

Should We Comply or Defy?

Pastor Cliff Bergman - Pinawa Alliance Church

Website: PinawaAlliance.com

Email: office@PinawaAlliance.com

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1 Peter 2.13 – 17; Rom 13.1 - 7

A central quality in an authentic Christian life is *submission*, something which stands in contrast with the world's emphasis on independence. Jesus Christ modelled *submission* for us when He left the glories of heaven to come to earth to carry out His Father's will by dying on the cross at Calvary for the sins of lost people. Paul, when writing to the Ephesians pointed out that *submission* is an evidence of being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5.21). Due to the importance of submission in the relationships of God's people, Peter also gave attention to it. He began by addressing submission by believers to government. It was a topic that was timely for first century believers who lived under repressive tyrannical leaders but the topic is certainly instructive and relevant for us as well.

Christians Be Subject to Your Government

In his letter to the fledgling groups of believers scattered in what is now modern-day northern Turkey, Peter sought to provide direction on how to live victoriously amid opposition and trials because of their faith. He reminded them of their relationship to God and the hope that was theirs – a hope not limited to their earthly existence, but one which extended to eternity. He assured them the Lord would care for them despite their present struggles.

An inescapable part of life for the initial readers of Peter's letter was their relationship to their governing authorities. Supplementing the passage in 1 Peter on how to relate to government is Paul's counsel to the Romans found in Romans 13. 1 – 7. These passages give us considerable insight into the relationship of Christians to government.

1. **Our Responsibility** – “Be subject to” (1 Peter 2.13; Romans 13.1)

The Bible's clear direction is that we are to *submit to* or *be obedient* to the wishes of another. The same term is used in both 1 Peter and Romans; it is a military term to describe the *rank* of persons under those who have authority over them. Thus, our responsibility is to set aside our wishes in favor of the wishes of those over us; to comply with them.

2. **Who We Are to be Subject To** (1 Peter 2.13-14; Romans 13.1)

1 Peter 2:13–14 (ESV) ¹³Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

The institutions or authorities we are to submit to encompass the emperor or king and those to whom he delegates authority, such as governors. It is clear, submission is not limited to duly elected governments who are supportive of Christian beliefs, but also satanically minded despots and tyrants, such as Nero, who was the emperor when both 1 Peter and Romans were written. Rome was notorious for immorality, evil, corruption, and violence, anything but Christian in character.

Some mistakenly believe that the admonition to Christians to submit to their government only applies if the government holds to Christian values or is at least sympathetic to Christianity. There is no such proviso in Scripture. If anything, it is just the reverse. When Romans and 1 Peter were written the government at the time was hostile towards Christians.

Along those same lines, submission to a governing authority is not synonymous with agreement. It is that reality that makes submission so difficult sometimes. While we disagree with a decision of our governing authority, we choose to submit because of God's will.

3. **The Rationale for Submission** (1 Peter 2.13-16; Romans 13.1-2, 4, 6)

The quality of submission is woven through all our relationships as believers, beginning with submission to God. We set aside our self-will, our agenda, our opinions on the meaning of life and how to get to heaven, for God's overarching truth. We submit to Him when we conclude we are better off following His will than our self-directed will. That includes how to function as harmoniously as possible in society.

Our submission to our government is a derivative of our submission to God; we submit because of His command to do so. "*Be subject for the Lord's sake*" (1 Peter 2.13). All governments serve under God, irrespective of their acknowledgement of their accountability to God or not. Since God has directed us to be submissive, we are to be obedient to His command; it flows from our desire to honor the Lord and please Him. Refusal to submit to authorities is ultimately refusal to obey God.

Romans 13:1–2 (ESV) ¹Let 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.** ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

For reasons we fail to comprehend, there are brutal dictators responsible for the most horrific actions, who nevertheless serve with permission from God and will be held accountable to Him.

4. **The Purpose of Governments** (1 Peter 2.14; Romans 13.3-4)

A key role of governments is to provide order within a society, a function affirmed by God. To that end they establish laws by which people function. In many cases a good number of laws are rooted in Biblical truth. Governments also hold people accountable to the laws they establish, punishing those who do evil while commending those who do good. However, even the best of governments, since they are made up of fallible people, don't carry out their responsibilities perfectly. We need to bear that in mind as we evaluate past and present leaders who sometimes make very poor decisions along the way.

Societies with order, even when led by godless dictators, generally fare better than those who throw off all restraints and end up in chaos. There are a number of examples in the world today.

5. **Living Honorably** (1 Peter 2.15-17; Romans 13.7)

As followers of Jesus Christ, our relationship to our government should be exemplary and provide no legitimate reason for criticism by those in authority. It *silences* our critics (1 Pet 2.15). The way believers relate to the world is important. Among the instructions Paul gave to Titus was “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ²to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Titus 3:1–2, ESV). The author of Hebrews directs us to “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy” (Heb 12.14, NIV). One of the qualifications of an elder is that he “be well thought of by outsiders” (1 Tim 3.7). There are obviously places where we must confront the world and take a stand against it, but there are many places where we can coexist peacefully. Maintaining that balance demands walking closely with the Lord and being sensitive to His guidance.

How we are to live is summed up with: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Peter 2:17, ESV).

- **Honor everyone** – As much as it lies with us, we need to treat others with integrity, respect, and dignity. “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” (1 Pet 2.12).
- **Love the brotherhood** – Unity within the Church goes a long way in making a positive impression on the watching world. To that end we must *love one another earnestly from a pure heart* (1.22).
- **Fear God** – God directs us to submit to the government over us and we will give an account to Him one day. “And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1:17).
- **Honor the emperor** – In light of the office he holds, we are to give honor to the emperor who holds his position under God.

In the Old Testament era, when Israel rebelled against God, God used the Babylonians to conquer Israel and take them into captivity for 70 years. During their exile, Israel was to settle down and submit to the Babylonians and contribute to the welfare of their new government and pray on its behalf (Jer 29.4-7).

6. **Are There Exceptions to Submitting to the Government?**

There are obviously acceptable exceptions to submitting to the governing authorities. If the governing authority commands someone to do something which conflicts with a clear command of God, then one must obey God. Peter and John followed that principle when the Jewish ruling council prohibited them from speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus (Act

4.18). “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’” (Acts 4:19–20, ESV). Soon afterwards, the high priest on behalf of the council, reiterated their prohibition against teaching in the name of Jesus (5.27-28). The response of Peter and the apostles was unchanged. “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’” (4:19–20). In those instances, the command to not teach in the Name of Jesus clearly contradicted the command to declare the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ (Mat 28.18-20). Peter had firsthand experience in knowing when to not *comply* with the demands of those in authority.

The Romans were tolerant of other gods and were willing to add Jesus to the various gods scattered throughout their vast empire. It was the claim by the Christians of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ that the Romans opposed. The Christians correctly believed that Jesus Christ was the only means of salvation and that He alone was to be worshipped. Nero, and successive Roman emperors, claimed to be a god and ordered people to worship them. Christians had to decide whether they would comply with the emperor’s requirement or obey God and His commandment that He alone was, and is, worthy of worship. To show their compliance with caesar’s command, Christians were required to take a pinch of incense and put it “on the fire that burned in the presence of the image of the Roman Caesar.”¹ Those who refused faced persecution. For some, it meant death, often in the most horrific manner. Choosing to submit to God often had very real consequences.

We too face places where the position of our government and its laws conflict with the teaching of Scripture. Such is the case with their definition of marriage where the government’s is much broader than “the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime”² (Mark 10.6-9). Along with the Biblical definition of marriage is that “Sexual intimacy is intended for marriage and sexual intimacy outside of this protective bond is therefore contrary to God’s good design for humanity.”³ Another flashpoint in our country is the government’s support for totally unregulated abortion, something which conflicts with the value God places upon life which begins at conception. Thus far our government has permitted people of faith to hold to positions which conflict with theirs. However, as Christians move beyond the confines of the Church community, they are increasingly discovering the intolerance of our government and its institutions to any position other than its own.

Determining how to respond and be consistent is not always readily apparent. Sometimes there is no clear option and one must weigh the pros and cons considering insight from Scripture to determine the best course to follow. Let me turn our attention to a present-day example where convictions differ on how to best address it.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/just-a-pinch-of-incense/>

² <https://www.cmacan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/statement-on-the-family.pdf>

³ <https://www.cmacan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/statement-on-human-sexuality.pdf>

Should We Comply or Defy?

The past year and one-half with COVID-19 have been filled with experiences that were unimaginable two years ago. Among those experiences is the impact of COVID-19 on Churches. At the forefront, when considering the matter of submission to the government, is whether Churches should follow the orders of their respective government concerning COVID-19 restrictions. Is compliance with provincial health orders to physically distance, wear masks, and suspend in-person worship services a failure to follow the clear teaching of Scripture to do otherwise? Some unequivocally view compliance in that manner. It would be hard to miss the very passionate rhetoric and the news coverage of Churches that have refused to comply and some of the court cases that have been launched. Irrespective of how the court cases are adjudicated does not answer the question from a biblical perspective.

The question is, “Is this a case where we should follow the Bible’s command to *comply*, or is there overarching Biblical direction to *defy* the government’s orders?”

1. The Importance of the Church Gathering

Most of you have heard me say or have read my repetitive words of encouragement emphasizing the importance of weekly Church attendance. Believers gathering as the Church family is the norm and the model woven throughout the New Testament. Carrying out all the functions of the Church, which is an interdependent body of believers, necessitates in-person gatherings of the Church. I am increasingly persuaded that gathering regularly for the three-fold purpose of worshipping our God, hearing from Him through His Word, and ministering to one another is vitally important and one of the most important choices a believer makes. The pattern we model before the *community of saints*, beginning with our children and grandchildren, as well as the *watching world*, can be far reaching.

There is no question about the fundamental importance of in-person meetings of the Church.

Hebrews 10:24–25 (ESV) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

2. Exceptions to the Biblical Norm

However, are there times when an exception may be warranted? We understandably make allowance for those who are too ill to attend, or an unavoidable emergency occurs. The work schedules of some people prevent them from weekly attendance. There are other legitimate situations which make it impossible for some to attend. Even among those who passionately champion Churches defying the government’s orders prohibiting in-person meetings some will sometimes miss attending Church services.

Despite the pattern for the consistent meeting of the Church found in the New Testament, without question not all believers were able to consistently gather. For example, some were slaves whose masters were not sympathetic to the importance of Church attendance. Bear in mind though, that exceptions to a norm, even when found in Scripture, do not erase the validity of the norm which is regular consistent in-person gatherings of the Church.

3. Why Are We Here?

As I reflected on this topic which has polarized many Christians, and as I prayed for insight and faithfulness to the Bible, a question popped into my mind. It is an obvious question and

one which lies at the heart of an answer, “*Why are we here?*” Or more precisely, “*Why has God left us here after He saved us?*” He could have immediately taken us to heaven, but He hasn’t.

There are several answers that come to mind. Things like the propagation of the human race or fulfilling God’s command to have dominion over the earth. Or one can turn to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* for the answer, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”⁴ God surely wants us to become sanctified and holy in a practical sense. There are, of course, other practical reasons like our participation in the functioning of society and our contribution to that happening.

However, a key reason is that God has left us here to influence the world with Kingdom values – we are His ambassadors entrusted with His truth. Sometimes that role is to hold back the advance of darkness, or at the very least, slow it down. God makes it clear we are *salt* and *light* in a world characterized by darkness (Matt 5.13-15). I mentioned earlier that as much as possible we are to live at peace with others and draw attention to the importance of a good reputation with the *watching world*. Not a reputation gained by becoming like the world or adopting a life of compromise, but living with integrity, conviction, and respect for others while holding to Biblical values. Our concern ought not be limited to the *community of saints* but extend to the *watching world*. Let us not overlook the obvious; Jesus left the glories of heaven to come to earth and clothe Himself with humanity for the express purpose of seeing lost people rescued from the hopelessness of sin and provide them new life and genuine hope. Later in his letter, Peter continues to draw attention to the importance of being people of integrity who are committed to holy living. One of the reasons is surely that we may gain an opportunity to influence our society in a positive way. To that end Peter counsels us, “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, **always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect**” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV).

A central purpose for our continued journey on earth, and something that ought to be in the forefront of all our minds is influencing those around us with the Gospel of salvation and the overarching desire to see the unsaved embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

4. How Do We Best Achieve God’s Goal?

If God’s goal for us is to impact our world in a positive manner for eternity, then we must bring that perspective into determining whether we should *comply with or defy* the government. A fundamental question to ask when deciding whether Churches should comply with provincial health orders is, “How will the watching world perceive the actions of Churches? Will onlookers be drawn to the Church as a beacon of hope and refuge during a time of uncertainty?” or, “Will they be driven further from the Church?” Unless one does an extensive survey, the answers to those questions are somewhat speculative. However, over the many months of COVID, I have received a fair amount of input from a diverse number of people. Except for those who are passionately in favor of Churches defying the government and who presumably already are believers, I haven’t had a single person commend the Churches for defying the government’s orders. None of them have viewed it as positive.

⁴ <http://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism/>

It is relatively easy to find inconsistencies in the government's restrictions or to question the actual risk of transmission of the virus in Church settings and therefore dismiss the legitimacy of the restrictions Churches are faced with. However, that is the case with other segments of society as well, such as the small business owner who is required to close while a big-box retailer who sells some of the same items can remain open. In many cases rather ordinary people who make up our society have experienced financial loss and hardship because of the pandemic and in some cases, due to restrictions that history may reveal were misguided. Nevertheless, that is the context from which the *watching world* forms their assessment of the Church's behavior. Churches who have complied with the health orders are not endorsing the validity of all the restrictions, they are complying with the law, and accepting the government's direction, just like others in society are doing.

5. Some Other Considerations

It is worth noting that unlike the Roman governments of the early centuries of the Church, our government has not singled out Churches with their restrictions. The restrictions are all encompassing and very broadly based. Also, while the early Christians were required to "worship" the emperor and declare him lord, Christians today are not required to worship a false god nor deny their belief in God and His Son Jesus Christ. Nor have we been forbidden from worshipping God or continuing to carry out ministry in other ways.

In Conclusion

Throughout the past eighteen months, we have demonstrated we are resilient and able to adapt when necessary. For us in PAC, the redevelopment of our website as COVID was just beginning has proven providential and invaluable for ministry which has reached well beyond our local Church and allows me to connect with many of you. For many years, I resisted *Facebook*, but it too has proven invaluable for ministry and is the link to many of you. And along with most of you, I also discovered *Zoom*. As valuable as all those resources are, none of them will replace the experience of face-to-face, in-person interaction with the community of saints.

Some of you reading this are among those who are unable to gather with the Church even though it is the longing of your heart. You may be constrained by health or lack of transportation or no evangelical Church near you or some other reason that prevents your attendance. You know firsthand what it is forgo meeting with the Church. Over my many years of visiting in nursing homes, one comment I received with regularity was, "I so miss my Church!" May that be the longing of all our hearts.

For those of you who can return to in-person meetings of the Church, let me encourage you to do so. Don't delay as restrictions are lifted. Just like our compliance to not meet was a message to the *community of saints* and the *watching world*, also is what we do when we no longer are restricted from meeting.

The Lord Is My Salvation – Keith & Kristyn Getty

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzZaeKr3PD4&ab_channel=GettyMusicVEVO