen Esther, Daniel, and Moses to influence government policy.
- B. The extent to which the church should seek to bring about change in society is difficult to answer.
- C. Where is the line of influence and action to be drawn?

Summary: "In the name of the Lord we are to go forward, unfurling His banner, advocating His word. When the authorities command us not to do this work, when they forbid us to proclaim the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, then it will be necessary for us to [declare the apostles' words in Acts 4:19, 20]." —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 395.

COMMENTARY

I. The Christian and Secular Authority.

Few would deny that the Bible generally teaches respect for established authority. Traditionally, few people in any human society would have regarded this as strange or burdensome. Most civiliza-

Christians in Government?

Imagine your nation is overrun by a foreign power that occupies your land, defeats your army, kills thousands of civilians, levels numerous cities, and takes many prisoners. Imagine, next, that one of those prisoners not only becomes a favorite of the very ruler who destroyed your nation but actually serves that ruler faithfully for many years. Most people would deem this person a traitor, would they not?

Who is the Bible character described above?

The answer, of course, is Daniel (*see Daniel 1; 2:48, 49*), whose story (among those of others) raises all sorts of interesting questions regarding the role of faithful people who are in positions of political power and authority.

What other biblical hero became a powerful political figure? *Gen. 41:41-44.*

Though, no doubt, the world of politics offers many potential pitfalls for any Christian, there have been those who have faithfully served in government positions. Indeed, even in our own church, Seventh-day Adventists have been involved in government. For a number of years a Seventh-day Adventist Christian served as the prime minister of Uganda. In Papua New Guinea, Seventh-day Adventists form a sizable percentage of the population, and, thus, it should not surprise us that there are many church members in high government positions. The same is true for several of the small island states in the Pacific. And even in countries where Adventists are less numerous when compared to the size of the population, we now find Seventh-day Adventists as members of Parliament or in other high positions.

Think about this: We believe God's law is a transcript of His character; that is, the law He has given us reflects the kind of God He is. With this idea in mind, why would we be better off living in a nation where Christians are involved in the political process, the very process that originates the laws of the country? At the same time, what potential dangers arise from those who seek to use government power to promote a religious agenda?

tions have tended to run on a strictly hierarchical scheme, with obedience enforced with a minimum of concern for what we today would call human rights. Indeed, things simply were the way they were, and a bad end awaited anyone who defied the will of his or her family, tribe, or, worst of all, king.

That is not to say that this was necessarily negative or that there weren't benefits to people who knew their role in family and society and performed it gladly and well. Today, however, in most Western societies, the balance has tipped the other way. What used to be regarded as established sources of authority and meaning have lost their credibility: Churches are allegedly run by abusive dirty old men; families are said to be hotbeds of child and spousal abuse; television informs us that parents and teachers are clueless buffoons. Every individual must find his or her own path in life without reference to these bankrupt institutions.

The biblical view differs from these extremes. First, we are free individuals created by God with the choice to obey or not. This not only extends to earthly authorities but to the authority of God Himself. Under certain circumstances, we have the right and responsibility to use our brains and our reasoning powers to decide when we no longer legitimately can obey authority. (*See Acts 5:29.*)

But on the other hand, most of the time we are to obey established authorities and assume that they are in some sense working for our good. Indeed, we are to pray for them and ask God to give them the wisdom to use that power for good. Furthermore, a misguided sense of entitlement or the will to assert oneself is not an excuse to dodge legitimate rules or laws or to attempt to cheat the system.

II. Useful Quotes on the Christian and Secular Authority.

“The general principle which Paul states so unequivocally is the duty of being good citizens. He argues from the nature of organized society, the purpose of God which it is designed to promote, and the right and proper service which ought to constitute the individual's recognition of these facts. He has not guarded himself by including exceptions or discussing difficult cases, and his plea has nothing to do with the beneficence or the oppressiveness of the ruling power. . . .

“At the same time it is only fair to admit that Paul appeals to men and women whose citizenship possesses certain wholly distinctive marks. While subject to the secular empire, they look for the coming of another kingdom—the kingdom of God on earth. To what extent this becomes an issue of immediate practical politics is a question on which Christians have always differed widely; but there is no doubt that it introduces a new element of tension into our loyalty to the state.”—*The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1954), vol. 9, p. 599.

Obedience, Yes . . . But *(Acts 5:29, Rom. 13:1-5).*

Read Romans 13:1-5 and 1 Peter 2:13-15. What attitude toward political leaders do they admonish Christians to have?

Read Acts 5:29 and Romans 13:7. How do these verses help us better understand the texts quoted in the previous question?

There's no question that Christians, in whatever land they are in, should be good citizens, obeying the laws of their country. At the same time, as followers of the Lord, they answer to a higher Power, One greater than the government, to whom they are to give all due honor and respect, tribute, and custom (*see Rom. 13:6, 7*). At the same time, we must not forget that Paul and Peter died at the hands of the very authorities they were telling their people to obey. Obviously, then, respect for authority and obedience to the government have their limits.

Indeed, one powerful example comes from the history of the United States. In the nineteenth century, when the issue of slavery was dividing the Christians in the United States, Ellen G. White made it no secret as to where she stood.

“When the laws of men conflict with the word and law of God, we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be. The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 201, 202.

Throughout the years, there have been many examples of civil disobedience, of people purposely violating the law of their land in order to bring about political change. What potential dangers await Christians who get involved in such action? At the same time, what situations might exist where their Christian duty demands they get involved?

“If instead of praise [the Christian] incurs punishment and persecution, what fault is that of his? After all, he was not looking for praise when he did that which brought him punishment, nor did he do good for fear of punishment. If he meets with suffering, instead of praise, his conscience is clear in the sight of God and he has nothing to fear. After all, he has not brought shame and discredit on the Church. He obeys the power, not for material profit, but ‘for conscience’ sake.’ That is why the government cannot hurt the Christian’s conscience even if it makes a mistake. The Christian is

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Deuteronomy 8:11, Matthew 5:39, Luke 3:12-14, Romans 13:1-7, Hebrews 12:14.*

- ① Discuss whether or not Christians should confront a clearly evil political regime when that regime poses no threat to their religious practice. Discuss if it is a *bad witness* to be purposefully out of step with the dominant political system or if Christians should cooperate with such a system in every way possible.
- ② Generally we agree we should reflect our Christian values in our vote. Yet, often Christians will disagree on the specifics. How is it possible for two Christians, supposedly voting according to the same principles, to come to such different conclusions? What can we learn from such situations?
- ③ It is common to regard politics as a dirty and morally suspicious business. Yet, many Christians, including some Seventh-day Adventists, are involved in it. How is it possible to remain untainted by corruption in the world of politics?
- ④ Usually we are told that we are to obey the law of the land unless it conflicts with the will of God. How can we know when this line is crossed? How might our own biases color such a perception either way?
- ⑤ “You can’t legislate morality” is such a common observation that it has become a cliché. Yet, clearly some morality is legislated. One might even argue that all or most law is based on some moral principle. However, the question remains: How much morality can or should one legislate?
- ⑥ List specific church-state issues that are in the news. What principles regarding the church-state connection can we find in Romans 13:1-7 that will help us deal with these issues in a concrete manner?

Paying Taxes *(Matt. 22:15-21)*

Few people, if any, like to pay high taxes. But in any modern society, the state must have large amounts of money to pay for the things a government is expected to provide: education, basic health care, roads, tunnels, bridges, police, armed forces, and so on. We may question whether the taxes should be as high as they often are, but we cannot question the legitimacy of being taxed.

What did both Jesus and Paul say about the legitimacy of taxation by the authorities? *Matt. 22:15-21; Rom. 13:6, 7.*

The tax referred to in Matthew 22 was “payable into the imperial exchequer, imposed on every inhabitant of the country from the time of puberty until the age of sixty-five. It was resented by the Jews as a repeated reminder of the fact that they were subject to foreign power in their own land.

“The attitude to the payment of taxes remained a moot issue in the early church. Paul finds it still necessary, nearly thirty years later than this, to lay down the rule for Christians. The authority of the state is divinely ordained, and the payment of taxes is to be made ‘for the sake of conscience.’ ”—Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 439.

What other principle comes into play when we deal with our taxes? *Luke 16:10-12, 2 Cor. 13:7.*

We must show honesty and integrity in all our financial dealings. This principle also extends to what we can receive from or must pay to the government. It is dishonest to claim a benefit to which we are not entitled, and it is just as wrong to withhold from *Caesar* what is his due.

Of course, we may use all legitimate means to lower our taxes. But making false claims and defrauding the government are as much a dishonesty as stealing from our employer or from our neighbor. A Christian cannot be expected to smile when his or her taxes are higher than expected, but he or she can be expected to be honest.

Suppose you have cheated on your taxes in the past. What can you do to make restitution?

still free and has nothing to fear, and he can still pay the State its due by suffering innocently.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 237.

“The good that a Christian strives for in a secular society will be the highest good that a secular society can reach in a fallen world. He must not try to impose on his fellow citizens some mirror copy of the kingdom of God. Yet he must find a good way, and give it practical expression in his secular situation.”—*Eerdmans Handbook to Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 292.

III. The Bible on the Christian and Secular Authority.

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (*Rom. 13:1, 2, NIV*).

Witnessing

As children we were taught to obey our parents and respect our elders. In school we learned to follow the rules. On our jobs we report to our supervisors and follow company regulations. When we drive we must obey the traffic laws or be ticketed. All through life we find there is always someone or something in charge. Everywhere we go there are rules to follow and authorities to answer to. We see signs such as Keep Off the Grass, No Pets Allowed, No Swimming, Do Not Enter, and Private Property.

When God created the world He put Adam and Eve in charge. He gave them dominion over the whole earth, including every creature (*Gen. 1:27, 28*). By this we can see that the concept of someone being in charge is God’s design. As long as those in charge do not go against God’s law, we as Christians have a responsibility to submit to authority.

Joseph was a slave in the house of Potiphar, “and his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper” (*Gen. 39:3*). A Hebrew maiden who had been taken captive by the Syrian army directed her heathen master to Elisha the prophet of God for healing (*2 Kings 5*). Even David refused to take the life of the king whom God had anointed, although the king sought to kill him (*1 Samuel 24*).

How can respectfully following regulations and doing our duties with a Christlike attitude provide opportunities for witnessing to both those in authority and our associates?

Promoting Christian Values

The Seventh-day Adventist Church always has been strongly opposed to any interference by the state in the affairs of churches and other religious communities and, vice versa, the meddling by organized religion in matters of government. Individual members may choose to serve their country in a high office, but the Adventist Church believes that, as a corporate body, it should stay away from politics.

This does not mean, however, that the church has no interest in the values that are promoted in society and that it should not make its voice heard on moral issues that affect society. It would be wrong to impose some of our values on others, but it would be equally wrong not to present a strong witness with regard to the values we believe would make the world a better place in which to live. It is not always an easy balance to find.

What examples can we find in the Bible of faithful followers of the Lord who sought to bring about a change in government policy?

Exod. 5:1-3

Esther 7:1-7

Dan. 2:24-27

Besides these examples, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is filled with examples of the prophets attempting to influence government policy; that is, to try to get the rulers to turn away from apostasy and to follow the Lord. Of course, the times back then were radically different from any we face today. Nevertheless, there's nothing wrong with Christians seeking to use their influence toward helping bring about positive moral and social changes. The difficult questions arise, however, concerning just what changes a church should seek to bring about and how a church should implement these changes. Not everything that's sinful should be made illegal, a distinction Christians in all ages have not always understood. Where to draw the line has been and still is a difficult question for the church to answer. Thus, as mentioned earlier, this is a topic in which *sanctified caution* must be used.

What have been your own attitudes toward church involvement in politics? Do you tend to be an aggressive advocate of involvement, or do you think the church should shy away from these issues? What reasons do you have for the position you take?

“Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than men!’ ” (*Acts 5:29, NIV*).

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to commend those who do right” (*1 Pet. 2:13, 14*).

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Vince Lombardi gave this formula for a winning football team to Lee Iacocca: “There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don’t win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to care for one another. You’ve got to love each other.”—Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christianity Today, Inc. and Baker Books, 1997), p. 137.

How do you express love for the authorities in your life?

Thought Questions:

- ① Does loving or respecting a leader require liking or being fond of that person? What insights does Galatians 5:13-15 provide?
- ② What counsel in Proverbs 6:12-19 can be used to evaluate authorities?
- ③ How do 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:12; Galatians 5:14; Isaiah 8:20; Psalm 1:1, 2; and Hebrews 12:1 help us establish boundaries in our relationships with authorities?

Application Questions:

- ① Childhood is the building block for adult behavior. How did you relate to authorities—parents and teachers at school and church? Reexamine memories of the patterns in your childhood to understand how you now relate to authority. Which of the following pairs of behavior belonged to you: blaming or accepting responsibility; riding on the back of others or being disciplined; inconsistency or consistency; uncontrolled behavior or self-controlled through the Holy Spirit?
- ② What does the Bible say about discipline and accountability? These texts can jumpstart your search: Discipline—Proverbs 3:11, 12; 13:24; 1 Corinthians 11:27-32; Hebrews 12:1-13; Revelation 3:19; Accountability—Proverbs 3:21-26, 6:1-4.

Further Study: “Christ’s reply was no evasion, but a candid answer to the question. Holding in His hand the Roman coin, upon which were stamped the name and image of Caesar, He declared that since they were living under the protection of the Roman power, they should render to that power the support it claimed, so long as this did not conflict with a higher duty. But while peaceably subject to the laws of the land, they should at all times give their first allegiance to God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 602.

Discussion Questions:

- ① **Ellen White was very active in the temperance movement in the United States. In fact, she was so strongly in favor of banning alcohol (prohibition) that she encouraged people to vote for prohibition—even if the vote was held on Sabbath. “ ‘Shall we vote for prohibition?’ she asked. ‘Yes, to a man, everywhere,’ she replied, ‘and perhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, If necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time.’ ”—A. L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1984), vol. 1, p.160. Discuss the implications of her stance in the context of this week’s lesson.**
- ② **Is it legitimate, or even a duty, for the church to speak out on some moral issues, even if this may draw the church into a political debate?**
- ③ **Though living at a time of great political corruption, Jesus said very little about the political issues of His day. What lessons can we draw from His example? What lessons should we not draw from that example?**

Summary: Christians are citizens of the heavenly kingdom first, but they are most definitely also citizens of their own country and are to accept their part of the responsibility all citizens should share. The principle of rendering to Caesar what is his and to God what is God’s gives us a broad outline from which Christians are to work in whatever land they reside.