

ROMANS 13:3, 4 THE POWER OF THE SWORD

“Rulers are not a cause of fear for good behaviour, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.”¹

Roger Williams was a graduate of Cambridge University, where in order to receive his degree he was forced to sign articles declaring that the king was by right the head of the English Church, that worship according to the Book of Common Prayer and church government through bishops were lawful, and that the official creed of the church expressed true doctrine.²

Later, his open and bold Separatist convictions got him into trouble. Upon being compelled to leave England for Massachusetts colony, Williams wrote, “It was bitter as death to me when Bishop Laud pursued me out of this land, and my conscience was persuaded against the national church and ceremonies and bishops.”³

To his dismay, Williams discovered that the religious climate was not much better on this side of the Atlantic. His ideas of freedom and worship were contrary to those in the established church of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He curtly turned down the invitation to be the teacher of the largest church in the colony because the people were “unseparated,” that is, the people of the congregation were not distinctly Christian; they were clearly undistinguishable from their non-Christian neighbours. The strait-laced fathers of the colony were infuriated when Williams went among the Narragansett Indians. The Puritans did not count the Native Americans whom they called “aborigines” as among God’s elect. To their dismay, Williams told the Indians that the Great Spirit was the Creator of us all, and that like a parent the Great Spirit cared for his children. The Great Spirit wanted men and women to treat one another as brothers and sisters.⁴

Rather than allow himself to be deported back to England for his convictions, Williams left Salem for the wilderness. Leaving his wife and two daughters, Mary and Freeborn, to trudge through the bitter cold and snow of the New England winter of 1636, he negotiated the purchase of land from the Indians on a site adjacent to Narragansett Bay. There, he established what would eventually become Rhode Island Colony.

Williams named his settlement Providence Plantation, because he believed the providence of God led him there. In Providence, he organised the first Baptist Church in what was to Europeans the “New World.” Roger Williams is remembered as a man who stood against the illicit power of the state exercised against the conscience of those who would worship God according to the dictates of their heart. He stood for religious liberty, and we remember him for his stance to this day.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² H. Leon McBeth, **The Baptist Heritage** (Broadman Press, Nashville, TN 1987) 125

³ McBeth, *op. cit.*, 126

⁴ O. K. Armstrong and Marjorie Armstrong, **Baptists Who Shaped a Nation** (Broadman Press, Nashville, TN 1975) 38

This example from Baptist history in the New World reminds us in dramatic fashion that government—especially government that is allied with church—bears considerable power to compel agreement with its will. The message today seeks to understand the power of government over the citizenry and the role of Christians before the power of the sword. In previous studies we discovered that the power of government is not absolute—there are limits to the submission of conscientious Christians that can be rendered to governmental dicta.

In the verses before us this day, we encounter what I believe to be the most difficult portion of this entire passage. Paul seems to take no account of the possibility that government may be tyrannical—that it may reward evil and suppress good. It would be but a few years after Paul penned the words of this book that Nero would launch a pogrom against the people of Christ. Multitudes would lose their lives, paying dearly for their Faith. In the ensuing years, various emperors would lash out against the Christians unleashing repeated waves of persecution that stretched over two centuries. Persecutions came not because of the Christians' good works, nor even directly because of their Faith, but rather, as Stifler observes, because of "the mistaken notion that the peace and safety of the state were imperilled by the Christians' refusal to honour the Gods."⁵

THE POWER OF GOVERNMENT TO ENFORCE ITS WILL — Preaching on the matter of relations between church and state imposes the need for thoughtful contemplation for each of us. In the message two Sundays past, I gave my understanding of Scripture. I have taught you from Scripture that a Christian is obligated to resist giving obedience to unjust laws. Those laws which proscribe evangelism, pervert morality, distort ethics, restrict the freedom of peaceable assembly, limit the freedom of speech or regulate the freedom of worship must be resisted by the conscientious Christian.

Among the specific examples of resistance to unjust laws that are provided in Scripture, civil disobedience is approved, even expected, when the law forbids worship of God [EXODUS 5:1]. Christians must conscientiously resist when the law commands believers to practise idolatry [DANIEL 3], or commands believers to receive permission before praying [DANIEL 6], or when the law commands believers to worship a man [REVELATION 13]. The law must be disobeyed by all who believe the Master when it commands the murder of innocent lives [EXODUS 1:15-21] or when it commands that God's servants be killed [1 KINGS 18:1-4]. Finally, believers must refuse to obey any law which forbids propagation of the Gospel [ACTS 4:17-19].

As an example of such resistance, I cited the examples of Corrie ten Boom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, each of whom was imprisoned because of resistance to the encroachments by and injustice of the Nazi State. I was very careful as I crafted earlier messages to avoid advocating anything more than civil disobedience. However, I must note that Bonhoeffer did join an attempt on the life of Adolph Hitler.

I wonder whether my cultural background has gotten the best of me. Though I struggle to find specific permission in the New Testament to engage in active resistance, even against a tyrannical government, and though I am cautious not to encourage a church as a congregation to engage in active resistance—even against a tyrannical government—I confess that in light of the teaching of this particular passage of the Word of God I would have difficulty not participating in active rebellion in some instances.

⁵ James A. Stifler, **The Epistle to the Romans** (Moody, Chicago, IL 1960) 216

That government is said to “bear the sword” implies force. God has given to government power to conduct its affairs. It is easy enough to think of countries like North Korea or Iran operating by force. We think of Canada as a free society, and compared to countries such as these, we suppose ourselves to be quite different. Really, we are not so very different in that each form of government must use force to rule.

Examples of the coercive power of the state abound. I need not be specific, as generalisations will suffice to demonstrate the point.⁶ For example, like all western democracies, we have a system of “voluntary self-assessment” of income tax in this nation. When you fill out your income tax forms each April you can read how we are a unique nation in that we “voluntarily” assess our own tax and “voluntarily” pay all those funds which keep our governments (both federal and provincial) operating.

Isn't that wonderful? It sounds very civil to speak of voluntary taxation. However, “voluntary self-assessment” is not really voluntary. Should you refuse to pay your income tax, you will be billed for the amount owing, plus interest. If you, however, refuse to pay after being billed, you will be arrested and your assets seized to pay the delinquent taxes. Thus, paying taxes is not voluntary at all. It is mandatory, and the proof that it is mandatory is that government bears the sword to accomplish its will.

Another example might be provided by those who operate a business in this country. Suppose your business becomes bogged down by the multiplication of governmental regulations applied to your business. You are required to collect GST or HST and remit it to the government, care for employment insurance and Canada Pension Plan contributions for your employees, meet health and safety regulations, obey the Workers Compensation Board requirements, and so on and so forth. You have so much paper work to attend to that you decide you just will not bother to work for the government in these areas any longer. Of course, you will be arrested and your business shut down. The only logical conclusion is that government does bear the sword.

However much we may dislike the coercive power of government, it is a power granted by God. Ideally, this power is given to ensure peace for the citizenry as that which is good is encouraged in society and that which is evil is held in check.

CIVIL AND SOCIAL POWER — There must be constraints to the use of the sword. We have already discovered that government is restricted by God's higher law, and Christians are responsible to distinguish between what is right and what is evil. It may be beneficial for us to think carefully about the limits of government's authority and power. The limits, when defined, will also assist each of us to determine the point at which the conscientious Christian must engage in civil disobedience.

Paul says that civil government is “God's servant,” and officials are “ministers of God.” What can we say concerning the ministry or service which God has assigned to government? It should be obvious from our studies that this service has to do with good and evil. This service is essentially for the physical protection of the citizenry when it is wronged. In the previous chapter of Romans, Paul warned Christians against seeking revenge when wronged. In fact, Paul said that any vengeance belongs to God alone [**ROMANS 12:19**].

⁶ The examples cited are suggested by James Montgomery Boice, **Romans: Volume 4, The New Humanity, Romans 12-16** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1995) 1656-7

Thomas Schreiner has cogently observed, “Even though believers are not to avenge themselves, it does not follow from this that the government abstains from punishing those who violate the law... The ruling authorities have a responsibility to correct those who practice evil, so that society is peaceful and spared from anarchy.

ROMANS 12:17–21 has already shown that God will execute his vengeance upon unrepentant sinners on the last day. Nonetheless, civil authorities also have a responsibility to impose penalties on those who carry out evil.”⁷

The statement concerning government officials—“he does not bear the sword in vain”—refers to government’s powerful authority to punish evil to the utmost. The phrase can refer to both capital punishment and to the making of war when attacked. In this statement, Paul is clear that individuals do not have the authority to execute punishment, but that government, which is established by God, does have that authority.”

The late John Stott, writing of the distinction between the role of the state and that of the individual, says, “We may perhaps say that individuals are to live according to love rather than justice, whereas the state operates according to justice rather than love.”⁸ The statement is not precisely true, since it attempts to set love and justice in opposition to each other, and they are not exclusive. It should be clear, however, that even though the state attempts to show love and compassion, it must keep as its primary concern, justice.

The state is given power to defend its citizens from enemies outside the state and evildoers within the state. That is, the state has the power to engage in war. Within this recognition is justification for creating an armed force, conscripting citizens into those forces, taxing the citizens for the war effort and moving the economy to support the war effort. These are legitimate powers for the state, and they are justified by the need for the common defence; however, the power to regulate the economy and the power to tax the citizens may not necessarily carry over into peacetime.

Within this context, we live in a nation which has historically permitted conscientious objectors to perform alternate service in time of war. Those who truly believed war to be a violation of their Christian duties were exempted to perform other duties. One could not simply evade responsibility; but one could serve in alternate ways.

The state has the power to defend the citizenry from evildoers within. The state has received responsibility to provide for and maintain the social order. This means that individuals who would threaten the state through fomenting civil unrest must be held in check. One reason we Christians are to pray for “all who are in authority” is so that we may live “a peaceful and quiet life” [see **1 TIMOTHY 2:1, 2 NET BIBLE**]. Social order is good for Christians because it ensures opportunity to advance the Gospel.

The second area in which the state has received authority from God is to establish, exercise and maintain justice. This is what Paul is talking about when he says the government is “God’s servant for ... good” and that it is a terror to bad conduct. Government is responsible to reward good behaviour and to punish bad behaviour. This statement assumes a moral standard—a conviction that we can define “good” and “evil.” If the state is to punish evil, there must be a moral standard to which not only the state, but also the individual citizen must conform. In order to punish evil, good must be defined; there must be an objective moral standard which exists outside the state.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, **Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans** (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1998) 678

⁸ John Stott, **Romans: God’s Good News for the World** (InterVarsity Press, Wheaton, IL 1994) 344

This point is vitally important for us as Canadians. John Whitehead wrote a book entitled **The Second American Revolution**.⁹ Though the book was written for an American audience, it applies to Canada—this is especially true in light of the Constitution Act of 1982 and consequent system of jurisprudence that has rapidly evolved as result of that document. The revolution Whitehead writes about is a rejection of rule by law which is objective and unchanging for a malleable sociological law determined by jurists. To explain this point, I appeal to a summation of this matter that is provided by Dr. Boice.¹⁰

“In 1907, [United States] Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes expressed the sociological understand of law for the first time officially when he said, ‘The Constitution is what the judges say it is.’ He meant that the justices are not bound by an absolute law. Instead, they are free to find whatever they want in the law and even to change it. So, there is no appeal beyond what the [United States] Supreme Court decides, even if it is contrary to what the Constitution or any other laws meant years ago.”

The Supreme Court of Canada essentially has adopted the identical activist view espoused by Justice Hughes; thus, today Canadian law has become evolutionary, constantly changing as the bench changes to reflect the particular attitudes of the current jurists. Almost forty years ago, American Supreme Court Justices found a right of privacy secreted within penumbrae of the American Constitution—something which none of the founding fathers could have imagined. These actions permitted the silent holocaust which has witnessed the execution *in utero* of millions of innocent infants. That “right” now serves as the foundation for a presumed “right” to medical execution, which is commonly known as euthanasia. Of course, these concepts were later ratified by Canadian justices to permit abortion by physician in our own nation as well.

More recently, despite action of Parliament, courts in Quebec, British Columbia and Ontario, and finally the Supreme Court of Canada, discovered that marriage is not a union between one man and one woman; rather, marriage is whatever the courts determine it shall be. I suppose it is only a matter of time until we catch up to India and witness the marriage of a child to a stray dog, or witness a man marrying a mongrel.¹¹ Adultery is, for all practical purposes, legal since the courts argue that the criterion for determining legality is whether an act is consensual. Despite intense media attention, it seems a foregone conclusion that the courts will ultimately discover a “right” to bigamy, androgyny and group marriage. More worrisome still is the very real prospect that some bright jurist will discover a right to paedophilia, so long as the act is consensual.

When the American Constitution was written, the authors intended something quite different from what exists today. The founding fathers clearly intended that the law would be supreme. The United States was to be a nation governed by law, and not by men. This particular concept passed into American jurisprudence from the monumental work **Lex Rex**, written by the Scottish jurist Samuel Rutherford and the English jurist William Blackstone, who worked the concept into English common law.

⁹ John W. Whitehead, **The Second American Revolution** (David C. Cook, Elgin, IL 1982)

¹⁰ Boice, op. cit. 1659

¹¹ “Girl weds dog to break ‘evil spell,’” BBC News, 19 June, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3004930.stm, accessed 26 July 2011, “Man in India Marries Dog to Atone for Stoning to Death Mating Canines,” <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,311079,00.html>, accessed 26 July 2011, “Girl married to stray dog”, <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/WeirdNews/2003/06/19/114901-ap.html>, accessed 30 July 2011

The American colonists believed in absolute law to which even the magistrates were responsible. It was on this foundation that they judged themselves right to rebel against the British Crown. It was precisely because King George had violated the rights of “life and liberty,” which had been given to them by the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” that they rebelled. The state’s ability to act justly depends upon absolute law. This is the only truly Christian approach to the authority of the state. Apart from such absolute law, the possibility of equal justice for all becomes a phantom, and the citizens become subject to the constantly shifting whims of their judges.

The state has received divine power to defend its citizens and to punish evildoers. What is of importance for us today is that the state has no authority—and even less power—to actually change or reform the evildoer. C. S. Lewis has clearly pointed out this truth in an essay entitled, **The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment**.¹² Lewis distinguishes between the old idea of retributive justice, in which an individual has done wrong and is punished in accordance with the deed, and the humanitarian concept of justice in which the individual is disciplined in order to reform him.

The former concept is based on what was once known as “desert.” It meant that the murderer is given a longer jail sentence than the thief because the murder is a greater crime than theft, and thus, the murderer deserves a greater punishment. The latter concept is based on what someone thinks might help or cure the criminal.

The Mosaic Law prescribed many kinds of punishment, all of which were appropriate to the offence committed. For theft, punishment included restitution, returning that which was stolen or payment of equal value. If the thief had no money with which to repay, the thief was required to work out his debt.

Again, referring to Mosaic Law, punishment was always public. The offender was shamed before family, friends and society as deterrence. Punishment was also generally corporal. The lash of the whip brought immediate physical and bodily pain. With the exception of execution, punishment was also short-term. Once the penalty was paid, the offender was free to pursue life again.

If we appeal to the principles laid out in Mosaic Law, *punishment is administered as a matter of justice*—of appropriate retribution for a crime; there was no concept of personal revenge. Despite pleas from psychologists, *punishment is intended to be a deterrent to crime*; the guilty individual is to be discouraged from committing further wrong. Mosaic Law required *impartiality*. Wealth or social standing was not taken into consideration in meting out justice. A fourth principle was that *punishment was to be swift*—without delay. With a system of corporal punishment, most punishment could be administered on the spot. A final principle was that *with the exception of execution, following punishment was pardon and readmission into society*.

Modern justice grew out of liberal Christianity. Quakers were among the first to advocate for the modern system of prisons as a humane means to rehabilitate criminals. The terms employed in referring to these institutions during an earlier era—penitentiaries and reformatories—speak of ambition to bring about penitence and to reform the criminal. Heavy emphasis is placed upon the mental state of prisoners in the Canadian justice system. Before release, all federal prisoners must pass through psychiatric testing and be cleared to return to society.

¹² C. S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment” in **God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1970) 287-94

The Canadian system is similar to that found in Norway. Chuck Colson, president of Prison Fellowship, describes a visit to a maximum security prison that is located outside of Oslo in 1980. Here is a recent account of his experience at that time. “I was greeted by the warden, who was a psychiatrist. She gave me a tour of the place, which seemed more like a laboratory than a prison. We met so many other psychiatrists that I asked the warden how many of the inmates here were mental cases.

“She replied, ‘All of them, of course.’

“I was stunned. Really? ‘Well,’ she said, ‘anyone who commits a violent crime is obviously mentally unbalanced.’

“This was the ultimate expression of the therapeutic model. People, the reasoning goes, are basically good, so anyone who could do something so terrible as this must be mentally ill. And the solution is therapy. It is a tragically flawed and inaccurate view of human nature. And, as I learned just a few days later, a very dangerous one.

“During that visit I preached the Gospel to the prisoners. They were completely numb to the message. But as I was leaving, a young correctional officer, a Christian, came up to me. She said she had prayed for someone to confront the prisoners with the message of sin and salvation. She was frustrated by the corrections system in Norway, where there was no concept of personal responsibility, and therefore no reason for prisoners to seek personal transformation.

“Only days later, I learned the tragic news: The young officer I had met was assigned to escort an inmate out to see a movie as part of his therapy. On the way back to prison, he murdered her.”

Then, Colson makes this pertinent point that is essential for justice to prevail. “When we attempt to explain away moral evil, we will fail to constrain it. We cannot account for human behavior without recognizing that we are fallen creatures prone to sin.”¹³

There is a sad footnote to this account. The maximum sentence a criminal can receive in Norway is twenty-one years. Thus, barring some extraordinary event, the Oslo fascist, Anders Behring Breivik, will be released into society again in 2032. A spokesperson for the office of public prosecutions is quoted as saying, “There’s been no reason to keep people in prison for life.” Though the General Civil Penal Code allows for extension of sentences beyond the 21-year maximum for up to five years at a time, when questioned on this possibility, she said it would be highly unlikely. Almost as an afterthought, the idea of life imprisonment was ultimately dismissed with the quip, “That would mean the person is going to spend his entire life in prison.”¹⁴

Our Canadian justice system is actually a mixture of the two concepts mentioned. Jail sentences are supposed to be proportionate to the degree of crimes committed, but judges mitigate sentence on the basis of whether a prisoner is well-behaved, whether alcohol was involved, whether the criminal had a bad childhood or suffers from mental illness or even whether the person shows remorse. Woe betide the prisoner who fails to say, “Sorry.” Such an individual is not yet cured and may never be released from prison.

¹³ Chuck Colson, “The Terror of Evil and Sin,” Breakpoint, <http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/17539>, accessed 1 August 2011

¹⁴ Peter O’Neil, “Life sentence unlikely for mass murderer,” [canada.com, http://www.canada.com/life/Life+sentence+unlikely+mass+murderer/5153625/story.html](http://www.canada.com/life/Life+sentence+unlikely+mass+murderer/5153625/story.html), accessed 1 August 2011

Lewis argues that, although the humanitarian view seems compassionate and thus enlightened (it claims to want only the wellbeing of the criminal), it is actually cruel for several reasons. It takes determination of the nature and length of the penalty out of the hands of judges, who affix it for all according to an objective legal standard, and places it in the hands of psychological experts who alone may determine when the criminal is well. It debases the individual involved. Instead of being a responsible moral agent, capable of doing wrong but also capable of paying a proper punishment for the wrong, the criminal becomes an object to be worked upon by the experts until he is “well” according to their definition. This was the system employed in the former Soviet Union.

Lewis then writes, “If crime and disease are to be regarded as the same thing, it follows that any state of mind which our masters choose to call ‘disease’ can be treated as crime; and compulsorily cured.”¹⁵ This should concern Christians. Christianity has never been popular, and in the name of curing “antisocial” or “intolerant” beliefs or actions, any government that is powerful enough could lock us away until we are cured.

On the basis of **ROMANS 13:1-7**, I am confident that the state has no business trying to cure criminals. Government is mandated by God to punish bad behaviour and to reward good behaviour. That which is good is defined by the fixed standard of God. In the long run, all that government can do is that which God has determined.

THE CHALLENGE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE — The message demands that we draw the conclusion that government cannot develop morality. This does not mean that governments do not attempt to develop morality; but in reality, government cannot create morality; morality is fixed by God who gives life. Nevertheless, modern governments seem intent on changing attitudes through censoring attitudes that they have concluded to be wrong. As one example, “homophobia,” whatever that may be, is censored. Thus, public affirmation of homosexuality compelled by force of law is achieved through government compelling tolerance for that which is against nature. Moral people must not be permitted to express the opinion that homosexuality is a self-destructive behaviour which would die out in one generation if no further recruitment was permitted.

Thought crimes are outlawed under the guise of restricting hatred; negative expressions that are deemed hateful concerning an identifiable group, are outlawed under modern law. To be certain, Christians must not hate anyone—not even government thought police. However, it remains true that increasingly Christians are being censored as criminals because we are said to be “intolerant.” It seems not to matter that we minister to sick and dying homosexuals, or that we seek their welfare; the government is intent on changing our insistence upon naming homosexuality as sin.

“Liberal intellectuals who gave us hate speech laws want to foster sensitivity, toleration, self-esteem, rejection of prejudice and bias through intolerance. ...[I]n a true liberal democracy the only legitimate way to decide who is right is by public criticism.

“The prevailing belief today is that people who hold wrong and hurtful opinions should be punished for the good of society... This is a very dangerous principle that ‘one shall not hurt with words.’ ...Today, there is ‘a social right’ not to be offended. Words that wound ... are now the subject of a social imperative in Canada and a crime.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Lewis, op. cit. 293

¹⁶ Edward L. Greenspan, “Don’t criminalize words that wound,” National Post, Friday, June 13, 2003, A14, <http://www.nationalpost.com/search/site/story.asp?id=AFA2BC47-E97F-460A-B9CC-AC20A4820DA9>,

Consider another transition in governmental engineered morality. Though I don't advocate smoking—it is a dangerous habit, fraught with peril for those who insist on pursuing the habit—it is difficult to see how modern municipal governments can justify the multiplied attempts at creating a new morality by condemning smoking in public places. Consequently, an individual's right to private property is sacrificed for the right of the state to regulate whether the individual chooses to smoke or not. It is of no consequence to the state that it is being enriched through extracting exorbitant taxes on the tobacco (a legal substance); they must regulate it still further. Allied with municipal virtocrats are provincial and federal moral police who pass laws restricting “second-hand” smoke and seeking to sue tobacco companies for selling that which has poured millions of dollars into federal and provincial treasuries. Interestingly, though bureaucrats say that smoking tobacco is wrong, many of the same bureaucrats argue that smoking pot is fine! Some jurisdictions are going so far as to hand out clean crack pipes!

That which is virtuous, and therefore moral, is that which has been declared good by God. Stealing is wrong because a God-given right to private property exists. Murder is wrong because there is an unalienable right to life. Sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong because it reduces fellow humans to a piece of meat valued solely as a means to gratify our own lusts; and immorality violates our holy oath sworn before God Himself.

Morality comes from revealed religion. Christian people are the greatest asset a nation possesses. If the faithful were truly salt and light, we would have worked our way throughout society. We do not need more laws; we need moral citizens who endeavour to honour God and who hold the governments accountable to righteousness. If our citizens are not moral, even the laws which we now have can be, and will be, employed in an immoral fashion. Far too many bright lawyers use existing laws so that people can avoid paying debts, escape imprisonment, cheat the innocent and oppress the poor.

There are biblical limits on how and when believers can disobey government. “Disobedience is not allowed simply because the government *limits* religious freedom. Rather, government must *negate* freedom. All laws limit freedom. It is the nature of law to draw lines so that one may know where his freedom ends and another person's begins.”¹⁷ Consider the following examples which affect us in our worship. Government regulations regarding zoning, building standards or parking are not in themselves oppressive, and they should thus be obeyed. Do they limit the freedom a church has? Assuredly, freedom is limited. However, they do not compel compromise of the conscience. However, should a government mandate teachings or practises contrary to the Word of God, Christian conscience compels us to refuse to comply.

It should be evident that the practical issue of obedience to the state is not easy to articulate. It is not that Scripture is unclear; Scripture is abundantly clear that we must not engage in active resistance to tyrannical government. The question remains, if a state is immoral, can the Christian citizen justify resistance to tyranny? The general rule is that Christian non-compliance to oppressive laws should be a *refusal*, but not a *revolt*; disobedience should be *passive*, not *active*. Even when a believer cannot submit to the law, he must be willing to submit to the consequence of that law.

see also Stephen Brooks, “Hate Speech and the Rights Cultures of Canada and the United States, 49th Parallel, http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue13/brooks.htm#_edn5, accessed 26 July 2011

¹⁷ Norman L. Geisler, “A Premillennial View of Law and Government,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 142, #567, July, 1985, 262

Peter refused to stop preaching Christ, but he did not refuse to go to jail [ACTS 5]. Daniel refused to pray to the king, but he did not refuse to enter the lion's den [DANIEL 6]. The three Hebrew men would not bow, though they were willing to burn [DANIEL 3]. The power of resistance lies in willingness to face the power of the sword.

One excellent example of this righteous attitude comes from the Hessian Anabaptists (c. 1538 A.D.). Having been accused of sedition, their response was: "These who are not obedient to the authorities ... should be punished with the sword by the imperial edict. We do not want to be disobedient to worldly authorities. If we have done evil, then we accept the adequate judgement."¹⁸

We would do well to learn again the reality of ROMANS 8:28. "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." We have a promise in this text that God is able to find ways to bring good out of apparent evil. Thus, even should the state turn against the people of God in a way that is actually evil, God will bring good out of the situation, even if the good comes eventually. Difficult though it may be for us to imagine, Käsemann is correct in his remarks. "Sometimes the Lord of the world speaks more audibly out of prison cells and graves than out of the life of churches which congratulate themselves on their concordat with the State."¹⁹

There remains a cautionary note that must now be spoken to Christians. We must not blindly obey government; but, we are obligated to honour those in authority, recognising that authority is granted. We are to be in subjection to those in authority, realising that God is the author of authority. We must be prepared to hold government accountable through righteous means. I concur with Everett Harrison, who writes, "Christians will not as a church lead in revolution, but only as citizens of the commonwealth. ...[T]he Christian community is obligated to voice its criticism of the state's failure, pointing out deviation from the divinely ordained pattern. Subjection to the state is not to be confused with unthinking, blind, docile conformity."²⁰

A second word of caution is given to governments: do not abuse Christ's people. God is jealous for His people; and though He delays judgement of those who oppress His people, He shall always prevail and He shall avenge His holy people. Governments that seek to compel tolerance of that which is intolerable for believers in the Risen Son of God must be prepared to sink into oblivion if they fail to acknowledge the authority of God and the placement of His holy people.

The words I have spoken are not intended as a challenge to anyone; rather, they are intended to be an exposition of the clear teaching of the Word of God. To those who share our service out of duty, out of boredom or out of mere convenience, our purpose is to present the claim of Christ Jesus as Lord of life. The question that is posed to you is, "Have you placed your faith in Him? Have you received forgiveness of sin? Are you counted as one of His precious children?" Our encouragement is for you to receive the grace of God in Christ the Lord. Do it now. Amen.

¹⁸ Franz Gunther, (ed.), **Urkundliche Quellen zur hessischen**, Timothy Dalzell (trans.), (Waldeck, Marburg, Ger. 1951), 179, cited in Geisler, op. cit., 263

¹⁹ Ernst Käsemann, **New Testament Questions Today** (Fortress, Philadelphia, PA 1969) 215

²⁰ Everett F. Harrison, **Romans**, in Frank E. Gæbelein (ed.), **The Expositor's Bible Commentary** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1976) 138