

What is the Christian's responsibility for civil government?

TWO SWORDS



A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Two Swords

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A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Two Swords

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Welcome to *Two Swords*

Welcome to *Two Swords*, a brief introduction to the relationship between civil government and the Church as the agent of the Kingdom of God.

As Augustine explained in the fifth century, the Christian lives in two worlds at the same time. The one, the City of God, is ruled by Christ, our exalted King, Who is expanding His Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven – by His Spirit, in and through His Church, and according to His Word.

The second, the City of Man, is also ruled by Christ, Who is King of kings and Lord of lords. He has entrusted the civil affairs of human society to governments of various kinds, establishing them as agents of His good purposes and authorizing them to execute His holy and righteous and good Law of liberty and love.

Civil governments all over the world are established by God. But this does not necessarily mean they are in every matter obedient to Him. Where Christians serve Christ the King, they will seek to bring the civil government from which they benefit into line with the good and perfect will of God, by every lawful means, and at every opportunity.

It thus is important that believers understand the relationship between the Church and civil authorities, and that they live in these two worlds, as far as possible, according to the Kingdom calling and glory of their exalted Savior and Lord (1 Thess. 2.12).

These studies can help to put this situation into perspective. *Two Swords* has been developed for individual or group use, as you will see from even a quick perusal of the pages that follow.

We are happy to provide this resource for your use at no charge. If you find these, or other resources of The Fellowship of Ailbe, helpful in your walk with and work for the Lord, please consider sending a gift to support this work and to help us extend our outreach to others.

May the Lord bless you as you take up this study of the Lordship of Christ, and how He works to express that through ecclesiastical and civil authorities.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 King of Nations

*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD;
Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever he wishes.
Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
But the LORD weighs the hearts.
To do righteousness and justice
Is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.* Proverbs 21.1-3

The necessity of government
“Everything is politics.”

We've all heard that quip, and, increasingly, it appears, people consider it to be true. Whatever human beings need, whatever we want, whenever our security or wellbeing is threatened, we look for political solutions.

Government, we have come to believe, is the means to a just and prosperous society, whether your view is that this requires more government or less.

Of course, civil governments are important. No one wants to live in anarchy, where the only security is in power and the willingness to wield it, however much it takes. Governments are essential for good order in a society; the bigger questions begged by such a notion are those that concern the nature of good order, the form of government best able to ensure good order, and the means whereby governments should do so.

Government in perspective

In the continuous frenzy of political activism and commentary that have come to define our own society in the 21st century, it can be easy for the followers of Jesus Christ to lose their proper perspective. Government matters, and good government is to be preferred over bad. But Christians need to remember that good government is government as *God* defines it, not as men might define it.

Words like “freedom,” “rights,” “justice,” and “prosperity” are little more than political Silly Putty in the hands of skilled politicians. But in the hands of God, and according to His Word, such terms have fixed, abiding, and all-important significance. The task of the Christian is to understand such ideas as God intends them, then to work to bring God's ideas to reality in the social sphere.

We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and the leaven of beauty, goodness, and truth in an age in flight from God. It ill behooves us as the followers of Christ to leave any aspect of this fallen world beyond the reach of the Kingdom grace of our Lord.

Two swords

The world is ruled by two swords. The one, the sword of political power, is wielded by men, many – perhaps the majority – of whom believe that they have the right and duty, apart from any considerations of divine intent, to define and wield the political sword as they best see fit.

This view, especially over the past century, has been a source of incalculable misery and destruction.

The second, and by far the more important, sword is the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. By this Sword the King of nations rules in all the affairs of men, advancing the cause of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit and driving back the darkness of unbelief and sin (Rom. 14.17, 18; 1 Jn. 2.8).

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The kings and nations of the earth are in the Lord's hand, Who rules them by His Sword and Spirit. He knows the heart of every man, even every political leader, and He is resolved that men shall be governed unto righteousness and justice.

The Lord is determined that the knowledge of His glory shall cover the earth as the waters cover the seas (Hab. 2.14), and will use all His powers to accomplish this exalted objective.

Thus, in all the affairs of men and nations, they who are, in the first instance, ruled by the Sword of the Spirit must seek, by all available means, to affect the course of human life under the swords of the nations for the cause of King Jesus and according to the priorities of His advancing rule.

Christians must not stand idly by while self-interested politicians wield their swords for merely persona, temporal, and material ends. There are larger concerns and a more important agenda to be pursued, if the goodness of God is to be known in the land of the living

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Psalm 27.13. Give some examples of “the goodness of the Lord” that civil governments either help or hinder.
2. Meditate on Romans 14.17, 18. What is the Kingdom of God, and what is our responsibility as Christians with respect to this Kingdom (cf. 1 Thess. 2.12; Matthew 6.33)?
3. As you understand it at this time, how do the City (Kingdom) of God and the City of Man interact in our world today? What frictions are in evidence? What opportunities exist for furthering the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Spirit in each of the cities within your own community?
4. Meditate on Romans 13.1-4. If government is a “servant of God for good,” why is it that this is not abundantly in evidence all over the world?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn, and how are you seeking to grow in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next Steps: Find someone to be a prayer partner with you as you work through this study. Share your goals and determine to pray together regularly as you work through these lessons.

Prayer:

2 God and the Sword of Politics

The king answered Daniel, and said, "Truly, your God is God of gods, the Lord of kings..." Daniel 2.47

King of the political sword

Nebuchadnezzar's response to Daniel's interpretation of his dream was but the first of several steps that would result in the Babylonian tyrant submitting his earthly sword to the Word of God (cf. Dan. 4.34, 35).

The Scriptures – particularly the Old Testament – contain many stories meant to indicate the primacy of the Sword of the Spirit over the political swords of kings and tyrants. Throughout the Old Testament, especially, we see the ways that God employed the sword of politics to accomplish many short-term gains for His people.

As we read these stories – in which whole peoples were put to the sword, nations were brought down by violence, and kings and their armies were gruesomely destroyed – and all this according to the will and with the approval of God – we must keep in mind the context in which these accounts took place. The world before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ was in many ways a graceless place. The law of sin, which yet today contends for the hearts of men, was the order of the nations. No gracious Spirit, no absolute and universal Word, and no faithful and far-flung people existed to restrain the madness of the nations. War, conquest, and death were the norm as men pursued the way that seemed right to them.

It was into such a world that God began to establish His people and to lay the foundation for the great drama of redemption that would unfold beginning with the New Testament.

We wince

If Israel was to survive long enough for the promises and prophecies to be fulfilled in Jesus, she would have to be expert in wielding the political sword according to the practices of her day. She would need wise judges, strong monarchs, and brave warriors to contend with the violent nations in whose midst she sought to establish the rudiments of a just society.

We read the accounts of cities being offered to the Lord in destruction, Samuel hacking Agag to pieces before the Lord, and violent visitations from God on sinful and hardened peoples, and we cannot help ourselves: we wince. Here we see the God of love wielding the sword of violence in order to assert His sovereignty and protect His eternal plan.

But such was the world under sin, and so were the political practices of the day, that, in order to make space for the Gospel of grace to take root and flourish, the ways and weapons of a violent world had to be wielded by a people who were to be ruled by the Prince of Peace.

It is no accident that Jesus was born into a world secured by Roman peace, or that He eschewed the avenue of political power to accomplish His redemptive ends, or that He instructed His disciples not to depend on the sword for the progress of their cause.

With the coming of Christ a new power came to earth – the Kingdom of God – a power that had not been present during the period of the Old Testament. And with that power came the Spirit of Peace to transform the hearts of violent men – such as Saul of Tarsus – and to equip them with the weapons of righteousness and peace and joy for the advancement of Jesus' rule.

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A new sword

Beginning with the New Testament we see more forcefully and effectively the power of the Sword of the Spirit to accomplish the will of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

While the Word of God had always been in the background of much of the bloodshed and violence of the Old Testament, with the finished work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the stage of history was set for a new way to advance the divine economy. That new way does not cancel or negate the political sword or the role of governments. It does, however, establish the primacy of the Sword of the Spirit as the defining weapon of the Prince of Peace unto the blessings of the nations and the glory of God.

Nations and their rulers remain prone to violence yet today; however, a greater power is afoot in the world, and that power can – and has – subdued even the most godless, unbelieving tyrants. The Sword of the Spirit, at work within the City of God, is powerful to change even the most reprobate and violent rulers of the City of Man.

For reflection or discussion

1. In Harper Lee's great book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus is confronted at one point by a mad dog – snarling, growling, foaming at the mouth, and approaching. He takes out his rifle and shoots it dead. Should he have just knelt down and tried to calm the creature with sweet words and gentle strokes? Relate this episode to what you've read in this lesson.
2. The Kingdom of God is an eternal reign. It always has existed and always will. But Jesus came, in a certain sense to “bring near” the Kingdom of God to the affairs of men. What difference has His coming accomplished where the Kingdom of God is concerned?
3. The coming of the Kingdom and the Sword of the Spirit does not negate the validity of civil governments and the sword they are commissioned to bear. What would you say should be the proper relationship between these two “swords”?
4. Understanding the relationship between these two swords can be difficult. What questions, concerns, or caveats do you have at this with respect to this matter?
5. Meditate on 2 Chronicles 36.17-21 and Daniel 4.34, 35. What happened to Nebuchadnezzar? How did that come to pass? Whom did God use in that process? How?

Next Steps: Paul says we should pray for those in political authority over us (1 Timothy 2.1-3). What does Paul hope will result from this? Who are the “kings and all who are in authority” for whom you should be praying? Make a schedule for weekly prayer that will enable you to fulfill this challenge. Share your plan with your prayer partner.

Prayer:

3 A Servant for Good

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain... Romans 13.3, 4

A check on wickedness

The fact that, in the period of history that begins with the New Testament, the sword of politics has been relegated to a *secondary* role in the divine economy, does not mean that it has no part to play in furthering God's plan to bless the nations.

Governments are God's ministers for good.

With the coming of the Kingdom of God the Sword of the Spirit has come near, even into the very midst of the affairs of men and nations. Since the first Christian Pentecost that Sword has been cutting a swath of grace and truth through the course of history, accomplishing far more in the way of righteousness, peace, and joy among the nations than the political sword could ever hope to achieve.

But because wickedness has not been eradicated, and will not be until Jesus returns, because men will continue to do what is wrong rather than what is good, it will be necessary – as in the time of the Old Testament – to check their self-interested and violent ways with the sword of politics, which is the power of the State.

The purpose of civil government

What Paul claims in Romans 13.3, 4 did not simply begin to be true following the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. All governments throughout all of history have had their existence at the pleasure and according to the purposes of God. We may not always be able to discern those purposes or to reason our way to understanding the ways of God's sovereignty over all governments from all times, but it is true nonetheless. God is sovereign over civil governments, and always has been.

Paul was simply stating for his generation what, as we have seen, the Old Testament consistently taught: The Sword of the Spirit has always ruled the sword of politics. Now, however, with the coming of the Kingdom of God, the transforming powers of the Word of God are much more manifest and available, and more far-reaching than ever they were in the days of the patriarchs and prophets.

So governments today exist at God's pleasure; they are His servants. Their purpose is to sustain and advance God's rule of goodness on earth.

Now we know that there is scarcely a government anywhere in the world today that would agree with this notion. The secularization of the age and the misuse of the doctrine of the separation of Church and State have corrupted the thinking of rulers and the people they govern, so that, outward formalities aside, no nation today acknowledges its duty to be that of serving the good purposes of God.

The role of God's people

But this does not exempt governments from this divine calling. God has not changed His mind.

Nor does it mean that those who are grounded and instructed in the ways of divine goodness – the ways of the Sword of the Spirit – may draw back from working to enable governments in every place to fulfill their divinely-appointed service.

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But can we depend on the best ideas of men to be able to discern that which is good and right?

We cannot, of course. Rather, we must consult the Lord on such matters, turning to the Sword of the Spirit for guidance in understanding and ordering the proper use of the sword of politics in our day.

God alone, speaking through His Word, can provide us with reliable and unchanging norms of goodness to help us in knowing how governments should fulfill their divinely-appointed roles. The citizens of God's Kingdom fulfill their callings, in part, when they work and pray and teach in such a way as to counsel and guide the powers-that-be in how they must fulfill the good plan of God for their people.

For reflection or discussion

1. Can you think of some examples of how our own government is serving the good purposes of God, in spite of itself?
2. Are there any areas where our civil authorities have turned away from the good plan, purposes, and will of God? Can you give an example or two, and show from Scripture why you believe this?
3. Meditate on Matthew 5.13. Does this have application to the Church in our society today? In what ways?
4. In order for government to fulfill its calling as God's minister to us for good, is it necessary that every member of the government be a Christian? Why or why not?
5. What opportunities are available to Christians in this country to encourage and assist civil government in fulfilling its God-given responsibilities?

Next Steps: Continuing praying for civil authorities. See if you can find an email or postal address for each one. As Paul often let people know he was praying for them, we should do the same with these civil authorities. What might be a good approach for you in letting your civil authorities know from time to time that you pray for them? Share your thoughts with your prayer partner.

Prayer:

4 Wielding the Political Sword

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain... Romans 13.3, 4

Good governments

We have observed that God establishes human governments, of various kinds, to serve, under the power of His Word and Spirit, for His right and good purposes.

Governments are God's servants, as Paul explained. As God's servants governments either *do* His bidding, by sustaining justice and advancing what is good, or they *resist* His will by using their powers for purposes other than His.

Yet even rebellious governments remain in the hands of the Lord, and He will, in His way and time, cause them to serve His purposes, no matter how long or hard they resist.

How does a government wield its political sword in a manner agreeable to the will of God? By understanding and prosecuting its mission according to the Sword of the Spirit. Good governments make good laws, laws which can be seen to reflect or derive from the teaching of Scripture and the practice of Christian rulers down through the ages. Good governments by their good laws oppose and suppress all that is bad, everything, that is, which would promote the cause of the Lie, and all its attendant evils, within its jurisdiction.

Use of force

When good laws prove insufficient to restrain evil and promote justice, governments may resort to force. Crime is defined as that which offends against the law, especially against the good Law of God. Crime upsets the balance of justice in a society because it fails the duty of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

When crimes have been committed, government must act to restore justice and righteousness. It must hold criminals accountable according to the standards of justice revealed in the Scriptures, and this can include the forfeiture of freedoms or wealth, or even life.

The preservation of goodness and justice is the highest calling of government, and rulers must not be reluctant to act swiftly and decisively to restore the balances when justice has been transgressed.

Force and other nations

This may entail engaging other nations in hostilities – war. When the preservation of a good, just, and orderly society is threatened by foreign powers, it is the duty of government to resist those powers and to preserve the divine order of goodness.

Nations may not engage in war for *any* purpose. A war is just when a nation whose good order has been assaulted or threatened turns to the power of the sword, all other means failing, to restore good order and suppress those who threaten it.

When the motive for war becomes something other than the restoration and preservation of justice and goodness, the good purpose of war is compromised and government fails to serve its Creator. Wars that are engaged, for example, to achieve or preserve some merely economic advantage may not necessarily be just. Nations that are engaged in wars must at all times make sure that their motives and ends are just, and that they are prosecuting this wielding of the sword in a manner consistent with God's purposes and means.

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The making and execution of law, the enforcement of justice, and the preservation of good social order – even if by means of war – are the primary functions of civil government. Many secondary functions may derive from these, but all such subsidiary duties and responsibilities must, like the major functions of government, find their proper place within the swath marked out by the Sword of the Spirit.

For only when government wields its sword according to the principles and precepts of God’s Word can it fulfill its calling as a minister of God to us for good.

For reflection or discussion

1. What is justice? How does the idea of justice relate to the Sword of the Spirit? The sword of the civil magistrate?
2. Is justice a matter for courts and legislatures, merely? Should churches take an interest in justice? What about families?
3. Do you think the Christians you know have a good understanding of the Biblical teaching about civil government? Why or why not?
4. Is it the duty of the Church, wielding the Sword of the Spirit, to teach its members about the proper role of civil government, and of church members in relation to civil government? Why or why not? If so, how should a church carry out this duty?
5. What “sword” does a local church have to restrain evil and restore justice within its own community? How does that work?

Next Steps: Talk with a pastor about your church’s practice of church discipline. How does it work? To what ends? What is your role in this important work?

Prayer:

5 Abuse of Power

And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not a man!" Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. Acts 12.22, 23

The desire for sovereignty

Human governments abuse the powers entrusted to them from God when they consider their own word and will to be authoritative rather than God's.

This is a tendency inherent in all governments for the simple fact that rulers are sinful and will at times use their offices for personal gain or according to individual whim. This "desire for sovereignty," Augustine warned "is a deadly corrosive." History is littered with examples of nations and rulers reduced to rubble by the selfish ambition of those in power. Such calamitous upheavals do not occur outside the scope of God's sovereign rule of the nations; indeed, at times, they may be manifestations of His divine judgment.

These are words that fall hard on the ears of our secular contemporaries. Even many Christians may find it difficult to believe that God acts so directly and with such wrath in the course of human affairs. But when His glory has been offended, His justice compromised, and people are being oppressed to one degree or another by rulers bent on having their way, we must not suppose that the God Who rules the political swords of this world by the Sword of His Spirit will simply stand aside.

Herod

Herod learned this lesson the hard way.

Previous to the incident concluded in our text, Herod had abused his power by turning the political sword *against* the Sword of the Spirit in an attempt to assert Rome's authority over all religions. He put to death the Apostle James and imprisoned the Apostle Peter, evidently with the intent of similarly silencing him.

Then, when Peter was delivered by the angel of the Lord, Herod abused his power further, by unjustly ordering the death of those who had been on watch at the time of Peter's deliverance. His hubris before the people of Tyre and Sidon was merely the last straw in a series of challenges to God's authority. He was struck down, our text explains, "because he did not give God the glory."

God is glorified in the work of governments when His good and right purposes are preserved and advanced. When those in power consider their own plans, programs, projects, and precepts to be superior to those of the Lord, they raise the power of the political sword against the Sword of the Spirit, and challenge God to prove His authority over them and their rule.

God responds to all such challenges – not always with the kind of swiftness we see in the case of Herod, but sooner or later, and in His own most appropriate way.

This does not mean that we can always attach the specific troubles or trials of any particular government to specific acts of hubris in the face of God. Nor does it mean that we may confidently predict the judgment of God against nations or political platforms that oppose or disregard His will.

An obligation of vigilance

This much we know: Government is God's minister, ordained to further His good among men. Nothing of good can long continue where God's Word is ignored, His ways flouted, and His authority to rule abused. This means that Christians – those entrusted with the Word of God (Ps. 147.19, 20), have a special obligation

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of vigilance in warding off the wrath of God by working to keep governments within their proper bounds of authority.

In so doing we need to understand and make good use of every lawful avenue and opportunity for shaping the direction of government, at every level of society. We are stewards of the freedoms we enjoy in our society, and vigilance and lawful political involvement are important means for securing those freedoms for ourselves and our posterity.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Romans 1.18-32. In what ways does the judgment of God appear in our day? What evidence do you see of this judgment at work in our society?
2. Meditate on Psalm 147.19, 20. What does it mean that we – the spiritual descendants of Jacob – have been entrusted with the Sword of the Spirit? What are we supposed to do with it?
3. Can we expect civil governments to fulfill their divinely-appointed calling as long as they remain ignorant of that responsibility? How does this obligate us who have been entrusted with the Sword of the Spirit? What challenges do Christians face in making civil government aware of its God-given duties?
4. What are some ways that you might expect to see the judgment of God fall on civil governments that resist Him?
5. What are some ways we might expect to see the judgment of God on His people, when they fail to wield the Sword entrusted to Him in seeking and advancing His Kingdom?

Next Steps: Are there any political issues presently before us as a nation in which the Sword of the Spirit should be more decisively invested? What thoughts do you have about these issues? How might you learn more about what the Sword of the Spirit teaches as the civil government's good duty here? Talk with a pastor or church leader about these questions.

Prayer:

6 The Church and the Sword

And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God... Ephesians 6.17

Equipped with the Sword of the Spirit

In these days when the Kingdom of God has come on earth, the followers of Jesus Christ do not, as a Body, wield the political sword. Their assigned weapon for the struggle in which they are engaged is the Word of God, the Sword of the Spirit.

For this reason, churches do not enact temporal punishments against members who transgress the Law of God; spiritual and church discipline, and the practice of penance according to the Word, are the proper methods of correction available to believers within their communities. This does not exempt offenders from being liable to the political sword, should their transgressions require; it simply insists that the Church must not undertake the restoration of justice except according to its appointed means within its own community.

The Word of God is able to equip the followers of Jesus Christ for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Wherever the goodness of God may come to light in the land of the living, there it will do so only according to the teaching of Scripture and through the lives of those who submit to the Sword of the Spirit in all things. Wherever the followers of Christ do not engage the Sword of the Spirit, there the goodness of God cannot emerge and the darkness of unbelief and sin will prevail.

The Christian's calling is thus to be equipped by the Word of God for the good works God has before ordained for every area of our lives (Eph. 2.10). The Scriptures – the Sword of the Spirit – are God's Word for all of life, but they will only speak into all of life with transforming power when believers learn and live the teachings of Scripture.

For all of life

Believers must come under the Sword of the Spirit in all their thinking, affections, priorities, and practices (2 Cor. 10.3-5). By daily reading, study, and meditation on the Word of God, through faithful teaching and obedient learning, Christians may expect the inherent goodness and truth of Scripture to shape their souls and to show forth in their lives, in every aspect of their lives.

This Sword is the one we are to live by and to wield day by day in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. As we do, letting the Word of God cut deeply into our souls and through all the confusion and uncertainty of our culture, we bring the cauterizing and healing powers of the Sword of the Spirit for good into all of life, culture, and society.

When we fail to do this, we consign our neighbors to the capricious ways of the spirit of the age and corrupted edges of the sword of politics.

Not persuaded

The problem today is that, while the Scriptures claim that they are sufficient to equip us for every good work, the followers of Christ are not persuaded.

Or, we are not convinced that the responsibility for the good order and just working of our society falls squarely onto the shoulders of those who have the Sword of the Spirit and the mandate to "take" it.

Either way, we as believers disobey our Lord and King and fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

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At the same time, because the Scriptures – the Sword of the Spirit – are sufficient to equip us for every good work, those good works include such as are necessary to ensure that government fulfills its own good calling and wields the political sword according the God’s good purposes and will.

Scripture does not teach us to *avoid* political activity, but to *engage* it actively and thoroughly, and to work by every legitimate means to help civil governments do their work to the glory of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. Paul says we must “take” the Sword of the Spirit. What does it mean to “take” that Sword? How does this work out in your life?
2. Is being a good and involved citizen part of our callings as disciples of the Lord? Why or why not?
3. Meditate on Matthew 22.34-40. What should be the goal of our “taking” of Scripture? How does this relate to the theme of these studies?
4. Are your own practices of Bible reading, meditation, and study adequate to equip you for helping civil government fulfill its calling from God? Can you see any areas where you might improve your “taking” of the Sword of the Spirit?
5. Edmund Burke, that great Irish statesman, reminded us that “the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” Apply this insight to the lessons we have been studying.

Next Step: Meet with a church leader or pastor to share your approach to “taking” the Sword of the Spirit as you presently practice it. See if he or she has any ideas to help you improve your study and use of Scripture. Share the results of this conversation with your prayer partner.

Prayer:

7 God's Sword and Man's

But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Acts 4.19, 20

This is what the Lord says

When as Christians we "take the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" into the arena where the political sword is wielded, we demonstrate, in the most direct way, the authority of God and His Word to rule the affairs of men and nations.

There must be no shying away from this, and no attempt to disguise our Scriptural convictions in the language of the common weal or right reason alone. While right reason must certainly attend our use of Scripture in the public square, and the common weal will be among the ends we seek, the honor of God and the cause of His Kingdom are our first priority.

We must not hesitate to say and to demonstrate, even in our civic duties and endeavors, "This is what the Lord says."

Three duties

The Christian wields the Sword of the Spirit in the arena of government in three ways.

First, by *participation*. In a free society such as ours opportunities to participate in the political process, and thus to affect the ways the sword of politics is wielded, are available at many levels. Becoming informed, engaging in conversations, making use of local and national media, working for candidates and causes, joining a political party, and serving in public office are just a few of these.

We also participate in government when we obey and support just laws and give encouragement to those who serve according to the principles of goodness found in the Word of God, whether or not they are aware of their doing so.

Second, Christians wield the Sword of the Spirit when they *speak prophetically* to the powers-that-be. How will rulers ever know to govern by good and just principles unless someone who knows such principles makes them known?

Anyone can criticize policies that are contrary to God's Word. It's quite another matter to take the time, demonstrate the grace, and practice the patience needed for protracted discussion and debate in the public square.

We must at all times remember that the Word of God is the Sword of the *Spirit*. He wields His Word according to His good purposes. At times, when reasons fail and common sense is lacking, if the Word of God is clearly, winsomely, and unabashedly proclaimed, the Spirit may be pleased to use His Sword in ways that go beyond reason or common sense.

Finally, the Christian wields the Sword of the Spirit in the political arena by *active protest* against that which offends the holiness and justice of God. Such protests may be peaceable, or they may, all other recourse failing, require acts of civil disobedience.

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But if we are serious about God's Truth, and we believe it to be the means toward a good and just society, we will not hesitate to stand up against whatever is contrary to Scripture by every legitimate means, and, those being exhausted, by outright disobedience to unjust laws.

God rules!

God rules in the affairs of men and nations. The Sword of the Spirit circumscribes the political sword in every nation. The judgment or blessing of God attends the work of those who bear the two swords under which we live.

Civil magistrates must bear their sword according to the good purposes of God's calling. Believers must bear their Swords for the same ends, and they must "take" the civil sword in their hands to full extent of the freedoms and responsibilities granted them as citizens of the City of Man.

But God's Sword must rule over all. And the way this is made manifest to the watching world is when the followers of Christ, through participation, prophecy, and protest, take their stand squarely on the Word of God and call their rulers to acknowledge their duty before Him.

For reflection or discussion

1. Were Peter and John being bad citizens in the passage cited at the beginning of this lesson? Explain:
2. What can we expect to be the consequences if Christians fail to become more involved in civil government in the ways we have briefly surveyed here?
3. What have you learned from these studies about the relationship between civil government and the Kingdom of God?
4. What is the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next Steps: Ask your prayer partner to work through this study with you. Make a copy for him or her, then agree to meet, say, weekly, to work through each lesson and pray together.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship to help us extend our ministry and resources to others. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.