

1689 Chapter 24 - Of the Civil Magistrate

Speaker Notes from Harbor Church's 2025-26 Sunday School series on the Second London Baptist Confession (1689)

Comment on style: These were primarily notes for my own presentation & delivery that have been slightly edited & reformatted. Italicized sections sometimes include extra speaking notes, questions, and/or prayers that may be more applicable to the Sunday session itself. Hopefully those are not confusing. Scripture references are usually ESV unless otherwise stated.

- T. Brack

Outline:

1. Source and Purpose of Civil Magistracy
 - a. Christ is King
 - b. His Glory, Our Good – defense and encouragement
2. Christians in Government and its scope (a case for Christian Governance)
 - a. Historical views
 - i. Presbyterian/Anglican – the missing paragraph
 - ii. Particular Baptist – extant publications and sermons
 - b. Scripture's Examples
 - i. Wisdom Literature
 - ii. Record of kings – both in and out of the covenant
 - iii. A NT context (general equity prudently applied)
 - c. Objections
3. Subjection to Government
 - a. Obedience & Prayer
 - b. Unlawful commands / illegitimate authority?

Session 1 - Paragraphs 24.1-24.2a

1. God the supreme Lord, and King of all the World, hath ordained Civil [a] Magistrates to be under him, over the people for his own glory, and the public good; and to this end hath armed them with the power of the Sword, for defense and encouragement of them that do good, and for the punishment of evil doers.

a Rom. 13:1-4

2. It is lawful for Christians to Accept, and Execute the Office of a Magistrate when called thereunto; in the management whereof, as they ought especially to maintain [a] Justice, and Peace, according to the wholesome Laws of each Kingdom, and Commonwealth: so for that end they may lawfully now under the New Testament [b] wage war upon just and necessary occasions.

a 2 Sam. 23:3; Ps. 82:3-4

b Luke 3:14

3. Civil Magistrates being set up by God, for the ends aforesaid; subjection in all lawful things commanded by them, ought to be yielded by us, in the Lord; not only for wrath [a] but for Conscience sake; and we ought to make supplications and prayers for Kings, and all that are in Authority, [b] that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty.

a Rom. 13:5-7; 1 Pet. 2:17

b 1 Tim. 2:1-2

First, a broad definition of 'civil magistrate'. I'm not using my usual standby here (Webster's 1828 Dictionary) because I think Webster took a narrower view than the editors of the confession would have in their day.

Civil Magistrate: A governing official invested with authority by God to administer and enforce the law.

In the 1600s, this would refer to any civic authority from supreme ruler to local justices of the peace. Webster restricted this to the administrative branch, but in their day, the parliamentary body which commissioned the Westminster Confession of Faith were considered civil magistrates.

Paragraph 1

God's sovereignty over nations

We'll start with the very first phrase: "God the supreme Lord, and King of all the World".

Jesus is the supreme sovereign of all, spiritually, and also with respect to the all kingdoms of the earth.

"The basis of civil magistracy is found in the order established by God Himself. His Lordship is foundational to every facet of the exercise of earthly authority. All authority has its basis in God." - J. Renihan [\[1\]](#)

there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God
Rom. 13:1b

As we covered in earlier chapters, God: created all things (*2LBC 4 of Creation & Gen. 1*), instituted forms of authority or proper hierarchy pre-fall (*Adam over creation via naming and dominion mandate, Adam representative of all mankind, Eve as help-meet to Adam*), then post-fall-in what I would call "progressive revelation"-made His will for civil authority known to the peoples according to His decrees, timing, and plans. (*Chapters: 3 Decrees, 5 Providence, 7 Covenant, etc.*)

Post fall, the first explicit fleshing out of the direction for this civil authority took place in the Bible after the flood, Genesis 9:6, when God delegated authority to enact punishment upon murderers.

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.
Ge 9:6

In Gen. 10 & 11, we see the development of nations through different families descended from Noah, which resulted from God's limitation on the unified people's excessive, rebellious earthly authority at Babel, which He did through the division of language. The people sought to concentrate power in order to "ensure a name for themselves". They were avoiding God's command to fill the entire earth and instead sought to reach to the heavens and rival His power (*if such a thing were possible*).

In Chapter 19, we covered the laws that God gave to the one people he called from among the nations to be His (*like a seed*), with the plan that from that people He would raise up a savior who could fulfill all aspects of His will for Man and then fashion an everlasting people in His likeness from all nations.

Before the leaders of Athens, Paul put it this way:

"And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him."
Ac 17:26-27

The Father had sovereignty over the course of the nations and at the right time vested all of that into the Son. (See Mt. 28:18, *the great commission*.)

We know that Satan tempted Jesus with rule of all the kingdoms of earth, presumably to be given by Satan to Christ, but according to schemes that would have been at odds with the will of the Father. Jesus absolutely would have all rule and authority over all the kingdoms - but not by the will of the devil, not by his power or means. Instead, that "strong man" as he was described in Luke 11:14-21 would be bound in the exact way and time prescribed-by the decree of God the Father and by the death and resurrection of Jesus who now sits at the right hand of the Father.

Providential delegation with a purpose

While recognizing that all civil authority is under God, beyond that, this chapter doesn't call for any explicit or concrete structure of government, other than perhaps the mention of the word "Kings". Renihan puts it this way: "Caution should be used when reading this chapter... it is not an exhaustive treatise about government." [\[2\]](#)

It doesn't otherwise delineate specific types of officials (sheriffs, judges, mayors, etc.). However, it does recognize that the 'offices' of civil magistrates exist for specific purposes and with particular duties.

Q. According to this first paragraph, why did He institute such authorities?
A. For His glory and for our public good.

These goods are namely: use of the sword to punish evil doers and also to defend and encourage those who do good. *(These two may or may not be one and the same thing... some might argue they are. I would argue they are two distinguishable yet overlapping functions.)*

there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God ...he [the magistrate] does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God [for your good], an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Rom. 13:1b & 4b

Here's some examples of God getting glory from actions of governments either in: exacting justice and/or fulfilling his prophecies:

- Nebuchadnezzar bringing the sword to Judah - Jer. 25 (including v12)

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words,
9 behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for
Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land
and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to
destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation.
Je 25:8-9

- Is. 41 - Cyrus of Persia conquering Babylon and issuing the decree for the Israelites to return, Ezra 1:1-4

Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those
who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish.
Is 41:11

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I name you, though you do not know me.
5 I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
Is 45:4-5

These are very explicit examples, but in the general case, it is still true that all civil rulers are to fill this function.

From AA Hodge, an Excerpt From The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Commentary

"If the glory of God is the chief end of every man, it must be the chief end equally of all nations and communities of men; and it ought to be made the governing purpose of every individual in all his relations and actions, public and official, as well as private and personal. And if the glory of God is his chief end, it is that to which all other objects and designs are subordinated as ends. The specific way in which the civil magistrate is to endeavour to

advance the glory of God is through the promotion of the good of the community (Rom. 13:4) in temporal concerns, including education, morals, physical prosperity, the protection of life and property, and the preservation of order.” ^[3]

A comment about promoting of good vs. the magistrate doing the good himself: This doesn't mean magistrates are to take on all of the functions Hodge listed as their own duty, but in many cases are to secondarily enable those who are to do them. ie: they aren't everyone's father or everyone's school teacher, but help fathers and school teachers do tasks God has delegated to them. As Hodge continues...

“This they are to do, not by assuming the functions of the Church, nor by attempting by endowments officially to patronize or control the Church, but personally by their example, and officially by giving impartial protection and all due facility for the Church in its work; by the explicit recognition of God and of Jesus Christ "as Ruler among the nations;" and by the enactment and enforcement of all laws conceived in the true spirit of the Gospel, touching all questions upon which the Scriptures indicate the will of God specifically or in general principle, and especially as touching questions of the Sabbath-day, the oath, marriage and divorce, capital punishments, etc.”

Now clearly, this latter section of his quote is not something we see today in our nation, really, whether we are talking about the first table or the second table of the law. (I do intend to make the case later on that this general sentiment would probably have met with more agreement than disagreement from the editors of the 2LBC in comparison to what we see today in modern conceptions of how liberty of conscience & the civil magistrate intersect.)

Paragraph 2

2. It is lawful for Christians to Accept, and Execute the Office of a Magistrate when called thereunto; in the management whereof, as they ought especially to maintain [a] Justice, and Peace, according to the wholesome Laws of each Kingdom, and Commonwealth: so for that end they may lawfully now under the New Testament [b] wage war upon just and necessary occasions.

a 2 Sam. 23:3; Ps. 82:3-4

b Luke 3:14

Christians and power are not oil and water

The gospel does not create a dichotomy between power and righteousness.

Christians are not called to give up authority or abdicate their public vocations in society in order to follow Jesus. When asking John the Baptist who prepared the way for Christ what they should do, tax collectors and soldiers were not told to find new jobs. They were directed to behave righteously within their professions: not extorting, embezzling, or lying, but being content. Their roles in support of "Caesar" were not abrogated.

I think this is a point of relative confusion in evangelical circles today, in that there is not a small number who seem to think that to be properly Christian means must they divest themselves of any authority they might hold over unbelievers... Either that or they must always defer to the liberty of

unbelievers (as unbelievers define liberty), sort of like how some think Christians must be poor in order to be the kind of faithful follower Christ really wants.

KC mentioned last week how at some point in our history the nation became functionally anabaptist. (No oath taking, office holding, use of the sword, etc.)

Again turning to Hodge, I think he has a very simple explanation for just how illogical this thinking is on the part of Christians:

"It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate. This is evident enough. Indeed, in the highest sense, it is lawful for none other than Christians to be magistrates or any thing else, since it is a violation of God's will that any man is not a Christian. And the greater the number and the importance of the relations [viz. roles and responsibilities] a man assumes, the greater becomes his obligation to be a Christian, in order that he may be qualified to discharge them all for the glory of God and the good of all concerned." [\[4\]](#)

Essentially, who could better execute justice and peace than men who are able to understand true justice and peace and can actually offer functional, binding oaths?

The scope of that power

Per the confession, this activity is supposed to be according to "wholesome" laws. Let's look at what that means.

WHOLESOME, adjective [G.]

1. Tending to promote health; favoring health; salubrious; as wholesome air or diet; a wholesome climate.
2. Sound; contributing to the health of the mind; favorable to morals, religion or prosperity [\[5\]](#)

That's a fairly vague scope, though, isn't it?

What is the extent of the magistrate's power when it comes to the intersecting areas of authority between the church and state? Is one over the other? Does government have authority or duty to enforce aspects of the first table of the moral law; or as James Baird asked in his recent work, *King of Kings*, "Must government promote Christianity as the only true religion?" Overall, why does our confession seem so quiet on these matters? Why not include an "exhaustive treatise on government"?

Before we get there, though, this is a good point to discuss the "missing" paragraph-paragraph 3 from the Westminster confession.

Here's how it reads from the 1646 version:

WCF 23.3 1646 version:

3. The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

This was also drastically amended by American presbyteries in 1788.

American 1788 Philadelphia revision:

3. Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.

Let's start with the last question I posed first: "Why does our confession seem so quiet on these matters?" Remember that the reformed confessions are meant to be relatively succinct summaries of primary and secondary doctrines of the whole counsel of scripture and they are products of a specific process. For example, the WCF was written during a period of Civil War by an assembly of English puritans and non-voting members of parliament and Scottish covenanters (presbyterians who'd overthrown the rule of Bishops). There were also minority viewpoints in some matters from congregationalist leaning members or those that were more Erastian (*who considered national states fully over church*), etc.

Then, the 2LBC was a further revision from believers who had just been subject to persecutions and were trying to express both their substantial unity with the rest of the reformed tradition yet also key points of difference in how they viewed covenant theology and the resulting make-up of the church. Likewise, they would've likely had their own views on this topic of civil government, but also want to remain in peaceful unity. In light of this I would argue that the relative silence on some of these issues shouldn't be taken too strongly. We shouldn't turn it into a "wax nose".

Instead of seeing an effort at intra-protestant ecumenism and a nuanced increase in toleration with respect to worship and church polity, I think there has been a tendency to read this chapter with a

specific hermeneutic, which I would describe as follows: "fully incorporated 1st amendment, regulative principle of governance". Meaning, I think there are at least two frames of mind that may be unduly influencing contemporary interpretations here:

1. our current culture's highly "secularized" legal framework regarding "freedom of religion" (this develops from generational apostasy, a national re-founding via supreme court activism, & dilution via multi-culturalism), and...
2. regulative principle of worship (*again, hermeneutically speaking*) misapplied to a political context.

As a result, I think some have interpreted silence as akin to forbiddance of any civic authority; I think in some circles, we've seen something more than just godly submission to Caesars running a progressive, atheistic theocracy, but participation in crafting a "baptized" apologetic for the system as we know it.

Were the Particular Baptists arguing for religious liberty as we know it today?

Certainly at any point in time, there will be a diversity of opinion on a topic like this. Not everyone in any historical snapshot is going to have exactly the same point of view. However, I'd like to bring up a few points of consideration to show that they most likely were not seeking some kind of neutral playing field in society for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, etc.

First, let's consider the DECLARATION OF SEVERAL OF THE PEOPLE CALLED ANABAPTISTS, IN AND ABOUT THE CITY OF LONDON from 1659.

"This document was signed by 24 Particular Baptists, including two of the three Particular Baptists who signed both the First London Confession and the Second London (William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys), as well as many of the other most important leaders of the movement, such as John Spilsbury, Henry Jessey, and John Tombes. If there is any document that could be considered to be representative of the early Particular Baptists, it would be a document signed by these men." - Andrew Warrick [\[6\]](#)

In it, they sought to address 5 accusations:

1. As such, we are opposite to Magistracy.
2. That we would destroy the Publick Ministry of the Nation, who differ from us in some things about Religion.
3. That we do countenance the people called Quakers, in their irregular Practise.
4. That we endeavour a Toleration of all miscarriages in things Ecclesiastical and Civil, under pretence of Liberty of Conscience.
5. That we design to murder and destroy those that differ from us in matters of Religion, thereby endeavouring to make us odious to some People fearing God, And also to incense the rude Multitude against us, to provoke them (if possible) to destroy us.

In other words, they were accused of being opposed to civil government, that they would destroy the established church, that they would support irregular practices like the Quakers, that they sought toleration in all things regarding church and state under the name of 'liberty of conscience', or that they sought to murder or take up arms against other Christians.

A few quotes from it...

On point 1,

"it hath been our profession, and is our real practise, to be obedient to Magistracy in all things Civil, and willing to live peaceably, under whatever Government is, and shall be established in this Nation: for we do believe, and declare, Magistracy to be an Ordinance of God, and ought to be obeyed in all lawful things."

On point 2,

"As for the publick Ministers of the Nation, who differ from us in the matter of Baptizing Infants, and some things in Church-Government; We are so far from endeavouring to destroy them, that we judge, they ought to have the Liberty of their Consciences therein; and that it is our duty to stand by them, and preserve them (so much as in us lies) from all injury and violence."

"To the fourth: Whereas we are further charged with endeavouring an universal Toleration of all miscarriages, both in things Religious and Civil, under pretence of Liberty of Conscience; it is in both respects notoriously false. And we do before the Lord, that shall judge both quick and dead, yea, before Angels and men, declare our utter detestation of such a Toleration; for in matters Civil, we desire there may not be the least Toleration of miscarriage in any, much less in our selves.

Nor do we desire, in matters of Religion, that Popery should be tolerated, the blood of many thousands of the people of God, having been barbarously shed, by the Professours thereof; or any persons tolerated, that worship a false god; nor any that speak contemptuously and reproachfully of our Lord Jesus Christ; nor any that deny the holy Scriptures, contained in the Books of the Old and New Testament, to be the Word of God: And yet, we are not against tolerating of Episcopacy, Presbytery, or any stinted form, provided they do not compel any others to a compliance therewith, or a conformity thereunto"

So the Particular Baptists that were party to this document were: clearly for liberty of conscience with respect to Protestant Christian belief, not belligerent against an established church, and wholly opposed (expressing utter detestation) to the kind of "religious freedom" we see in our day, that is, broad acceptance of false religions on the part of the magistrate. (*Again, we ought to look again to Chapter 21 to see how scripture properly defines religious freedom.*)

Another document written by Particular Baptist churches in Northumberland (*bordering Scotland*) to Cromwell The Lord Protector in 1654, expressed happiness in his "glorious conquests and wonderful victories by land and sea, which hath spread Christ's fame" and detailed their prayers that his highness "may effectually endeavor (by the rule of God's word) to suppress all profaneness, idolatry, atheism, blasphemy, the contempt of scriptures, ordinances, and seasons of God's worship..." [\[2\]](#)

Another key consideration is that the Particular Baptists were both against the James II's Declaration of Indulgence in 1687 and for William and Mary's Toleration Act of 1688. James' act was broad toleration that removed tests for public office, but the latter explicitly excluded Roman Catholicism

and anti-Trinitarians. It also required profession of Protestant faith for holding public office. William Kiffin put it this way in his autobiography:

"A new project, therefore, was set on foot to engage the Protestant Dissenters by giving them the liberty of their meetings and promising them equal authority in the nation with other men. But this was in the tail of it to engage them thereby to promote the taking off the test, and to strengthen the Popish interest by setting the Protestant Dissenters against the Protestants of the Church of England. This plot, being carried on with all diligence, took with several Dissenters, but indeed they were but few and for the generality of the meaner sort, William Penn being indeed the head of that party." [\[8\]](#)

More from Keach's sermon on acknowledging God in all our ways, a sermon in response to a civil call to prayer and fasting could go here, but leaving out for presentation time.

From John Gill:

"[Magistrates] are to discountenance and suppress impiety and irreligion; and to countenance and encourage religion and virtue; even Aristotle observes in his book of Politics, that the first care of government should be the care of divine things, or what relate to religion... Kings are the guardians of the laws of God and man; and Christian kings have a peculiar concern with the laws of the two tables, that they are observed, and the violators of them punished; as sins against the first table, idolatry, worshiping of more gods than one, and of graven images, blaspheming the name of God, perjury, and false swearing, and profanation of the day of worship: and those against the second table; as disobedience to parents, murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness, &c. most of which, under the former dispensation, were capital crimes, and punishable with death; and though the punishment of them, at least not all of them, may not be inflicted with that rigor now as then; yet they are punishable in some way or another; which it is the duty of magistrates to take care of." [\[9\]](#)

Session 2 - Paragraphs 24.2b-24.3

Began with a short recap of prior content, a definition of wholesome, reminder that we examined historical particular baptist thoughts and how we shouldn't read this chapter anachronistically, that is, assuming they aimed at what the US has "achieved" with respect to freedom of religion.

If you were tasked with fielding questions like, "What is Caesar's?" "What is right for a civic ruler/authority to do or not do?" What's the right place to turn? (Well, primarily, the precepts and examples given by special revelation, and then the light of nature & general revelation, right?)

Overview of OT's direction and assessment of civil magistrates

Direct Instruction

So, let's do a little of that right now, looking at wisdom literature, the examples of the kings, and finally the New Testament.

If we look to the Psalms:

1 Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
3 "Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
6 "As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill."

7 I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
11 Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
12 Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Ps 2:1-12

What are all rulers called to do lest they be broken into pieces by our Savior and King? (*Re-read verses 10-12 and note this is all kings, without distinction.*) They are called to recognize who the Son is, submit to him, and take refuge in him. They are also called to in general, "be wise".

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. 9:10

Proverbs opens by saying,

1 To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
3 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
4 to give prudence to the simple,

knowledge and discretion to the youth—

5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,

6 to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Pr 1:2-7

As a whole, the wisdom contained within the Proverbs (and the rest of scripture) is described as follows:

15 By me kings reign,
and rulers decree what is just;

16 by me princes rule,
and nobles, all who govern justly.

17 I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.

18 Riches and honor are with me,
enduring wealth and righteousness.

19 My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
and my yield than choice silver.

20 I walk in the way of righteousness,
in the paths of justice,

21 granting an inheritance to those who love me,
and filling their treasuries.

Pr. 8:15-21

Rulers ought to see the wisdom of Solomon in the Proverbs. Also, in subsequent chapters we routinely see there are two paths only, the righteous way of the Lord or the one that leads to destruction.

Proverbs 10 also is full of applicable instruction:

The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot. 10:7

Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray. 10:17

The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. 10:21

By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown. 11:11

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. 11:14

So rejection of this wisdom is not something a ruler should do, nor should he want his people to do so.

I would encourage anyone to read through all the proverbs imagining you were a king, president, legislator and see where you end up regarding what such officials ought to do or not do within their office. *(I think most would come away saying they need to know and apply the whole counsel of the word... they'd need to know exactly how God defines righteousness, good, and lawfulness.)*

Indirect instruction by narrative and assessment

both in covenant...

Next, if we looked to narrative examples instead of proverbial ones what might we see? Specifically, in the record of kings what exactly constitutes a good ruler vs. a bad one? At a high level, those that used their authority to extinguish idolatry and evil practices and promote justice according to God's laws... these are assessed as the good kings to varying degrees. That would include: David, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah/Azariah, Jotham, Hezekiah, Josiah.

Let's consider the instruction given in the final words of the good king David from 2 Sam. 23

1 Now these are the last words of David:

The oracle of David, the son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man who was raised on high,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the sweet psalmist of Israel:

2 "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me;
his word is on my tongue.

3 The God of Israel has spoken;
the Rock of Israel has said to me:
When one rules justly over men,
ruling in the fear of God,

4 he dawns on them like the morning light,
like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,
like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

5 "For does not my house stand so with God?
For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.
For will he not cause to prosper
all my help and my desire?

6 But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away,
for they cannot be taken with the hand;

7 but the man who touches them
arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear,
and they are utterly consumed with fire."

2 Sa 23:1-7.

For certain, this can be applied spiritually with respect to Christ's rule, but since all earthly kings are under His authority, doesn't it make sense to apply the twofold principle from verse 3 temporally as well? A good king rules justly (*as defined by the wisdom of God's word ie: the second table*) in the fear of God (*first table*).

Or King Hezekiah in 2 Ki. 18:

3 ... he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. 4 He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan). 5 He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. 6 For he held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses.
2 Ki 18:3-6.

...and not in covenant

On Verse 6; is this only because the Israelites were in a covenantal theocracy as God's chosen people? Well... look at the assessments of Gentile kings.

- The king of Nineveh in Jonah 3:7-9 - commanded all his kingdom to repent at the warning of God, and the wrath of God was turned from them.
- Nebuchadnezzar did a number of things wrong, but when did he do right? He essentially instituted the 3rd commandment after his attempt to immolate Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, backing it up with capital punishment. (Dan 3)
- Darius in Dan. 6 - after Daniel's defiance and supernatural rescue, Darius turned his prior edicts on their head, decreeing that all his kingdom ought to tremble and fear before the one true God, and then threw his bad advisors to the lions instead.

OT Israelite kings are evaluated as extensions of God's kingship, with success measured by faithfulness to God's commands, but even lacking a similar covenant, Gentile kings are assessed likewise.

In the New Testament, does this change?

While there is a greater focus on how believers are to interact with other people and authority regardless of which nation they live within, I don't see any fundamental criteria changing in the New Testament with respect to: what makes a good ruler, what defines justice, or what is public good.

For example, Paul continued to declare the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) and in Acts 17, while being subject to earthy authorities he still told them that "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed" What defines righteousness certainly has not changed, which is why earlier in the confession (*Chapter 19*) the moral law and the "general equity of the [civil] law" is still applicable. Therefore it follows that good rulers would prudently apply these components of the law. (*Dusty Deevers recently gave an exposition of Acts 17 at Founder's conference.*)

It is important to consider this chapter in connection with many of the other topics we have already covered, particularly Law 19, Liberty 21, Religious Worship 22, lawful oaths 23, and in future, the church 26. A number of points in these touch on the scope of civil authority.

(We had a question last week that was along the lines of... if these things are outside our control, what's the point of going over them? The answer is that we don't know who might end up being a public official in our church. It is good for us to know these things for that reason. Also, in our society we have the ability to influence who may be elected to many such roles. Therefore, we ought to be knowledgeable with respect to scripture and God's standards so as to be proper voters.

Additionally, I just wanted to provide some encouragement for us that it is good and proper to consider taking on such roles and that within them, it is righteous to do what you can to extend the justice and mercy that God would will to be done-to be explicitly pro-Christ, for His commands and for His people, too. Working that they may live peace-able God-fearing lives, and that both the magistrate and the people would make God's glory their chief end.)

Potential Objections...

On the last sentence of the paragraph regarding just war:

What about turning the other cheek? Mt 5:39 Are Christians called to a pacifistic life; how can we wage war in light of that? First, remember the moral law of God endures from the Old Testament to today. The 6th commandment applies to unjustified killing-murder, crimes of passion or personal vengeance-not the execution of proper justice by proper authorities or the protection of others in our care. This is evidenced by the many instructions in the law about when to use capital punishment against offenders; even then it never meant all killing.

Also, any Christian is duty bound to understand the OT & the NT, able to reconcile actions that the Israelites were directed by God to take against Canaanite peoples with the commands of Christ about extending the kind of love and mercy to others that He showed to us. If we avoid enacting retributive justice when it is called for and is within our authority can also be wicked. *(Consider the murderers and rapists who are currently being deported. We may get rid of them temporarily, but they will still be a terror to their land if set free there.)*

But what if a bad magistrate holds that kind of power discussed above, enforcing perhaps both tables of the moral law (ie: protecting church, stopping idolatry, requiring no work on the sabbath). What if a bad ruler turned that against Christians)? There can always be unrighteous people in positions of authority (particularly given Romans 3:10 - no one is righteous). That doesn't negate the role itself, nor what God has delegated to it.

Consider that there can be false shepherds in the church or fathers who are selfish, uncaring, or doing rather poorly at raising their children in the way they should go. Does that mean we argue against the role of fathers or against the existence of the family or church elders? Do we try to undermine the duties and authority scripturally delegated to them? No, of course not. Yet somehow many Christians have become convinced that civic rulers ought to be a bit kneecapped to keep them out of trouble... or that they must act impartially with respect to revealed truth vs. false religions and ideologies.

These kinds questions also lead us directly into the 3rd paragraph, which deals with how we ought to respond to the civil magistrate.

Paragraph 3

3. Civil Magistrates being set up by God, for the ends aforesaid; subjection in all lawful things commanded by them, ought to be yielded by us, in the Lord; not only for wrath [a] but for Conscience sake; and we ought to make supplications and prayers for Kings, and all that are in Authority, [b] that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty.

a Rom. 13:5-7; 1 Pet. 2:17

b 1 Tim. 2:1-2

In response to our civic leaders' conduct, be it righteous or scandalous, we are called to two main actions:

1. Obedience in all lawful commands
2. Prayer and supplication for all in authority

Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Ro 13:5-7

Obedience

With respect to wrath:

14 A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and a wise man will appease it.
15 In the light of a king's face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain.
Pr 16:14-15

A king's wrath is like the growling of a lion,
but his favor is like dew on the grass.
Pr 19:12

21 My son, fear the LORD and the king,
and do not join with those who do otherwise,
22 for disaster will arise suddenly from them,
and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?
Pr 24:21-22

Also Pr. 20:2, 25:15

And to conscience:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work... For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,
Titus 3:1, 3-4a

Appropriate obedience is a good work of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul called "excellent and profitable"-the right response to being saved by Jesus.

Common Questions

What about unlawful commands?

First, reconsider what we covered in Chapter 21, the liberty of conscience. There were times where the apostles and early church leaders did not follow what the magistrates commanded them to do because they must obey God over and above man. Caesar cannot demand that which is not his.

But in making such a stance against a ruler we can expect persecution in return. A number of the particular baptists were imprisoned in their day for continuing to meet or lead in worshipping congregations not approved of by the state. Biblically, we could see how the apostles were subject to martyrdom without taking up arms. (*Also examples like John Bunyan*)

What about use of arms against rulers; is it ever justified?

It is not a topic entered into lightly, but obviously one we must consider, particular given our national history... pertinent historical documents include books like *Vindiciae contra tyrannos: A defense of liberty against tyrants* which was likely written by one or more Huguenots and its precursor, *The Magdeburg confession* written by Lutherans which argued in support-not of general revolution-but the validity of one lesser magistrate interceding on behalf of those to which he is bound by duty and people rallying in support of that magistrate.

Certainly, the actual belligerents and situations on the ground matter, too. For example, in some cases we must ask if the leaders in question are even legitimate rulers. If we were to consider the American war for independence as a case study, there are questions of whether it should even be classified rightly as a "revolution" (*though that is certainly how most secular education seeks to define it*) or if the Americans were attempting to repel an unlawful seizing of power by parliament. Were colonists appealing to the covenants they'd established with their king and rejecting usurpation by parliament?

We could in like manner consider the biblical account of Jehoiada who orchestrated a coup against Queen Athaliah to restore Joash, the rightful heir to the throne. (2 Ki. 11) These situations are different than say... Jeroboam and the Israelites rebelling against Rehoboam, stoning the taskmaster and dividing the kingdom because the king was a poor ruler who planned to be harsh to the workers. (1 Ki. 12)

Holy Peace via salvation and truth is the end

Also, let's look at the context of the referenced verse from 1 Tim:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Ti 2:1-4

If we go just a few verses earlier, why is Paul exhorting Timothy to teach his flock to do this?

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.

1 Ti 1:18-19a

In 1:18, it's because this is the believer's warfare: holding to the faith in good conscience. And the rest of the book is about properly filling and maintaining orderly structures of authority, serving Christ in truth with contentment.

Turn to 1 Tim 6 and read 11-19. In 6:11, "Pursu[ing] righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight[ing] the good fight of the faith." To do this is to "take hold of the eternal life to which you were called".

"For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."

Brief conclusion

The civil magistracy is: a temporal aid, part of God's providence, an important means of His rule, and it plays key roles in the extension and support of His eternal kingdom. Whatever our roles are within this aspect of life, as in all other things, our focus should be on Christ and eternity, doing as He has commanded and thereby loving Him and neighbors as ourselves and enjoying Him to His glory.

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