



*Walking the Same Old Good Paths and Right Rule Along the Narrow Way.*

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## **Commentary excerpts on Romans 13:1-10**

*From various authors older and more recent  
that logically relate to how we as a church are submitting to government guidelines  
related to the 6th Commandment and the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

**For our original article on this topic, see:**

<https://www.reformation21.org/blog/submit-to-the-government-serving-god-to-save-lives>

Commentators in Order of Presentation:

1. John Calvin
2. J.C. Ryle
3. John Brown
4. William G.T. Shedd
5. William R. Newell
6. Tom Westwood
7. Thomas Manton
8. Herman Hoeksema
9. Gordon H. Clark
10. Charles Hodge
11. John Murray
12. Herman Ridderbos
13. G.E. Ladd
14. Donald Barnhouse
15. Matthew Henry (also on Ecc. 8:2, 5 and Matthew 27:58)
16. Robert Haldane

**John Calvin**  
**Institutes for the Christian Religion**  
**Translated by Henry Beveridge**  
**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.**  
**Book 4**

25. "... if we have respect to the word of God, it will ... make us subject not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty toward us, but all princes, by whatever means they have so become, although there is nothing they less perform than the duty of princes. For though the Lord declares that a ruler to maintain our safety is the highest gift of his beneficence, and prescribes to rulers themselves their proper sphere, he at the same time declares, that of whatever description they may be, they derive their power from none but him. Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity. Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which he has invested lawful power. I will not proceed further without subjoining some distinct passages to this effect. We need not labour to prove that

an impious king is a mark of the Lord's anger, since I presume no one will deny it ... [he cites Job 34:30; Hos. 13:11; Isaiah 3:4; 10:5; and Deut. 28:29.] ...” [670]

“ ... even an individual of the worst character, one most unworthy of all honour, if invested with public authority, receives that illustrious divine power which the Lord has by his word devolved on the ministers of his justice and judgment, and that, accordingly, in so far as public obedience is concerned, he is to be held in the same honour and reverence as the best of kings.” [671]

26. Calvin references Dan. 2:21, 37-38; 4:17, 25; 5:18, 19, and says, “ ... we have no doubt that we are to view the most iniquitous tyrant as occupying the place with which the Lord has honoured him.” Next he cites 1 Sam. 8:11-17, and writes, “Certainly these things could not be done legally by kings, whom the law trained most admirably to all kinds of restraint; but it was called justice in regard to the people, because they were bound to obey, and could not lawfully resist ...” [671-672]

27. “ ... the most remarkable and memorable passage is in Jeremiah. He cites Jeremiah 27:5-8, 12 and writes, “We see how great obedience the Lord was pleased to demand for this dire and ferocious tyrant, for no other reason than that he held the kingdom. In other words, the divine decree had placed him on the throne of the kingdom, and admitted him to regal majesty, which could not be lawfully violated. If we constantly keep before our eyes and minds the fact, that even the most iniquitous kings are appointed by the same decree which establishes all regal authority, we will never entertain the seditious thought, that a king is to be treated according to his deserts, and that we are not bound to act the part of good subjects to him who does not in his turn act the part of a king to us.” [672]

28. “Let us doubt not that on whomsoever the kingdom has been conferred, him we are bound to serve.” He cites Jeremiah 29:7. [672]

[Though he does not agree with Calvin to the degree of these writings which he cites in a footnote, David VanDrunen highlights that “Jeremiah 27 and 29 provide perhaps the closest Old Testament counterpart to the explicit descriptions of government legitimacy and its corresponding obligations found in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.” David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 202), 28.]

“Thus David, when already king elect by the ordination of God, and anointed by his holy oil, though causelessly and unjustly assailed by Saul, holds the life of one who was seeking his life to be sacred, because the Lord had invested him with royal honour. He cites 1 Sam. 24:6-11. [673]

29. “This feeling of reverence, and even of piety, we owe to the utmost to all our rulers, be their characters what they may.” [673]

“But rulers, you will say, owe mutual ties to those under them. This I have already confessed. But if from this you conclude that obedience is to be returned to none but just governors, you reason absurdly ... Should husbands and parents neglect their duty ... would children be less bound in duty to their parents, and wives to their husbands? [see 1 Pet. 2:18-19; 3:1-2] ... if we are neglected by a sluggish, if, in short, we are persecuted for righteousness' sake by an impious and sacrilegious prince, let us first call upon the remembrance of our faults, which doubtless the Lord is chastising by scourges. In this way humility will curb our impatience. And let us reflect that it belongs not to us to cure these evils, that all that remains for us is to implore the help of the Lord, in whose hands are the hearts of kings, and inclinations of kingdoms.” [673-674]

31. "... let us at the same time guard most carefully against spurning or violating the venerable and majestic authority of rulers, an authority which God has sanctioned by the surest edicts, although those invested with it should be most unworthy of it, and as far as in them lies, pollute it by their iniquity. Although the Lord takes vengeance on unbridled domination, let us not therefore suppose that the vengeance is committed to us, to whom no command has been given but to obey and suffer. I speak only of private men. For when popular magistrates have been appointed to curb the tyranny of kings ... So far am I from forbidding these officially to check the undue license of kings, that if they connive at kings when they tyrannise and insult over the humbler of the people, I affirm that their dissimulation is not free from nefarious perfidy, because they fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, while knowing that, by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians." [674-675]

32. "We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates ..." [he cites Dan. 4:22, Acts 5:29, and 1 Cor. 7:23]. [675]

**J. C. Ryle**  
***Day By Day with JC Ryle, July 15, Morning***  
**On Matthew 17:22-27 and Romans 13:1-7.**

"Our Lord's example in this case deserves the attention of all who profess and call themselves Christians. It teaches us plainly that there are matters in which Christ's people ought to sink their own opinions and submit to requirements of which they may not thoroughly approve rather than give offense and hinder the gospel of Christ. God's rights we undoubtedly ought never to give up; but we may sometimes safely give up our own. It may sound very fine and heroic to be always standing out tenaciously for our rights. But it may be doubted, in light of such a passage as this, whether such tenacity is always wise and shows the mind of Christ. There are occasions when it shows more grace in a Christian to submit than to resist.

"We may not like all the political measures of our rulers. But the grand question after all is: "Will it do any good to the cause of religion to resist the powers that be? Are their measures really injuring our souls? If not, let us avoid acting in a way that will offend them. As members of society there may be usages and customs in our circle which to us as Christians are tiresome, useless, and unprofitable. But are they matters of principle? Do they injure souls? Will religion be profited if we do not comply? Let us beware of false scruples."

**John Brown**  
***An Analytical Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans***  
**Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981.**

"To understand this important and much discussed passage aright it is of primary importance to recollect that it was directly intended to guide the Roman Christians in the circumstances in which they were laced, and to apprehend distinctly what may be termed the logical division of the paragraph, and the bearing its various parts have on each other." (482-483)

"The Christians at Rome were a small handful of men—comparatively few of them, probably, Roman citizens—living under a powerful, absolute monarchy, whose administration was, however, ordinarily conducted according to the principles of a civil and

criminal code of law which is admitted to have been one of the best the world has ever seen.

“The apostle enjoins the general duty of civil obedience, in very strong terms ... (483)

Re: “higher powers” in verse 1: “This command, though unlimited in its terms, is yet obligatory only on certain clearly defined conditions. It is to the magistrate acting officially, not to the magistrate personally, that this obedience is owing. Obedience to an inferior magistrate is not due, if he enjoins or exacts anything inconsistent with the declared will of the supreme authority; and, finally, the Divine law must not be violated, in consequence of any command of the civil power: ‘We must obey God rather than men.’

Within these limits, the law is peremptory: ‘Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.’” (484)

Re: “every soul”: “It is an idiomatic, and, probably here, an emphatic expression. It seems intended to bring the idea of the universality of the obligation more strongly out than the use of the ordinary term, ‘every one,’ would have done.” (485)

“No man, in society, clothed with civil power—whatever form it may assume, whether he be an arbitrary autocracy, or a limited monarch, or the administrator of an aristocracy or democracy—no such man fills such a place but ‘of God’ ... Every magistrate, in organized society, occupies his place in consequence of Divine arrangements; and the grand object of the institution, of which he is the organ is a thing agreeable to God’s will.” (486)

“The existing Roman magistrates, from the Emperor to the AEdile, have been put in order under God: whosoever, then—however high his place may be in the Church, or however distinguished by miraculous gifts—sets himself against this divinely marshaled magistracy, not only commits a crime against society in disturbing a useful human arrangement, but is guilty of sin in opposing a Divine arrangement. Disobedience is not only a civil crime, but also a moral delinquency: it is not only a breach of the laws of men, but of the law of God.” (487)

“... the apostle here refers to the general character of the code of the Roman law, and its administration. The laws of the empire were favourable, like the laws of all civilized states, to the peaceable subject, and armed with penalties against the disobedient and rebellious.” (489)

“The general principles contained in these injunctions are applicable to Christians in all countries and in all ages. This passage clearly teaches us that Christians, in all countries and ages, should respect and obey the civil government under which they live; that a Christian who follows a course that leads to anarchy, acts a wicked, as well as an inconsistent and foolish part; that no Christian is warranted to disturb a settled civil government because it is not in its form and administration, so good as he could desire it; and that all Christians, placed in the same circumstances in reference to the civil government under which they live as the primitive Christians were to the Roman government, are bound to act, not only on the same general principle, but precisely in the same way.

“There are a great many questions connected with the limits of civil obedience, and the right in certain circumstances, of resistance on the part of subjects, which have been dragged into the exposition of this passage; but, so far as I have been able to perceive, the above is the meaning—the whole meaning of the apostle.” (491)

Citing 1 Peter 2:17 as a cross reference, he writes: “It is as if the apostle had said, ‘Civil authority is a sacred thing: reverence it wherever you meet it, and let your reverence

correspond to the degree in which it is possessed by the object of your respect.' ... Honour civil rule, as God's ordinance, in all its forms.'" (494)

**William G.T. Shedd**

***Commentary on Romans***

**Edmonds, AP, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, date? [first published in 1879 by Charles Scribner's Sons, this seems to be a facsimile of it].**

"The apostle passes now, in verses 1-7, to the Christian's duties toward the State. He may have been led to this, in part, by the seditious and revolutionary temper of the Jew, which showed itself occasionally in open rebellion against the Roman authority, Acts. v. 37. But the principal reason was of a general nature. He would lay down principles for the Church universal, in all time, and in reference to government in the abstract."

"Unwilling obedience to the government is not a Christian virtue ... Even bad governments are not excepted: .... The fact that an earthly government may be corrupt and tyrannical does not disprove the divine origin of government; any more than the fact that parents may be unfaithful to their duties proves that the family is not divinely originated; or the fact that a particular church may become corrupt proves that the church is not divine in its source. St. Paul, however, does not teach, here, that *any* degree of tyranny, whatever, is to be submitted to by a Christian. If the government attempt to force him to violate a divine command, for example to desist from preaching the gospel, or to take part in pagan worship, he must resist even unto death. See Acts iv. 19; v. 29. Most of the apostles suffered martyrdom for this principle. But in respect to 'things pertaining only to this life' (1 Cor. vi. 4), and in cases in which the rights of conscience and religious convictions were not infringed upon, both Christ and his apostles taught that injustice, and even tyranny, should be submitted to, rather than that revolutionary resistance be made. And this, because merely earthly liberty, and the rights of property, are of secondary consideration. The same rule applies to the relation of the individual to the State, in this case, that applies to the relation between man and man. If a Christian is defrauded of his property by a fellow believer, he ought to 'take the wrong, and suffer himself to be defrauded,' rather than 'go to law one with another,' 1 Cor. vi.7. In like manner, in regard to merely worldly good, the Christian should forego his rights and allow himself to be ill-treated even by the government under which he lives, rather than organize a rebellion and bring on war with its untold evils. Political freedom is one of the most valuable of merely earthly blessings; and political slavery is one of the greatest of merely earthly evils. Yet Christ and his apostles nowhere teach or imply, that either individual or organized action was justifiable, even under the tyranny of Rome, in order to obtain the former, or abolish the latter. On the contrary, they dissuade from and forbid it. Compare Mat. xvii. 24-27; xxii. 17-21; 1 Cor. vii. 21, 22; 1 Tim. vi. 1. (375-376)

"VER. 3 connects with verse 1 (Calvin, Tholuck, Philippi, Hodge), and assigns an additional reason for obedience, viz., that government is not only an ordinance of God, but a *beneficial* ordinance." (377)

"VER. 7 summarizes and repeats, for the sake of emphasis, the exhortations in verses 1-6." (379)

**William R. Newell**

***Romans Verse by Verse***

**Chicago: Moody Press, 1938**

“WE HAVE HERE a passage of great importance in these lawless days!” (480)

“There is a great necessity at this hour to emphasize to all Christians this solemn exhortation of the apostle. Lawlessness,—contempt for authority—is upon us like a flood. This lawlessness (*anomia*) is the *essence* of sin.” (481)

“Magistrates are put in place, set up, or ordained, of God. Never mind if they are bad ones, the word still stands, ‘There is no power but of God.’ Remember your Savior suffered under Pontius Pilate, one of the worst Roman governors Judea ever had; and Paul under Nero, the worst Roman Emperor. And neither our Lord nor His Apostle denied or reviled the ‘authority!’ (483)

“... as to our persons and our property and our lives, that is, as regards earthly things, we are subject to the powers that God has put in place or ordained; and should not ‘withstand’ them. Those who do so withstand, will bring on themselves guilt and Divine chastening. The Christian, above all men, should be in quiet subjection to constituted authority.” (484)

“Every Christian, in his life, should be praiseworthy in the eye of rulers, and, if consistent, he generally is so.” (485)

Regarding verse 6, “Here the apostle uses the word from which we get ‘liturgy’ ... in describing these ‘authorities.’ God uses the same word in Hebrews 1.14 regarding the angels, calling them ‘ministering spirits’; and also concerning the ‘ministering’ of the Old Testament priests (Heb. 10.11). In these days of restlessness toward restraint, and flouting of authority, we need to meditate much on the fact that the constituted authorities are *liturgists of God*: not indeed at all in spiritual things, but none the less God’s own ministers in governmental things. It is on this account that those governed pay tribute; for these ministers of government must be supported.” (488)

“Let Christians be first to give ‘honor to whom honor is due.’ Leave to the base the despising of others!” (489)

**Tom Westwood**  
***Romans: A Courtroom Drama***  
**New York: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc, 1949)**

“Chapter 12 is his church life, so to speak; chapter 13 his life of obedience as a subject under the government of his country.” (265)

“The entire tenor of the exhortations in chapter 13 can be summed up in the word ‘subjection.’ We are living in a politically minded age when unfortunately many Christian people are taking far more part in worldly politics than they are in Christian affairs. Romans 13 comes in for our instruction in that way. It can only be read in the light of what Paul discloses in the Philippian Epistle: our citizenship is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour. In the last analysis the only politics in which a Christian should be actively interested are the affairs of heaven: the promulgation of the testimony of his Lord in a world that needs the gospel more than it needs anything else.

“Concerning the government of this world, the Christian’s one interest, then, is obedience.” (265)

“The obligation of the Christian, however, is to obey the power no matter whom my wield it. He recognizes that the power itself is ordained of God. Is there no limit to this? Indeed there is [cites Acts 5] ... There may come a time, although it seldom does come,

when the powers that be issue an edict in direct violation of the Word of God. Then the Christian must make his choice. He must be very sure, however, that the power is conflicting with the actual Word of God, and not with some of his own ideas about it.” (266-267)

“ROMANS 13 sets forth the Christian’s responsibility as an obedient subject under the constituted authority which God has set up in the land. We are living in such days of anarchy and rebellion that it is wholesome for every Christian to keep this in mind. God’s injunction to us is that we should be subject to the powers that be, and the reason for that subjection is that these powers are ordained, or set up, by God Himself.

“Political affiliation has no bearing upon the case. The Christian must look beyond the personality of the officer or the party that may be in power, and see that the authority that is wielded by those in office is constituted by God Himself, and to such the Christian is bound to be subject and obedient.” (267)

“We should be very grateful to the Lord for the marvelous way in which He has maintained law and order in this land in which we live. I mention that in spite of much of the failure in high places today, that failure is as nothing to that which subsists in many other lands around the globe.” (268)

“Large factions of organized men are today advocating the overthrow of government and preparing to take the power of constituted authority into their own hands. This will be rampant when the man of sin is revealed.” (269)

“These truths touch upon very practical issues in our lives and give us valuable instruction as to our behavior in a world of confusion such as we have today.” (269)

### **Thomas Manton**

#### ***The Works of Thomas Manton***

#### **Worthington, Pa.: Maranatha Publications, date?**

Vol. 13, in his sermons upon 2 Cor. 5:

“ ... It is not to deny civil respect and honor to the wicked and carnal; for that would destroy all government and order in the world: Rom. xiii. 7 ... We are to own parents, magistrates, persons of rank and eminency, with that respect which is due to their rank and quality, though they should be carnal; for the wickedness of the person doth not discharge us of our duty, or make void civil or natural differences and respects due to them.” (220)

Vol. 16, in his sermon on Titus 2:12:

“I now come to the second branch, wherein the duty of man is expressed, and that is justice or righteousness, which implies the duties of our public capacity and relation to others.

“First rule, To give every man his own. This is laid down, Rom. xiii.7 .... (143)

“Fifth rule, We must be so far from wronging any man, that in many cases we must not demand our own extreme right: Phill. iv. 5 .... Extreme right is but an injury when you do not all you may do by the letter of the law out of lenity and christian forbearance. Power stretched to the utmost is but tyranny; and when the words of the law are urged contrary to the end, the law is made a pattern of sin and unjust dealing. In short, this equity and moderation piety in not interpreting things doubtful to the worst sense ... For peaces’ sake much may be done, that we may not dishonour God, nor vex others for every trifle; the good

of others is to be considered, that we may not undo them, though it be our right. Thus Paul departed from his own right ... 2 Cor. xi. 12." (148-149)

**Herman Hoeksema**

***Righteous by Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans***  
**Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 2002).**

"At the time when the church of the new dispensation was first called out of the world from every nation, there was special need of an admonition to be subject to the higher powers. The Jews had always been averse to having a foreigner rule over them ... This aversion was carried over into their converted state. Also the Gentile Christians might easily assume an attitude of resistance against the powers of the world, for was not Christ their Lord? If Christ was their Lord, was it not the prerogative of Christ alone to rule over them? Was it not in conflict with the dignity of Christ that His citizens were subject to the worldly powers? This aversion was aggravated by the fact that these higher powers were often corrupt. The higher power is often in the hands of men who are evil. Moreover, especially in those days, the higher powers used the sword against the church.

If we bear all this in mind, we can understand that under the heading of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice unto God, the apostle also admonishes the church that they be subject to the higher powers, remembering that they are ordained of God." (619-620)

"Authority means ... he has the right to impose his will on others and the right to expect that the will of others be in subject to his will. Authority is that a man has the right to tell others what to do and to expect that they obey him. Therefore, when the apostle speaks of higher powers, the implication is that some men are placed over others with the right to command others and to expect that they will obey them... When the apostle speaks of higher powers, he has reference specifically to the authority of the state, to the civil government ... It is the magistrate that is the *minister of God*." (621)

"Since the time of the French Revolution, especially, the principle that has taken root is that authority is vested in the people. Therefore, it is the people who confer their authority upon their officers. But it is a communistic principle that the people are sovereign. This is the principle that the source of authority is in man himself.

"That man himself is the source of all authority is contrary to all Scripture ... Man has no authority in himself. Man is not the source of authority. Nor is the majority the source of authority ...

"Authority has been conferred upon men in civil government as regards *the powers that be* ... these men are placed in their positions by God. It makes no difference how they got there. Whether they got there by the vote of the people or by force, they are the powers that be, placed in their positions by God ... Government was not instituted because of sin. It developed from the family." (621-622)

"The authority of the civil government is limited to its own domain.

In addition, the civil government is limited by other spheres of authority. The civil government has no authority in the church. The authority of the church is to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise discipline. The civil government has no authority over this threefold office of the church ... the authority of the state concerns the life of its citizens in their public manifestation." (623)

"The only proper attitude we may assume toward these higher powers is that of subjection. Subjection is the opposite of resistance." (624)



“Perhaps someone will say that this is all very well as long as we have a good government, and he may criticize the apostle for not mentioning the bad governments. I reply that at the time of the apostle there were no good governments. ‘But what,’ someone asks, ‘if the government becomes corrupt, as is often the case, and interferes with the church, forbidding us to worship God?’ ... My answer is that the subjection remains, but the positive obedience falls away. Suppose that the authorities should forbid us to worship? What then? Scripture says that we must never cease to do good. We must always obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29]. We must go on with our worship. But if the sword turns against us, what then? We must be subject to the sword ... If they turn against us for righteousness’ sake, we are to suffer for righteousness’ sake.” (624)

**Charles Hodge**  
***A Commentary on Romans***  
**Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989.**

“THE CHAPTER TREATS MAINLY OF OUR POLITICAL DUTIES. FROM VER. 1 TO VER. 7 INCLUSIVE, THE APOSTLE ENFORCES THE DUTIES WHICH WE OWE TO CIVIL MAGISTRATES. FROM VER. 8 TO VER. 10, HE REFERS TO THE MORE GENERAL OBLIGATIONS UNDER WHICH CHRISTIANS ARE PLACED, BUT STILL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR CIVIL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS.” (404)

“The duty of obedience to those in authority is enforced, 1. By the consideration that civil government is a divine institution, and, therefore, resistance to magistrates in the exercise of their lawful authority is disobedience to God, vers. 1, 2. ... A pure and exemplary life as members of society is enforced by the consideration that the night is far spent and that the day is at hand, that the time of suffering and trial is nearly over, and that of deliverance approaching, vers. 11-14.” (404-405)

VERSE 1. “*every soul*” ... emphatic ... By *higher powers* are most commonly and naturally understood those in authority, without reference to their grade of office, or their character. We are to be subject not only to the *supreme* magistrates, but to all who have authority over us ... It is a very unnatural interpretation which makes this word refer to the character of the magistrates, as though the sense were, ‘Be subject to good magistrates.’ This is contrary to the usage of the term, and inconsistent with the context. Obedience is not enjoined on the ground of the personal merit of those in authority, but on the ground of their official station.

“There was peculiar necessity, during the apostolic age, for inculcating the duty of obedience to civil magistrates. This necessity arose in part from the fact that a large portion of the converts to Christianity had been Jews, and were peculiarly indisposed to submit to the heathen authorities ... The history of the Jews at this period shows how great was the effect produced by these and similar causes on their feelings towards the Roman government. They were continually breaking out into tumults, which led to their expulsion from Rome, and finally to the utter destruction of Jerusalem. It is therefore not a matter of surprise, the converts from among such a people should need the injunction, ‘Be subject to the higher powers.’ Besides the effect of their previous opinions and feelings, there is something in the character of Christianity itself, and in the incidental results of the excitement which it occasions, to account for the repugnance of many of the early Christians to submit to their civil rulers. They wrested, no doubt, the doctrine of Christian liberty, as they did other doctrines, to suit their own inclinations. This result, however, is to be attributed not to religion, but to the improper feelings of those into whose minds the form of truth, without its full power, had been received.” (405-406)

*For there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God.*

“This is a very comprehensive proposition. All authority is of God. ... every magistrate is of God ... We are to obey magistrates, because they derive their authority from God. Not only is human government a divine institution, but the form in which the government exists, and the persons by whom its functions are exercised, are determined by his providence. All magistrates of whatever grade are to be regarded as acting by divine appointment ... There is no limitation to the injunction in this verse, so far as the objects of obedience are concerned, although there is as to the extent of the obedience itself. That is, we are to obey all that is in actual authority over us, whether their authority be legitimate or usurped, whether they are just or unjust. The actual reigning emperor was to be obeyed by the Roman Christians, whatever they might think as to his title to the sceptre. But if he transcended his authority, and required them to worship idols, they were to obey God rather than man. This is the limitation to all human authority. Whenever obedience to man is inconsistent with obedience to God, then disobedience becomes a duty.” (406)

#### VERSE 2.

“If it is the will of God that there should be civil government, and persons appointed to exercise authority over others, it is plain that to resist such persons in the exercise of their lawful authority is an act of disobedience to God.” (406-407)

“It is clear that this passage (vers. 1, 2) is applicable to men living under every form of government, monarchical, aristocractical, or democractical, in all their various modifications. Those who are in authority are to be obeyed within their sphere, no matter how or by whom appointed. It is ... the powers *that be*, the *de facto* government, that is to be regarded as, for the time being, ordained of God. It was to Paul a matter of little importance whether the Roman emperor was appointed by the senate, the army, or the people; whether the assumption of the imperial authority by Caesar was just or unjust, or whether his successors had a legitimate claim to the throne or not. It was his object to lay down the simple principle, that magistrates are to be obeyed.” (407)

#### VERSE 3.

“Paul is speaking of the legitimate design of government, not of the abuse of power by wicked men.” (407)

#### VERSE 4.

“Magistrates or rulers are not appointed for their honour or advantage, but for the benefit of society, and, therefore, while those in subjection are on this account to obey them, they themselves are taught, what those in power are so apt to forget, that they are the servants of the people as well as the servants of God, and that the welfare of society is the only legitimate object which they as rulers are at liberty to pursue.” (407-408)

#### DOCTRINE

1. “Civil government is a divine institution, *i.e.*, it is the will of God that it should exist, and be respected and obeyed, ver. 2.”
2. “While ‘government is of God, the form is of men.’ God has never enjoined any one form obligatory on all communities; but has simply laid down certain principles, applicable to rulers and subjects, under every form in which governments exist, vers. 1-7.
3. “The obedience which the Scriptures command us to render to our rulers is not unlimited; there are cases in which disobedience is a duty ... They are not to be obeyed as priests or as parents, but as civil rulers ... How far the rightful authority of rulers

extends, the prices point at which the obligation to obedience ceases, must often be a difficult question; and each case must be decided on its own merits ...

4. "The design of civil government is not to promote the advantage of rulers, but of the ruled ...
5. "The proper sphere of civil government is the civil and social relations of men, and their temporal welfare; conscience, and of course, religion, are beyond its jurisdiction, except so far as the best interests of civil society are necessarily connected with them ... Still it is to be remembered, that it is an exception ... To justify the interference of the civil government, therefore, in any given case, with these important subjects, an exception must be made out." (413-414).

## REMARKS

1. "The Christian religion is adapted to all states of society and all forms of civil government ... the religion of Christ, when it enters any community of men, does not assail their form of government, whether despotic or free; and if there is anything in their institutions inconsistent with its spirit, it is changed by its silent operation on the heart and conscience, rather than by direct denunciation. It has thus, without rebellion or violent convulsions, curbed the exercise of despotic power, and wrought the abolition of slavery throughout the greater part of Christendom, vers. 1—14.
2. "The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy. It teaches rulers that they are ministers of God for the public good; and it teaches subjects to be obedient to magistrates, not only for fear, but also for conscience' sake, ver. 5
3. "God is to be recognised as ordering the affairs of civil society: 'He removeth kings, and he setteth up kings [Daniel 2:21]'; by him 'kings begin, and princes decree justice [Proverbs 8:15]'; It is enough, therefore, to secure the obedience of the Christian, that, in the providence of God, he finds the power of government lodged in certain hands. The early Christians would have been in constant perplexity, had it been incumbent on them, amidst the frequent poisonings and assassinations of the imperial palaces the tumults of the pretorian guards, and the proclamation by contending armies of rival candidates, to decide on the individual who had *de jure* the power of the sword, before they could conscientiously obey, vers. 1—5.
4. "When rulers become a terror to the good, and a praise to them that do evil, they may still be tolerated and obeyed, not however, of right, but because the remedy may be worse than the disease, vers. 3, 4.
5. "Did genuine Christian love prevail, it would secure the right discharge, not only of the duties of rulers toward their subjects, and of subjects towards their rulers but of all the relative social duties of life; for he that loveth another fulfilleth the law, vers. 7, 8.
6. ...
7. "All Christian duty is included in putting on the Lord Jesus; in being like him, having that similarity of temper and conduct which results from being intimately united to him by the Holy Spirit, ver. 14." (415)

**John Murray**  
***The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. 2***  
**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.**

"This section is not a parenthesis in this part of the epistle extending from 12:1 through 15:13. The obligations incident to our subjection to civil authorities belong to 'the good and acceptable and perfect will of God' (12:2)." (145)

"In 13:1-7 we have an all-important relationship affecting the life and witness of a believer and there is good reason why Paul should treat of it, as he does, in this portion of the

epistle. There is also sufficient ground for thinking that there was some urgent need for pressing home upon the believers at Rome the teaching which is given here respecting the prerogatives of magistrates and the obligations of subjects in relation thereto.

“We know from the New Testament itself that the Jews had questions regarding the rights of the Roman government (*cf.* Matt. 22:16, 17; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21-22). We also know that the Jews were disposed to pride themselves on their independence (*cf.* John 8:33). We read also of seditious movements (Acts 5:36, 37). There is also the evidence from other sources respecting the restlessness of the Jews under the Roman yoke... In the mind of the authorities Christianity was associated with Judaism and any seditious temper attributed to Judaism would likewise be charged to Christians. This created a situation in which it was necessary for Christians to avoid all revolutionary aspirations or actions as well as insubordination to magistrates in the rightful exercise of their authority.

“Not only was there this danger arising from association with Judaism, there was also within the Christian community the danger of perverted notions of freedom, especially in view of the kingship and lordship of Christ. The fact that Paul on three occasions [here and 1 Tim. 2:1-3; Tit. 3:1] in his epistles found it necessary to reflect on our duties in reference to magistrates and Peter likewise to the same effect in his first epistle [1 Peter 2:13-17] shows that there was a reason for reminding believers of the necessity to be subject to the magisterial authorities.

“Furthermore, Christians often suffered at the hands of these authorities and there was a greater reason to draw the line between the disobedience which loyalty to Christ demanded (*cf.* Acts 4:19, 20; and the obedience which the same loyalty required.” (146-147)

Vss. 1, 2.

“The higher powers” refer without question to the governing authorities in the commonwealth. The term ‘authorities’ is the more literal rendering and points to the right to rule belonging to the persons involved and to the subjection required on the part of the subjects. At the time when Paul wrote civil magistracy was exercised by the Roman government and the direct reference is to the executors of this government.” 147)

“‘Every soul’ ... The implication is that no person is exempt from this subjection; no person enjoys special privileges by which he may ignore or feel himself free to violate the ordinances of magisterial authority. Neither infidelity nor faith offers immunity. It is of particular significance that it is to the church Paul is writing. The Westminster Confession of Faith states the case well when it says: “Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrates’ just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted” [Chapter XXIII, section IV] ...

“The term for ‘subjection’ is one more inclusive than that for obedience. It implies obedience when ordinances to be obeyed are in view, but there is more involved. Subjection indicates the recognition of our subordination in the whole realm of the magistrates’ jurisdiction and willing subservience to their authority ... stresses active participation in the duty of subjection ... Paul is dealing with existing governmental agents ... He is not now treating of government in the abstract nor entering into the question of the different forms of government. He is making categorical statements regarding the authorities in actual existence ... they derive their origin, right, and power from God ... here it is expressly stated and excludes from the outset every notion to the effect that authority in the state rests upon agreement on the part of the governed or upon the consent of the governed. Authority to govern and the subjection demanded of the governed reside wholly in the fact of divine institution.” (148)

“There are many questions which arise in actual practice with which Paul does not deal. In these verses there are no expressed qualifications or reservations to the duty of

subjection. It is, however, characteristic of the apostle to be absolute in his terms when dealing with a particular obligation. At the same time, on the analogy of his own teaching elsewhere or on the analogy of Scripture, we are compelled to take account of exceptions to the absolute terms in which an obligation is affirmed" [cites Acts 5:29; cf. 4:19, 20]. (149)

"When there is conflict between the requirements of men and the commands of God, then the word of Peter must take effect.

"Again Paul does not deal with the questions that arise in connection with revolution ... 'The powers that be' refer to the *de facto* magistrates ... The apostle is not writing an essay on casuistical theology but setting forth the cardinal principles pertaining to the institution of government and regulating the behaviour of Christians." (150)

Vss. 3, 4 .

"... good behaviour secures good standing in the state, a status to be cherished and cultivated." (151)

"This designation removes every supposition to the effect that magistracy is *per se* evil and serves good only in the sense that as a lesser evil it restrains and counteracts greater evils [cites 1 Tim. 2:2]." (152)

"There is a direct, personal address in this clause, expressed in the words 'to thee', showing the relevance for the well-being of the individual believer of that service which the magistrate renders." (152)

Vs. 5.

"... 'conscience' ... The meaning here must be that we are to subject ourselves out of a sense of obligation to God ... [cites 1 Peter 2:13] ... The necessity, therefore, is not that of inevitable outcome ... but that of ethical demand (cf. I Cor. 9:16). (154)

Vs.6.

"The term for 'ministers' in this instance ... [is] used in the New Testament, with one possible exception, with reference to the service of God and sometimes of the highest forms of ministry in the worship of God (cf. Luke 1:23; Acts 13:2; Rom. 15:16, 27; II Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17; Heb. 1:7, 14; 8:2; 10:11). Hence, if anything, this designation enhances the dignity attaching to the ministry of rulers." (155)

Vs. 7.

Cites I Peter 2:17.

"In verse 3 the fear is that of the punishment to be inflicted; in verse 7 it is the fear of veneration and respect. In reference to God this is the fear of reverential awe (cf. Acts 9:31; Rom. 3:18; II Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21), in reference to men the veneration due on account of their station (cf. Eph. 6:5; I Pet. 2:1)." (156)

**John Calvin**

***The Epistles of The Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians***

**Translator, Ross Mackenzie. Editors: David W. Torrance Thomas F. Torrance.**

**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.**

Vs. 1.

“Paul’s careful treatment of this passage in his instructions concerning the Christian life seems to have been forced on him by some great necessity ... There are always some restless spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ is properly exalted only when all earthly powers are abolished, and that they can enjoy the liberty which He has given them only if they have shaken off every yoke of human slavery. This error, however, possessed the minds of the Jews more than others ... There was another thing, too, which alienated the Jews as much as the Gentiles from their rulers. These rulers not only all detested true godliness, but also persecuted religion with feelings of utmost hostility. It seemed absurd, therefore, to acknowledge as lawful masters and rulers those who were contriving to snatch the kingdom from Christ, the only Lord of heaven and earth. It is probable that these reasons led Paul to establish the authority of the magistrates with the greater care ... Paul intended, I think, to remove the empty curiosity of those who often ask by what right those who are in authority came by their power. It ought really to be sufficient for us that they rule ... *every soul removes every exception.*” (280)

“The reason why we ought to be subject to magistrates is that they have been appointed by God’s ordination. If it is the will of God to govern the world in this manner, any who despise His power are striving to overturn the order of God, and are therefore resisting God Himself, since to despise the providence of the One who is the Author of civil government ... is to wage war against Him. (280)

Vs. 2.

“ ... Paul warns that those who in this respect oppose the providence of God will not go unpunished ... the punishment which is inflicted by the magistrate ... but also every act of God’s vengeance, however He may exact it.” (281)

Vs. 3.

“ ... the very desire to shake off or remove this yoke from oneself is tacit proof of an evil conscience that is plotting some mischief ... Rulers ... never abuse their power by harassing the good and the innocent without retaining in their despotic rule some semblance of just government. No tyranny, therefore, can exist which does not in some respect assist in protecting human society.” (282)

Vs. 4.

“Magistrates may learn from this the nature of their calling. They are not to rule on their own account, but for the public good. Nor do they have unbridled power, but power that is restricted to the welfare of their subjects. In short, they are responsible to God ... But the ministry which God has committed to them has reference to their subjects.” (282)

Vs. 8.

“I think that Paul meant to refer to the precept concerning the power of magistrates to the law of love, so that no one might consider it weak. It is as though he had said, ‘When I request you to obey rulers, I require only what all believers ought to perform by the law of love. If you wish the good to prosper (and not to wish this would be inhuman), you ought to strive to make the laws and judgments prevail, in order that the people may be obedient to the defenders of the laws, for these men enable us to enjoy peace.’ To introduce anarchy, therefore, is to violate charity, for the immediate consequence of anarchy is the disturbance of the whole state.” (284)

Vs. 10.

“Those who are endowed with true love will never think of injuring their brethren ... Since magistrates are the guardians of peace and equity, those who desire that every individual should preserve his rights, and that all men may live free from injury, must defend to the utmost of their power the order of magistrates. It is the enemies of government who reveal their desire to do harm.” (286)

**Herman Ridderbos**

***Paul: An Outline of His Theology***

**Translated by John Richard De Witt**

**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.**

**Section 52, “Subjection to Civil Authority”, under the greater heading, “New Obedience”: pp. 320-326.**

“Of particular importance, finally, is what Paul writes on the attitude of Christians toward the civil authorities. In this connection three passages especially come up for discussion — Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 3:1. Of these Romans 13:1ff. is certainly the most important.

“The significance in the whole of Paul’s preaching of the positive attitude toward civil authority that is taken here has given occasion to all sorts of speculation...

“One can indeed make a meaningful connection between Romans 13:1-7 and the preceding rejection of the urge to personal retaliation ... Yet ... the admonition to the church to be subject to the constituted authorities is based ... only on the God-ordained character of government and on the protection one enjoys from it if he does that which is good.” (320-321)

“Romans 13:1-7 forms a subdivision of the paraenetic part of the epistle that begins with 12:1, and is therefore characterized by the qualification given there of the Christian life as ‘liturgy,’ the service of God in everyday life. Viewed in this context Paul’s intention becomes more transparent: obedience to earthly authorities is also involved in what Romans 12:1ff. calls the spiritual sacrificial device, the placing of oneself at the service of God in virtue of the mercy of God shown to the church. This obedience is a submitting of oneself to the order appointed by God. Included in the paraenesis beginning and in principle based in Romans 12:1ff., Romans 13:1ff. says therefore that the divine ordinances for the natural life, in particular those which involve the institution of the authority of government, retain their validity for the church, indeed that it is precisely the church, called and destined to God’s service by his demonstration of mercy in Christ, that has to respect this ordinance. To this is then added the motive of its welfare, the possibility of being able as church to exist in the world (vv. 3, 4). This last point is also met with very clearly in 1 Timothy 2:2: ‘that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life, in all godliness and gravity.’ ... It is ... clearly evident that obedience to the authorities is not merely a minor and incidental matter, a temporary conformity of the church to an order that is fundamentally no longer its own, but constitutes an integral part of the new obedience of the church of Christ; this appears also from the choice of words in Titus 3:1: ‘Remind them to be in subjection to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready unto good work ...’ (321)

“Paul does not have a specific government or prevailing order in mind, but that he speaks from a deeply rooted conviction, one that is not assailed by the misdeeds of a specific government ... there emerges here the faith of the apostle that the world is the creation of God, has not been abandoned by him, and has therefore been placed under his ordinances. That the authorities themselves can abandon entirely the distinction to be

maintained by them between good and evil and place themselves at the service of evil (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7, 8) does not prevent him from continuing to elucidate God's purpose with government, nor from giving expression to his faith that God upholds his purpose, continues to establish justice on earth through government, and thus continues to press it into the service of the well-being of the world ... Even though this general well being is advanced by the fact that government became of the wickedness of men is authorized and obligated to bear the sword .... that is in no respect to say that government is to be accepted and respected by the Christian church only as a necessary evil; rather in its office lies the proof that by its service God maintains and wills to see maintained his justice and his goodness in the world created by him (cf. 1 Tim. 2:2)." (322-323)

"Was there not in the fact that Christ was the church's Lord the possibility of dissociating itself from every 'worldly' bond, the more so as not only good but also evil was frequently to be feared from it? In this danger of anticipation and spiritualism more than in any other consideration the explanation will have to be sought for Paul's very emphatic paraenesis to submission to civil authority ... this very deliberate designation of government as the continuing instrument in the hand of God is of great significance for the whole understanding of the life of the church. However much its 'life' and its 'citizenship' are in heaven (Col. 3:3; Phil. 3:20), its place and calling lie in the ordinances of the present world." (323-234)

"... God ... in the work of redemption upholds the order of this world even in its fallen state ... not that the church is here summoned to a 'blind' obedience to government and that Paul declares every existing governmental power inviolable and sacrosanct ... for Paul 'to obey God rather than men' was no less valid than for the other apostles ... What interests him here, however, is ... to make it clear to the church that it has to give effect to its obedience and service to Christ, not without, but within the boundaries set for it by the civil authorities." (324)

**Gordon H. Clark**

***A Christian View of Men and Things: An Introduction to Philosophy***

**Unicoi, Tenn.: The Trinity Foundation, 2005.**

Chapter, "Philosophy of Politics".

"The fact that a theory *has been* or *is*, popular does not make it true." (77)

"... congress or parliament can be as autocratic as an individual emperor."

"Is it true that human nature is so dependable that voluntary promises will enforce themselves? ... some sort of state is needed to regulate some human affairs to some degree ... the justification of civil government is the basic question of politics." (85)

"... if it is a majority decision that determines the general will, how can it be said to be always right and always tend to the welfare of each citizen? Is it true that majorities are always right? Is it true that the sovereign association is always what it should be?" (88)

"... the consent of the governed. ... the phrase has more propaganda value, it is nonetheless an obscurantist slogan ... to treat the notion of the consent of the governed is to ignore the basic question: By what right does the majority coerce the minority?" (93)

"Is a constitution that provides for amendments logically consistent with the theory of inalienable rights?" (94)



“ ... phrases, such as the *sovereignty of the people* and the *consent of the governed*, only express the fact that the ruler has assumed the title of People’s Leader instead of King.” (95)

“Democracy made the naive assumption that the mass of the electorate could choose men capable of managing a nation’s affairs. Indeed, this is possible at the start when not even the rudiments of group organizations exist. But as soon as parliament assembles, tactical units form within it, whose cohesion depends on the will to maintain a dominant position. These tactical units use all the expedients of agitation to make the people their tool and in turn the organization becomes the tool of its leader. The will to power is stronger than any theory.” (96-97)

“If there is no source of rights other than the state ... if there is no force more powerful than the state; if there is no God who controls states, then totalitarianism is the conclusion to be expected ... Theism cannot properly be regarded as a mere belief in some sort of divine principle: A God who is worth anything is a God who makes a difference in politics and every phase of philosophy.” (98)

“ ... government is a divine institution. The authority of magistrates does not derive from any voluntary social compact, but it derives from God ... All human rights are gifts from God ... God is the source of all rights. He is sovereign in dispensing them, and the rights of magistrates are given to them by God. These rights are best exemplified in the powers of capital punishment and taxation ... It is the essence of government to coerce ... In singling out these two items as ordained of God, Paul gives a quite sufficient basis for governmental authority.” (99)

“ ... the state is also necessary under actual conditions because without civil government each man’s evil nature would turn his freedom to intolerable actions. The existence of the state is a partial punishment and cure for sin.” (100)

“ ... Christians, especially Jewish Christians of the first century, could easily produce arguments against obeying Rome. It will not be forgotten that one of the catch questions put to Christ was, ‘Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?’ Probably most of the Jews secretly believed that it was unlawful. Christ’s answer and Paul’s statement are justifications of *de facto* government. The powers that be, that is, the actually existing powers, are ordained of God ... It does not follow that Christians are enjoined from using all legal and peaceful means toward a just and honest administration.” (101)

“For the very reason that government is a divine institution with its authority derived from God, it follows that totalitarian governments are without authority beyond the limits set by God. And if magistrates exceed their authority, no one is under obligation to obey ...” (103)

“ ... only in a theistic worldview can both anarchy and totalitarianism be avoided.” (104)

“ ... voting is not intended to determine what is good. The aim of a vote is to determine the will of the majority, and it cannot be granted that the majority is *ipso facto* right. Too often the will of the majority has been mistaken or evil.” (105)

**George Eldon Ladd**  
***A Theology of the New Testament (Revised Edition)***  
**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.**

In his section, “The Christian Life”:

“Paul’s attitude toward the state is set for in the letter to the Romans. Even though it was an authoritarian structure in whose functioning pagan religion played an important role, it was the agent of law and order, and as such is ‘the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer’ (Rom. 13:5). Even Christians—indeed, especially Christians—must be subject to the state because it is divinely ordained ...

“It is clear that Paul was not concerned about social structures but only with how the Christian should live out the Christian life within the contemporary social situation ... There is no evidence that Paul looked upon the church as a structure that would take its place with other social structures and change them for the good.” (575)

In his section, “Eschatology”:

“In Romans 13:4, Paul affirms that the ruling authority (even though it be pagan Rome) is ‘God’s servant for your good.’ God has ordained human authorities to preserve order, i.e., to approve those who do good and to punish those who do wrong. The antithesis of this is the lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians 2:4: the deifying of the state so that it no longer is an instrument of law and order but a totalitarian system that defies God and demands the worship of human beings. This is the demonic state ... Paul sees a day when the rule of law will collapse, when political order will be swept away and be unable any longer to restrain the principle of lawlessness. Then the last defenses that the Creator has erected against the powers of chaos will break down completely ... At the very end, law and order will break down, demonic lawlessness will burst forth, and the church will experience a brief period of terrible evil that will be quickly terminated by the return of Christ (vs. 8).” (606)

#### **Donald Barnhouse on Romans 13:1-13 (from Logos Bible Software):**

“This teaching was especially important for the believers at Rome because the church there was formed around a central core of Jews, whose Old Testament heritage gave them the idea that they were a law unto themselves, and they were unwilling to render allegiance to any Gentile. They looked down upon the Gentiles and considered themselves superior to the nations among whom they lived and by whom they had been conquered. History records many evidences of their lawlessness in the face of established government.

“But now, rumors about the believers are beginning to circulate. Paul and Peter unite in telling believers, Gentile and Jew, to obey the magistrates. The powers that be are ordained of God. No one is above the law. If the Christians behave as true believers should, there will be no difficulty. Magistrates are not a terror to good citizens; only to evil citizens.

“The Christian must realize that not only is he a new creature in Christ Jesus and a citizen of Heaven, he is still a human being in a society of human beings, and he must shoulder the obligations of mass citizenship. The Christian is to integrate his life and activities with all human relationships. The believer is to understand the first and great commandment: he is to render to God the things that are God’s; that is, he is to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He is also to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; that is, he is to love his neighbor as himself.

“In America we are at liberty to preach Christ, but Christians should obey ordinances prescribing the time and place of preaching.

“A Christian’s liberty is not infringed if he is forbidden to preach in the street in a loud voice in the middle of the night when people want to sleep. Nor is Christian liberty infringed if

ordinances forbid a crowd to obstruct traffic. When it is necessary to get a permit from the police to hold a street meeting, the permit must be secured. The possession of such a permit does not give the Christian the right to exercise bad taste.

“When Paul wrote this epistle, Nero was in power. The great persecutions which fell on the early church had not yet begun in Rome, but the Holy Spirit was prescribing the line of conduct to be followed....the people who lived under the dictatorship of Nero were to be subject to the divinely appointed authorities in all matters save Christian conduct and the preaching of the Gospel.”

### **Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible (from AccordanceBibleSoftware):**

Introduction to the chapter:

“We are here taught how to conduct ourselves towards magistrates, and those that are in authority over us, called here the *higher powers*, intimating their authority (they are powers), and their dignity (they are higher powers), including not only the king as supreme, but all inferior magistrates under him: and yet it is expressed, not by the persons that are in that power, but the place of power itself, in which they are. However the persons themselves may be wicked, and of those vile persons whom the citizen of Zion contemneth (Ps. xv. 4), yet the just power which they have must be submitted to and obeyed. The apostle had taught us, in the foregoing chapter, not to avenge ourselves, nor to recompense evil for evil; but, lest it should seem as if this did cancel the ordinance of a civil magistracy among Christians, he takes occasion to assert the necessity of it, and of the due infliction of punishment upon evil doers, however it may look like recompensing evil for evil ...”

“*Every soul*. Not that our consciences are to be subjected to the will of any man. It is God’s prerogative to make laws immediately to bind conscience, and we must render to God the things that are God’s. But it intimates that our subjection must be free and voluntary, sincere and hearty. *Curse not the king, no, not in thy thought*, Eccl. x. 20. To compass and imagine are treason begun. The subjection of soul here required includes inward honour (1 Pet. ii. 17) and outward reverence and respect, both in speaking to them and in speaking of them—obedience to their commands in things lawful and honest, and in other things a patient subjection to the penalty without resistance—a conformity in every thing to the place and duty of subjects, bringing our minds to the relation and condition, and the inferiority and subordination of it. “They are *higher powers*; be content they should be so, and submit to them accordingly.” Now there was good reason for the pressing of this duty of subjection to civil magistrates, 1. Because of the reproach which the Christian religion lay under in the world, as an enemy to public peace, order, and government, as a sect that turned the world upside down, and the embracers of it as enemies to Cæsar, and the more because the leaders were Galileans—an old slander. Jerusalem was represented as a *rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces*, Ezra iv. 15, 16. Our Lord Jesus was so reproached, though he told them his kingdom was not of this world: no marvel, then, if his followers have been loaded in all ages with the like calumnies, called *factious, seditious, and turbulent*, and looked upon as the troublers of the land, their enemies having found such representations needful for the justifying of their barbarous rage against them. The apostle therefore, for the obviating of this reproach and the clearing of Christianity from it, shows that obedience to civil magistrates is one of the laws of Christ, whose religion helps to make people good subjects; and it was very unjust to charge upon Christianity that faction and rebellion to which its principles and rules are so directly contrary. 2. Because of the temptation which the Christians lay under to be otherwise affected to civil magistrates, some of them being originally Jews, and so leavened with a principle that it was unmeet for any of the seed of

Abraham to be subject to one of another nation—their king must be of their brethren, Deut. xvii. 15. Besides, Paul had taught them that they were *not under the law*, they were made free by Christ. Lest this liberty should be turned into licentiousness, and misconstrued to countenance faction and rebellion, the apostle enjoins obedience to civil government, which was the more necessary to be pressed now because the magistrates were heathens and unbelievers, which yet did not destroy their civil power and authority. Besides, the civil powers were persecuting powers; the body of the law was against them.”

Re: “for wrath’s sake”. “The Christians were then in those persecuting times obnoxious to the sword of the magistrate for their religion, and they needed not make themselves more obnoxious by their rebellion. The least show of resistance or sedition in a Christian would soon be aggravated and improved, and would be very prejudicial to the whole society; and therefore they had more need than others to be exact in their subjection, that those who had so much occasion against them in the matter of their God might have no other occasion. *Those that resist shall receive to themselves damnation*: ... they shall be called to an account for it. God will reckon with them for it, because the resistance reflects upon him.”

Re: “for conscience’ sake”:

“This makes common civil offices acceptable to God, when they are done for *conscience’ sake*, with an eye to God, to his providence putting us into such relations, and to his precept making subjection the duty of those relations.”

Re: “no power but of God”:

“The usurpation of power and the abuse of power are not of God, for he is not the author of sin; but the power itself is ... civil powers are from God’s governing power. The most unjust and oppressive princes in the world have no power but what is given them from above (John xix. 11), the divine providence being in a special manner conversant about those changes and revolutions of governments which have such an influence upon states and kingdoms, and such a multitude of particular persons and smaller communities. Or, it may be meant of government in general: it is an instance of God’s wisdom, power, and goodness, in the management of mankind, that he has disposed them into such a state as distinguishes between governors and governed, and has not left them like the fishes of the sea, where the greater devour the less. He did herein consult the benefit of his creatures.— *The powers that be*: whatever the particular form and method of government are—whether by monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—wherever the governing power is lodged, it is an ordinance of God, and it is to be received and submitted to accordingly; though immediately an ordinance of man (1 Pet. ii. 13), yet originally an ordinance of God.”

“... the children of Belial, that will not endure the yoke of government, will be found breaking a law and despising a blessing. Magistrates are therefore called gods (Ps. lxxxii. 6), because they bear the image of God’s authority. And those who spurn at their power reflect upon God himself. This is not at all applicable to the particular rights of kings and kingdoms, and the branches of their constitution; nor can any certain rule be fetched from this for the modelling of the original contracts between the governors and governed; but it is intended for direction to private persons in their private capacity, to behave themselves quietly and peaceably in the sphere in which God has set them, with a due regard to the civil powers which God in his providence has set over them, 1 Tim. ii. 1, 2. Magistrates are here again and again called God’s ministers. He is the *minister of God*, v. 4, 6. Magistrates are in a more peculiar manner God’s servants; the dignity they have calls for duty. Though they are lords to us, they are servants to God, have work to do for him, and an account to render to him. In the administration of public justice, the determining of quarrels, the protecting of the innocent, the righting of the wronged, the punishing of offenders, and the preserving of

national peace and order, that every man may not do what is right in his own eyes—in these things it is that magistrates act as God’s ministers. As the killing of an inferior magistrate, while he is actually doing his duty, is accounted treason against the prince, so the resisting of any magistrates in the discharge of these duties of their place is the resisting of an ordinance of God.”

“But pity it is that ever this gracious intention should be perverted, and that those who bear the sword, while they countenance and connive at sin, should be a terror to those who do well. But so it is, when the vilest men are exalted (Ps. xii. 1, 8); and yet even then the blessing and benefit of a common protection, and a face of government and order, are such that it is our duty in that case rather to submit to persecution for well-doing, and to take it patiently, than by any irregular and disorderly practices to attempt a redress. Never did sovereign prince pervert the ends of government as Nero did, and yet to him Paul appealed, and under him had the protection of the law and the inferior magistrates more than once. Better a bad government than none at all.”

**Matthew Henry, on Ecclesiastes 8:2, 5.**

“ A particular instance of wisdom is subjection to authority and a dutiful, peaceable perseverance in our allegiance to the government which providence has set over us. The duty of subjects is here described.

(1) We must be observant of the laws. In all those things wherein the civil power is to interpose, whether legislative or judicial, we ought to submit to its order as constitutions.

(2) We must not be forward to find fault with the public administration or to quarrel with everything that is not just according to our mind, not quit our post of service under the government, and throw it up, upon every discontent.

“We must not be forward to find fault with the public administration, ‘When he is displeased at thee, or when thou art displeased at him, fly not off in a passion, nor forsake the kingdom.’ We must prudently accommodate ourselves to our opportunities, both for our own relief, if we think ourselves wronged, and for the redress of public grievances.”

**Matthew Henry, on Matthew 27:58, Joseph asking Pontius Pilate for Christ’s body:**

“The grant of the dead body procured from Pilate, v. 58. Joseph *went to* Pilate, the proper person to be applied to on this occasion, who had the disposal of the body; for in things wherein the power of the magistrate is concerned, due regard must be had to that power, and nothing done to break in upon it. What we do that is good, must be done peaceably, and not tumultuously. Pilate was willing to give the body to one that would inter it decently, that he might do something towards atoning for the guilt his conscience charged him with in condemning an innocent person. In Joseph’s petition, and Pilate’s ready grant of it, *honour* was done to Christ, and a testimony borne to his *integrity*.”

**Robert Haldane**

***An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans***

**McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing Company), date?**

**Chapter 13**

Introduction to Romans 13:

“CHRISTIANS having become the subjects of a kingdom which is not of this world, might be led to suppose that they were released from the ties of obedience to human authorities, especially such as were not Christians. Far different is the doctrine here taught by the Apostle. He commands ‘every soul,’ both Jew and Gentile, to be subject to the existing powers. He makes no exception as to the nature or constitution of any government. He speaks neither of monarchies, nor of republics, nor of mixed constitutions. But he applies all his precepts to every form that government may assume. As there is nothing from which political partisans in the present day more widely differ than from the apostolic doctrine laid down in this chapter, Christians ought to give to it the more earnest heed, lest they be led away on this subject by the opinions of the world, or of those who ‘despise government.’ They ought to examine carefully what is here taught by the Apostle, without attempting to accommodate it to their preconceived views of civil liberty. This is the more necessary, as many have lately embarked in politics with a keenness that will be of no service to their spiritual life, and will rather than to make them cleave more closely to the dust.” (575-576)

“... Christians learn at present from this passage the will of God respecting their duty to civil government, just as those to whom this Epistle was addressed. It is true that there is an innumerable variety of differences in circumstances; but this is nothing to the purpose. The things taught in these Epistles are in all circumstances duty. The Roman Christians were under a despotism, and those who read this Epistle may live under a free government. But the duty of obedience is in both cases the same. The powers are under both equally to be obeyed.

It is of the utmost moment that Christians, under all forms of government, should have a rule concerning their duty to civil government clear and precise. Such a rule we have here laid down. No practical subject is more fully or more explicit treated in the word of God.” (576)

Quotes 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Titus 3:1.

“In the most solemn manner, subjection to the existing powers is here enjoined. This is contrary to the wisdom of the world, which takes offense at such subjection, and contrary to the proud heart of man, that would make religion a pretence to cover its secret reluctance to submit to disagreeable restraints. How natural the opposite doctrine is to the carnal heart, may be seen from the general sentiments entertained on the subject by rulers and ruled—by infidels and professed Christians—by statesmen and people of all ranks. With one consent, the generality of men, even in this country, which is comparatively so much enlightened by the Scriptures, proclaim that subjection to rulers is, even in things civil, limited and conditional—that in case of the breach of the supposed compact between the rulers and the ruled, rebellion is lawful, and resistance a duty. Even in the houses of Parliament is this doctrine boldly maintained. It is much to be desired that among those who thus trample on the commandments of God, and set aside the Scripture doctrine on this subject, there were no real Christians. It is lamentable to reflect that, to justify resistance to the civil powers, many of the people of God have resorted to the same false rules of interpretation which Neologians and other perverters of the Divine word have invented to banish the doctrines of grace from the Bible. No expedients to explain away the meaning of any part of Scripture were ever more forced than those adopted to make this chapter accord with the right of resisting the powers that be.” (576-577)

*Ver. 1.—Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God.*

“... every government is to be obeyed, because there is no government but of God.” (577)

*Let every soul.*

“ ... No phrase could more clearly and definitely express the duty of subjection to the civil rulers whom God has placed over us, than that which the Apostle here employs. This passage *expressly* enjoins obedience to all governments equally ... The Apostle speaks of ‘powers’ without peculiar reference. Every one, without exception, is, by the command of God, to be subject to the *existing* powers, whatever were the means by which they became possessed of the situation in which they stand ... the successors of Caesar were recognized by Jesus, and were the rulers of the Roman empire when the Apostle wrote; Jeroboam was expressly appointed by God as king over the ten tribes; and the oppressed Jews were commanded to pray for the peace of Babylon.” (577-578)

*For there is no power but of God.*

“ ... No tyrant ever seized power till God gave it him ... The worst government in any country is of God, and is calculated to effect His purposes and promote His glory. Wicked rulers are necessary in God’s plans to punish wicked nations ... Whatever may have been the means of their exaltation, it is God who has exalted them either for a blessing or a curse to the people. They who enjoin obedience to civil government on the supposition of implied compacts or conventions, overturn the ground on which it is rested by the word of God.” (578)

“ ... The Divine appointment of the government that is over us, is the ground on which the duty of our submission rests; and the powers that be—that exist in any country—are appointed by God.” He quotes Daniel 4:17, Jeremiah 27:5, and Psalm 75:7. (579)

*Ver. 2.—Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.*

*Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.*

“ ... Resistance to the government ... is resistance to God ... There is but one exception, and that is when anything is required contrary to the law of God ... The people of God, then, ought to consider resistance to the government under which they live as a very awful crime—even as resistance to God Himself. They are bound to obey, not good rulers only .... but oppressive rulers also, if they do not command what God forbids.” (579)

*And they that resist shall receive unto themselves damnation.*

“When the ignorance of God’s people is punished for any offense against the government of their country, their chastisement should be looked on as a chastisement from God.” (579)

“It ought to be observed, that God’s people may be in ignorance on this subject as well as on any other, and that we are not to suppose that all who have resisted the governments under which they were placed are enemies to God ... But their ignorance is sinful. If they mistake their duty on this subject, they are more inexcusable than when they are ignorant on almost any other subject, for it is taught with a plainness that nothing but strong prejudice can resist.” (580)

*Ver. 3.—For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same.*

*For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.*

“ ... This verse is often supposed to limit the obedience inculcated in the preceding verses to rulers who are of a proper character, and actuated by right motives. Nothing can be more unfounded. It is not introduced as the ground of obedience to civil government. The ground of obedience is stated in the first verse, immediately subjoined to the command ... When the government is wicked, cruel, and oppressive, in the inscrutable ways of His sovereign providence, it is overruled by God so as to forward the object He has in view. Without exception, it is true in every age, and in every country, that the existing civil powers are ordained of God. It follows, then, that whosoever resisteth the powers, resisteth the ordinance of God ... Here there is no limitation of anything previously spoken. It is a characteristic of civil government which is universally applicable. It is true of the worst government, that it is not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Good works and bad works are not here spoken of with reference to Christianity. The reference is to the works generally accounted good or bad in society, and the worst government will not punish such good works. No man was ever punished because he would not injure his neighbors. It is a general declaration with respect to all governments. The very worst of them is a blessing. The conduct of Christians with respect to obedience to Christ, as it is offensive to civil rulers, and has often been punished by them, is not here in the Apostle’s view ...—This is a truth which experience will prove to every Christian. If he obeys the laws of the country, and does the things that are good, he will have no reason to be afraid of the government. If called to suffer for Christ’s sake, he has no need to fear.” (580-581)

*Ver. 4.—For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*

*For he is the minister of God to thee for good.*

“ ... Civil rulers, then, as the ministers of God, ought not only to be obeyed without resistance, but with alacrity ... In spite of all the evils that derogate from its proper character, it promotes the good of society. But none are so much indebted to it as Christians, to each of whom it may indeed be emphatically said, it is the minister to *thee* for good. Were the restraints of government removed, Christians would be attacked, persecuted, or destroyed in any country. Even the persecution of the worst government would not be so bad as the persecution of the world, if freed from the restraint of law. Notwithstanding the numerous persecutions endured by Christians under the Roman emperors, they were still to them the ministers of God for good, without whose government they would probably have been exterminated. ‘The Christians to the lions!’ was the common cry of the multitude among the pagans. The Roman government afforded protection to Paul for a long period, and saved him on different occasions from suffering death by his countrymen. Let Christians, then, in every country, instead of joining with the enemies of its established order, be thankful for the Divine ordinance of civil government, and exert themselves to maintain obedience and peace. It is of the utmost importance for them in every country to understand their duty to civil government. In this way they will most effectually command the Gospel to the world, and remove some of the most powerful obstacles to its progress. While they show that they fear not man, where he ordains what is contrary to the commandments of God, they ought likewise to show that obedience to God, and gratitude to Him who appoints civil government for their protection, obliges them to submit to the rulers in all things temporal. (581)

“Some have inferred from this passage that the Apostle’s injunctions refer solely to such governors as are truly good and altogether what they ought to be. Nothing can be further from the truth. From this it would follow that the Apostle, while professing to furnish an explicit rule of conduct in this matter for those whom he addressed, in reality gave them none, and that he has here laid down no clear and precise direction which could apply to Christians from that time to the present. Human governments, like everything administered



by men, must always be imperfect; and as it is easy to form exaggerated ideas on this subject, no administration of any form that has ever existed would appear to come up to the imagined standard ... The rule which is here given is clear to all. It was dictated to Paul by God under one of the worst governments that ever existed, and under which the blood of the Apostle himself was shed, as if he had been a malefactor." (581-582)

*But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid.*

"—If men will transgress the laws under which they are placed, they have reason to be afraid; and God here warns His own people, that, in such a case, they must not count upon His protection or interference to deliver them from the punishment due to those who rise up against His institution. This ought to caution Christians against identifying themselves with political associations to oppose or subvert the government of their country. When they do so they are likely to suffer for it,—even more likely to suffer than the wicked themselves. God may in the meantime pass over the sin of the latter, while He visits that of His people with chastisement." (582)

*For he beareth not the sword in vain.*

"—This implies that civil government is not a mere pageant arrayed with all the ensigns of power and vengeance against the opposer, but it also shows that the providence of God so orders it that rulers will in general be successful against the disturbers of the peace, so that evil-doers will be discovered and their plots defeated." (582)

He alludes to John 18:36.

*For he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil.*

"... Instead of being a duty, it is a sin to neglect avenging the laws when they are transgressed." (582)

*Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.*

"... The assertion that civil rulers, without any exception, are appointed by God, would appear strange, when it was considered that they were heathens, and tyrants, and persecutors. But heathens, and tyrants, and persecutors as they were, they are proved to be of God, by their being a terror not to good works, but to the evil. With all their wickedness, they uphold the great principles on which society is founded, and on which only it can subsist. The Christian then, has no reason to dread them; for he does not practice the evil works which they punish, and he does the good works which they approve. This verse shows the reasonableness of the command of submission to government. As if the Apostle had said, 'Do not think this command a hard saying; *for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.*'" (583-584)

*To the Christian he is the minister of God for good.*

"Indeed, civil government is more for the advantage of Christians than for that of others. They need its protection more than any other class of men. Were it not for the protection of government, Christians could not live even in the countries where are the proudest boasts of enlargement of mind with respect to civil liberty." (584)

*Ver. 5.—Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience's sake.*

“‘To carnal wisdom,’ says Dr. Carson, ‘the doctrine of unlimited submission to civil government in temporal things appears a hard saying. Who can hear it? If this sentiment prevails, it may be said, rulers may tyrannize as they please. They who speak thus do greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God in the ruling of the world. It would be a hard thing indeed if God did not rule the rulers. But the Christian has nothing to fear, when he considers that every plan and proceeding of government is overruled and directed by his God. If He puts His children into the hands of men, He retains these men in His own hand, and they can injure them in nothing without His permission ... Have not Christians more security for their safety in the care of their Almighty Father, than in a permission given by Him to defend themselves against the oppression of rulers? They have peace whatever party gets into power, because they know that in everything God fulfils His purposes by them. God rules on earth, even in the councils of His enemies, as completely as He rules in heaven. When God chooses to overturn the empire of tyrants, He is at no loss for instruments. He is not obliged to employ the heirs of glory in such scenes of blood: He uses the wicked to overturn the wicked.’”

In the preceding five verses the Apostle makes no provision, in matters of civil submission, for any case of resistance or rebellion, under any circumstances. He makes no exceptions, no modifications; he discusses no hazardous cases of conscience upon emergencies not existing; but in language which none can mistake, and with an authority the commanding solemnity of which defies opposition, he proclaims to the Greek and to the Roman, to the barbarian and the civilised, *Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. The powers that be are ordained of God.*” (584-585)

*Ver. 7.—Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; customs to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.* (586)

“... Why are we not accountable for the application of every part of a general tax? Because we have no control over it, and our approbation of it when we pay it is not implied. The same consideration exempts us from our responsibility respecting the sinful application of a specific tax.”

*Fear to whom fear.*

“... The Christian is not to brave the authorities whom God has set over him, nor to set them at defiance, on pretence that he is a servant of God.” (587)

*Ver. 8.—Owe no many anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*

“... It is a great injury to men, and a reproach to Christianity, when the servants of God neglect this duty.” (588)

*But to love one another.*

“... The whole law is grounded on love to God and love to man. This cannot be violated without the breach of the law; and if there is love, it will influence to the observance of all God’s commandments.” (588)

*Ver. 9.—For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*

“ ... Nothing can be more evident than that if we loved our neighbour perfectly, we would commit none of the things here specified ... Its prohibitions, then, are not unreasonable restraints upon our liberty, but the just requirements of love.” (588)

*Ver. 10.—Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour.*

“—Love never injures our neighbour in any respect, but, on the contrary, as far as in its power, does him service ... What, then, shall we say of the morality of men in general, who live in strife and contention, as often as their interests in the smallest degree interfere? What is the origin of all the disputes in the world but a want of love?” (588-589)

*Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

“ ... Love ... will prevent murder ...” (589)

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