

Biblical Foundations of Authority and Government



Overarching world view: The Bible is pro-authority.
Those who are rebellious against authority are always rebuked.

“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.” (2 Peter 2:9-10, cf. 2:13)

“Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities” (Titus 3:1)

“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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” (Rom. 13:1)

This immediately raises the question: What about an *unjust* authority? Does Christianity encourage blind obedience to oppressors?

Two checks on authorities in Scripture:

1. All authorities must give an account to God. God is an authority over all others.

Without this belief, no basis for “speaking truth to power” or “civil disobedience”.

“Speaking truth to power”

Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? (2 Samuel 12:7-9)

Civil Disobedience (“Conscientious” Disobedience)

“We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29)

2. God has set up a network of multiple authorities, with different “spheres” of authority. No one authority has total authority.

Government (Romans 13:1)
Employer/“Master” (1 Peter 2:18)
Church elders (Heb 13:17)
Parents/Father (Heb 12:9)
Schoolmaster/Guardian (Gal 3:24)

Difference of Christian view of authority and world's view

World's default: Authorities are “winners” who get to tell others what to do to serve them.

Christian: Authorities are “ministers” or “servants”—provide order, training, etc. (Matthew 10:25-28)

The right of government to use force (“the sword”)

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:3-4)

A “foreshadow” of the just judgments of God himself.

The pacifism debate: may a Christian participate in this part of government?

Is there a difference between justice and revenge?

Revenge is forbidden in the Bible, in both the New Testament and Old Testament.

Leviticus 19:17-18 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

Is crying out for justice or rescue the same as revenge?

No: a just judge is a trusted *neutral* party who can be objective.

Leviticus 19:15 “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.”

Deuteronomy 1:13-16 “Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.’ And you answered me, ‘The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.’ So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, ... And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him.

Lack of action when the oppressed are crying out is actually injustice. It is not commended but rather condemned.

“Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?”
(Proverbs 24:11-12)

“Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, “You are in the right,” will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations.” (Proverbs 24:23)

Earthly justice mimics God's own response to those who are "crying out"

Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. (Exodus 2:24-25)

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians." (Exodus 3:7-8)

Example of parental discipline

There is a great deal of debate about what governments are legitimate.

When do we work actively against an oppressive government? (e.g. Civil War in England, France during Reformation)

A broad topic, but in general:

* Being non-Christian does not automatically make a government illegitimate (e.g. Rome in the day of Jesus and Paul, Babylon at the time of Daniel, Egypt at the time of Joseph)

* Being Christian does not automatically make a government legitimate. (e.g. Israel rejected by God at the time of Jeremiah, Pharisees rejected by Jesus)

* If one government is torn down, we must work to put another in its place, as God has set up the institution of government.

Other broad topics:

When may a government act *proactively*?

(E.g. Joseph collects food in Egypt in advance of famine)

What if there is disagreement about what laws to enforce? (pluralism)

What if there are multiple competing governments? (just war theory)

etc....