The Civil Magistrate

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[0:00] Now in our progress through the next section of the biblical basis behind our church's confession of faith, we come this morning to the basis behind chapter 23, which is entitled Of the Civil Magistrate.

Now civil magistrate doesn't just mean like justice of the peace or a magistrate in a lower level justiciary of our own country. Civil magistrate is a generic term for those who hold civil or political power at whatever level it may happen to be.
It may be the head of state, the king or queen or the president or whatever it may be, or it may be the prime ministers below that, or the governments at the different levels, local government, national government, whatever it may happen to be.
We are subject to so many different levels of rule and of governing, and all who hold the authority in those positions are ultimately holding it from God.
That is what we read in our passage today, that every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God.
[1:15] He has either put them directly in place, or he has allowed them to take power and to be put in the place that they are. And that is one reason why we are to submit to them.

As Peter tells us, you know, in 1 Peter chapter 2, we read from verse 13, And submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme, the top level of government, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of the evildoers and for the praise of them that do well.
For so is the will of God, that with well-doing he may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.
Honour all men, love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.
In other words, it doesn't just depend on whether or not somebody is a good king, or a good prime minister, or first minister, or counsellor, or whatever it may be. We are to be subject to them because ultimately it is God who has put them in place.
[2:34] And this is the first thing that we must recognise with this particular doctrine. It is the kingship of Christ. Ultimately, this is about the kingship of Christ.

If a believer submits to authority in this world, much of which may be corrupt, or which may indeed be positively sinful, some of it actively anti-Christian.
And remember that Paul is writing in an atmosphere and a time where persecution of Christianity was rife. And if anything, it was going to get worse in the centuries that would follow.
Rome was not a friendly face to Christianity. It persecuted Christians viciously in ways. Not continuously, but it would go in bouts.
And when the bouts came, they were really vicious and cruel. And yet, Paul writes to those at Rome to let every soul be subject to the higher powers.
[3:37] Because every power that exists, God has put it in place. And this is what the Christian needs must acknowledge first. The kingship of Christ. He is the one ultimately in charge.

Like if a little brother or sister doesn't like what the other one's doing, But if mum said I could or dad said I could, that's where the argument has to be taken. That's where the protest, if there's going to be a protest, has to go.
It has to go to the higher authority. If we have a problem with those who rule over us, Most of us, if we're of a certain age, will have lived at some point under some kind of government that we either didn't like, Or didn't agree with, or didn't ourselves vote for.

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You know, if you happen to be of a left-leaning persuasion, Then you'll have had to live at times under Tory governments. If you're of a right-leaning persuasion, you'll have had to live under Labour governments.
If you're of a nationalist persuasion, then you might hate the fact that despite all the representation you've got in Scotland, You're still ultimately ruled by Westminster. If you have a unionist persuasion, you might hate the fact that nationalists hold all the power in Scotland.
[4:53] And likewise, you could replicate this in Ireland, in Wales, in America, whatever the case may be. We're always at different times, even if we don't face active persecution.

We're going to be ruled over at different times in our lives. By governments or authorities that we don't like. That we didn't vote for, we might have voted for the other side.
And this happens, it goes cyclically. You know, every generation is different. You can't imagine such and such a party ever coming back into power, or being in power, or putting out the other one, or whatever the case may be.
Christians, like everybody else, will be of different political hues, or persuasions, or colours, or badges. But ultimately, it is the kingship of Christ that we are called upon to acknowledge.
And because Christ is king over all the nations of the world. Not just those of Europe or the West. Christ is king over all the nations of the world.
[5:53] Then the reason that we submit ultimately to those who we may not like, or who may indeed be out to annihilate us, or to persecute us, or whatever the case may be.

We submit to them as far as conscience permits. In other words, as long as what they are commanding us to do does not contradict what God commands us to do. In their legitimate sphere of power or influence, we are to obey them.
Now when he says rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil, we can all think of cases where that's not been the case.
You know, if you're a Christian living in Zimbabwe, and you're being persecuted by the government, then come on, how can you say they're not a terror to good works? We are here trying to feed people, or trying to do good to people, and the government's persecuting us.
Or if you were in the Third Reich, in Nazi Germany, then you would find you were being persecuted there for seeking to do good. And other places and other times, you might be persecuted by the governments in power, even when you're seeking to do good.
[7:11] But you submit as far as conscience allows, when it doesn't contradict what God requires of you. Yes, you are to give them the due civil authority, but not to put them in the place of God.

You see, like Daniel and his three friends, you know, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed, they go, when they are commanded to obey Nebuchadnezzar, and all the things pertaining to the kingdom of Babylon, yes, they do it.
But when he says, right, I'm setting up my golden image, and you've all got to bow down and worship that. Do they do that? Say, no, we only worship God. That's the true God. That's who we worship.
This is what we are called upon to do, to put Christ first, the kingship of Christ first. Everything else follows from that. Now, one reason why we are seeing a kind of breakdown in the acceptance of, for example, democracy across the world, when we are seeing, you know, well, this has been a result, but we're not going to accept that.
We're going to go out and have these demos. We're going to try to work that actively, deconstruct what has been the result of this or that election or whatever. You know, the one reason that populations as a whole are refusing now to accept their own structures, their own results, their own definitions of what they put into power, is because they can't accept their own because they've already thrown out God.
[8:42] They've already thrown out the kingship of Christ, and so what is left all begins to fall apart. It is like if you've got a wall of breeze blocks or bricks or whatever, and all the time you've been chipping away, taking out the cement that holds the bricks together.

Hey, it's okay, because the wall's still there, but you take out, finally, every last bit of cement, every last bit of line that holds it all together, and you've still got all the blocks in place.
Okay, the wall's still there, but sooner or later somebody's going to knock it or push it, and the stones start coming out of it. You start taking Christ's kingship out of any political system, and it begins to fall apart, and that is what we are finding now in our own Western society and also to an

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extent across the world.
When you take Christ out of the picture, the rest begins to fall apart. The kingship of Christ is paramount. Christ came over all the nations, not just over those that may have had a Christian heritage.
Second thing is the subordination of, we'll say kings, but it means the civil magistrate. Every level of government is itself subject, not only to those above them, but to God.
[9:57] They have their own individual sphere. For example, if there were local affairs to be discussed or sorted out at the corner level, then it wouldn't be okay for the MP or the MSP to walk in and say, well, you know, I represent Ohio government, I represent Westminster or Holy Root, so I can tell you guys what to do.

Actually, he can't, because in their own sphere, they have jurisdiction for local affairs. In his sphere, in Holy Root or in Westminster, he's got jurisdiction for his affairs.
And likewise, where God is concerned, the civil magistrate, as he has to govern at whatever different levels he or she is at, there is also government of the church, which is separate.
And just because somebody may be a good or godly civil magistrate, it doesn't give them the power to then say what's going to happen in the church or how the church should organize what it believes or how it worships or whatever.
And we've got examples of that in the Old Testament. Think, well, come on, David, godly king, surely he helped with the worship of God. Solomon, you know, built the temple, yes, but there always has to be the clear distinction between the kingship governing the land and the priesthood, for example, and the Levites dealing with the temple and the worship.
[11:19] The apostles are not civil magistrates. Likewise, in the case in the Old Testament, 2 Chronicles, you've got Uziah, who was a godly king, chapter 26, 2 Chronicles.

But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction. For he transgressed against the Lord his God and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense.
And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord that were valiant men. And they withstood Uziah the king and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests, the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense.
Go out of the sanctuary, for thou hast trespassed, neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God. There are different spheres of jurisdiction, just as the cornet is one, just as Holy Spirit is one, just as Westminster is one, just as the Queen is one.
And likewise in other countries, you've got the President of the United States, you've got the Senate, you've got the House of Representatives. Each has their own sphere of jurisdiction. And yes, there are levels. But ultimately, there is the subordination of the civil magistrate to Christ.
[12:34] He or she is under God. They are not themselves the final authority. They are not themselves the ultimate place where the buck stops.

The kingship of Christ is first. The subordination of the civil magistrate to God then fits into the right place. It's like if you're putting a car engine back together.
Not that I know much about car engines. But you know, if you've got everything in its right place, then all the bits and all the different pipes and the screws and nuts and bolts, they all fit into the right place.
If you put the engine all back together and you close the bonnet and then you look down and say, oh, there's still three or four bits here missing. Oh dear. Where could they, oh, never mind. It all fits anyway. It's fine. No, it isn't.
Because everything is meant to have its right place where it fits together. And the right place for the civil magistrate, yes, it's over the people because that's where he or she has been put.
[13:32] But under God, the subordination of the civil magistrate, they give an account to the Lord.
What then is our place given that we are all, to an extent, ruled over?

We're all ruled over by others. Very few of us are ever put in a situation where we hold real power, politically speaking. And if we do hold that power, then we only hold it for a very brief time.
And we hold it as from God. You know, Jesus did not deny, for example, Pilate's authority and the power of life and death that he held over him.
But he did say to them that he didn't have any power except from God. John 19, we read at verse 10, then said, Pilate unto him, unto Jesus, Speakest thou not unto me?

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Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee and to have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldst have no power at all against me except that were given thee from above. [14:36] Therefore, he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. No power at all except, Pilate, except that were given you from above. And he doesn't mean the emperor.

He means that God has put Pilate in that place for that time. Our position as the ruler is, as we mentioned, to give all due respect, accountability, law-abiding faithfulness to those whom God has put in place over us.
That doesn't mean that we can't necessarily legitimately campaign for the opposition or for a different party or a different person to take over government. That kind of campaigning is legitimate, but what's not legitimate is, say, plotting to assassinate or overthrow or destroy the governments that God has put in place.
It's not legitimate saying, well, that's it, I'm not paying my taxes then because of that. Stop that. No. We are to pay tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom is due. These are, as Peter says, the ministers, oblique servants of God whom he has put in place.
And they require in order to govern, they require not only the obedience but the resources of the country that they rule over. God has ordered it so. What happened when there was no king in Israel?
[15:55] We read, every man did that which was right in his own eyes. And that is not put in terms of, hey, wasn't it wonderful? This was utopia. Everybody got just to be free and do what was right in his own eyes.

You read the book of Judges and you find the kind of things that happened then when everybody just did what was right in his own eyes. The amount of bloodshed and brutality and abuse and oppression and exploitation and sexual violence and all that happened when every man did that which was right in his own eyes.
Because there was no king to fear, no law to obey because God's ordinance was thrown out. But the civil magistrate in his right place is responsible to God, subordinate to God and we likewise, our place is to accept and acknowledge their legitimate power but also that we have responsibility.
We have responsibility ultimately to God but also to them whom he has put in place. And that means, yes, we have to pay our taxes. Yes, it means we have to be diligent citizens. Usually, usually, if they are honest, most powers across the world will find that Christians will make the best and most faithful citizens.
That won't be the case if the government is trying to set up itself in the place of God. It won't be the case if they are seeking as some, you know, Eastern Asian countries are literally seeking to do certain statues of their present as a dictator and requiring people to worship that just like Nebuchadnezzar, you know, in Babylon.
[17:33] It's literally happening in some countries and other places where they say, well, unless you submit completely to the party, then you must be subversive. If governments put themselves in a place of God, Christians will not be able to go along with that.

But other than that, they'll be, for the most part, moral citizens. They'll be law-abiding. They'll be peaceful. They'll be those who do pay their taxes. They'll be those who should or ought to be hard-working.
They'll be faithful. They will probably minimize social and domestic breakdown because of what they believe, because of what they practice, because of the kind of love of the God that they serve. For the most part, the more Christians there are in a society, the more that society will be leavened, the more it will be peaceable, the more it will be easy for a magistrate to rule over because most people will be peaceable and law-abiding.
And they will be subject to that lawful authority. It will be a better place for the magistrate to rule over. That is part of our responsibility because it is part of our witness.
[18:41] It is part of how we are meant to show that we acknowledge the ultimate authority of Christ. It's not about going on demos or causing an overthrow of this government or bringing down this regime or that regime or whatever.

Starting civil wars almost always brings bloodshed, violence, destruction and anarchy. And these are things the devil just loves.
A bit more hatred, a bit more intermessing strife, a bit more families against each other. Yeah, that's great. The devil loves that. But God doesn't love that. God seeks peace.

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And that doesn't just mean being slaves to everybody but it does mean obeying the judgment of authority that God has put in place. What about where that authority as we mentioned a little while is openly wicked?
Does that mean God has put that authority in place? That openly wicked authority? That, supposing you've got a king that thinks he is a God. What does God say about that? Well, we look in Exodus and we see in chapter 9 where God says, he speaks, the Lord said unto Moses, Rise up early in the morning, verse 13 of chapter 9 in Exodus, and stand before Pharaoh and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, let my people go that they may serve me.
[20:03] For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart and upon thy servants and upon thy people that thou mayest know that there is none like me in all the earth. For now I will stretch out my hand and I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence and thou shalt be cut off from the earth.

And here's the key verse, 16. And in very deed, for this cause have I raised thee up for to show in thee my power and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.
Sometimes the Lord does raise up a wicked power. Sometimes the Lord does allow or put in place a wicked power with all that that entails.
Sometimes this is to let people see this is what rule is like if God is not in it. This is what it is like to be ruled over by a pagan or a godless tyrant power.
This is what it is like if you take God out of the picture. God allows wickedness sometimes to flourish. God allows wickedness sometimes to rule.
[21:13] What is the duty of the Christian entity? It is the same as it always is. To recognize that the powers that be are ordained of God. God writes in Proverbs 16 verse 4 The Lord hath made all things for himself yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Which then brings us to the next point. We've got the absolute kingship of Christ. You've got the subordination of the civil magistrate to Christ. You've got the responsibility of the ruled.
That is us. Most of us are ruled over and we're all ruled over by somebody at different levels. Then you've got the accountability. The accountability of all.
We will have to give an account for how we have behaved as subjects as citizens of the countries where the Lord is with us. We will have to give an account not only for our individual sins and our relationships with others and so on.
But we will also have to give an account for how we have behaved in respect of those whom the Lord has placed over us. They likewise will have to give an account for how they have used the power that they had while they had it.
[22:31] If somebody's only in power for say two years then he's got less to account for than somebody who's in power for ten years. And if somebody's in power for fifteen years then he's got more to give an account for than somebody's only in power for six months.

But all the time that they hold power they have to give an account for that. Jesus says in Luke chapter twelve in the second part of verse forty eight for unto whosoever much is given of him shall be much required and to whom men have committed much of him they will ask the more.
Civil government as we say is quite distinct from spiritual government or oversight. It is a separate sphere of jurisdiction but it is nevertheless that which God himself has appointed.
Just as he has appointed officers and courts and so on for the church so he has appointed officers rulers kings presidents what have you and courts for the land for the civil authority and as I said all of us will at times have been ruled by governments or authorities that we didn't like and all of us I'm sure in our naivety have thought we could do a much better job if only I was first minister if only I was prime minister if only I ruled the world wouldn't it be so much better a place because I would sort out this and this and this and this and make sure that never happens and I would do this and I would do that but at fourth course the fact is we do not see all that the civil magistrate all that the powers that we have to deal with we cannot see all the reasons behind strategic decisions maybe in foreign policy or economic decisions and all the impact that each one has we only see our little piece we only see the little bit that we are focused on and we don't often see the effect of what happens to the rest of the dominoes when you push one because James puts it this way you know he talks about the law in general speak not evil one of another brethren he that speaketh evil of his brother and judgeth his brother no matter what level that brother or sister may occupy speaketh evil of the law and judgeth the law in other words he says what God has put in place isn't good enough if thou judge the law thou art not a doer of the law but a judge there is one lawgiver who is able to

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save and to destroy who art thou that judges another in other words if God has put them in place as the governor as the civil magistrate as the authority there will be lots of times we don't like it and that's human and that's normal and that is universal because even if the party or a group that you love is in power for a little while there will come the time when they're not anymore and then they're going to be ruled over by somebody you don't like or vice versa so how do we respond to that we are to recognize God put them in place whoever it is that holds the power for however long it may be the civil magistrate

God put them in place and out of our devotion to God we acknowledge them not only do we acknowledge them but we pray for them we pray for them to do the best possible job that they can do we pray for them to be as faithful as they can be to be as diligent in the use of public power and funds as they can be don't rise to Timothy I exhort therefore that first of all supplications prayers intercessions giving of thanks be made for all men for kings and for all that are in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our saviour you may not like who's in power we don't have to like the Christians wouldn't have liked the fact that pagan Caesar was in power the Hebrews wouldn't have liked the fact that pagan Pharaoh was in power but what are you to do Jeremiah says remember when the exiles are in Babylon instead of being in Jerusalem with the temple that they had so abused and neglected and the Lord who they had turned against then they were ruled over by a pagan power in exile they soon discovered what it's like to be ruled over by a power that doesn't have the Lord [26:56] Jehovah as its authority and what did Jeremiah say and God says pray for the good of this city to which you've been taken pray for those who rule over you there pray for its good its blessing its prosperity plant your gardens your vineyards marry wives give your children and manage and settle down and pray for its good because this is what the Lord seeks and in the fullness of time he will bring you back again it's only for a time that we are called upon to be here it's only for a time that we will be ruled over by whoever rules us we are to pray for them that they will do the best possible job what do you want I mean ultimately whoever's in power of whatever level of government holy wood westminster whatever do you want them to do a bad job or do you want to do the worst possible job or the best possible job now of course we could be cynical and say well actually I want them to do a rotten job I want them to make a complete mess in it so that they'll get kicked out and my lot will get back in but who's to say when our lot get back in whoever they may be or whatever party may be whether they'll make any better job we can't desire disaster for our own country for our own community we can't truthfully before God pray for bad things to happen we have to pray for the good of the land where we dwell we have to pray for the good of our communities we have to pray for the good of the ruled and of those who rule over us because they hold their position from God and ultimately they will answer to God because in recognizing the authority and the legitimacy of the civil magistrate at all different levels of power what we are doing and we've come full circle now again to this what we are doing is we are recognizing we are acknowledging the kingship of Christ the one to whom they and we must give an account there is no power but of

God the powers that be are ordained of God let us pray

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