

A DIFFERENT AUTHORITY

by Al Parr

Christians are sometimes called upon to make decisions that involve both doctrinal and highly emotional issues. One such question troubling many concerns the matter of war. On the one hand, the patriotic individual is inclined to stand with comrades-in-arms and defend home, hearth and way of life. On the other hand, the faithful servant of God wonders how he can wear the name of “the Lamb” and behave like a wolf in his neighbor’s pasture. Sadly, the eager patriot and the humble servant are often the same person, torn by such loyalties.

But are these loyalties mutually exclusive? Should the Christian be ashamed to speak up in support of his government, and of his friends in its military service? Can a Christian pray on one day that there be no war, and consistently pray on the next day for military victory, which necessarily includes destruction and death in the opponent’s field? Such questions have been debated by many for as long as the church has existed, and we will not likely end the debate here, but we do believe that there is an answer from God, and that with Him there is no debate.

God has given the state authority to engage in some activities which are forbidden the individual. Just as it is God’s will that “the husband is the head of the wife,” that “children obey (their) parents in the Lord” and that “fathers rear (their) children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 5:23; 6:1, 4) - and not that the state should do so instead - so it is His will that the state bear the sword as “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13:4).

Most Christians understand that the church has God-given responsibilities that the individual acting alone does not have (I Corinthians 5:4), and that the individual certainly has authority to behave in the home in ways that are clearly not authorized as the work of the church (I Corinthians 14:34-35). As the individual has responsibility and authority not given to the state (Colossians 3:18-21), it is not strange that the government has responsibilities and authority not given to the church or the individual (Luke 2:1; 20:22, 25).

Human government exists by the authority of God (Romans 13:1-2). Those who occupy positions in government may conduct business within the realm of that authority. They may make and enforce laws (Matthew 5:25-26). They may protect and defend the people and institutions whose leadership is entrusted to them (Proverbs 24:1-6). They may do this in their governmental positions; they may not legislate, enforce or defend on their own authority (Matthew 26:51-52). Yet, as the creation of God they must rule righteously (I Timothy 2:1-4).

A Christian must obey the authority of God in the conduct of his home. The same Christian must obey the authority of God as he worships and works in the church. If the same Christian is a member of the government, he must obey the authority of God governing the conduct of governments. There is One Law-giver Who has given different commands and responsibilities to the one Christian in his various roles in the world.(*)