

God ordained that governments should aid their citizens (even people of faith)

By Will Hall, *Message* Executive Editor

ALEXANDRIA, La. (LBM)—Many opinions have been expressed about the Payroll Protection Loans offered to churches, evangelists and faith-based nonprofits; but, too much of the commentary seems to offer little in the way of a fundamental doctrine about the role of government and the responsibilities of Christians (who are Kingdom citizens first, Philippians 3:20-21) as an anchor for the discussion of this issue.

Thankfully, the Bible offers a good deal of information about the relationship between civil authority and the Christian.

Succinctly, this includes the duty of Christians, as a minimum, to:

-- recognize and accept (obey) the authorities ordained by God in the form of a civil government (Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17) ... but whether the authority be civil or spiritual, we are *to obey God first* (Daniel 3: 16-18; 6:10; Acts 4:5, 18-20);

-- pray for government leaders (specifically that we might lead a quiet life and that they might hold their offices in godliness and honesty)(1 Timothy 2:1-3); and,

-- pay taxes (Romans 13:6-7).

Meanwhile, God charges the government, as basic functions, to:

-- protect the populace and provide safety from lawlessness (Acts 21:27-37; 22:25-30; 23:1-35);

-- punish the wicked (and the government sometimes cannot perform this function without the testimony given, or the charges brought, or the rights asserted by believers) (Romans 13:3-4; Acts 16:35-40; 22:23-30; 25:1-3); and,

-- promote the general welfare of the people (1 Timothy 2:2b-3).

It is this third broad responsibility of government that, perhaps, offers the best fit for understanding the current issue of accepting crisis relief from the government as an individual and as an incorporated ministry.

Indeed, the Bible provides multiple examples of civil authorities attending to the general welfare of their citizens, but, also, specifically coming to the financial aid of God's people:

-- When Zerubbabel was tasked with rebuilding the temple, King Cyrus gave him authorization, but regarding the actual construction, also declared, "let the expenses be given out of the king's house" (Ezra 6:3-4).

-- King Darius subsequently offered his approval of the reconstruction effort. Moreover, he commanded that it be built "of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered" (Ezra 6:8). He even decreed that his governors in the region

provide “both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of Heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons” (Ezra 6:9-10).

-- Nehemiah actually petitioned King Artaxerxes for military protection as well as for timber from the king's forests to rebuild the wall, the palace and his own residence (Nehemiah 2:5-9).

-- Even before this, God had used the government of Egypt in His plan to rescue the known world from a crushing widespread famine, raising up Joseph to be appointed second in command of the country in order that he would direct the government to take saving actions for all people (Genesis 39:2, 41).

These examples provide enduring principles that transfer to the present day and should inform our understanding and our decisions on such things as loans that for most of our churches and evangelists will be forgiven by the end of June.

I understand the position of those who refuse to take advantage of this offer because of their concern that it will continue to push our country's debt to unacceptable levels. However, on the other hand, keeping people employed provides security for the country in terms of social stability (less unrest among the people). It also provides a stable tax base (taxpayers fund the government) and a stable financial system (consumers drive the economy).

But, I do not grasp why some insist that Christians should not rely on government in the face of the economic upheaval that is obvious in the present situation.

It is not a lack of faith to access resources that have been made available through a channel God has blessed in similar dire circumstances (revisit the examples above). [The anecdote about the man of prayer who ends up wet in Heaven after not taking advantage of a Jeep, a Jon boat and a helicopter during a flood comes to mind.]

Likewise, it is not a lack of preaching about stewardship and tithing that is the fundamental issue in the crisis facing our churches. It is a matter of people not being employed and thus not having income on which to tithe or provide other offerings.

Moreover, U.S. Sen. John Kennedy has assured Louisiana Baptist leaders that there are no strings attached, at least with regard to possible government interference with our positions on human sexuality and traditional marriage. He is a member of the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship -- that drafted most of the CARES Act as it pertains to Payroll Protection Loans for nonprofits, and successfully fought to include churches in the provision. His office sent the following information to allay our concerns on the matter: “Nothing in [SBA nondiscrimination regulations] shall apply to a religious corporation, association, educational institution or society with respect to the membership or the employment of individuals of a particular religion to perform work connected with the carrying on by such corporation, association, educational institution or society of its religious activities.”

Finally, opponents to the offer of the loans, which will be forgiven in three months, fail to acknowledge that most churches and pastors already are beneficiaries of other government policies that are much more financially entangling:

-- Pastors receive a housing allowance, not from the church (the church merely designates an amount), but from the government which allows this money to be received (mostly) tax free.

-- Churches and Christian schools benefit from being nonprofits and thus as 501(c)(3) entities avoid paying taxes that small businesses must pay.

-- What's more, Christian men and women are about to receive \$1,200 each and another \$500 per qualifying child as aid in the face of lost income. Are they to reject this financial relief from the government?!

In the end, it is a well-established point of orthodox doctrine that the government is charged with promoting the general welfare of the people; and, there is an overwhelming body of biblical evidence that the provisions for churches and evangelists in the CARES Act seem to fall under this God-ordained responsibility.