

Delegated Authority – Deuteronomy 17:1-20

Introduction – All lawful human authority is delegated authority. When we understand how to submit to biblical authority, we will have found true liberty. Liberty is not the absence of constraint when it comes to the desires of our flesh. Liberty is not the absence of law; liberty is the fruit of faithful submission to the law. And those who hold ministerial authority must themselves submit to that which will provide liberty.

Judgment Begins in the Household of God (v1) – The rest of the chapter deals plainly with civil authority, but this first verse deals with ecclesiastical. Understanding authority and submission must take place rightly in the church before it ever will in the marketplace. God established our approach to Him; to replace His terms with our own reveals contempt for His authority (Mal 1:8).

Procedures in Civil Authority (vv2-7) – The emphasis here is on procedural justice in a capital case, but the example is public idolatry. Procedurally, men and women are treated equally, and a case must be made with two or three witnesses (“diligent inquiry” also implies cross-examination) before a judge may rule on such a matter. If a guilty sentence was rendered, the guilty person was to be executed publicly and the witnesses must participate in the execution. Idolatry is a capital offense because it is treason to God Who is King over the state. Even worse is excommunication, a declaration of being removed from the covenant people of God and unto eternal condemnation – and the New Testament uses just this kind of procedural language with regard to such cases (Matt 18:16, 1 Cor 5:13, 2 Cor 13:1, 1 Tim 5:19).

This is foreign thinking for us in today’s Christianity, both with regard to the church and with regard to civil matters. In the public square, we have bought the lie that all gods have been removed from the marketplace, but every law-system has a law-source, a god, and America’s is named Demos.

Wisdom in Civil Authority (vv8-13) – Matters should be decided locally whenever possible, but life and law is messy and wisdom requires a system of appeals when necessary. At Jerusalem the priests would judge on difficult ecclesial matters and judges would handle civil issues (v9) and so we see in Israel the appropriate separation of church and state (2 Chron 19:11). However, this is not a separation of God or His law – and state.

When the matter is decided, it is settled and is used to teach/apply God’s law (v11). That decision is to be obeyed and any presumptuous acts against the rulings are to be treated as treason against the state and its delegated authority (v12). This is because disobeying God’s law is claiming another law-system and therefore another law-giver, another god. Defending pluralism is defending idolatry. We also learn that the scriptures teach the deterrent value of capital punishment used biblically (v13).

What Qualifies a Godly King? (vv14-20) – God has never been opposed to His people having a king; in fact in His plan we always were to have the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, as the King of kings. Paul teaches us, speaking in another area of authority, that the flesh puts up with fools gladly (2 Cor 11:19-20) for the flesh is attracted to kings who take bribes – our bribes. Think of our day: we gladly let up to half of our salary taken away by force in taxes, but if some lawmaker dares to curb our sinful flesh, we rise up and declare tyranny is upon us. And so the issue was not judges or governors verses a monarchy. The issue was the supremacy of God’s law and authority remaining in all situations.

If a king ruled, he was required to be one of the covenant people, i.e. a man of faith (v15). He therefore shared the same ultimate submission to God as his authority. He was not to act like Egypt nor return to Egypt for multiplying military power (v16). He therefore was not to forget that military power could never be a source of security in the place of the fear of God who had decimated Egypt. He was not to multiply wives for himself (a political and sexual problem) for it would turn his heart away (v16). He also could not use his office to multiply his own personal wealth (which of course would most likely happen through bribes and such). He was placed in the position of delegated authority to be a servant-leader to the people (and hence we learn why authority is ever delegated).

At the center of his rule, would be his foundational commitment to his God and his God’s law. To make clear that god was Yahweh, he was required to openly show that in keeping his own copy of the law to read all the days of his life (vv18-19). A ruler’s religion is never personal. This is commanded so that the people are protected (v20, Jer 22:1-5).

All Human Authority is Delegated Authority – Whether parental, ecclesiastical, or civil, all human authority points to some standard which requires a standard-bearer, an author of the law. But there is only One Prince of Peace, only One Author of Life, only One Law-giver, only One Judge on the Final Day. We show our devotion ultimately in only one way: obedience to His law (John 14:15). From the beginning, our refusal to do so has only brought sin and misery to the human experience.

We Get the Leaders We Deserve – The people of our nation, including the church, do not want a man or men to rule us who first of all submit to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and do so openly, gladly, and practically. We invite idolatrous leaders because we are an idolatrous people. They represent us well.

Civil Reformation – will not take place through political reform first. It comes from repentance, beginning in the home and in the church. Honor your father and mother with a view to the promise. Accept any delegated authority given to you by bowing the knee yourself to the Lord of all authority.