

Supporting the Civil Authorities

Romans 13:2b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We've been talking about the Christian and government and the Christian's attitude to the government and to politics. What we have seen in scripture is that there are two unscriptural views one can take of the government, or of the civil authorities.

The first is the view that the Federal government, particularly, but even the State government, is not only separate from the church but is antagonistic to the church. This view sees the government as the enemy of the church -- sees the government as the devil in some sense -- and as the leader of evil. This view sees it as the destroyer of religion in schools, as the initiator of unjust wars, as the killer of the unborn. Generally the attitude is that the government is evil and is against all that is good.

Now, at different times the government may be those things. But the error of this view is that it treats the civil authority in the light of the particular politicians or the particular policies that you happen to have experienced at a certain time in history. And it begets in the body of Christ the siege mentality. It begets the "persecuted minority" attitude. It begets a self-defensive attitude. It begets the "ghetto complex" in the body of Christ -- the "run to the hills with your weapons and food until the second coming" attitude. And down through history, that attitude in the church has always brought about a withdrawal from the political process. In other words it has brought about a tendency to withdraw from any participation in the political and civil process of the nation. And indeed, it has brought about a tendency to circumvent the institutions of the civil authorities and to set up our own institutions in parallel to their institutions, instead of acting as leaven in the society. This is always brought about by a withdrawal attitude on the part of the church.

Now, apart from the fact that such a "ghetto complex" or such a self-defensive mentality is ridiculous in a democracy like ours -- where we can vote and run for office and change things if we want to -- apart from that, the fact is that that "ghetto complex" or the "siege mentality" is utterly unlike the attitude that is expressed in this dear book (the Bible) and that is encouraged in the Christians of that day. The spirit of the verse we're studying is utterly different from that. You can see that if you look at it in Romans 13:1: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." I suppose we'd call that a "friendly" verse; "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God."

And loved ones, these people had every right to say "the government is the tax gatherer and the misuser of taxes". They had every right to say, "The government is the suppressor and the repressor of our freedom." They had every right to say that. But here is Paul, in the same days as Nero the emperor, who lit live Christians to illuminate his gardens when he was running his massive parties and he says "No, don't run for the hills. Don't gather your weapons and food and withdraw. Don't pull back. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God. And those that exist have been instituted by God."

The Christian leaders that followed and led the church immediately after the death of the apostles

-- people like Clement and Ignatius and Arodius -- the great Christian leaders that came into existence after the apostles died out, had the same attitude. Not an antagonistic attitude to this government, but an attitude that this government was instituted by God to hold society back from anarchy and to preserve it from the spirit of lawlessness -- that is really the spirit of anti-Christ -- while the redeeming grace of God in the body of Jesus could get to work saving individual souls. I don't know if you've read some of the reports of the persecutions in the early days. They were hideous. They dressed Christians up in animal hides and then put them into the arenas with wild animals to be torn apart. They crucified children and mothers together. They were hideous.

Some of those accounts are written by a man called Clement -- a famous leader of the church. He left us a prayer that he used every Sunday in his church. This is the same man who knew those persecutions wrote the accounts of them that we have. Here's his prayer, written after an especially intensive series of persecutions that had just taken place. "Give concord and peace to us, and to all that dwell on the earth, while we render obedience to thine almighty and most excellent name and to our rulers and governors upon the earth. Thou, Lord and Master, has given them the power of sovereignty through thine excellent and unspeakable might, that we, knowing the glory and honor which thou has given them, may submit ourselves unto them; in nothing resisting thy will. Grant unto them therefore O Lord, health, (this was to a man like Nero) peace, concord, and stability that they may administer the government which thou has given them without failure. For thou, heavenly Master, King of the ages, gives to the sons of men, glory and honor and power over all things that are upon the earth. Do thou Lord direct their counsel according to that which is good and well-pleasing in thy sight." A few days after, he watched Polycarp being burned.

And loved ones, the "ghetto complex" attitude, and the "siege mentality" attitude brings about certain judgments upon us; any unscriptural resistance to the government brings about a judgment upon us. You can see that in Romans 13:2: "Therefore he who resists the authority resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment." We resist the authorities when we treat them for something that they're not; when we treat them as through and through evil; as utterly antagonistic to God, as utterly antagonistic to his plan; as not part of his plan for the world. And when we do that in regard to this "ghetto complex" that we adopt, we incur a certain judgment upon ourselves.

First of all, we bring up our children in fear. We do. We bring up our children -- not in faith but in fear. Fear that the heart of the King may not be in the hand of the Lord. When we adopt a siege mentality, or a ghetto complex towards the government, we bring up our children in fear that maybe God cannot overrule this -- maybe that's one thing that's too big for him. Maybe he cannot overrule the actions of the government in regard to my life. Maybe the heart of the King, as the Bible says, is not, in fact, in the hand of the Lord. So of course, we force them to withdraw in fear from anybody or anything that is secular, instead of encouraging them to be strong and go forth into society, and influence it and be leaven in it. We encourage them to withdraw from anything that is not religious or that is not part of our church.

On the other hand, we affect the person who does not know Jesus by our kind of "ghetto complex" mentality. We create a feeling that Jesus is exclusive and withdrawn and is actually pretty impractical. We create a feeling that he doesn't have much to do with the normal organizations and the normal governments that we have to deal with in this life. And we begin to undermine the authority that was specifically appointed by God to prevent the world from plunging into anarchy. We begin to nibble at the bit of order that exists in our society, just as if we had built the

barricades years ago in the anti-Vietnam demonstrations. They may have been built on very good principles, but they had the overall effect of encouraging the man of lawlessness.

So, loved ones, that's one view: the view that regards the government as evil and as the devil. Now, strange enough, the other unscriptural attitude is the very opposite of that. It regards the government, not quite as God, but as the kingdom of God. And it has the attitude that the best thing possible would be if every Senator and every Congressman were a full time evangelist! Really -- there are loved ones that think, "Boy, that would be the greatest -- if every Congressman and every Senator was a full time evangelist, and the laws of our state and our government enforced Christian belief and behavior upon everybody." In other words, the other unscriptural attitude is the attitude that thinks, "We ought to be making this a Christian nation. We should make this a theocracy -- a community that is bound and governed by laws that not only enforce the Ten Commandments, but enforce belief and obedience to Jesus as well, on pain of penalty."

Of course, the worst thing about that attitude is, it's unscriptural. Jesus said in effect, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, my disciples would fight -- they wouldn't be standing back here. My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is not the Senate of the United States. It's not the Congress, it's not the government of China, and it's not the government of France or Germany or the government of Ireland. My kingdom is not of this world." Then Jesus went on to point out, very clearly, that "The kingdom of God is within you. It's within men's hearts, that's where my kingdom is. That's the only place it can be built. It's an invisible kingdom. It's like a seed that rose silently overnight in a farmer's field. It's growing quietly and secretly. Sometimes you can see it, sometimes you can't. Most times it's invisible. It is not a visible kingdom."

God spent thousands of years scattering the Jews again and again with invasion and exile because they were constantly trying to form a theocracy. They were constantly trying to form a state that would be built on the Mosaic Laws. Not that the Mosaic Laws would simply be used to hold back anarchy and chaos, but they were trying to build a state that would be a perfect expression of God's law here on earth. And God is still in the business of trying to destroy that. Some of us are involved in trying to build it up because we misunderstand what's happening. But down through the years God has constantly scattered the Jewish people every time they have tried to establish a visible expression of what the kingdom of God is because it's impossible -- it was never God's intention.

Loved ones, this view is a failure to make the clear distinction that Jesus makes between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of the next world; or the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the earth. Jesus made it clear when he said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:17) In other words, he said keep them separate and make sure you remember that you can't make the one into the other. It was never meant to be and it will never be.

The civil government is there to keep us from killing each other, while Jesus is able to send his Spirit into our hearts. But the kingdom of this world can never, with its laws, form Jesus in a person's heart. Only the Spirit of God can do that. Galatians 3:21 states very clearly that the law was never meant to do that. "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." So, loved ones, if you could make people alive by laws, then God might permit us to have a theocracy. But there is no law that can make a person alive. There's only a willing surrender of their own

wills to Jesus. Not an enforced submission of their wills to an external law.

But this wrong view of government incurs a judgment too -- just the same way as the other one did. And the judgment is this: that those of us who look upon America and the Federal government and the State government as organizations that we should try to make into the kingdom of God, or to match the kingdom of God as carefully as possible -- or to make it act as an arm of the church or do the work of the church -- we end up using the sword to do it. We end up preoccupied with issues, we end up preoccupied with laws, and preoccupied with public relations questions. We end up with power-brokering -- with being preoccupied with block votes and all the clumsy paraphernalia that men and women here on earth use to try to influence each other against their will. And those of us who get involved in trying to make the political situation into the kingdom of God, end up utterly preoccupied with the very same issues that occupy the politicians -- everything that is involved in external politics. We become involved in those instead of being preoccupied with a love of Jesus, and a love of men's individual souls and hearts, and prayer for them because of him and then we lose the fragrance of Jesus in our lives.

We get coarse and we spend all our time in political arguments and all our time trying to move in caucuses of all kinds -- trying to move people this way and that -- instead of being preoccupied with what Jesus said when he was asked, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said, "It's not for you to know the times or places that God has set in his own good time but you shall receive power and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." So instead of concentrating on being his witnesses, we become what we like to think of as "Christian politicians" -- moving something that will move back three months hence or two years hence or ten years hence. The picture that the person who doesn't know Jesus gets of the body of Jesus is hideous. No longer is it the glance at the winsome bride who, in humble and lowly and loving people, tells him of the secret to life. Instead it becomes a domineering, dominating, overbearing church or Christendom trying to force its will on the majority of the people.

So loved ones, the two uses are extremes. And they incur their own judgment upon us. Now, how can we best support civil authorities -- because that's the topic this morning: not just resisting them but supporting them? How can you best support the civil authorities? It's important to see that that's what Paul is talking about. He is not trying to give an answer to every political situation that exists throughout the world; he is not. And we're foolish if we get involved in that kind of a discussion. God is not, through Paul, trying to give recommendations for solving every political situation that exists throughout the world. All he is doing is directing us, as the body of Jesus, in the ways that we could support the civil authorities to enable them to perform the function that he has given them. Or preserving the world from chaos so that the body of Christ can continue on its ministry of redemptive work and individual hearts. So that's what he's dealing with.

How can we support the civil authorities to perform the function that God has given us? First, by being whole-heartedly involved: by voting, by running for office if God guides us to, by taking part in every way in the political process, as we are obligated and privileged to do as citizens. Not by withdrawing from this society but by acting as leaven in it -- by being active people who are operating inside an institution that God, himself, has created.

That means, at times, that we'll be involved in the same thing as Paul and Peter and the other apostles were involved in. They were often involved in un-Christ-like laws. Laws that were utterly opposed to the will of Christ and utterly opposed to the will of anybody who loved Christ. And yet those laws had either been passed by the majority, in a democratic situation, or they had been

imposed by a dictator. And the apostles, faced with that situation, did not try to fight that, but they did everything possible to bring a Christ-like spirit into the exercise of those laws.

If we had slavery in the United States today, what a wild uproar would be in the church. If you go by our present record, I think probably nobody would ever get saved because the church would be so busy opposing this terrible evil by political power and maneuvering, that it would have no time to deal with little ones who wanted to get to know Jesus. And yet, loved ones, that's the situation the apostles faced. Do you realize that in their time more than half of the people in the Roman empire were slaves? Now, what was Paul's attitude? Did he lead a crusade against slavery? No. It's unnecessary to point out to you that the whole spirit of love that is presented in the Christian gospel is utterly opposed to slavery -- that's plain and obvious. The message is all for preferring the other before yourself, honoring the other person, loving the other person as yourself, giving the other person a better situation and better privileges than yourself, so is utterly opposed to it. Yet here is what Paul writes in Ephesians 6:5-9, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eye service as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and forebear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."

Paul knew that if he were ever to try to change the laws on slavery, all the attention would go off Jesus. All the attention would go off the gospel, all the attention would go off the issues that are involved in living eternally and a searchlight would come on to slavery. And this little Christian group would suddenly become the anti-slavery group that was out to destroy the power of the Roman empire. Paul knew that as soon as that happened, he would be involved not only in the lawlessness that the anti-Christ brings, but in the group pressure that the anti-Christ brings to coerce men's will. So Paul, instead of that, introduced the Christ-like spirit into the way these people dealt with each other. And actually the book of Philemon, (if you know it in the New Testament), Philemon was the owner of a slave. Paul was writing that letter to him, because he was sending back his slave to him who had now been converted. And Paul had told the slave, "Go back to your master."

That's why things like the Golden Crib, I think it's in Philadelphia, is so good. The Golden Crib is a group of people, who, when they discover a girl or a woman who is going to have a baby that she doesn't want and she wants to get an abortion, they get in touch with her. They put her in touch with a family who wants to adopt the little one. The family pays for her treatment and for her support during those eight or nine months and during those months, they also find her another family to stay with that is going to be an adoptive family for some other child, not for her child. So she lives with that family, experiencing Jesus' love and kindness and tenderness, and the baby is born and then adopted. That's why it's so good: the wee girls that are in trouble for all kinds of reasons don't see a Jesus that is saying, "Don't get an abortion -- you are killing your child. You're evil if you kill your child -- don't do that. We're against you and we're going to make the laws against you and we're going to dam up the money so that you can't do it." And suddenly the little girl -- she is wrong, I admit, she is wrong -- but let him who is without sin cast the first stone. Instead, she sees a Jesus who is like the Jesus who met the woman caught in adultery, you remember. He said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." So "go and sin no more" should be our aim. And that's why things like the Golden Crib are so much more in keeping with this spirit that you get in the New Testament in regard to Paul's attitude to slavery.

So that's one way to support the government. Support it in every way -- vote, run for office, take part in the operations, the organizations, and where there are un-Christ-like laws, bring a Christ-like spirit into the operation in the exercise of those laws. The second is the one that is plainly stated in the New Testament lesson: if a government, by forcing you to obey them, is going to force you personally to disobey God, then you must obey God rather than them, there's no question. It's important to do that because that helps the government, too. It keeps the government inside its function and inside the limits that God has set for it. It cannot force men to disobey their God. You'll see that in Acts 4:18-21, "So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people; for all men praised God for what had happened."

And then Acts 5:27-30, "And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.'" And yet, of course, they had to receive the beating that was the legal punishment.

So we can be conscientious objectors, and we can do other service. In fact our government provides service for us to do rather than go to a war situation. We can educate our children at home and we can do other things in education. In areas where we, personally, feel that God's commands to us are being corrupted, or we are being pushed to disobey God, then of course we must obey God.

Now, any questions?

Q:<inaudible>

A: The question is: how do you see the Presidential position influencing church leaders to speak out for things? No. You can't have it. It's not just politics, apart from anything else, but it's certainly not good theology for the President to try to influence church leaders to influence the people to vote a certain way. On the other hand, the church leaders got themselves into it. It's their own fault -- they kind of opened themselves to it by saying, "We could be power brokers too."

Q:<inaudible>

A: What about Bonhoeffer, who was the German theologian, who took part in the plot that failed to kill Hitler? And, loved ones, I thought, how will I answer that if somebody asked! And immediately it came to me the same as that dear man Lech Walesa. I don't know where he stands, but don't you tremble? Don't you hesitate to say, "He was wrong", or, "He was right." I feel the right answer, brother is: what would I do if I were in Bonhoeffer's place? What do I do if I were in Lech Walesa's place? At the moment I am not. And I'd be humble and lowly and say those are hard decisions. It's obvious that the Hitler situation came about partly through Christians failing to take their position in the political process; failing to vote their conscience and to stand up and speak strongly before the terrorism got going. So Bonhoeffer ended up trying to catch a ball that had already been dropped by his team.

Q:<inaudible>

A: The question is if we trust, if we believe that God is able to overrule and to bring all things according to his will, why would we get involved in something that is possibly unscriptural or not according to his will? Seems to me, we would always get involved in things that are according to his will because even though he is able to overrule all things, it's only in the light of our full obedience and willing submission to his directions that he will be able to do that. So undoubtedly there's no difficulty with the things that he tells you to do in scripture. But why would you get yourself involved in things that are possibly unbiblical or not his will if we really believe that he is able to overrule all things? I think, I fear it's a lack of faith. But again, you have to be deeply, sympathetic with someone like Bonhoeffer. You have to be deeply sympathetic with a man who finds himself in that position. But undoubtedly, in the coolness that we can experience here, of our own thinking, it is not lawful for us in that way to engage in evil in order to do it.

Q:<inaudible>

A: Brother asks what about the church offering sanctuary for Salvadorians. I didn't think of that one brother, so you caught me! That situation has always seemed to me such a token expression; a kind of, "we want to do good, and we want to help others." I was a liberal Methodist, at one time. And we always used to look for issues that would make us seem to be doing God's work to society. We always liked to be more benevolent than society and certainly more benevolent than you evangelicals! In fact my wife and I met at that bread and cheese lunch which we ran to feed the hungry. So we always loved that kind of stuff because we often were pretty bankrupt inside in our own spirits and hearts. So I always thought of that (offering sanctuary) as having something of that. I am sure some other loved ones do it out of real love for the Salvadorians. It seems to me wrong. I just think you can't live under a government that is as relatively enlightened as ours and be pulling the rug from under it like mad in your church buildings that are tax-exempt. If you want to carry it on and on, it seems to me if we were in some other countries, they'd roll the tanks in and take care of us. So it seems to me, apart from being unscriptural, a very unloving attitude to take to our government, which, I think, has been very kind to us.

Q:<inaudible>

A: Tim asks wasn't Israel, before the time of Samuel or Saul, somewhat of a theocracy? Well, Tim it was. But it was interesting during the time of the judges; God gave the laws and then allowed local judges to apply those laws in different situations throughout the country. And it was, in a sense, only before God, reluctantly, gave them a king. You remember they said, "We want a king. We want a king so that we can act against the other nations with the same power of the sword." And he refused and refused, and then let them have a king, of course after a number of years. It was a disaster. So it seems to me that you could say there was some former government but it would be hard to call it a theocracy. Undoubtedly he allowed them to experience something of a theocracy in order to see its frustrations and futility. So there I'd go with you; that he allowed them to experience it so that they would see the futility and the frustration. I just don't think it was his ideal will for them.

Q:<inaudible>

A: Lannie is asking what about President Reagan asking for a week of prayer for the nation and for sin and so forth. And loved ones, it's not our place to tie the guy (the President) down. We have

to pray for him and love him. And I'll ask God to give him wisdom, for what he does and what he doesn't do. But I don't feel it's our place to pontificate on what he should or what he shouldn't do. Next, you'd be telling me what I should do, shouldn't do. Seems to me that there's a place for good love and great kindness and graciousness and the guy is not always going to speak perfectly. I think if all of us had our conversations recorded day-by-day that we'd have enough to put us in prison at times! So I am reluctant, loved ones. You have to give the fellow, I suppose, what we'll put up with. Maybe that's what you can get away with. But it seems to me hard to say he shouldn't make any pronouncement on prayer. What he should do or what he shouldn't do is a matter of his judgment and we have to pray for wisdom for him. I don't think we ought to get ourselves into a tight legal situation, "this you can do, this you can't" because life, itself, does not operate that way even in our own personal experience.

Q:<inaudible>

A: The question is how can we appear not to be anti-Semitic if we don't support the things that are done in Israel? This is, believe it or not, what I was trying to say three years ago but it was lost in the shouting! It seems to me that many of us evangelical Christians without any question in our minds and without much study of prophecy identify Zionism with the return to Israel that is prophesied in the Bible. And even in Israel the most orthodox Jews believe that that is heresy. They believe that the whole Zionist thing is not right and that this is not the return that is prophesied when the Messiah comes. That the return that takes place when the Messiah comes will be so much an act of God and an act of Jesus or the Messiah returned to earth that it will have nothing to do with all the manipulating, the power broking, the managing, the killing, the fighting that is going on by the power of our right arm in Israel at the moment. And even the orthodox Jews will not touch the belief that this is actually the final biblical return. But we evangelical Christians, we will not study our prophecy. We will go with those who want, at times, to make use of us, or those who want to interpret the Bible in their own way and we identify that as the biblical return, and therefore we go with it completely and absolutely. We back all the money that is being spent, and we back all the weapons, and we find ourselves in these uncomfortable situations where we have the destruction that takes place of all those men and women in Lebanon. We feel "it's not right, it's not right but this is right". And we get ourselves into that spot because we identify this return as the biblical return prophesied. And we're like Gamaliel; we think we're opposing God, when in actual fact we're not.

Now, of course, the other side is trickier because they know that. And so anybody that does not support what is being done in Israel at the moment, they give a name to. And once you give that name to a guy or a girl, it doesn't matter what he does, he just goes down in the chaos. He is actually in the same position as Paul with slavery: if he speaks up and answers, then it becomes anti-slavery or an anti-Semitic church. So he shuts up and just goes down quietly. It seems to me that that is the issue. I love loved ones who are Jewish. You can't even say the term Jews, become somebody will accuse you of being anti-Semitic when you even use that term. I have nothing but love for what God has made and have no feeling of antagonism to the Jewish people at all and love them. But what is happening in Israel is not the scriptural return prophesied. The scriptural return that is prophesied is very clear if you look at the terms of it: it's Jesus returning and delivering Israel from the power of the anti-Christ and settling them in their own land by miracles. It's not this kind of manipulation which actually, I think, will be doomed to failure and, I think, will crumble from within.

Q:<inaudible>

A: I don't want to draw this out, but I remember Clyde Anderson, who is a lawyer here, saying, "Shouldn't we write to the papers?" This was during the anti-Semitic thinking (towards the teaching of the church), "Should we not write to the papers and oppose and fight?" I think it's good that we didn't engage in the power of the sword battle. I think that's wrong. I think if people accuse you wrongly then you should be willing to go down. I think we'll hold it here.

Shall we pray?

Dear Father, we thank you for your great love. And we thank you for the bigness of your heart, the greatness of your heart, the benevolence of your heart. Lord, we thank you that you did not deal with us according to our sins and you did not reward us according to our iniquities. Lord, we thank you for that. And Father we thank you that you have begotten in us that same heart of forgiveness and mercy -- that same big heart.

Lord, we want to thank you for the government that we have. We want to learn more how we can be citizens that are a blessing to you in this nation. And Father, meanwhile, we would pray for our President and for the other dear men and women who are in the government. Lord, we know there is much evil and much wrong and much sin, but Father we would pray, as Clement of Rome prays, that you would continue to overrule and to preserve our government as a bulwark against the men of lawlessness and the spirit of anti-Christ, that we may have more years to tell others about Jesus. We ask this for your glory.

Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.