



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

"The Bible's teaching on the duty of rulers"

The Believer



and obedience to the State

Genesis 9:1-13 and Romans 13:1-5

The substance of a sermon preached by Rev. Gordon Dane, minister of Coragarry Free Presbyterian Church, Co. Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland, at the 1998 Kilskeery Annual Conference September 18th --20th

The subject of civil government or what the compilers of the Westminster Confession called 'the civil magistrate ' is a vital one. You do not have to read far into God's Word before you begin to read of regulations for civil government and of God making provision for the right rule of the people. But this is a very neglected subject. It is for that reason that I feel I need to start by making a number of general introductory statements about civil government and what the Bible says about rulers.

1). In Romans 13:1, we are told that the powers that be are ordained of God. Paul wrote at the time when Rome was in charge. Rome had come into Judea as a conqueror; indeed they were ruling most of the Mediterranean as a result of conquest. Some of the Roman emperors were the most wicked and sinful creatures that you could meet. Mad Nero was the emperor at the time when Paul was in prison and yet Paul still says that the powers that be are ordained of God. There is a significant phrase in Daniel 4: 17 where Daniel interprets the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, which meant he would be driven out of his kingdom and act like a wild beast. Daniel said: *This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.* So God is sovereign and gives the rulership of kingdoms to whomsoever He will, even the basest of men and the most wicked of men. That does not mean that God is responsible for the awful deeds these men have done. Men are responsible for their own sin. When Pilate and the rulers of the Jews put Christ to death, that death was planned before the foundation of the world and yet Peter said in Acts 2, when preaching about Christ to the Jews, *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.* It was ordained by the determinate counsel of God but that did not deliver the Jews from their responsibility. He said to them ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. So God has set up the basest of men to be rulers, but they are responsible for their own deeds and actions.

2). Now let me say something else and in some ways this is going to seem slightly contradictory to what I have just said and that is the fact that Satan obviously has some kind of control over the affairs of the world. As an example of what I am saying I would like you to recall the temptation of the Lord Jesus in the wilderness. In Matthew 4:8 & 9 you will read these words: *Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;*



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. So the devil was able to promise the Lord that if He would worship him he could give Him all the kingdoms of the world. In the parallel account in Luke 4, we are told how the devil said in verse 6, *For it hath been delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it .* Now the Lord Jesus did not laugh at that or dismiss that claim. In fact as He walked in the garden of Gethsemane the Lord Jesus remarked to His disciples, in John 12:31, *The prince of this world cometh .* The devil has a part to play in setting up rulers, but in the end God is sovereign and nothing happens outside of the will and decree of God. We also realise that the activity of Satan is limited by divine providence but we should note that national governments as we have them today are part of Satan's sphere of influence. But above all things the decrees of God stand fast and God brings to pass that which He wills.

When rulers stand before God at the last day they are going to have to give an account of their actions. In Amos 1:13 it speaks about the children of Ammon and their king who had mutilated defenceless women. God says, in verse 15, *And their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together, saith the LORD .* Then it goes on to speak about the iniquity of the

Moabites who had burned the bones of the King of Edom into lime and God says, *And I will cut off the judge from the midst thereof, and will slay all the princes thereof with him, saith the LORD.* So it was not just the rulers of Israel or the rulers of Judah who were called into account. But here one heathen king is punished for being unmerciful to another heathen king. Heathen kings are just as responsible as Christian rulers. What does the Bible have to say about those responsibilities? I want to look at them under a number of headings this evening.

I. Judicially

Could we look firstly at what we want to call the judicial responsibilities of rulers. Romans 13:3 & 4 say this: *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. . . . he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.* Rulers are to reward good and punish evil. Those who do evil are to dread the ruler. Sin is the reason why we need rulers to be a terror to evil doers today. It is sin that has brought about all the miseries and problems in this province and the problems in our families and of our hearts.

There is a law in the interpretation of the Bible and it is the law of the first mention. Most would agree that the establishment of coercive human government is to be found in Genesis 9:6, where God says to Noah, *Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man .* Here, as Martin Luther said, God shares His power with man and gives him the power over life and death among men. When God made this covenant with Noah it was a covenant for perpetual generations, verse 12. Now there are arguments about how much the law of Moses applies to today. The Westminster Confession rightly takes the position that many of the laws of Moses passed away with the ceremonial law, but this law has not passed. Capital punishment for murder is laid down for generations gone by and it is for today. God instituted coercive human government for the restraint of evil. That is one of the primary duties of rulers. What do we find in the gov-



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

ernment of this land at the present? There is not the coercion of evil doers. The sword of justice is not being wielded, but the terrorists that have bombed and killed and committed atrocity after atrocity are not only being let out of prison but are being rewarded. Rulers are to be a terror to evil and if we go away from God's Word in this or anything else it will spell disaster.

II. Morally

Rulers have a duty morally. This too is established in that formative passage in Genesis 9. In verse 5 it says: *at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man*. We are reminded that we have a duty to one another. If you turn to one of the other main passages on the subject of government it is put positively. In Romans 13: 8-9 after speaking of rulers it says:

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is a moral basis to government. Man's behaviour towards his fellow man is governed by the moral law of God.

What about all the scandals involving those who are in authority? One of the ministers in the last Conservative government, Adam Clarke, boasted about his adultery. The present Foreign Secretary, Robin Cooke, very publicly left his wife for his secretary. At least one member of the present government is openly a sodomite. And then we have all the scandal about President Bill Clinton of the USA. Many in the United States have been taken aback by the way Bill Clinton continued to enjoy a 60% popularity rating, in spite of the fact that people did not believe he was telling the truth about these affairs. The attitude which has been fostered by the press is that you may divorce your public life and your private life. They tell us that as long as the person can do the job then it does not matter what they get up to in their private life. Someone who commits adultery is breaking the commandments of God. *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. They are also involved in lies and deceit because they tell lies to cover it over. How can liars and vow breakers be good rulers? Remember what happened King David when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. God sent the prophet to rebuke him and tell him that his little child would die because of his sin. The prophet lifted his finger and pointed in David's face and said, *Thou art the man*. It is the duty of preachers in these days to lift the finger and point it in the face of rulers and say, "You are breaking the moral laws of God." Rulers are to be enforcers of God's Law which is summarised in the Ten Commandments. They cannot do that if they break them themselves.

In an article called "Britain in Sin," the author makes the point that successive governments have managed to legislate against every one of the ten commandments. For example the fourth commandment has been opposed in the laws for the deregulating of Sunday trading. Then there is at present growing support for a proposal to accept the legality of living wills. This is a step on the road to Euthanasia and taken along with the Abortion laws we have laws which flout the sixth commandment - *Thou shalt not kill*. Then with the intro-



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

duction of the National Lottery and the encouragement of the sin of gambling there is an opposition to the eighth and tenth commandments, which prohibit theft and condemn covetousness.

Then just to take one more example, we think of how the ninth commandment forbids lying and requires truthfulness. We all know too well how Government ministers have lied. They told us it would turn their stomachs to talk to the I.R.A and all the time they were speaking to them. The Government thinks it can ride roughshod over the laws of God. God brought some of the Old Testament rulers to account. He is still the same and there is a law that every one of us would do well to take heed to which is this, Be sure your sin will find you out. Sinners may appear to escape for a while but God will find them out.

But I have to say this. When you read the Old Testament it is very evident that when the citizens of any country are allowed or encouraged by their rulers to break God's law and blaspheme God's name and the crimes go unpunished, then there is an accumulating debt of offence against the majesty of God which cannot go unpaid. When Judah went into captivity, the God-fearing people like Daniel and Ezekiel went too. The innocent had to suffer because of the sin of the country. That is why our situation is serious. God's people need to pray for revival and national repentance. In Ulster we have a land that has been blessed by God in the past. We need to be concerned because the nation will be judged as a whole for its increasing sinfulness unless there is repentance.

III. Socially

But not only do rulers have responsibility judicially and morally but they have responsibility socially. The Bible indicates that rulers have a responsibility towards the widow and the poor and those who are vulnerable in society. Now I could take many, many passages but I am going to take one example from Jeremiah 22. Look at verses 2 and 3. *Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates: Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place.* The Bible does most severely take to task rulers who oppress the poor and the widow or who take advantage of them. Ecclesiastes 5:8 says, *If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they.* God is higher than they and He regards the oppression of the poor and the widow and the fatherless.

Nowadays we have a Commission for human rights and a court of human rights (not that we endorse all that those organisations stand for) but you think of even a few hundred years ago when rulers ruled with a rod of iron and did pretty much what they liked. Yet it is just one of the privileges that we have in a land where the Bible was taught that we have social legislation. We think of men like Lord Shaftesbury and Dr. Barnardo, godly men who pioneered social care and stood up for the poor and the oppressed. You look around at many of the services we have to day -- hospitals, social services -- all these things come from the principles of Scripture being applied. The Bible as usual is away ahead of its time.



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

If only people lived by the rule of the Word of God. But can I make one more application before we move on. In this province we have men with guns being given prominence while the widow and the victims of their terror are being ignored. Those with guns in their hands are able to demand what they want because they have guns in their hands. That is breaking of God's law.

IV. Religiously

But there is one more area that I want to look at and it is this. Does the ruler have a responsibility religiously? Well, if we mean by that that there is a duty on the ruler in the exercise of his control over civil matters for the promotion of true religion and the prosperity of the Church of Christ, then I think we can say the ruler has a responsibility. I think a ruler should give advantage to the truth. He should not persecute false views but he should promote the gospel. In that sense there should be an establishment of true religion. Now the problem is how do you give favour to true religion? There are a number of things we should say. The first is this. The great principle of Protestantism is that men should not be fined or imprisoned or put to death merely over differences of opinion on religious subjects. This is the great Protestant principle of civil and religious liberty. There should not be intolerance or persecution over religion. There is no Scriptural sanction for persecuting people because of religion. That is the first principle.

The second is this. The ruler has no right to interfere in the affairs of the Church of Christ. He has no right to appoint ministers or tell the Church what they should do. Remember Saul at Gilgal when he tried to make the burnt offerings when Samuel had not arrived. The kingdom was taken from him for that. He usurped the function of a priest. God said he had overstepped the mark and God said he would lose the kingdom for it. Remember Uzziah who tried to offer incense before the Lord in the temple and was smitten with leprosy. Both men had stepped into an area where they had no right to go.

The established Church in England is a Church in which the government has a right to appoint the bishops. So you can have a Prime Minister who might be the most ungodly wretch but he appoints the bishops. Peter and the other apostles stood before the rulers of his day and albeit they had a religious function, when they required him to stop preaching the gospel he said We ought to obey God rather than men.

In the European Union there have been moves to produce a register of cults which has included what would be regarded as mainstream Protestant Churches. In Belgium, the Chamber of Representatives have just passed a law, creating what they call "A sect oversight organisation." Among those listed as sects were a number of Protestant Churches to which about 50% of Belgian Protestants belong. This law has still to be approved by the senate.

We need to be careful today. Persecution and attempts by the state to interfere in religion have not gone, in fact they are coming back again. I would say it will not be long until the EU begins to try and interfere in the affairs of the Church. The press have already reported a project by London University which is listing information on religious bodies outside the mainline denominations. The university claims this is merely to produce a survey. Perhaps it is. I don't want to be alarmist but you know as well as I do how the world and the devil



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

would want to shut the mouths of those who preach the gospel. You know that Rome would love to get rid of those who oppose ecumenism. It would not be the first time they would seek to do it through persecution. We have quickly and briefly dealt with some of these areas.

There is so much more that could have been said. Could I close by just emphasising what I said before? The ruler like the rest of us is going to have to stand before God and give an account of himself. The ruler may hold power in his hand today but there is One above him Who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. One day we will all have to tell Him how we have discharged our duties. The government has embarked on immoral policies and we all may have to suffer for it but the Bible says *Righteousness exalteth a nation but sin is a reproach to any people*. The Bible urges us to pray for our rulers. Pray that God will save them. Pray that God would turn them in their paths of unrighteousness and sin. Pray that God will send revival to our land because without it we are headed for disaster. But I am glad we don't have to close on a note of pessimism because one day there will be a reign of perfect righteousness.

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore
Till moons shall wax and wane no more*

The Lord will come and set up His righteous reign on earth. Are you looking forward to that day? Are you looking forward to the day when you will see the King in all His beauty? If you are not saved, may you come to that King and be washed in His precious blood.