

THE CHRISTIAN AND CIVIL AUTHORITIES

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This essay is designed first to set out the Apostle Paul's teaching on the relationship between Christians and civil authorities, and then to examine its contemporary application for Christians using the clearest New Testament text – Romans 13:1-7. This passage contains general commands for both Christians and non-Christians. Paul reasons that obedience is required because civil authorities have been ordained by God (13:1b-2) and because civil rulers are responsible to maintain civic order (13:3-4). Two motivations for obedience are the avoidance of wrath and the maintenance of a good conscience (13:5). Finally, the obligations of obedience are discussed (13:6-7). It is concluded that Romans 13:1-7 is just as applicable today as it was in Paul's time.

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I am pleased for the opportunity to contribute this essay to a *Festschrift* honoring Dr. Robert L. Thomas. When I came to Talbot Theological Seminary as a young divinity student, he had just recently come to teach New Testament. It was my privilege to have all my New Testament courses from him. I remember him as a demanding but fair teacher. He had a passion not only to teach us the Greek language and exegesis, but to make what we learned applicable in our preaching and the communication of God's word. After my student days, we had opportunities to work together for The Lockman Foundation. We have a warm friendship and Dr. Thomas was the preacher at my father's funeral. So, it is with thankfulness to God and genuine appreciation for Dr. Thomas that I offer this article.

The Bible is a book whose purposes are to tell us who God is and what He is like, that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, and that Jesus Christ became a man and died for our sins so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life. It is not primarily a book about political and social theory. However, that does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about political ethics. Quite to the contrary, the subject of civil government is discussed widely in both the

Old and New Testaments. Government is a part of God's providence, a fact of biblical history, and an important factor in the outworking of biblical prophecy.¹

The clearest New Testament text on the relationship between the Christian and civil government is Romans 13:1-7. While it is not the only passage that discusses the issue,² it is a coherent and carefully constructed argument on this topic. Paul reasons that God is firmly in control of human history, and that no one comes to a place of leadership without God's permission. Civil government is not a human invention, but of divine origin. Therefore, Christians are to submit to those in authority. Rulers then are established by God (v. 1) as His servants (v. 4). They have a special dignity, but are also in a position that puts them under God.

This understanding of the state has been widely criticized, and it has also been erroneously used as justification for tyrants and the Christians' obligation to obey them.³ Some Germans used this text to support absolute obedience to the Third Reich in Germany. It was also used in the defense of apartheid in South Africa. These are just two of the most recent attempts to justify evil regimes through appeal to Paul and Romans.

Much of the literature on this text has to do with matters that are outside the scope of this paper. Some of these issues include whether this is genuinely Pauline or not,⁴ what is the origin of this teaching about the State, what historical

¹ David R. Plaster, "The Christian and War: A Matter of Personal Conscience," *GTJ* 6 (1985): 436.

² Cf. Mark 12:13-17; Acts 5:29; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 3:13. See also Old Testament texts: 2 Samuel 12:8; Proverbs 8:15,16; Jeremiah 27:5-11; Daniel 2:21, 37-45; 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21.

³ See these resources for a discussion of the problems with this interpretation: Gerhard Ebeling and others, "Romans XIII [exegesis and commentary of Romans 13:1-7]," *Risk* 7:2 (1971):1-39; V. Riekkinen, *Römer 13: Aufzeichnung und Weiterführung der exegetischen Diskussion* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1980); W. Bauer, "Jedermann sie untertan der Obrigkeit," in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (ed. G. Strecker; Tübingen: Mohr, 1967) 262-84; W. Affeldt, *Die weltliche Gewalt in der Paulus-Exegese. Röm. 13,1-7 in den Römerbrief-kommentaren der lateinischen Kirche bis zum des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969); B. C. Lategan, "Reception: Theory and Practice in Reading Romans 13," in *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (eds. P. J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer, NTTS 15; Leiden: Brill, 1991) 145-69; Pol Vonck, "All Authority Comes From God: Romans 13:1-7—A Tricky Text About Obedience to Political Power," *AFER* 26 (1984): 338-47; Alexander Webster, "St. Paul's Political Advice to the Haughty Gentiles in Rome: An Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 25 (1981): 259-92.

⁴ Cf. Webster, 259-92; James Kallas, "Rom 13:1-7: An Interpolation," *NTS* 11 (1964-65): 365-74; J. C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 207-09; W. Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem* (SNT; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975); W. Monro, *Authority in Paul and Peter: The Identification of a Pastoral Stratum in the Pauline Corpus and 1 Peter* (SNTSMS 45; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983) esp. 56-67.

situation in Rome was the occasion of this passage⁵, whether there are parallels in Jewish, pagan, or Christian literature⁶, as well as lexical studies of various words in the text. Each of these has its value, although one can often do little more than speculate about what the answer is. The purpose of this paper, however, is first to set out Paul's teaching on civil authorities and then to examine its contemporary application.

ROMANS 13:1-7 AND ITS CONTEXT

Romans 13:1-7 is a part of a paraenesis, i.e. a group of exhortations, counsel, or advice, which begins in chapter 12 and ends in chapter 15. There are those who think that it is an intrusion into the context. Some have even suggested that it was a later addition by someone other than Paul. These speculations are entirely unnecessary.⁷ It is true that these verses appear quite abruptly without any explicit syntactical connection to what precedes them, and that 13:8-10 make quite good sense if they followed 12:9-21. However, it may be that Paul's teaching about the transitory character of this world is just the reason that he includes 13:1-7. Because a new era is coming, some may be tempted to reject every societal institution including civil government. Moreover, there may be an extreme attitude which rejects submission to civil authority as a part of the command not to be conformed to this age (12:2). Thus, there is the need to be reminded that the natural world in which we live out our human existence has not

⁵ J. Friedrich, W. Pohlmann, P. Stuhlmacher, "Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13:1-7," *ZTK* 73 (1976) esp. 155-59; A. J. M. Wederburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 63-64; J. I. H. McDonald, "Rom 13:1-7: A Test Case for NT Interpretation," *NTS* 19 (1989): 546-47; Daniel Kroger, "Paul and the Civil Authorities: An Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7," *Asian Journal of Theology* 7 (1993):352-57; Matthew G. Neufeld, "Submission to Governing Authorities: A Study of Romans 13:1-7," *Direction* 23:2 (1994): 94-96; J. I. H. McDonald, "Romans 13:1-7 and Christian Social Ethics Today," *Modern Churchman* 29:2 (1987): 22-24; Rebecca I. Denova, "Paul's Letter to the Romans, 13:1-7: The Gentile-Christian Response to Civil Authority," *Encounter* 53 (1992): 212-22; Susan Boyer, "Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7," *Brethren Life and Thought* 32 (1987): 212-13.

⁶ See Denova, 222-27; Thomas J. Reese, "Pauline Politics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 3 (1973): 326-29; Kroger, 349-50.

⁷ See E. Käsemann, "Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969); O. Kuss, "Paulus über die staatliche Gewalt," in *Auslegung und Verkündigung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1963) I, 247; U. Wilckens, "Römer 13, 1-7," in *Rechtfertigung als Freiheit* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974) 205; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 790-94; Robert H. Stein, "The Argument of Romans 13:1-7," *Novum Testamentum* 31(1989):325-26; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. by Scott J. Hafemann; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 198-204; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988) 758-59; Stanley E. Porter, "Romans 13:1-7 as Pauline Political Rhetoric," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 3 (1990): 115-17; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 457-60.

been entirely abandoned by God. Moo says, "As a manifestation of his common grace, God has established in this world certain institutions, such as marriage and government, that have a positive role to play even after the inauguration of the new age."⁸

There are actually some veiled ties to the immediate context. In 12:18, Paul teaches that the Christian should live peaceably with all. Thus, he describes in 13:1-7 how to live peacefully with the state. Paul states in 12:19 that wrath and vengeance belong to the Lord, and then in 13:4-5 speaks about the wrath of God. The word "pay" is found in both 12:17 and 13:7, while 13:8 speaks of the "debt of love" and 13:7 commands the paying of our debt of taxes and tribute.⁹ At any rate, it must be admitted that the ties to the immediate context, are at best loose, making this essentially a self-contained passage.¹⁰

A GENERAL COMMAND (13:1a)

Paul begins with a general command, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." While Romans is written to believers, this command is addressed more broadly. It is to "every soul." Paul uses "soul" in typical Old Testament and Jewish understanding of the whole person, not just the immaterial part. Submission to civil authority is especially a duty that Christians are to fulfill, but it is not limited to them alone. The duty has the most universal application.¹¹

The command is about "governing authorities." The English word "authority" refers in secular and biblical Greek to the possession of authority. As an abstract noun, it bespeaks the concept of authority, as in Matthew 28:18. However, when it is used in a concrete sense, it refers either to the sphere in which authority is exercised (cf. Luke 23:7) or to the person who exercises the authority. It is clearly the last sense that is in view here.

It has been argued that the person exercising the authority is either a governmental official¹² or a spiritual being.¹³ A few interpreters have argued that

⁸ Moo, 791.

⁹ Stein, 326. See also Morris, 458.

¹⁰ Käsemann, 199.

¹¹ Moo, 795; Stein, 326; Walker, 8, 11-12; Dunn, 760; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 225.

¹² See Stein, 328; Moo, 795; Dunn, 760.

¹³ The foremost defender of this view is O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1962) 195 and idem, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1956) 65-70, 95-114. See also C. D. Morrison, *The Powers that Be* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1960); K. L. Schmidt, "Das Gegenüber von Kirche und Staat in der Gemeinde des Neuen Testaments," *TBI* 16 (1937) cols. 1-16;

the one referred to here is, at least, partially a spiritual being. The main argument for this latter view is that elsewhere Paul uses the word “authorities” to describe angelic powers.¹⁴ There are four reasons that require the rejection of the spiritual beings’ view.¹⁵ First, when Paul uses this word to refer to spiritual beings, he always combines it with the word “powers.” That is not the case here. Second, other terms in this text that are parallel with “authorities” are not capable of this double meaning. They are called rulers in v. 3 and servants to whom taxes and tribute are due in v. 4. Throughout this passage, Paul uses terms that are taken from Greco-Roman government and administration, and there is no reason to think otherwise here. Third, nowhere does Paul speak of the redemption and conversion of these authorities. An appeal to Colossians 1:19-20 is tenuous since Jesus triumphs over them (Col 2:15), though they remain hostile (Eph 2:1-2). In view of 1 Corinthians 15:24 which tells of the destruction of all dominion, authority, and power at the return of Christ, it should be clear that, even if we give Colossians 1:19-20 the most general meaning possible, this reconciliation is yet future.¹⁶ Fourth, Paul never commands his readers to submit to such angelic beings. Quite the contrary, he counsels that believers should resist and oppose them. Thus, the “governing authorities” spoken of here are in reference to human civil authorities (cf. Luke 12:11; Titus 3:1).

Stanley E. Porter offers an important alternative. He argues that the governing authorities are civil rulers, but that not every civil authority is in view. The command refers only to those who are *just*. If Porter is right, many of the problematic applications of the text are resolved. This claim is based on his understanding of the word translated “governing.” It is a participle, and he says that it has either the sense of “rank” (i.e., superiority in position), *or* superiority in quality. While he admits that there is support for superiority in position in Paul’s writings, he thinks that the latter sense is preferable here.¹⁷

Porter gives three arguments in support of the qualitative sense. First, the idea of superiority in quality is to be found in the literature outside of the New Testament. Examples he cites are Isocrates 4.95 where qualitatively better

G. Dehn, “Engel und Obrigkeit, in *Theologische Aufsätze Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Wolf: Munich: Kaiser, 1936) 90-110; C. E. B. Cranfield, “Some Observations on Romans 13:1-7,” *NTS* 6 (1959-60): 241-49, though he later retracted this view in his commentary; K. Barth, *Church and State* (London: SCM, 1939) 23-36.

¹⁴ See Ephesians 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16; 2:15 for the plural use and Ephesians 1:21; Colossians 2:10 for the singular use. See also 1 Peter 3:22.

¹⁵ Moo, 796 n. 22.

¹⁶ Stein, 328.

¹⁷ Porter, 123.

cities are destroyed, Daniel 5:11 (LXX) which says that Daniel surpassed all the wise men of Babylon, and Jesus Sirach 33:7 which asks why one day is superior to another. Second, he sees two of the three Pauline uses of the participle related to superiority in quality (Phil 3:8; 4:7). Romans 13:1 is a third possibility. Third, superiority in quality means that submission is only due to just rulers. As stated before, such an interpretation solves many of the problems with this text.¹⁸

This view is attractive, but I think it must be rejected for the following reasons. First, the lexical evidence is sparse and unclear.¹⁹ Second and most importantly, the entire context in which this command is found is absolute and universalistic. Paul calls on “every person” to submit. He says that “there is *no* authority except which God has established,” and that “the authorities that exist have been established by God.” If he had intended for us to understand that this was true only of good and just authorities, he could have made that point much clearer. Third, the universal, absolute understanding of the text is in keeping with what is said about civil authorities elsewhere throughout the Bible (cf. Jer 27:5; Dan 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21).

Paul calls on everyone to “submit” to these governing authorities. Had he meant that “obedience” was required, he had a variety of stronger words to use.²⁰ Submission is the recognition of one’s subordinate place in a hierarchical structure, i.e. the acknowledgement that certain people or institutions have been placed over us. His emphasis is on a person’s attitude. The call for submission to recognized authorities is not uncommon in Paul’s writings. He tells Christians to submit to their spiritual leaders (1 Cor 16:16), Christians to submit to one another (Eph 5:21), Christian slaves to submit to their masters (Titus 2:9), Christian prophets to submit to other Christian prophets (1 Cor 14:32), and Christian wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:24; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5).²¹ This submission is to be voluntary as indicated by the middle or passive voice.

PAUL’S FIRST REASON FOR SUBMISSION (13:1b-2)

In 13:1b-2, Paul gives the first reason for submission to civil authorities. It is a theological reason. It is an appeal to the general truth of creation, not to Christological or eschatological grounds. Submission to civil rulers is required because there are none that have not been given their power by God. This is

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

¹⁹ Moo, 795-96.

²⁰ Dunn, 759. See also Porter, 120.

²¹ *Ibid.*; see also Moo, 797.

stated a second time positively, “The authorities that exist have been established, ordained or appointed by God.”²²

In 13:2, Paul cites two negative consequences that follow from the fact that God has appointed existing rulers. The first is that to resist an authority is to resist God. This is the case because they have been appointed by God and His authority stands behind them. The second negative consequence is that those who resist will “bring judgment on themselves.” The judgment that will ultimately fall may be the wrath of the state spoken of again in 13:4 or the future judgment of God. If it is the former, then the future tense of the verb is logical; if it is the latter, it is eschatological. In favor of the wrath of the state is the fact that it is explicitly spoken of in 13:3, 4. However, the word for “wrath” is different from the one used in 13:2. Furthermore, the close relationship of the wrath to divine appointment is in favor of divine wrath, as rebellion against the state is ultimately rebellion against God’s ordinance. Some have tried to combine the two ideas. However, the judgment of God is mediated through the state. Because the state is the servant of God, it is not unreasonable to associate its judgment with God’s judgment. The most telling reason against the government only view is that the word for “wrath” in 13:4 is used by Paul eleven times in Romans of which nine, ten if you count this instance, are references to God’s judgment. There are five other occurrences in Romans of the judgment here in 13:2 and all of these refer to divine wrath.²³

PAUL’S SECOND REASON FOR SUBMISSION (13:3-4)

In 13:3-4, Paul gives a second reason that Christians are to submit to governing authorities. Stein calls it a practical reason.²⁴ Civil rulers have not only been appointed by God, but they also have been entrusted with the important function of maintaining order. This is to be done by punishing those who do evil and rewarding those who do good. Civil rulers are not a cause for fear for those who do what is right. This statement recognizes that a secular state has the right to use compulsion. Those who do what is right will be free from fear, but those who do what is wrong have every reason to be afraid. This presents a problem in view of rulers who oppose the gospel and persecute the Church. However, Paul is not addressing that problem. He is not dealing with every circumstance that a

²² John Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1980) 203 holds that the word should be understood as “orders” them. This means that he “brings them into line or lines them up with his purpose.” Harold J. Dyck, “The Christian and the Authorities in Romans 13:1-7,” *Direction* 14:1 (1985): 47 thinks that Yoder may well be right.

²³ Stein, 331. See also Moo, 799.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

Christian might encounter, only what would normally be true. The last part of v. 3 is framed as a question, "Do you want to be free from fear?" However, it may be a statement that forms the protasis of a condition, "If you want to be free of fear, then . . ." Paul concludes this verse by saying that doing what is right will even result in praise from those in authority.²⁵

Verse 4 centers around two statements of Paul in which he calls the ruler a "servant of God." The ruler is a *servant* of God, no more and no less. In the Greek text, "God" appears first for emphasis. The first statement describes the ruler's positive function of praising those who do good. This simply reaffirms what was said in v. 3b. The second statement gives the ruler's negative task of punishing evil. Paul has spoken of this function in v. 3 as well, and now he elaborates on it. The word "servant" is usually used of those who serve willingly. But, from this text, we see that this can be done unconsciously and even against one's will. This is the case where a civil ruler, who has been appointed by God, administers punishment and reward according to God's standards of justice but does recognize God's part in all of this.

Positively, this may be done by praising and encouraging what is good and right. However, it may also be done negatively by being a cause of fear to those who do what is wrong. Paul indicates that the state does not bear "the sword" in vain. Much has been written on the meaning of the word "sword." There are those who think that it is a reference to the power of Roman provincial governors to execute Roman citizens serving in the military.²⁶ The problem with this interpretation is that it would be irrelevant to most Roman Christians. Others understand it as the power to put down messianic revolts.²⁷ Still others see it as a general reference to the state's power to punish evildoers.²⁸ There seems to be good evidence that the term does not simply refer to a state's power to inflict the death penalty.²⁹ Rather, "sword" has a wide range of meaning in Greek literature. However, it surely does not exclude the power to inflict capital punishment. The context in Romans describes the state's power to punish evil and bring wrath on those who disobey. It is doubtful that Paul's readers would not have associated this function with the ability to execute those who do wrong. Acts 12:2 may be a parallel where it recounts that Herod killed or executed James with the sword.

²⁵ Morris, 133-34.

²⁶ See A. N. Sherman-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 8-11.

²⁷ M. Borg, *A New Context for Romans XIII*, *NTS* (1972): 216-17.

²⁸ E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 358; W. Schrage, *Die Christen und der Staat nach dem Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971) 58.

²⁹ Friedrich, Pöhlmann, Stuhlmacher, 140-44.

Romans 8:35 may also use the sword as a metaphor for capital punishment. Furthermore, Old Testament passages like Exodus 21:12-14, Leviticus 24:17, and Numbers 35:16-34 may be understood as providing support for the right of the state to inflict capital punishment.³⁰

In the latter part of 13:4, Paul gives the grounds for the state's sword-bearing powers. The state is God's servant to execute His wrath on wrongdoers. While it is possible that this is a reference to eschatological wrath, it is more likely that the state, in accord with the order of creation, is God's agent to punish those who do wrong. For instance, Babylon is a weapon in bringing God's wrath (Isa 13:5; Jer 50:25).

A SUMMARY EXHORTATION (13:5)

Verse 5 is a summary of the argument in verses 1-4. This is supported by the use of "therefore" and the reintroduction of the verb "submit" previously used in 13:1a. Paul summarizes the reasons that have been given for submission in two "because of" phrases. The grounds are "because of wrath" and "because of conscience." The wrath spoken of here is a reminder of the punitive function granted the state in 13:4b. This is still divine wrath as the state is acting as God's servant. Paul does not mention the positive function in rewarding those who do good. We do not know why the positive function is not mentioned, although Stein may not be far afield when he says that states are far better at punishing those who do evil than they are in rewarding those who do good.³¹

The avoidance of punishment is not, however, the most important reason for submission. That reason is for the sake of conscience. The introduction of conscience in this summary is surprising since Paul has not mentioned it anywhere before in his discussion. A good deal has been written on Paul's use of "conscience." Some understand it as a retrospective term, i.e. looking back at the pangs of conscience that one would experience in the doing of evil.³² However, it is unlikely that this is the exclusive way that Paul uses the term; and a future sense seems most in keeping with the context here. Failure to be subject to the civil authorities will bring pangs of conscience in the future because the Romans knew that to resist the ruler was to resist what God had appointed.³³ As Moo states, "Such submission is part of that 'good, well-pleasing, and perfect' will of

³⁰ Stein, 335-36; Moo, 802; Dunn, 764.

³¹ Stein, 337.

³² Cf. Paul K. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) 440; C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (SBT 15; Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, 1955) 65-71.

³³ Stein, 337-38; Moo, 803; Dunn, 765-66.

God discovered by the renewed mind. . . . 'Not being conformed to this world' does not require Christians to renounce every institution now in place in society. For some of them—such as government and marriage—reflect God's providential ordering of the world for our good and his glory."³⁴

THE ARGUMENT FROM PRACTICE (13:6)

The relationship of 13:6 to what has preceded it is unclear. At least part of the reason for this is that the referent of "For this reason" is unclear. It may be to "conscience" in v. 5³⁵ or to the general thought of vv. 1b-4.³⁶ Stein argues for the latter on the grounds that Paul seldom uses "For this reason" to refer to a single word. However, either view amounts to the same thing, as those who hold that it refers to "conscience" think that "conscience" is a summary of the argument of 13:1b-4.

The verb "pay" may either be indicative or imperative. If it is imperative, Paul is commanding the Romans to pay taxes. The fact that "for the authorities are God's servants" makes it quite clear that the indicative is correct, as "for" almost always indicates a ground or reason for the previous statement. The point is that the Romans are acknowledging, by their tax paying practice, the authority which the government has over them.³⁷ Why Paul would think that the Roman Christians paid taxes and that they were convinced that it was correct is uncertain. However, it is likely that they were aware of Jesus' teaching in Mark 12:13-17 as well as His practice in Matthew 17:24-27.

In the second half of v. 6, civil rulers are again called "servants of God." The word for "servant" is a different one here. It is frequently used in the LXX of people who served in the temple (Num 4:37, 41; 1 Sam 2:11, 18; 3:1; Ezra 7:24; Neh 10:39; Isa 61:6) and in the New Testament of those "ministering" for the Lord (Heb 8:2; 10:11). The use of this term would certainly be a reminder that civil rulers were appointed by God and were serving Him in the carrying out of their duties. Therefore, the paying of taxes is a duty owed not only to the government, but also to God Himself.

³⁴ Moo, 803.

³⁵ Eg., Cranfield, 668; Moo, 803-04.

³⁶ Stein, 340-41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 341; Moo, 804; Dunn, 776.

A SPECIFIC COMMAND (13:7)

The final verse of this paragraph has no explicit link to the verses around it. However, it is best understood as a specific application of the general command given in v. 1a. “In so doing we have a kind of ‘inclusio’ in which the commands of 13:1a and 13:7 bracket the entire account.”³⁸ The readers of Romans are to keep the general command of 13:1a by “paying all of them [the governing authorities] their dues.” This is the language of discharging a debt. There are four obligations specified. They are presented in synonymous parallelism and “rhyme.” Rulers are due “taxes,” “tribute,” “respect,” and “honor.” Some have taken the last term to be a debt to God, finding in the sequence of words a saying reminiscent of Jesus’ (Mark 12:17) who commanded his disciples to give to Caesar what was his and to God what was His. The last word of the four is often translated “fear.” It is argued that this is due God alone.³⁹ It seems unlikely that is Paul’s meaning here as he has said that civil rulers are God’s servants, and it would not be wrong to honor them as such.

THE CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

How are we to understand and apply Paul’s teaching today? Moo is surely not far from the truth when he says, “It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Rom. 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning.”⁴⁰ Because most interpreters want to avoid the conclusion that unconditional and absolute obedience is required, a number of approaches have developed in the application of this text. I shall simply discuss the most important positions, and then give my own view.⁴¹

First, Paul’s teaching on civil government in Romans 13:1-7 reflects his naivety about the evil that governments might do. His experience with governmental authorities had been positive on the whole as determined from Acts. Some authorities had even recognized his right to preach the gospel. Furthermore, he was writing Romans during the early stages of Nero’s reign which was a period of stability and good government. However, such a view is out of keeping with a strong view of biblical inspiration as well as the fact that Paul undoubtedly knew, from history, the harsh treatment that Israel had received at the hands of pagan rulers. He could not have been unaware that his readers were

³⁸ Stein, 342.

³⁹ Cranfield, 247f.

⁴⁰ Moo, 806.

⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of alternatives, see *ibid.*, 807-10.

under the rule of the very government that put the Lord Jesus Christ to death. Furthermore, many of his reader had suffered persecution under the same government to which he is counseling submission, having been forced to give up their homes and businesses and live in exile. Surely, Paul was not so naive as to forget all this.

Second, Paul is only commanding submission to those authorities or rulers who are just or in submission to God themselves. Where they are unjust, the Christian is no longer under obligation to obey them.⁴² In my discussion of v. 1a, I have expressed the reasons for which I think that this is unlikely.

Third, Paul's command is only applicable to the immediate situation to which he is responding. He is giving advice to the Roman Christians about their immediate obligation. Therefore, it is a serious mistake to generalize the command and require submission to civil magistrates today.⁴³ There is surely a measure of truth to this point. Much of the New Testament is written to address specific problems in specific churches. However, if advice only to immediate situations means that commands can subsequently be dismissed, then most of the New Testament could be dismissed as not applicable to today's problems. Furthermore, Paul seems to go out of his way to emphasize the universal character of his teaching. As mentioned above, the teaching is addressed to "every person," and Paul says that there is "no authority" except by divine appointment. Therefore, one would expect the teaching to be normative not just for Roman Christians at the time of the writing of the epistle, but for all Christians through all time.

Fourth, submission to civil rulers is not the totality of the biblical teaching on the state. It is always dangerous to take a single text and make it the whole biblical teaching on a subject. It is rare that the Scripture speaks only once on any major matter. It is thus the task of the interpreter to collect and harmonize *everything* that the Bible has to say on civil government. When one follows this process, it is clear that Christians are not automatically to give absolute, unconditional, and unthinking obedience to their government.

From direct statements in Scripture and biblical examples, it is clear that it is *sometimes* necessary to disobey civil rulers. Norman L. Geisler has compiled a list of these exceptional circumstances:⁴⁴

1. When the government prohibits the worship of God (Exod 5:1).
2. When it requires the taking of innocent life (Exod 1:15-21).

⁴² Porter, 123.

⁴³ See footnote 5 for examples of this interpretive approach.

⁴⁴ Norman L. Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985): 262. See also S. James, "Divine Justice and Civil Government," *Trinity Journal* 6ns (1985): 199-210.

3. When it demands killing of God's servants (1 Kings 18:1-4).
4. When it requires the worship of idols (Dan 3:1-7).
5. When it commands prayer to a man (Dan 6:6-9).
6. When it prohibits the propagation of the gospel (Acts 4:17-20).
7. When it demands the worship of a man as God (Rev 13:4, 8).

There are also indications throughout the Romans' text that obedience, while universally required, is not absolute or unlimited. The government has delegated authority which comes from God. It is not to usurp the place of God. The believer has an obligation to the state, but is also under a higher obligation to God (cf. Acts 4:17-20). This text makes it clear that the duty of the ruler is to punish evil and reward good. When the state prohibits good and demands evil, it is no longer performing its God-ordained task. Christians are told to obey for conscience's sake. When the state demands what conscience will not condone, by biblical standards, then Christians must disobey. Balance is needed. We should not empty the meaning of Romans 13:1-7 with a thousand qualifications. Civil rulers need the support of Christians under their authority. But the state can never have the place that must be reserved for God alone. Therefore, it is a duty of believers to pray regularly for those in authority over them (1 Tim 2:1-2) so that they may live godly and peaceable lives.