

## Christians and the Government: An Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7

Ever since the evil Nimrod formed his kingdom, there have been the governed and those who govern. Many times an uneasy relationship has existed between the two. Over the last two millennia, the Christian's relationship toward the various governments under which they lived has evolved, often unevenly, depending upon the nature of the government involved. Can we find timeless, universal principles to guide us in our behavior toward our government, whether democracy or dictatorship? The Bible is certainly not silent concerning the relationship that Christians should have toward civil government. For the purposes of this paper, we will primarily concern ourselves with one passage, Romans 13:1-7, though we will reach outside this passage some. We wish to do three things as we examine this text: 1) Understand the origin and purpose of civil government; 2) Recognize the Christian's responsibility toward government; 3) Offer some practical applications and closing observations.

The Christians to whom Paul was writing lived in the imperial city of Rome. The exact history of the congregation is uncertain, but due to the importance of the city and the relative ease of travel into it, many feel confident that the congregation was established not long after Pentecost (Lipscomb 9,10). Scholars generally place the writing of the epistle ca. AD 56-59 while Paul was in Corinth (Hendriksen 15; Jackson, *A New Testament Commentary* 263; Moo 3). This means that the epistle was written during the reign of the notorious Nero Caesar (Blaiklock 140). While Nero's early rule was relatively calm, Rome already had an uneasy relationship with Christians as Claudius had earlier expelled all Jews from Rome, and with them many Christians (Acts 18:2). This is pertinent to our study as there likely was a general feeling of distrust and perhaps even some ill-will on the part of Christians toward the Roman Government. It is under these circumstances that Paul writes in Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." [All scripture is quoted from the ESV unless otherwise noted.] This universal statement sets the stage for his teachings on the subject of the Christian and civil government.

### The Origin and Purpose of Civil Government

Many students of the Bible have stated that there are three divine institutions: the home, the church, and civil government. Others contend that government is not a divine institution, but an institution originating from man and controlled in great measure by Satan (Rogers 9-19). In the beginning, man was governed by God's rule and authority. The first human government was established by the great hunter of men, Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-12). According to Keil and Delitzsch, the name Nimrod means "we will revolt" (165-67), and thus he revolted against God through his hunting of men and establishing a kingdom. The nation of Israel was initially ruled solely by God; however, the nation revolted against God (1 Sam. 8:7). Therefore, God gave them a king, but He did so in His anger (Hos. 13:11). Satan claimed to rule all kingdoms (Luke 4:6); he is

called “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30), “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). Satan does indeed have great influence in all the governments of this world, but the only power Satan possesses is what he has been allowed (Luke 4:6; Job 1:12; 2:6 et al.).

What then do we make of Paul’s statement in Romans 13:1 that “those [authorities] that exist have been instituted by God”? The word translated “instituted” or “ordained” (ASV) comes from the Greek “τάσσω,” which means to arrange, to put in place, or to appoint (BDAG 991), without respect to “the character or the spiritual nature of the subject involved” (Jackson, *The Christian* 4,5). Therefore, it should be concluded that man rejected God’s supreme rule, and God then set or appointed civil government to be an earthly authority in the matter of justice. God has at various times used good men and evil men alike to accomplish His purposes (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:5-16; Isa. 10:5; Jer. 25:9). Truly, God rules supremely in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 5:21). However, that should not be seen to imply that God looks favorably upon any or all of what those kingdoms may or may not do; only that God’s ultimate plan will be carried out regardless.

God demands that we submit to (Rom. 13:1) and do not resist (Rom. 13:2) the governmental authorities. If we do not submit, or if we resist, we then will incur judgment. One important exception to this rule is if the will of the governmental authorities is in direct conflict with the will of God (Acts 5:29). The reason Paul gives for Christian submission to civil government is that they reward and protect those who do good, and punish those who do evil (Rom. 13:3). Common sense dictates that this must be taken generally rather than absolutely; no government on earth perfectly distributes justice, for all governments on earth are run by fallible men. However, as a general rule, if one obeys the laws of men they will not have cause to be afraid of their government.

Paul then says that the government “does not bear the sword in vain” (Rom. 13:4). The “sword” here refers to “the power of authorities to punish evildoers” (BDAG 622), and “in vain” means “without cause” or “to no purpose” (BDAG 281). Therefore, the government has the right and responsibility to do that which Christians have been expressly forbidden (Matt. 5:39-48; Rom. 12:19-21). Government is then declared to be “the servant of God” (Rom. 13:4). The word translated “servant” in the ESV is “διάκονος,” which means an agent, intermediary, or assistant (BDAG 230-31). Again, the word does not indicate the character of the servant (Jackson, *The Christian* 5), only that God makes use of the servant. It seems significant that Paul bookends his discussion of the Christian and the government with discussions of love (Rom. 12:9ff.; Rom. 13:8ff.). Love your fellow man, and obey your government; two principles by which to live. Also significant is the use of the second and third person pronouns in Romans 13:4. This seems to distinguish the Christian from the government under which he lives.

## The Christian's Responsibility toward Civil Government

If the government owes the Christian protection from those who would do harm, what then do Christians owe the government? Paul has already mentioned that Christians are to submit to the civil government, now he details some specific responsibilities. First, Paul says that our obedience to civil government is a moral obligation, “therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience” (Rom. 13:5). We will have more to say about this later, but for now it is enough to mention that what follows affects our relationship with God.

Based upon the service of protection that government is to provide, Christians are to pay taxes (Rom. 13:6). Governments throughout history have levied taxes against the governed. Taxes were the primary way to support the civil portion of Israel’s theocracy. Taxes have been a source of great frustration to Christians and non-Christians alike. Under the Roman occupation of Judea, the tax collectors were despised by the Jews (Mark 2:15-16; Luke 7:34; 18:11). Controversy extended even to the Master Teacher, Who taught to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s (Matt. 22:15-22; Luke 23:2). Those who wish not to pay taxes because of what they perceive to be an oppressive amount extracted will find no relief here. Likewise, those who believe that sinful behavior of government is a reason not to pay taxes will go away frustrated by the teachings both of our Lord and of Paul. Governments may do many things which are contrary to the will of God. The Roman government was as wicked as any other government, even subsidizing idolatry, but Scripture is consistent in stating the Christian’s obligation to pay taxes.

Verse seven begins with the broad statement, “Pay to all what is owed to them.” Christians are not to retain unpaid debts (Rom. 13:8). Therefore, whoever is owed, whether national or local, must be paid. The phrase in the ESV, “revenue to whom revenue is due,” seems better rendered by the NASB and the ASV, “custom to whom custom” (cf. Lewis 99). Custom refers to “duties imposed upon articles of trade and traffic brought from other countries” (Lipscomb 237). This addresses both smuggling and bribery. A Christian cannot be engaged in the smuggling of goods or in bribery to avoid paying custom which is due. It should go without saying that God has always abhorred the taking and giving of bribes (Exod. 23:8; Job 6:22; Prov. 17:23).

The last two phrases in verse 7 are difficult indeed to implement, “respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” The word translated “respect” is “φόβος” which can mean “terror,” “fear,” “reverence,” or “respect” (BDAG 1062). Due to the context, it seems that respect is the intended meaning. Therefore, Christians are to not only obey and pay, but also they are to respect their leaders. This seems very lacking in our generation. “Honor” is from “τιμή,” which carries the idea of affixing a value, or “manifestation of esteem” (BDAG 1005).

The word is used to speak of the honor due God (1 Tim. 1:17), the honor brethren should have toward each other (Rom. 12:10), and the honor that a husband should have for his wife (1 Pet. 3:7). We should agree with Hendriksen that simply paying the money that is owed is not enough; we must demonstrate true and honest respect and honor toward our civil authorities (437,38).

### Practical Applications and Closing Observations

Essentially, Scripture has detailed a four-fold duty of Christians toward their government. First of all, Christians are to obey their governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-5; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). This comes with only one exception, when government asks us to do something which is at variance with the Christian walk (Acts 5:29). Second, Christians are to pay that which is due the government. This is in exchange for the protection which civil government is supposed to provide the Christian. Third, Christians are to honor and respect those who rule over them. Regardless of the governmental policy or even of the governmental philosophy (e.g. Republic, Dictatorship, Monarchy, et al.), a Christian has a duty to honor and respect those in authority. Fourth, Christians have an obligation to pray for those in power. This was not detailed in Romans 13, but Paul would mention this elsewhere. In 1 Timothy 2:1,2, Paul tells Timothy that prayers should be made for all men, even (or perhaps especially) for those who sit in the seat of power.

This writer is convinced that if Christians would be less engaged in the day to day goings on in the political realm, and more engaged in implementing these four duties into their lives, more people would be saved, and our souls would be the better for it as well. Christians should remember that Christianity is a worldwide religion which transcends the borders of any earthly country. The interests of any given earthly kingdom are overshadowed by the interests of the kingdom of Christ.

Paul, in Romans 13:1-7, reveals that governments and Christians operate in separate realms with distinct duties. The government owes the Christian protection; the Christian owes the government obedience, tribute, honor, and prayer. The Christian does not owe the government protection, just as the government does not owe the Christian obedience, tribute, honor, or prayer.

Paul's declaration that a Christian should obey his government because of conscience (Rom. 13:5) will bring us to a fitting end. When Christians commit some "heinous sin" that is completely out of character, their conscience will no doubt be pricked, and they will hasten to repent. Paul is suggesting that when one violates the law, in either large or small ways, his individual conscience should be pricked. We should not obey the law because we are afraid of the temporal ramifications. Neither should we obey the law simply to avoid God's wrath. Rather

we should obey the law, submit to our rulers, and give them due honor and respect because in so doing we submit to the Almighty, and we give Him the honor and respect which is due Him.

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