

**LIVING AS CHRISTIANS IN A COMPLEX WORLD:  
A HOMEGROUP DISCUSSION SERIES ON SOME TOPICAL ISSUES**

**TO OBEY...OR NOT? TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD WE OBEY OUR RULERS?**

Christians sometimes find themselves faced with this dilemma. How do we react when we feel that those who govern us have either overstepped the limits of their God-given authority, or not taken action to bring about justice and to serve the common good?

First, let's read two passages from the Bible.

***Romans 13:1-6***

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

***Romans 12:16-18***

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

***Now let's listen to Revd Helen Burnett, who faced exactly this dilemma. Revd Helen believes strongly in the "Five Marks of Mission", including (5): To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth". She believes Christians should not stand by while our planet is ravaged by human-made climate change so took action on the streets of London. Helen kindly agreed to be interviewed for this series, and here is her account of what happened:***

<https://youtu.be/n1vkHtilsO0>

If you are interested in hearing more of what Revd Helen had to say when she was in court, there is a further video setting out the detail of her statement (which was also published in Church Times): <https://youtu.be/bpsTLx5AEig>

Pause for a few moments and reflect on what Revd Helen has said. Whether or not you feel comfortable with everything she said, there can be no doubt that she has the "courage of her convictions".

### **What do you think Christians should bear in mind when confronted with an issue like this which prompts really strong feelings?**

What do you think Paul saying in the passages we have read? Here are some hints:

- the principle of ordered government is God-given;
- there is an authority invested in government which is from God - irrespective of whether we dislike or disagree with particular policies;
- in our governmental system, there *is* formal Opposition. This is embodied in Parliament by the Leader of the Opposition and by parliamentarians in both Houses who seek in a constructive way to present alternative policies and to oppose the government;
- all governments are subordinate to God. The rulers, according to Romans 13, are God's servants;
- the state, too, exists as God's servant and for our good. It exists to meet the need for justice - which is why society is to be ordered in such a way as to reflect the just and righteous character of God.

But perhaps you feel, especially in regard to the last two points, that a government (eg a totalitarian one) has claimed an allegiance that belongs only to God and has become demonic - like the image of the Beast in Revelation 13.

**Micah 6:8**

***He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God.***

*Discuss:*

*What do you think these words mean, and how can they be reflected in our society?*

For “mercy” we could read the human values of “kindness, steadfastness and loyalty.” These are essential building blocks of what the State is about - for there are human costs as well as financial costs to be measured in all policymaking.

And this:

**Matthew 22:21**

***Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's  
and to God the things that are God's***

Does this mean that matters of church and the Christian faith should be kept separate from the State? We can easily misinterpret a passage like this, but perhaps Jesus is actually telling his questioners to pay for - and respect to - the privileges of Roman rule, whilst at the same time reminding them that there is nothing which belongs to Caesar that doesn't first belong to God. And humankind bears the image of God, so just as they should give to Caesar what bears his image, so we all should give to God *all* of ourselves

So, are there times when Christians are doing right when they express their involvement in the world in a strong way like the Revd Helen did? Remember - she expressly declares that Christian Climate Action does not set aside the law, but remains subject to it and protestors are prepared to face up to the penalties they incur.

Take the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as another example. Here is a video link about his life, entitled: “The Cost of Discipleship”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvNTVrtXPAU>

*“The church needs to question whether a government is acting legitimately.”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In a separate study, we will touch on the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa - another example of a Christian who dared to open his mouth about deeply “social” issues. Can you think of others?

We may not all be called to follow Bonhoeffer’s example, or even Revd Helen’s. Neither should we try to decide for others where “boundary lines” should be drawn. But we believe that we have a responsibility to hold our leaders accountable to God for the heavy duties they exercise.

### ***Some other points for discussion (if you have time and inclination!)***

We shouldn’t pretend that these ethical questions are always simple and straightforward or that the answers are binary. On the contrary, they sometimes raise very complicated issues. Some early Christian writers, such as Augustine, drew very clear distinctions between the “City of God” and the “Earthly City” which, on the face of it, might have implied a secular space which had rolled back the boundaries of God’s purview. However, Augustine recognised the practical reality that Christians have to live in both worlds - what really mattered to Augustine was where their true allegiances lay.

So we do have to step carefully and thoughtfully. Even concepts of “religious freedom” have to be looked at carefully. One person’s freedom may be another’s abuse. It is all too easy to justify one’s course of action by quoting a few Bible verses - but the reality is that two listeners of the same parable might take away two completely different moral positions. We hear stories of people holding back their taxes because they don’t agree with the things they’re spent on. Or, if you’re in France, you might be arguing that certain groups shouldn’t wear certain kinds of clothing because government considers there to be a disruptive effect in the classroom.

Modern liberal democracy certainly has its attractions but when it comes to freedom of religion or thought it certainly raises some complex issues. On the one hand, the recent banning of singing in church, was justified on scientific advice about the spread of Covid. But when viewed in the context of huge crowds being allowed to gather for a Cup Final or Grand Prix event, did you begin to wonder whether it was “a thin end of the edge” which set a precedent which might seriously erode our freedom to worship in future? What mattered? Was it the “greater good” or individual right to freedom in worship?

**Finally, do spend some time praying for our leaders:**

#### ***1 Timothy 2:1***

***I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.***