

“Authorities that Exist have been Established by God”: The Nature and Extent of Christian Duty to Governing Authorities in Romans 13:1-7

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Abstract

In many countries, especially in Africa, many leaders ascend into power with allegations of rigging, corruption, murder, and other vices. Thus, when these leaders attain power and authority, they serve their interests rather than their subjects. At the helm of their tenure, many of these leaders employ similar methods to retain control. Having this background in mind, the Apostle Paul's instruction in Romans 13:1-7 to submit to governing authorities seems problematic. Among other things, he argues that God has established authorities that exist. What is the meaning and application of this biblical text in contexts where repressive regimes reign? The research uses the exegetical approach to examine Paul's arguments on Christian responsibility, response, and relationship with governing authorities. The biblical text affirms that God has ordained governing authorities and entrusted rulers with delegated power. Expectedly, leaders ought to serve as God's servants, thus making it easy for Christians to submit, honor, and pay required taxes. However, even in cases where leaders fail to be God's servants, the purposes of God remain unthwarted. The biblical idea of submission must thus be in line with the whole law of God—the believer only to what is in line with God's will.

Keywords: Authority, Ordained, Submit, Governing Authority, Christian, Rulers

Introduction

In the book of Romans 13:1-7, the apostle Paul discusses Christian duties to civil authorities. In verse 1b, he writes, “*there is no authority except from God, and those existing have been ordained by God.*” This statement raises concerns that this pericope also addresses. For instance, what happens when the government in question is tyrannical. How can Christians obey this biblical command when human authorities exhibit apparent shortcomings. What is the nature and extent of this call to submission? This paper examined the meaning of Paul’s teachings within its context and appropriated the textual meaning to the modern context. The study indicates that God has ordained the government institution and summons those in power to rule as servants. Thus, the imperative to submit does not absolve oppressive regimes from responsibility and divine judgment, for they are required to rule as God’s servants. The paper also demonstrates that biblical submission must be consistent with the whole counsel of God’s word—when the government is asking what is contrary to God’s will, the believer is not mandated to submit. The research used the grammatical-historical method to determine the author’s original intent in the text. The approach looks at the grammar, syntax, and literary and historical context of the text.¹ The method presupposes that Scripture is divinely authored and is therefore without error and authoritative for our faith and practice.

The Background Information of Romans

The epistle is one of the New Testament books with a consensus from almost all scholars on its authorship.² The internal evidence (1:1) confirms the Apostle Paul as the author, writing to Christians in the ancient city of Rome (1:7a). Initially, Jewish Christians dominated the church in Rome, but following emperor Claudius’ expulsion of Jews and Christians from Rome in AD 49, the Gentiles became the majority.³ After the death of Claudius in AD 54, the Jewish Christians began to return to Rome. By the time Apostle Paul wrote his letter in AD 57, most church members in Rome were primarily Gentiles.⁴ Nero was the emperor of Rome at this time.

¹ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Ekklesia Africa Ltd., 2019), 41.

² Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 6 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 13.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Ibid., 16. Schreiner similarly notes, “The Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome in A.D. 49 and they returned to Rome in significant numbers in A.D. 54. By then the social distance between Jews and Gentiles had increased, and the latter were much less inclined to adhere to segments of the law that the Jews still practiced (viz., food laws

Osborne notes that though Nero had not become the evil and anti-Christian emperor that he turned into, there must have been, in the empire, signs of anti-Christian activity. Hence, the apostle Paul is writing to a people who are under a not-so-good government.⁵ Apostle Paul primarily wrote the letter to inform the church in Rome about his impending visit after delivering the gift to the poor believers in Jerusalem (1:9–15; 15:23–32). However, the significant section of the book deals with soteriology (Chapter 1—11). The application section of the book (chapter 12—16) addresses Christian duties and responsibilities to God, the world, the governing authorities, and the spiritually weak. Specifically, 13:1–7 focuses on the nature and extent of Christian roles to civil authorities.

Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7

Reasons for Subjection to Authorities (Verse 1)

Verse 1: Πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω. οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ, αἱ δὲ οὗσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμέναι εἰσὶν·

Translation: *Let every soul be (habitually) in subjection to governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those existing have been ordained by God.*⁶

Verse 1 forms the thesis of the entire pericope (13:1–7). The first part of the verse, “Let every soul be (habitually) in subjection to governing authorities,” makes a summary statement. The second part of the verse introduces the reason for the assertion using the conjunction γὰρ. Every soul or person should be subject to governing authorities because God has established existing authorities. Notably, the phrase Πᾶσα ψυχὴ (every soul) is a rendering of the Hebraic equivalence of “every soul” where we say ‘everybody’.⁷ The command Paul issues is to all humankind. The present imperative ὑποτασσέσθω (be habitually in subjection) expresses a command.⁸ Matthew Neufeld, comments that the term denotes voluntary submission.⁹ This

and observance of the Sabbath). The differences of opinion between Jews and Gentiles are reflected in 14:1–15:13” (Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1998: 28).

⁵ Osborne, *Romans*, 2004, 341. The same observation is made by Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996), 807.

⁶ The verse to verse translations of Romans 13:1-7 are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Morris, Leon. *The Epistle to the Romans*. A Pillar Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 460.

⁸ Also taking ὑποτασσέσθω as present durative.

⁹ The Greek verb ὑποτάσσω (to be subject, to submit) is a hierarchical term which stresses the relation of a person to his or her superiors; the subordination can either be voluntary or compulsory. The argument of 13:1–7 is that the

instruction is also in Titus 3:1 “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, be obedient, and be ready to do whatever is good.”¹⁰

The Greek phrase ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις (to governing authorities) indicates Paul’s intended object of submission. In this context, the reference is to Roman authorities since Christians in Rome were under this political rulership.¹¹ The reason for this obedience is οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ,¹² αἱ δὲ οὗσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ¹³ τεταγμέναι¹⁴ εἰσὶν (for there is no authority except from God, and those existing have been ordained by God). The first part indicates that there is no other source of all power apart from God, and the second part presents God as the one who has established authority. Governing authorities not only have their ultimate source from God, but it is God who also puts it in place. Jesus told Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above...” (John 19:11a). The reason for submission is that authority is ultimately from God; and that he has established the institution of government. The focus here is power being from and by God.

Scholars who hold a contrary view believe that all government authority is evil and demonic. One such scholar, as noted by Grudem, is Greg Boyd. In his book, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, he reinterprets Luke 4:5–7, “And the devil took him [Jesus] up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, ‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’”¹⁵ He argues that he did not refute Satan’s claim that he wields all the authority of the world’s kingdoms. This is an argument from silence, hinging on the fact that Jesus did not counter Satan’s statement. In this context, Satan was tempting Jesus on the means to attain power over the kingdoms of the earth. The passage does not teach that government authority is satanic; to the contrary, many Scriptures affirm that authorities instituted among men are of God (1 Peter 2:13–14; Daniel 4:17). Grudem, in response to Boyd’s claim, remarks,

Christian should voluntarily submit in love to divinely instituted authorities, Matthew Neufeld, “Submission to Governing Authorities: A Study of Romans 13:1-7.” *Direction* 23, no. 2 (1994), 93.

¹⁰ New International Version used in all the Bible quotation outside the pericope.

¹¹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1996, 975-796.

¹² This is taking θεοῦ to be a genitive of source to indicate that all authority is from God.

¹³ Taking θεοῦ as subjective genitive to show that God is the one who has ordained all the authorities that exist.

¹⁴ Taking τεταγμέναι as perfect intensive.

¹⁵ Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 38.

Satan wants us to believe that all civil government is under his control, but that is not taught anywhere in the Bible. (Of course, Satan can influence some individuals in government, but he is not in control). The only verse in the whole Bible that says Satan has authority over all governments is spoken by the father of lies, and we should not believe it.¹⁶

All authority, and in this case government authority, is ultimately from God and by God.

Rebelling against Authorities Equals Rebelling against God (Verse 2)

Verse 2: ὥστε ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ ἀνθέστηκεν, οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήμψονται.

Translation: *Therefore, the one who sets himself in rebellion against the authority has set himself against what God has ordained. And those who resist shall bring judgment on themselves.*

Using the conjunction ὥστε (therefore), Paul writes a logical implication of what he discussed in verse 1. He instructs that since existing authorities have been established by God, resisting¹⁷ them implies resisting God's doing. The present participle ἀντιτασσόμενος is simultaneous with the action of the main verb ἀνθέστηκεν (Greek perfect tense); hence the sentence also be rendered "he who puts himself in resistance or opposition to authority has resisted¹⁸ against what God has instituted."

The issue at hand is not the disagreement with the government authorities but a deliberate rebellious inclination. Similarly, Moo argues, "the perfect participle ἀνθεστηκότες connotes a persistent refusal to recognize government's role in the divine hierarchy (and not just an occasional failure), as is clear not so much from the tense but the context."¹⁹ This teaching is consistent with other parts of the Scripture. For example, apostles disagreed with the Sanhedrin on the directive requiring them to refrain from preaching the crucified and resurrected Christ (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29). Although they disobeyed the Jewish religious body, essentially, they did not have a permanent, settled attitude of defying the authorities in everything.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Taking ἀντιτασσόμενος as durative present.

¹⁸ Taking ἀνθέστηκεν as perfect intensive.

¹⁹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1996, 799.

Apostle Paul writes that those with this rebellious attitude ἐαυτοῖς κρίμα²⁰ λήμψονται (bring judgment on themselves). Here, there are divergent views on the agent of the punishment, being either God or human authorities.²¹ The agent of punishment can be both divine (because the rebellion is ultimately against God) and human since God has established human institutions to serve his purposes.

Rulers are God's Servants who Reward Good Works and Repress Evil (Verses 3–4)

Verse 3: οἱ γὰρ ἄρχοντες οὐκ εἰσὶν φόβος τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἔργῳ ἀλλὰ τῷ κακῷ. θέλεις δὲ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν; τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποίει, καὶ ἕξεις ἔπαινον ἐξ αὐτῆς· **4** θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν. ἐὰν δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῇς, φοβοῦ· οὐ γὰρ εἰκὴ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ· θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν, ἑκδικὸς εἰς ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι.

Translation: *For the rulers are not a terror for good work, but for evil. Now, do you desire not to be afraid of authority? Keep on doing good, and you will be praised from the same. 4 For he is God's servant to you for good. However, if you keep on doing evil, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is a servant of God, an executor of wrath to the one who practices evil.*

In verse 3, the conjunction γὰρ (for) introduces another reason for submission. The rulers are customarily not to dread those doing good, but those who do wrong or evil. Paul's view here is similar to Peter's in 1 Peter 2:14, urging Christians to submit themselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men because they are sent by God "... to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

Those appointed into positions of power οἱ ἄρχοντες (the rulers) are not there in vain. Moo observes that Paul uses the noun ἄρχων only three other times in Pauline corpus, once in the singular (Eph 2:2: 'the ruler of the authority of the air'= Satan) and twice in the plural (1 Cor

²⁰ See Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1994), 888. The Greek word κρίμα means "a sentence of punishment or condemnation, implying also the punishment itself as a certain consequence."

²¹ Wuest, Kenneth S. *Wuest's Word Studies*. (Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), 224. Wuest cites in agreement Alford's view, "this judgment is in the form of punishment from God, through His minister, the civil power. Denney maintains that this judgment is a divine one, by noting that though most commentators regard it as coming through the human authority resisted but it's not clear for defiance against authority that does not even involve any human judgment will according to Paul ensure judgment from God. There is truth in both positions. Certainly, the human authority would punish violators of the law, and since disobedience to human law on the part of the Christian is disobedience to God, because God has obligated the Christian to obey it, God would also deal with the Christian."

2:6 and 8: ‘the rulers of this age’). Many scholars have taken the Corinthian occurrences as references to spiritual beings, but a reference to human rulers and leaders is probable, like in this verse.²²

Paul is describing the ideal situation using the Greek gnomic present εἶσιν. He restates God’s intentions for human authority. Leaders appointed by God ought to act justly and not be a terror to good conduct but to bad behavior. Therefore, having a rebellious disposition (a settled attitude of rebellion) against an institution that God established is sinful and deserving punishment. But what about situations when authorities respond with “terror” to good works? Paul doesn’t seem to address that question in this pericope. James Dunn notes that Paul is restating what is known by his readers but applies it to the Roman imperial authorities,

Paul does not idealize the situation he is addressing. He does not pretend the authorities of whom he speaks are models of the good ruler. His advice does not particularly arise out of his own experience of the Roman protection and the *pax Romana*. He and his Jewish readers in Rome knew well enough the arbitrary power of Rome. The tradition of Jewish wisdom on which he draws had already been well tested by the fires of persecution. Paul would have no illusions that a quiet subservience would be sufficient to guarantee peace. But his advice is not conditional on Roman benevolence. It is simply a restatement of the long-established Jewish recognition of the reality and character of political power.²³

Supporting the discussion in verses 1 and 2 on authority being from God, the function of government as promoting good and punishing evil is consistent with the nature of God who punishes evil and rewards good (Rom 2:6–10). He further admonishes believers τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποίει, καὶ ἔξεις ἔπαινον ἐξ αὐτῆς (*keep doing good, and you will be praised*).

In verse 4, referring to rulers, Paul writes, θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν (*for he is God’s servant to you for good*). As God’s servants,²⁴ rulers ought to serve their ultimate Lord, the Lord of Lords. Rulers have been appointed as servants for the good of those under them, σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν.²⁵ On this phrase, Leon Morris makes the following observation,

This “good” can be understood in more ways than one. Some hold it to mean the good of the individual, his prosperity. Or, being in mind 8:28 where God works everything for good, it is possible to see the words as meaning what the ruler does will in the end promote God’s purpose for the blessing of his people, that is,

²² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1996, 800.

²³ James D. G. Dunn et al., *Romans 9 - 16*, Word Biblical Commentary, [General ed.: David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin]; Vol. 38, B (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1988), 773.

²⁴ See comment on διάκονός in verse 6.

²⁵ Taking this phrase as an adverbial accusative of termination with focus on purpose.

their salvation. Another possibility is that the ruler is to bring about conditions for a tranquil and quiet life in which God's people can serve him effectively (cf. 1 Tim 2:2). Or again, the good may be the good that subjects do; authority may be exercised not so much in interest of the people as that the person may be led to do the good.²⁶

The “good” that these servants of God bring is the general welfare of the subjects. The “good” comes when rulers serve as God's servants, restraining evil and promoting good, thereby creating an environment where everyone goes about their activities peacefully. In such an environment, believers who always do good have no reason to be afraid.

However, those who do evil should reckon that rulers were not given τὴν μάχαιραν (the sword) as an instrument of power in vain. As God's servants, a ruler is obliged to be ἐκδικος εἰς ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι (*an executor of wrath to the one who practices evil*). Those in authority ought to rule as God's servants fulfilling their functions. Even when they do not live up to their divine identity, God can still use them in bringing order to society. Some scholars, using biblical grounds, have interpreted the use of the noun τὴν μάχαιρα (the sword) to refer to the whole issue of the death penalty.²⁷ The noun also appears in 8:35–36, referring to martyrdom or persecution by killing. The Roman *ius gladii* (right of the sword) referred to “the right of provincial governors to condemn to death a Roman citizen serving in the armed forces under their command, and so, as an allusion, was hardly likely to be relevant to those whom Paul addressed.”²⁸ Paul's words can be better construed as a loose reference to the general life-and-death power of the Roman imperium.”²⁹

²⁶ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1994, 463.

²⁷ “The sword was borne before them, in public processions, as a symbol of their right to punish by death. This is in accordance with God's covenant with Noah, after the Flood, which covenant remains in force: ‘Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.’ Those who decry ‘capital punishment,’ are themselves withstanding the Word of God as to the very foundation of human government” (Newell, William R. *Romans Verse-by-Verse*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1952).

²⁸ Barraclough, Ray. “Romans 13:1-7: Application in Context.” *Colloquium* 17, No. 2 (May 1985), 20. “The word is set within a rhetorical passage and refers either to armed conflict, execution, or violent death. Because the phrase ‘the sword’ is now for us symbolic of the armed might of the state, we blur the particular sense that reference to the use of the sword denoted in Paul's time. The term ‘power of the sword’ was ‘at this time a severely restricted term referring to the power of provincial governors to execute, without being hampered by the laws of *provocation*, soldiers in their command who were Roman citizens: it was not used to refer to full imperial power until the third century. The prime source of Paul's concept was probably the Old Testament. There ‘the sword’ is most often referred to in regard to a war situation. What is envisaged in 13:4 in the reference to ‘the sword’ is the armed might of Rome on a war basis, not the administrative judicial machinery of the empire. ‘Rome, like Assyria and Babylon, carries the sword of war as part of God's judging activity... the kind of disobedience that is contemplated is not every form of law-breaking, but that kind that could be expected to result in Rome bearing the sword of war.’”

²⁹ Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 206.

Lloyd-Jones highlights the relationship between the sword, justice and delegated power,

It has been the custom from time immemorial to make a sword the symbol of authority of magistrates. It seems that it was the custom of Roman emperors, when they appointed a provincial governor, to give him a dagger as he started upon his function. There is a story that on one occasion the emperor Trajan gave a dagger to a man whom he had appointed as a governor of a part of his great territory. And as he gave it, he said, “For me; if I deserve it, in me,” in this way demonstrating the great principle of justice... This sword represents the authority and power given by God to such people, even to the extent, if necessary, of taking life as punishment for misdeeds.³⁰

Primarily, Paul warns his audience that if they resist the authority, they may find themselves being punished, even by death, since the rulers have the power to do so. The power of the sword in this context was only a reserve of the Roman authorities. We see this in the Gospels, where the chief priests and leaders of the people had to ask permission from Pilate to execute Jesus.³¹

The Basis of Submission and Payment of Taxes (Verses 5–7)

Verse 5: διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν. 6 διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε, λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες. 7 ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς, τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον, τῷ τὸ τέλος τὸ τέλος, τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον, τῷ τὴν τιμὴν τὴν τιμὴν.³²

Translation: 5. *Therefore, it is necessary to submit, not only on account of the wrath, but also on account of conscience. 6. For because of this also you pay taxes; for they are servants of God, continually attending to this very thing. 7. Render to all their dues: tax to whom you owe tax, revenue to whom you owe revenue, respect to whom you owe respect, honor to whom you owe honor.*

The conjunction διὸ (therefore) presents the implications of the preceding verses. Christian submission to authorities ought to be motivated not by fear of punishment but by conscience. This kind of obedience stems from the understanding that God institutes governing authorities,

³⁰ Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn. *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 13: Life in Two Kingdoms*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 26.

³¹ See Matthew 27:1–2,26 “Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor... Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”

³² Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament: a Reader's Edition*, 2017.

...If it (government authority) is instituted by God, and *diakonos* of God, then it is subject to God and may not claim for itself the honor that is God's alone. Hence Paul's advocacy of submission for the sake of conscience did not imply blind submission to any rule, however tyrannous or unjust.³³

This kind of submission should not be hypocritical nor involuntary. Instead, it should emanate from a proper theology that the governing authorities are of and from God. It is God's will for believers to submit to rules instituted by God. This message is also reflected in Ephesians 6:5–6, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart."

Osborne quotes Brown's commentary on the verse, "conscience has primarily a negative function, referring to the pain we feel when we transgress the moral law, but at the same time it 'includes the power of discernment and rational reflection which enables the mind to analyze situations and actions, to discern moral issues and principles, the capacity to hear and apply the Word of God to our lives.'" ³⁴ Osborne adds, "The negative force is primarily true here for unbelievers, while for Christians, it functions positively, telling what God wants us to do."³⁵

Interestingly, Paul uses the word τὴν συνείδησιν (conscience) as one of the reasons to submit to the 'secular' authorities. Christians who resist the government or any other natural order of things that do not seem, to them, directly "spiritual" or religious are in most cases inclined to excuse it on their Christian conscience. Here Paul uses the same conscience to justify submission to government authorities. The noun συνείδησις (conscience) in 2:15 and 9:1 depicts moral consciousness. Therefore, our conscience, or moral consciousness, must be rightly informed by the Word of God as guided by the Holy Spirit.

In verses 6, διὰ τοῦτο (because of this) builds from the preceding discussion that submission should not just be out of fear but out of conscience. According to this verse, Christians pay taxes because those in power are God's servants. God appoints them as servants. It is noteworthy that the Greek noun used in verse 6 for 'servant' is different from the one in verse 4. In verse 6, the noun is λειτουργοὶ (that is plural, from λειτουργός), whereas in verse 4 διάκονός is used. The noun λειτουργοὶ in 15:16 refers to Paul as a minister of the gospel to the

³³ Bryan, Christopher. A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 206.

³⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 6 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 346.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

Gentiles. In Hebrews 1:14, the word refers to angels as ministering spirits, while in Hebrews 10:11, it refers to the Old Testament priests ministering through the offering of sacrifices for sin. Here, Paul reveals that state authorities, like religious leaders, are servants of God rendering a divine service. Just as priests are primarily concerned with spiritual matters, the civil authorities are God's servants in physical or external affairs. For this reason, believers pay taxes to facilitate the service of God through his servants in this domain.

Paying taxes here is just one example of the aspects of submission. Dunn alleges that Paul confronts a situation characterized by unrest regarding increased tax rates and might have feared that believers could think of revolting.³⁶ Further, McDonald argues,

There was a campaign in Rome against the tax system. The Christians were endeavoring to establish themselves in Rome during this period. Paul insisted on payment of taxes in full in order to demonstrate that Christians were responsible subjects within a political system which was alien to them, but which nevertheless performed certain necessary and proper functions.³⁷

This context is not clear from the text yet cannot be summarily dismissed. The main point conveyed is that Christians should submit and pay taxes out of a clear conscience and recognition that governing authorities are God's servants devoted to governance. Therefore, in verse 7, believers were required to give to what was due to them. Since the discussion was on state authorities, it is most likely that the *πᾶσιν* (to all) here is referring to the Roman governing authorities and not introducing other parties or opening it up to other relations.

Newell observes that *φóρον* (tribute) is a tax paid by subjects to a ruling nation (Luke 20:22); while *τέλος* (custom) is a tax paid by subjects or duty on goods.³⁸ The imperatives, *τελεῖτε* (pay) (v. 6) and *ἀπόδοτε* (render) (v. 7), speak of an obligation rather than free-will giving. Taxes, custom duty, honor, and the kind were not given at will but rather mandatory.

The noun *φóβον* (fear), in verse 7, has also been a subject of debate among scholars. The question of concern has been if Paul was asking believers to fear the government authorities. Some scholars say that this fear was referring to God, as in Luke 20:25 that reads, "Then give to

³⁶ "It is a striking fact that the discussion builds up to its climax on the subject of paying taxes. This is unlikely to be accidental... nowhere else does Paul include such instruction in any of his letters, and there must have been some reason for his doing so here. Those listening to his letter read out in Rome itself would know well enough what that reason was—the abuses, particularly of indirect taxation, which were causing increasing unrest in the capital at that very time" (Dunn 1988: 772).

³⁷ James I. H. McDonald, "Romans 13:1-7 and Christian Social Ethics Today," *Modern Churchman*. Vol. 29, No. 2 (1987): 24.

³⁸ William R Newell, *Romans Verse-by-Verse* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1952), 341.

Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Some argue that the tax, custom, and honor are for the government authorities, but the fear is for God. Other scholars avoid the problem by translating φόβον as respect so that all is directed to the authorities without much theological problem. Emphatically, Paul cannot be telling believers to fear the authorities in the negative sense since he has already instructed that one who does what is right has nothing to fear regarding the authorities. It will also not be consistent scripturally for believers to fear men. However, even if it were directed to God, Paul would not have instructed believers to fear God in the negative sense of the word. Here, Paul was referring to fear in a positive sense to mean respect, as seen in other Bible passages. (Eph 6:5; 1 Pet 2:18).

Summary Findings of the Study

First, the study has shown that every person should submit to government authorities because God instituted them. He has also appointed servants to serve in different capacities under these established authorities. The appointed rulers have the divine mandate and calling to serve God and the people they lead. This imperative does not in any way rule out the possibility of having despotic leaders ascending to high levels of power. Human beings have free will,³⁹ and in a democratic system of government, the people can choose a leader(s) who are not God-ordained. Also, some individual leaders can manipulate their way into power with ulterior motives. However, even in such cases, God's purposes remain unthwarted. God remains omniscient and omnipotent, and everything ultimately serves his purpose. Some scholars like John Stott⁴⁰ and remarks in the famous Kairos Document (1985)⁴¹ point out that political leaders sometimes wrongly interpret and apply Bible texts like Romans 13:1–7 to coarse submission even when they are propagating evil.

Second, those who rebel against governing authorities simultaneously rebel against God's doing and thus bringing judgment upon themselves. Therefore, Christians should exercise caution not to have a "default rebellious disposition" towards authorities. Instead, they should obey authorities as long as they are not forced to contradict the revealed will of God. Third, the purpose of governing authorities and rulers is to promote good and punish evil. For this purpose,

³⁹ See Genesis 2:16-17; Deuteronomy 30:19-20

⁴⁰ John R. W Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 341.

⁴¹ Tarcisius Mukuka, "Reading/Hearing Romans 13:1-7 Under an African Tree: Towards a Lectio Postcolonica Contexta Africana," *Neotestamentica* 46, No. 1 (2012): 28.

rulers have been entrusted the sword to execute this task for the good of society. In this respect, rulers are servants of God, just as clergy, working in different domains but ultimately accountable to God.

Fourth, the Christian has a responsibility to support the government and rulers. The specific examples given in the text include paying taxes and revenues, honoring and respecting the authorities (13:7). 1 Timothy 2:1–2 admonishes believers to pray for those in authority, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Conclusion

Romans 13:1–7 spells out Christian duties to governing authorities and rulers as submission, payment of taxes, revenues, and due honor. The pericope presents four motivations for Christians in exercising these duties. First, God has established the existing governing authorities. Any habitual rebellion against authority equals opposing God’s doing and attracts God’s judgment. Therefore, Christians ought to be obedient to authorities except when they are coerced to act contrary to God’s revealed will. Second, Christians should always be motivated to do good to be free from fear of the one in authority. Leaders in power have the sword as an instrument of power to execute justice- to punish evil and promote good. Third, Christians should perform their biblical obligations to rulers and authorities as a matter of conscience. They should do it with the proper understanding that they are doing the right thing as God sanctions. Fourth, Christians should understand that those in authority are God’s servants who give their full time governing. Thus, in summary, governing authorities are not inherently evil; they do not exist to hinder God’s work; instead, they ideally exist to promote justice. It is worth noting that Romans 13:1–7 does not conclusively cover the whole idea of the Christian relationship with the state. For example, as stated earlier, the passage does not explicitly address a situation where the government acts contrary to God’s will. In such scenarios, some other biblical references can be consulted for an authoritative and balanced approach.

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