

Slaying the Dragon



**Resistance to Tyranny is
Obedience to God**

Steve Forkin, M. Apol.

Slaying the Dragon

Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God

Steve Forkin

c 2023. Steve Forkin. All rights reserved.

contact: info@1cor15.net

Example Chapters Free

In this version I have included a few sample chapters to whet your appetite.

Feel free to reach out to me, if you are unable to afford the book and yet really keen to read it all.

Steve Forkin

Introduction

Please Don't Skip this Section

The Covid Pandemic years, quite like no other period in my life taught me how fragile governments are. As a Christian, I believe in the foundational, orthodox Christian doctrines. Christian anthropology starts with the fact that all humans since Adam are born with a sinful nature.

My mother was of Jewish descent and growing up in Germany in the 1970s and 80s I was steeped in the dark aspects of the German totalitarianism called the 3rd Reich. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to visit a concentration camp — I visited Dachau near Munich, Bavaria — and saw all the awful consequences of Germany allowing the rise of tyranny during the Weimar Republic and the resulting reign of terror under Hitler and the Nazis.



How could it happen?

It was not until I became confronted with the Christian gospel that the “why and how” questions began to make more sense. All humans have the capacity to do evil. Ultimately it is God's law and the working of His Holy Spirit that restrains man from evil acts. I don't think it is a stretch to say that all our ideas of “The Rule of Law” find their beginnings in the moral and ethical code of the Old Testament.

The moral law of the Old Testament is most simply stated in the ten commandments in the book of Exodus chapter 20. The first four of these are concerned with our relationship with God and the final six are concerned with our behaviour towards our fellow man.

John Adams, one of the framers of the US constitution recognised this: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." ^[1]

If we consider the remaining six laws of the Ten Commandments as a basis for what is commonly known as “The Rule of Law” today, then we should have a clear picture in our minds as to what it means to say, laws must have a moral basis.

The Covid Pandemic period demonstrated one thing to me with great clarity. We as societies want the government to fix our problems and we are happy to abandon any idea that the government has to have accountability to a moral code, in return.

In our postmodern world, morals are in such a state of flux that one cannot speak of morals as being the guard rails of society. As western societies, it feels like we are driving down a

highway at breakneck speed, with no guard rails at all. We are at the whim of the person who happens to be in the driving seat today. We have no say in what this driver might do or what powers he or she might amass given the arbitrariness of reasons used to amass them.



Most people appear to be completely oblivious to the speed of change. Most welcome the changes and happily surrender their freedoms. They would prefer the government to be responsible, rather than themselves.

Austrian-born, Friedrich August von Hayek, left Austria for the UK during the rise of Nazi Germany and the subsequent “Austrian Anschluss (annexation)”. Hayek was deeply concerned with the prevailing views about Nazism in the UK. There, fascism was viewed as a capitalist reaction to socialism. Hayek could see clearly that fascism was socialism with a different “veneer”.

In his groundbreaking work “The Road to Serfdom” Hayek lays out the reasons why collectivist forms of government inevitably lead to totalitarian forms of government, and we are failing to recognise this, today, at our peril.



"By giving the government unlimited powers, the most arbitrary rule can be made legal; and in this way democracy may set up the most complete despotism imaginable" ^[2]

We appear to be at a similar crossroads today. Few people really understand what the term “The Rule of Law” means and this lack appears to pervade the Christian community as well.

We would do well to heed his warnings during the rise of tyranny in central Europe:

"Man is free if he needs to obey no person but solely the laws [The Rule of Law]. As a vague idea it has, however, existed at least since the Roman times, and during the last few centuries it has never been so seriously threatened as it is today. The idea that there is no limit to the powers of the legislator is in part a result of popular sovereignty and democratic government. It has been strengthened by the belief that, so long as all actions of the state are duly authorised by legislation, the Rule of Law will be preserved." (F.A. Hayek) ^[3]



We fail to understand what the “Rule of Law” means at our peril.

The Nazis came to power by using the German constitution and legal system. In essence, German parliamentary democracy gave rise to the tyranny of Nazism by allowing the boundary of “moral authority” to be blurred by “legal authority”. The frightening developments in our day have all the same hallmarks.

"But this is completely to misconceive the meaning of the Rule of Law. This rule has little to

do with the question whether all actions of government are legal in the juridical sense. They may well be and yet not conform with the Rule of Law. The fact that someone has full legal authority to act in the way he does gives no answer to the question whether the law gives him power to act arbitrarily or whether the law prescribes unequivocally how he has to act. It may well be that Hitler has obtained his unlimited powers in a strictly constitutional manner that whatever he does is therefore legal in the juridical sense. But who would suggest for that reason that the Rule of Law still prevails in Germany?" ^[4]



Planned societies must inevitably make arbitrary rules legal. They are like a ticking time bomb!

"To say that in a planned society the Rule of Law cannot hold is, therefore, not to say that the actions of the government will not be legal or that such a society will necessarily be lawless. It means only that the use of the government's coercive powers will no longer be limited and determined by pre-established rules. The law can, and to make a central direction of economic activity possible must, legalise what to all intents and purposes remains arbitrary action. If the law says that such a board or authority may do what it pleases, anything that board or authority does is legal — but its actions are certainly not subject to the Rule of Law. By giving the government unlimited powers, the most arbitrary rule can be made legal; and in this way democracy may set up the most complete despotism imaginable." ^[5]



It is my contention, that Paul — the author of “Romans” — understood the difference between moral and legal authority. Our attitude towards governing authorities must be rooted in this understanding.

As we survey the biblical and church history data, this understanding will come into sharp focus.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Slaying the Dragon	1
Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God	1
Example Chapters Free	2
Introduction	3
Please Don't Skip this Section	3
Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God	8
How Does that comport with Romans 13?	8
Introduction	9
Let's Define Our Terms	18
Can we rule some things out?	18
Early Church Father Polycarp	20
The Martyrdom of Polycarp	20
So, what then was Polycarp's View on Government?	21
Romans 13:1-5	23
Who is the Audience?	23
Is this Passage Just another Late Addition by Another Author?	24
The Use of the Word Wrath in Chapters 12 & 13 appears Contradictory	25
Did Paul only include this Section due to Political Issues in Rome?	25
Does the Dating of the Letter Cause Interpretative Issues?	26
Does the Passage Command the Believer to Submit in an Absolute Sense?	26

- [1] John Adams on Religion and the Constitution, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/quote/john-adams-religion-constitution>, (January 10, 2023)
- [2] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, The Definitive Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 119
- [3] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, The Definitive Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 118
- [4] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, The Definitive Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p.119
- [5] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, The Definitive Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p.119

Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God

How Does that comport with Romans 13?



God is the only one who has absolute authority.

In the West, we live in a time of ever-growing government control and power. Both sides of the political spectrum appear bent on the belief that a government solution is never far away, whatever problem appears in society. Christians are faced with the impact of ever more incursions into the church's sphere of influence by ever-increasing numbers of edicts, however well-meant they might be. Increasingly these edicts touch on matters of the central message of Christianity, the gospel.

As believers, we need a response that both affirms the gospel and encourages us and our fellow man to follow after a life of peace. The central passage in the New Testament on how we as Christians should live out our gospel witness concerning what we commonly call *the government* is in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 13. ^[1]

Christians debate intensely over the application of the passage and its implications. This passage speaks to the life of the church and each individual. It is crucial to understand the message of this chapter and how one might respond.

The Christian church has been going for over 2000 years and it would seem foolish to ignore how our forbears of the faith have handled their interaction with the government of the day. It should not come as a surprise that there have been times of intense persecution. It will help us form a holistic view and proper God-honouring approach to this issue.

I will take a hard look at several crucial moments in church history and then walk through the first five verses of Romans 13.^[2] The aim is to establish the kind of authority governments have over the life of the Christian, how we should respond, and whether there are times when our response should include some form of disobedience or even resistance.

[1] All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted, Crossway, Copyright c 2001

[2] ESV

Introduction

“The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he breaks, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt.” (John Philpot Curran) ^[1]

Some Christians seem almost driven by a need to use some form of government coercion to impose good values and ideals upon all citizens. Progressives look upon the idea that the church used the force of war to spread Christianity in the Dark Ages with disdain. Conservatives on the other end of the spectrum seem to have a blind devotion to leaders who will advance their Christian ideals by force.

“We have no problem with the notion that a majority should be able to use the coercive power of the state to impose its preferences on the minority. We have no problem with advancing Christian ethics by force. We have no problem with tolerating a certain level of corruption, violence and deceit as we partner with the state to advance the common good just so long as it’s at the hands of men and women we endorse.” ^[2]

Both sides happily use the Bible as their *political proof text*, the problem is that in truth the Bible does not appear to support either of these notions.

One thing everyone readily acknowledges. History is replete with periods of tyranny. There are valuable lessons to be learned from church history that will also help us understand this text in Romans better. The last few decades have seen a stark rise in government power. With this growth in power, governments have tended to overreach their traditionally held boundaries. The overreach becomes painfully obvious when one compares comments from the Reformation period on the role of government. This first comment demonstrates what, people tended to think, the role of government was in the 16th century:

“That the public quiet be not disturbed, that every man’s property be kept secure, that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other, that honesty and modesty be cultivated; in short that a public form of religion may exist among Christians, and humanity among men.” (John Calvin)^[3]

Compare that with the failed attempt to count the number of existing federal laws in the USA today:

“The criminal code, which by the 1980s was scattered among 50 titles and 23,000 pages of federal law.” ^[4]

This quote by a staffer at the US Department of Justice, characterized this fruitless project perfectly: “You will have died and been resurrected three times, and still not have an answer

to this question.” [5]

Comparing this to the words of Jesus, when he was brought before a government tribunal of his day, one cannot help but note the stark contrast: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36)^[6]

In her rather interesting book on *Liberalism*, or what people used to think that term meant and what the term has been morphed into today, Deirdre Nansen McCloskey summarised the problems we face with government today, brilliantly: “Anywhere along the spectrum [right-left] the Government exercises compulsion backed by police. Nowadays such policies penetrate unusually deeply into people’s lives. To be governed under such a regime is to be ruled, bossed, taxed, drafted, redistributed, questioned, roused, coerced, beaten, watched, overseen, inspected, judged, nudged, prohibited, licensed, regulated, expropriated, propagandized, pushed, gassed, tasered, shot, jailed and executed. Yes, occasionally benefited, too. But at whose cost in compulsion and corruption?” [7]

All this naturally raises the question, what did Paul have in mind when he wrote his letter to the Roman church and used the term *governing authorities*? Is that a term we can switch out for *government* i.e. the *big statist forms of government* of most western nations today?

Given that government views have changed dramatically since the Reformation period, the views of government in the early church period were likely also vastly different from ours today. As we attempt to rightly interpret the Christian view — how one should correctly respond to civil governance — held by the New Testament authors, we must review the meaning and interpretation of words at their time. That also includes taking a look at the nature of governmental systems during their lifetime.

All this goes to demonstrate the profound changes that have occurred in the expansion of what is commonly known as government and Christian views of its rightful place and role in society. One thing is certain, Jesus and the early church viewed government very differently to us who live in the 21st century. Whilst it is true that the term *governing authority* is representative of what we call *the government*, that representation is not to be seen as a logical equal.

All protestants generally agree that humans have a sin problem. As a reformed believer I hold to the doctrine of "original sin" and also to the doctrine known in reformed theology as "total depravity". Total depravity simply states that sin has invaded all of man’s properties and that not only is he born in sin — born with the nature or pre-disposition to sin — but he is also dead in his sin. "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world." (Ephesians 2:1-2a) [8]

Now you may or may not be reformed in your theology — this book is a review of Romans 13 which applies to all Christians — but you likely agree that all humans have a sin problem.



It is obvious that this sin problem exists within all forms of modern government; since governments consist of humans who sin.

My aim with this book is to address how Christians should respond to civil governance. In other words, what should the Christian view of civil governance encompass?

Western nations have become increasingly hostile to traditional ideas and Christian beliefs in general in the last few decades. Churches and Christian apologetics ministries involved with cultural and legal issues have had to respond. As believers, we cannot be silent and relegate our responsibility to the church. We must first know how to respond, and secondly know how to behave.

As Christians, we generally rely on a specific set of biblical passages that speak of government and the Christian response. Our response is naturally determined by how we interpret these passages. The central passage, drawn on by all sides of this argument, is in Paul's letter to the Roman church, chapter thirteen.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Romans 13:1-5)

[9]

We will get into the meat of this passage soon enough. Here, I just want to highlight that it deals with civil governance concerning wrongdoers. The passage gives us no description of what kind of civil governance Paul had in mind other than that it wields the sword of punishment. The passage equally gives us no description of the wrongdoer other than good and bad conduct. It's remarkable how many Christians readily use this passage in support of their government of choice, whether that is a left-leaning social form of state or a right-leaning conservative form of state. There simply is no state in this passage and most certainly not the kind of states most western Christians live under, the kind with a "monopoly on coercion".

Most Christians today have some form of understanding that we are not under the "Mosaic Covenant" as per the author of Hebrews in the New Testament. Chapter 8 lays this out in detail and lands on this phrase: "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) ^[10] Some interpret this as follows. The Old Testament has no bearing on the New Testament believer, not even the 10 commandments have any moral capacity to bind the believer's conscience. The problem with this view is that every one of the 10 commandments apart from the observation of the Sabbath is repeated in the epistles of the New Testament.

The correct approach appears much more likely to be the application of the ceremonial law encapsulated within the Mosaic law. Much of the New Testament speaks of Christ being the one who has fulfilled the law. Most Christians at least recognise the eternal character of the moral law and ethics within the mosaic covenant. For our review of Romans 13 and the desire to understand what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the "wrongdoer" it is helpful to go back to the beginning of scripture.

Historically much of our thinking has been influenced by the concept called *the divine right of kings* i.e. his right to rule was implicit and objective. We the citizen had no recourse and it should not be too surprising that this did not bode well for kings or subjects in the long run. Much of mainland Europe went through violent uprisings as citizens sought to throw off the shackles of the imposition and demand of unquestioned obedience. Many Christians who sought to avoid the trap of violent revolution nonetheless realized the futility of the notion of *divine right of kings*, and searched the scriptures to see, what a true and right Christian response should be.

"The political authority of kings was believed to be granted by God, and the duties of citizens toward their king were imposed by God. Neither the conduct of kings nor the behaviour of individual citizens played any part in the generation of political bonds or authority. It was in reaction to this view, and the passive and unconditional obedience by the citizen which it commanded, that consent theory and the corresponding doctrine of political authority arose, amid the unrest and rebellion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." ^[11]

19th Century Reformed and well-respected theologian Charles Hodge argued against the civil establishment of the church — a marriage of church and state as it was in the United Kingdom. He warned against the idea that the government exists in and of itself and not as an establishment for the flourishing of those who are ruled. In his commentary on the Book of Romans he said: "The design of civil government is not to promote the advantage of rulers, but of the ruled. They are ordained and invested with authority, to be a terror to evildoers, and a praise to them that do well. They are the ministers of God for this very end... On this ground our obligation to obedience rests, and the obligation ceases when this design is systematically, constantly and notoriously disregarded." ^[12]

He further argued that the proper role and function of the church and civil government must be derived from scripture. In determining these roles one cannot argue from the Mosaic Law since that has been abolished in a covenantal sense, instead, we must argue from the New Testament ^[13]

Hodge argued that: "(a) That Christ did institute a church separate from the state, giving it separate laws and officers. (b) That he laid down the qualifications of those officers and enjoined on the church, not on the state, to judge of their possession by candidates. (c) That he prescribed the terms of admission to and the grounds of exclusion from the church, and left with the church its officers to administer these rules." ^[14]

He further said that: "The only means which the state can employ to accomplish many of the objects said to belong to it, viz. pains and penalties, are inconsistent with the example and commands of Christ; with the rights of private Christians, guaranteed in the Word of God (i.e., to serve God according to the dictates of his conscience); are ineffectual to the true end of religion, which is voluntary obedience to the truth; and productive of incalculable evil." ^[15]

Effectively the tasks and roles specifically assigned to the church in the New Testament cannot and are not to be carried out by the state, nor does the New Testament endorse much of the coercive behaviour of the modern state. How then can we find out what Paul had in mind when he assigned the role of punishing the evildoer to the civil magistrate? Going back to the beginning of scripture we find a helpful passage in Genesis 9 that tells us about what is commonly understood as "Lex Talionis", or the law of retribution. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." (Genesis 9:6) ^[16]

Now you might be thinking that this idea of retaliation only applies to the taking of human life, i.e. murder. In Genesis 14:1-16 we see Lot — Abraham's brother — taken captive with his entire household. The passage ends with Abraham retaliating against the aggressors and restoring Lot and his family. It is of particular importance to our quest to note that the passage explicitly tells us that Lot's possessions were taken and that Abraham restored them in the course of this battle with the aggressors.

The "non-aggression principle" — the initiation of force against another person or their property — is easily seen in this passage in Genesis and its outworking in the stories of Abraham and Lot. Given that this was stated long before the Mosaic Law was given and is never revoked it can be viewed as an eternal principle of justice and therefore appears readily the ground for Paul's use of the term "wrongdoer" and the civil magistrate's duty to punish him or her. Given the fall of man into sin, it is not hard to recognise that some form of civil government is necessary to deal with the kind of sin where one human being physically

harms another — whether in person or property.

Reformed and Libertarian author Gregory Baus summarised Paul's comments in support of the use coercion against the wrongdoer by the civil magistrate as follows: "Given the explicit institution of civil government in Genesis 9 by way of affirming the principle of proportionality in retributive justice, we must infer that the authorization of responsive coercion repeated in Romans 13 is restricted to the wrongdoing of prior initiation of coercion (aggressions) against persons and property. In other words, proportionality entails not only to what degree/extent coercion is used, but whether it is used at all. And to use coercion against non-aggressive immorality is disproportionate and violates the sword power authorized by God for civil government."

It's important to recognise that the proportionality principle applies to all humans and therefore includes the civil magistrate as much as it does to the wrongdoer. The use of the "sword" in Paul's words implies that coercion is used and by necessity, therefore, means it is in retaliation. We can therefore safely deduct from the use of Paul's language that he has crimes of civil nature in mind, where the retributive principle applies.

To give a somewhat contrived example. If the state demands that you sleep on a mattress that has fireproof chemicals in it, and you decide for the sake of your own health that you would come to harm by said chemicals. The state would be outside of its bounds in terms of Romans 13, to attempt to punish you as a "wrongdoer" given that you did not harm another human or their property in deciding to sleep on a mattress without those harmful chemicals.



The role of the civil magistrate in punishing the wrongdoer is therefore limited to crimes of the kind where one human being initiates physical force against another.

To put this in another way. It is itself a violation of these biblical principles when the civil government — regardless of what shape it takes — itself violates the principle of retaliation or non-aggression. Coercion can therefore not legitimately be used against non-coercive wrongdoing. Take a moment to let that sink in and then consider just how much of the behaviour of the modern state is in actual violation of these biblical principles.

This is a standard Christian Reformed and Protestant position as can be seen in section 23 of the "Westminster Confession of Faith (with the American Revision of 1788)" as it states: "It is the duty of the civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either in pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever."

^[17] See also chapter 20, section 4 which deals with the "lawful exercise of power," and note that lawful does not mean "legal" in the sense of the laws on the statute books of modern

western states, but rather lawful in the Biblical sense. The civil magistrate has "lawful" powers and when the magistrate wields the sword outside of these lawful powers the Christian is not obligated to obey.

It is also noteworthy that the church is under obligation to correctly teach its members what these lawful powers are. Essentially the church is failing in its calling if it fails to teach Christians what the rightful exercise of civil governance entails and more specifically when the true Christian is under obligation or duty to disobey or resist the wrongful exercise of power by the civil magistrate.

We can further see with some clarity that the role of the civil magistrate is also distinct from the roles the New Testament assigns solely to the church, neither does the New Testament endorse any kind of enjoining of the two.



Nonetheless, "lex talionis" or "the non-aggression principle" is entirely incompatible with the notion of a monopolistic state, how so? I hear you ask.

Civil governance is the administration of justice — or to use the terms Paul uses civil governance is the use of the sword to punish an evildoer — someone who has deserved to be retaliated against due to his or her initiating physical force against the person or property of another human being. The state is a territorial monopoly on coercive power that has no third party one can appeal to in the case of the state being wrong. The state is therefore by its very nature monopoly that exists solely for the purpose of retaining its monopolised power or what is commonly known by the phrase "the status quo."

Any single human being who is "above the law" or who cannot be charged with injustice by appealing to a third party is inherently unjust, we would readily call such a human being a dictator. The problem with the monopolised state however is just this - it is its own arbiter.



Who watches the watchman?

"Nemo judex in sua causa" (Latin) which literally means no one can be the judge of his own cause. It is a principle of natural justice and one does not have to study law to grasp the self-evidence of the statement. John Locke arguably a leading political philosopher says three things are needed to have civil governance:

1. Impartial Judges
2. A generally known and agreed upon body of law
3. Effective law enforcement

Please read the article I have referenced for a more detailed view of what John Locke had in mind with each of these propositions. When one considers the modern monopolistic state and the inability to appeal to an independent adjudicator it becomes apparent that the state fails in the first of John Locke's necessary requirements for the state. In a stateless society with a multiplicity of independent civil magistrates this inherent flaw of the modern monopolistic state is removed. Kerry Baldwin, in the article referenced details that the state also fails in the other two necessary requirements.



The very arguments that we have come to believe in that require a so-called monopolistic state actually refute its requirement. They are in favour of a stateless society.

This may cause you the reader some cognitive dissonance and this is in some respects to be expected since we have grown up in societies that have conditioned us to believe in their inherent necessity. Romans 13 is not making an argument for or against any particular political theory, what it does do is demonstrate what the clear boundaries of Biblical civil governance are and what the Christian response must be.

Now that we have a clearer picture of the high-level overview of the passage we can start to get into the nuts and bolts of the passage.

Remember to enjoy the journey, even if your current ideas are challenged a little.

[1] Glenn S. Sunshine, *Slaying Leviathan, Limited Government and Resistance in the Christian Tradition*, (Moscow, ID: Canon Press), p. 1.

[2] Jeff Wright, *Start with Jesus as King*, November 6, 2017, <https://libertarianchristians.com/2017/11/06/start-with-jesus-as-king/>, (January 17, 2022)

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* - translated by Henry Beveridge (Massachusetts, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), p. 971.

[4] Jeanine Cali, Library of Congress, *How Many Federal Laws Are There?*, March 12, 2013, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2013/03/frequent-reference-question-how-many-federal-laws-are-there/>, (January 17, 2022)

[5] Jeanine Cali, Library of Congress, *How Many Federal Laws Are There?*, March 12, 2013, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2013/03/frequent-reference-question-how-many-federal-laws-are-there/>, (January 17, 2022)

[6] ESV

[7] Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, *Why Liberalism Works - How True Liberal Values Produce a Freer, More Equal, Prosperous World for All* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 13.

[8] ESV

[9] ESV

[10] ESV

[11] A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (New Jersey: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1981), P.58, 59.

[12] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, <https://archive.org/details/commentaryon1873hodg> (February 6, 2023), p.658

[13] Charles Hodge, *The Relation of Church and State*, <https://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=92> (February 6, 2023)

[14] Charles Hodge, *The Relation of Church and State*, <https://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=92> (February 6, 2023)

[15] Charles Hodge, *The Relation of Church and State*, <https://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=92> (February 6, 2023)

[16] ESV

[17] Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 23 - Of the Holy Scripture. Carlisle: PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 2012, p. 106

[18] Kerry Baldwin, Anarchism, Minarchism and the Legitimacy of Civil Governance, <https://mereliberty.com/philosophy/anarchism-minarchism-legitimacy-governance/> (February 6, 2023)

Let's Define Our Terms



Before we dive in, a few definitions are in order.

I will use several terms that can have a range of different meanings. To ensure you as the reader have clarity concerning my use of these terms, I would like to suggest the following working definitions. Should the meaning of any of these terms differ in Bible passages quoted, I will draw your attention to such a change.

Obey: To act according to what one has been asked or ordered to do by someone in authority, or to behave according to, or conform in action to a rule or law, or instruction.

Disobey: To refuse to do something that one is told to do by someone in a position of authority. To refuse to behave according to, or conform to a rule, or law, or instruction.

To submit to or to be subject to: To surrender to or to be in a position or circumstances that place one under the power or authority of another person or persons.

Resist: To take action in opposition to, to fight, thwart reduce or stop an opposing force. This can be of a violent or non-violent nature.

Can we rule some things out?

In line with the definitions just stated, I think it is reasonable that we can rule out some behaviour.

Later, I will review a few periods of Church history to see how Christians have responded to tyrannical government and how this has shaped their theology. Please note, I am not claiming that Christians have always handled difficult circumstances correctly. In this section here, I am suggesting what one should rule out as unacceptable Christian behaviour based on Christian theology that is broadly accepted by most Christian denominations. Some Christians debate the relevance of the Ten Commandments to the New Testament believer. I believe the ten commandments remain applicable today for all believers, not in the sense that believers are made right with God by obeying them, but as a rightful response to God. In this sense, they are universally applicable to all of mankind.

The sixth, eighth and ninth commandments, “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal”, and “You shall not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:13, 15-16) ^[1], each reflects how we should treat our fellow man. The following, I think, is a reasonable deduction from these commandments:



All initiation of force or violence that is not in self-defense is wrong. Therefore, Christians may not initiate force or violence against their government since governments consist of people. Remember we are dealing with, what is easy to *rule out*, before we dig into the subject matter.

After looking at some examples from Church history we will do a detailed walk-through of Romans 13:1-5 ^[2], other supporting Bible passages, and theological commentaries to determine how we as believers should respond to government. If I suggest that a believer may disobey or resist the government, it will be according to the working definitions I just gave, and it will not include any form of, or use of, force or violence. I don't want to be misunderstood here, I am in no way and under no circumstances endorsing any kind of violent behaviour.

Keeping my working definitions in mind, disobedience is passive. In general, resistance can take a violent or non-violent form. Given my strong assertion, that any form of violent resistance to government is un-acceptable, when I refer to the believer's right to resist government tyranny, any such resistance is always non-violent in nature. Examples of non-violent resistance can be writing letters to lawmakers, hosting websites with anti-government information, and attending lawful protests.

[1] ESV

[2] ESV

Early Church Father Polycarp

Church history is replete with examples of faithful believers who resisted tyrants.

Their lives serve as great examples for the church today, and how we should respond to the ever-growing government incursion into the life of the church. In times of peace, we as believers rarely feel the burden of answering this question. Times of persecution have an uncanny way of forcing the church to take a position, sometimes by the sheer opposing force brought to bear on us by the Government of the day. The Early Church, the first, second, and third centuries AD, experienced several periods of brutal persecution.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostle John, was martyred on February 22, 156 CE. ^[1]

Polycarp was an early disciple of one of the disciples of Jesus. He received his teaching straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. His views on church and government are therefore particularly helpful. The writings of the early church fathers called "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" tell us that a noble Germanicus fought with the wild beasts in the Colosseum, that had been sent to tear and kill him.

This enraged the crowds, who: "marveling at the bravery of the God-beloved and God-fearing people of the Christians, raised a cry Away with the atheists; let search be made for Polycarp." ^[2]

Polycarp, encouraged by his fellow believers, fled to the hills outside Rome and was eventually found and brought into the Colosseum. The proconsul attempted to persuade Polycarp to recant his faith. All that Polycarp needed to do was swear allegiance to Caesar's patron saint. Polycarp could have kept his religion and walked out of the Colosseum if only he had been willing to accommodate. Polycarp's response to the proconsul is enlightening to understand his views of the correct relationship between a Christian and government.

Initially, the proconsul pressed Polycarp hard to recant, demanding he say: "Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent and say, 'Away with the atheists.'" ^[3] Polycarp responded: "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" ^[4]

Followers of Christ, in the minds of a pagan Roman, were atheists. "The people in the stadium correctly understood the Christians to be deniers of all their familiar patron spirits and deities." ^[5]

The proconsul then prevailed upon Polycarp to defend his position to the audience in the Colosseum, not just the proconsul. “The proconsul said 'prevail upon the people.' But Polycarp said; 'As for thyself, I should have held thee worthy of discourse; for we have been taught to render, as is meet, to princes and authorities appointed by God such honour as does us no harm; but as for these, I do not hold them worthy, that I should defend myself before them.'” [6]

So, what then was Polycarp’s View on Government?

Several things in Polycarp’s response are noteworthy for understanding his view of government. Firstly, he regarded Christ as king. Declaring the kingship of Christ was treason for a Roman who only regarded Caesar as king or lord. Secondly, Polycarp showed distinct respect for the authority vested in the proconsul. Polycarp did not consider the crowd, full of hatred and bloodthirst, worthy of a response. However, in the view of Polycarp, the proconsul was a princely authority, appointed by God and worthy of honour. “In the authority of Caesar and his proconsul Polycarp discerned a duality that was invisible to the proconsul and the people in the stadium.” [7]

It is also important to note, here, that Polycarp was a bishop and an authority in the church. Therefore, unbeknownst to the ordinary Roman citizens in the Colosseum, there was a conflict between two sets of authority. The secular authority of the Roman empire and the authority of the church. Both are subject to Christ; one directly and the other indirectly. In some sense, Polycarp was the one person in the stadium with dual citizenship, one as a resident of the Roman empire and the other as a Christian. Polycarp had the added role of Bishop in the church and, therefore, in the kingdom of God.

We are working to develop a Christian response to government authority and formulate a theologically correct political position. Polycarp’s response helps us to see how we should act.

“One of the dualities in Polycarp’s situation is a duality in the situation of every human being whatsoever: political authority mediates divine authority while at the same time being limited and placed under judgment by divine authority.” [8]

We, as Christians, all too easily think of the church in terms of a gathering of like-minded people. When the Government interferes by prohibiting one of the churches' actions, it is a matter of the Government inhibiting our individualistic ideas of liberty. Rarely, do we as Christians view infringement by the Government as two competing kingdom realities in conflict.

In Polycarp, we can see his loyalty to Christ as Lord and king and, secondly, to the emperor

as a subordinate authority. In Polycarp's day, for a non-Christian, non-Jewish citizen, this was an unthinkable attack on the ultimacy of the Roman emperor, who had God-like status. Due to our views of how a Christian must relate to secular government, most believers today do not disobey government rulings, even if they are uncomfortable and even prohibitive for the church's activities. The small number of Christians who see limits in the way the Government has authority over the church, generally disobey in the name of religious freedom and not because of competing kingdom conflict.

Wolterstorff is right in his analysis: "We will not declare that Christ is our king and that loyalty to our king requires that we not concede to the Government's demands. No Polycarps among us."^[9]

Nonetheless, as Christians, we are called to be faithful to the gospel and the Christian Scriptures. As the church, we should look at what the early apostles wrote about government and realise that it is the church's responsibility to be the "... The house-hold of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).^[10]

We are the church of the living God.



God's church has Christ as its rightful king, and faithfulness to his kingship and his word demands that the church declare the sovereign rule of its king.

[1] The Apostolic Fathers - The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Translated by Joseph Barber Lightfoot <https://ccel.org/ccel/l/lightfoot/fathers/cache/fathers.pdf> (January 25, 2022)

[2] The Apostolic Fathers

[3] The Apostolic Fathers

[4] The Apostolic Fathers

[5] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty - An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 14.

[6] The Apostolic Fathers

[7] Wolterstorff, p. 15.

[8] Wolterstorff, p. 16.

[9] Wolterstorff, p. 17.

[10] ESV

Romans 13:1-5

Let's do the hard work of Exegesis

The term *Exegesis* is a Latin word meaning to "lead or seek out" and its general use in theology is the work of drawing the author's original intent out of the text, as opposed to *Eisegesis* which is to "read into" the text something that is not there. We are all very capable of reading our own ideas and presuppositions into any text we read, and must tread with caution about drawing conclusions too hastily.

There are several tools we as good Bible students can use that aid us, in drawing out the correct meaning of the text. Context is certainly of paramount importance, i.e. the context of the surrounding verses, the context of the book or letter, and finally the context of the whole Bible. Another set of tools that really helps avoid wrong conclusions is to ask questions and raise objections. Imagine a courtroom scene where the text in question is on trial and the court lawyers, both the defense and the prosecution have to present their case, ask questions, and raise objections to the judge who makes the final decision.

In our case, you the reader, are the judge and I am playing the role of prosecution and defense lawyers. I will raise several questions about the passage and work through all the major objections. By doing this we will be able to filter out wrong conclusions and finally land on an application of the text for us as believers today.



I am also going to draw on the help of several well-known and respected Bible commentators, kind of like the courtroom lawyer drawing on the expertise of legal subject matter experts.

Who is the Audience?

A natural assumption on this question is to think, that since the letter was written and sent to the church in Rome, the audience throughout the letter is the church itself. Whilst it is not wrong, per se, to make this assumption, the text itself also gives us clues that a wider audience may be in view. In verse one Paul says: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." (Romans 13:1a) ^[1]

In verse two Paul says: "Therefore whoever resists..." (Romans 13:2a) ^[2] The word *whoever* gives us a further hint that Paul has a universal audience in mind. Commentator Douglas Moo tells us, that the primary audience is the Roman church and, by extension, all Christian believers, but it is reasonable to allow for a wider audience of all people. "The basis of Paul's authority—an apostle of the gospel—as well as the audience of the letter indicates that his

immediate reference must be to Christians. But we should probably not limit the reference to Christians.” [3]

Douglas Schreiner concurs. Paul calls every person to submit to the governing authorities. However, Paul specifically addressed the letter to the Roman church, and believers are in view: “Verse 1 indicates that submission is the responsibility of every person, which suggests that this injunction applies to both unbelievers and believers, but since Romans was written to believers the latter must be especially in view.” [4]

Is this Passage Just another Late Addition by Another Author?

Some scholars have argued that this section in the letter interrupts the flow of chapters 12-14. Before it — the passage we are reviewing — Paul speaks of love and its manifestations, and after it, Paul speaks of love and its interaction with the law. To the objectors, this section on government appears somewhat in conflict with the preceding and the following content. It has caused some scholars to suggest that it is a later addition to the text, possibly sparked by some governmental controversy in Rome. It must be said here that people who raise this kind of objection also generally do not hold to the inspiration of the text of scripture, nor to the idea that God has preserved the text of scripture for his people. These are arguments that we won’t get into. Needless to say, I believe in the inspiration and preservation of the text of scripture in its original manuscripts. That said, I am not suggesting that translations are perfect or inspired, nor is this the place for debating which translation is the best. If you want to explore the subject of the Bible’s accuracy, authority, and authenticity, the work of James White *Scripture Alone* is a great start. [5]



Schreiner deals with this objection succinctly and argues that: “The burden of proof is on those who contend that the text is interpolated.” [6]

Schreiner demonstrates an A—B—B—A type flow to the text and its surrounding context. This is a typical literary device used by Paul, showing us that he is indeed the author. Chapter 12:9-16 deals with love in the church, i.e. the first A. Then we have two blocks of text that deal with the outworking of Christian love, i.e. the two B’s. The first is how the believer relates to the world at large, in chapter 12:17-21, and the second is how the believer relates to political authority, chapter 13:1-7. Finally, we have the wrapping A to conclude with more love in the church. The way this passage in Romans fits into the preceding and the following text, points strongly against the objection, that the text is a late addition to the letter.

The Use of the Word Wrath in Chapters 12 & 13 appears Contradictory

Towards the end of chapter 12, Paul exhorts believers never to avenge themselves and grounds this exhortation in “for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” (Romans 12:19b) ^[7] In chapter 13, Paul writes, “For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4b)^[8] On the surface, these two statements appear to contradict each other.

The first thirteen chapters of Paul’s letter to the Romans are an in-depth statement of how God deals with human action namely, sin and rebellion. To say that God is angry with human behaviour is an understatement. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” (Romans 1:18) ^[9]

The statement that revenge belongs to God in chapter twelve is demonstrably a culmination of the previous chapters. Therefore one should ask how a government authority is also an avenger. Wolterstorff gives a helpful insight into how to make sense of the idea of vengeance in chapter 12. “The passage plays a role in Paul’s injunction to individual believers, as to how they are to conduct themselves. It plays no role in the account of the task of the state that Paul gives in chapter 13.” ^[10]

Effectively, Paul is exhorting believers to act in a way that gives room for God to avenge evil himself. The overall message of the Bible demonstrates that this will undoubtedly take place at the bar of God’s final judgment. Romans 13 tells us, that at times God will use human institutions to enact his judgment in the here and now. The theme of forbearance frequently appears in the letter to the Romans, in the same vein as judgment. As believers, we should be well aware of the need for God’s mercy in our own lives.

“Though God forbears the wrongdoing of the other nations, forbearance is not the last word. Eventually God judges and punishes... It’s [the Government] God-given task is instead to pressure citizens into not perpetrating injustice.” ^[11]

Did Paul only include this Section due to Political Issues in Rome?

“They [many scholars] think that there must have been a situation in the church at Rome, of which Paul was aware, that led him to include this exhortation.” ^[12] The reason they suggest this, is those fellow citizens who rejected excessive taxation by the state had infected some Roman believers. They want to say that Paul only included this section, as an exhortation to

pay taxes. Some argue that the evidence of tax issues in the early reign of Nero in Rome existed, giving some support that political motives were behind Paul's exhortation.

Other historical data suggests that there is also evidence, that Nero cut taxes in his early years, making the argument for a political motive behind this text inconclusive. ^[13]

However, the text itself, I would suggest, gives us sufficient data to contradict this idea. In verse 6, we only see Paul refer to taxation as the ground of submission to authority, not an exhortation to pay taxes per se. "For because of this you also pay taxes." (Romans 13:6) ^[14]

Does the Dating of the Letter Cause Interpretative Issues?

Some have suggested, dating the letter of Romans during the later period of Nero's reign causes problems with standard interpretations of the text. This later period of Nero's reign is one of the worst periods of Christian persecution in church history. This date raises the question of Christian submission to the governing authorities. It also bears down upon whether the Christian has any form of legitimate biblical grounds in opposing government overreach.

The team of commentators of the Reformation Study Bible, suggest a date ranging from A.D. 55 to A.D. 57, which is within the early part of Nero's reign. "Paul wrote Romans shortly before his visit to Jerusalem with the gift from the Gentile congregations (Romans 15:25 cf Acts 24:17). He likely wrote during his three months in Greece, described in Acts 20:2, 3. Whilst it is not possible to fix a date with certainty, the letter is best dated sometime between the end of 55 A.D. and the early months of A.D. 57." ^[15]

Historical evidence suggests that Nero was amicable to the Jewish community during his early reign. He prohibited some of the more barbaric practices in the Colosseum. This prohibition was possibly due to his co-regency with his mother. ^[16]

Finally, the words Paul uses concerning the rightful exercise of justice by government, "rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad." (Romans 13:3) ^[17], strongly suggest that Paul was not writing during Nero's later reign of terror. Nero, and his representative magistrates, could hardly punish evil and reward good while mass murdering Christians, burning them alive.

Does the Passage Command the Believer to Submit in an Absolute Sense?

There are no stated, limits in this passage about how far a believer should submit to the

governing authorities. Paul gives the reader two exhortations. The first is in verse 1: “be subject to the governing authorities.” (Romans 13:1) ^[18], and the second is in verse 3: “Then do what is good...” (Romans 13:3) ^[19] Notably, there are no explanations in this particular text as to what the submission should include and what it should exclude. The emphasis in this text is not on what submission to the governing authorities looks like, nor what doing good means, but rather the ground or reason for submitting. Therefore, I think it is safe to conclude that, there is no suggestion or confirmation in this text for the kind of obedience to a government that has no limits.

Moo suggests that: “To submit is to recognize one’s subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have authority over us.” ^[20] This recognition of the rightful place in a hierarchy, I believe, strikes at the heart of what Paul is aiming to communicate. It seems correct then to state that one can be in a state of submission in a general sense and yet at the same time disobey an injunction of a government in a particular sense. In this view, the believer would not be disobeying this passage of Scripture whilst, for the sake of conscience disobeying the Government in a particular issue.

It is helpful to review other areas where the Scriptures call believers to submit. Paul urges Christians to submit to their leaders in 1 Cor 16:16. It would be cultish to consider obedience to a Christian leader absolute. It would certainly be wrong to imply that Paul had absolute obedience in mind when he exhorted the Corinthian church. Paul asks Christian prophets to submit to other prophets to weigh up their prophetic statements in the same letter. (1 Corinthians 14:28-32) Again the use of the term submit has obvious limitations.

Paul calls on Christian slaves to submit to their masters in Titus 2:9. In the past, churches have used this to support the general concept of slavery. The context of the passage is about the general behaviour of the believer, in this case, the slave. Here too Paul concludes with an exhortation: “So that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our saviour.” (Titus 2:10) ^[21] The exhortation demonstrates that the master-to-slave relationship is not absolute. Both parties are to act in a godly manner. Biblical commentators today rightly recognise that this exhortation does not support slavery in the general sense of the word.

When we think of slavery today our minds are instantly drawn to the horrors of "chattel slavery", the capturing of innocent Africans, shipping them across the Atlantic Ocean to life-long involuntary servitude, pain, and often death. When the Old Testament law speaks of slavery it refers to voluntary indenture. The law code of the Old Testament provides protections for the slave. Masters were bound to release their slaves after a certain time had passed. We must not make the mistake of reading modern definitions of words into texts about different times, however tempting that may be.



This is perhaps the strongest argument that this passage does not command

absolutist obedience to the state.

Finally, Paul exhorts wives to submit to their husbands in Eph 5:24, and again no theologian would suggest that the submission Paul is calling for in the Christian wife is of the absolute kind. Paul never calls for absolute submission to any form of human authority.

Christians recognize that only God has absolute authority. If one were to suggest that our passage under review is a command to obey the Government whatever they say, one, therefore, has to conclude that the submission a wife is to render to her husband is absolute, and one has to accept that the slavish obedience cult leaders demand from their followers, is the correct biblical interpretation of the passages they call upon in support of their tyranny.



END OF FREE SAMPLE - I hope you were thoroughly encouraged so far.

[1] ESV

[2] ESV

[3] Douglas J. Moo, The Letter to the Romans - Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), p. 812.

[4] Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans - Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 664.

[5] James R. White, Scripture Alone (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2004)

[6] Schreiner, p. 658

[7] ESV

[8] ESV

[9] ESV

[10] Wolterstorff, p. 96

[11] Wolterstorff, p. 98, 99

[12] Moo, p. 809

[13] Emperor Nero, the Tyrant of Rome, June 9, 2020, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/roman/emperor-nero-facts-biography-tyrant-crimes-accomplishments/>, (January 10, 2022)

[14] ESV

[15] Reformation Study Bible, "Romans" (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2017), p. 1683.

[16] Nero, 1906, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11445-nero>, (January 18, 2022)

[17] The Annals - Book XV - A.D. 62-65, by Tacitus - Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.mb.txt> (January 18, 2022)

[18] ESV

[19] ESV

[20] Moo, p. 814

[21] ESV