

Romans Chapter 13 Revisited

It seems that every time someone opposes as myself attempts to encourage our Christian brothers and sisters to resist an unconstitutional or otherwise reprehensible government policy, we hear the retort, "What about Romans Chapter 13? We Christians must submit to government. Any government. Read your Bible, and leave me alone." Or words to that effect.

No doubt, some who use this argument are sincere. They are only repeating what they have heard their pastor and other religious leaders say. On the other hand, let's be honest enough to admit that some who use this argument are just plain lazy, apathetic, and indifferent. And Romans 13 is their escape from responsibility. I suspect this is the much larger group, by the way.

Nevertheless, for the benefit of those who are sincere (but obviously misinformed), let's briefly examine Romans Chapter 13. I quote Romans Chapter 13, verses 1 through 7, from the Authorized King James text:

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues:

tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."

Do our Christian friends who use these verses to teach that we should not oppose America's political leaders really believe that civil magistrates have unlimited authority to do anything they want without opposition? I doubt whether they truly believe that.

For example, what if our President decided to resurrect the old monarchical custom of Jus Primae Noctis (Law of First Night)? That was the old medieval custom when the king claimed the right to sleep with a subject's bride on the first night of their marriage. Would our sincere Christian brethren sheepishly say, "Romans Chapter 13 says we must submit to the government"? I think not. And would any of us respect any man who would submit to such a law?

So, there are limits to authority. A father has authority in his home, but does this give him power to abuse his wife and children? Of course not. An employer has authority on the job, but does this give him power to control the private lives of his employees? No. A pastor has overseer authority in the church, but does this give him power to tell employers in his church how to run their businesses? Of course not. All human authority is limited in nature. No man has unlimited authority over the lives of other men.

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(Lordship and Sovereignty is the exclusive domain of Jesus Christ.)

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By the same token, a civil magistrate has authority in civil matters, but his authority is limited and defined. Observe that Romans Chapter 13 clearly limits the authority of civil government by strictly defining its purpose:

"For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil . . . For he is the minister of God to thee for good . . . for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

Notice that civil government must not be a "terror to good works." It has no power or authority to terrorize good works or good people. God never gave it that authority. And any government that oversteps that divine boundary has no divine authority or protection. This is a basic principle of Natural Law (and all of America's legal documents--including the U.S. Constitution--are founded upon the God-ordained principles of Natural Law).

The apostle clearly states that civil government is a "minister of God to thee for good." It is not a minister of God for evil. Civil magistrates have a divine duty to "execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." They have no authority to execute wrath upon him that doeth good. None. Zilch. Zero. And anyone who says they do is lying. So, even in the midst of telling Christians to submit to civil authority, Romans Chapter 13 limits the power and reach of civil authority.

Did Moses violate God's principle of submission to authority when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster in defense of his fellow Hebrew? Did Elijah violate God's principle of submission to authority when he openly challenged Ahab and Jezebel? Did David violate God's principle of submission to authority when he refused to surrender to Saul's troops? Did Daniel violate God's principle of submission to authority when he disobeyed the king's command to not pray audibly to God? Did the three Hebrew children violate God's principle of submission to authority when they refused to bow to the image of the state? Did John the Baptist violate God's principle of submission to authority when he publicly scolded King Herod for his infidelity? Did Simon Peter and the other Apostles violate God's principle of submission to authority when they refused to stop preaching on the streets of Jerusalem?

Did Paul violate God's principle of submission to authority when he refused to obey those authorities who demanded that he abandon his missionary work?

In fact, Paul spent almost as much time in jail as he did out of jail.

Remember that every apostle of Christ (except John) was killed by hostile civil authorities opposed to their endeavors. Christians throughout church history were imprisoned, tortured, or killed by civil authorities of all stripes for refusing to submit to their various laws and prohibitions. Did all of these Christian martyrs violate God's principle of submission to authority?

So, even the great prophets, apostles, and writers of the Bible (including the writer of Romans

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Chapter 13 understood that human authority--even civil authority--is limited.

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Plus, Paul makes it clear that our submission to civil authority must be predicated on more than fear of governmental retaliation. Notice, he said, "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." Meaning, our obedience to civil authority is more than just "because they said so." It is also a matter of conscience. This means we must think and reason for ourselves regarding the justness and rightness of our government's laws. Obedience is not automatic or robotic. It is a result of both rational deliberation and moral approbation.

Therefore, there are times when civil authority may need to be resisted.

Either governmental abuse of power or the violation of conscience (or both) could precipitate civil disobedience. Of course, how and when we decide to resist civil authority is an entirely separate issue. And I will reserve that discussion for another time.

Beyond that, we in the United States of America do not live under a monarchy. We have no king. There is no single governing official in this country. America's "supreme Law" does not rest with any man or any group of men. America's "supreme Law" does not rest with the President, the Congress, or even the Supreme Court. In America, the U.S. Constitution is the "supreme Law of the Land." Under our laws, every governing official publicly promises to submit to the Constitution of the United States. Do readers understand the significance of this distinction? I hope so.

This means that, in America, the "higher powers" are not the men who occupy elected office; they are the tenets and principles set forth in the U.S. Constitution. Under our laws and form of government, it is the duty of every citizen, including our elected officials, to obey the U.S. Constitution.

Therefore, this is how Romans Chapter 13 reads to Americans:

"Let every soul be subject unto the [U.S. Constitution.] For there is no [Constitution] but of God: the [Constitution] that be [is] ordained of God.

Whosoever therefore resisteth the [Constitution], resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For [the Constitution is] not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the [Constitution]? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For [the Constitution] is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for [the Constitution] beareth not the sword in vain: for [the Constitution] is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for [the Constitution is] God's minister, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."

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Dear Christian friend, the above is exactly the proper understanding of our responsibility to civil authority in these United States, according to the teaching of Romans Chapter 13.

Furthermore, Christians, above all people, should desire that their elected representatives submit to the Constitution, because it is constitutional government that has done more to protect Christian liberty than any other governing document ever devised by man. As I have noted before in this column, Biblical principles and Natural Law form the foundation of all three of America's founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

(See: http://www.chuckbaldwinlive.com/c2005/cbarchive_20050630.html)

As a result, Christians in America (for the most part) have not had to face the painful decision to "obey God rather than men" and defy their civil authorities.

The problem in America today is that we have allowed our political leaders to violate their oaths of office and to ignore--and blatantly disobey--the "supreme Law of the Land," the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, if we truly believe Romans Chapter 13, we will insist and demand that our civil magistrates submit to the U.S. Constitution.

Now, how many of us Christians are going to truly obey Romans Chapter 13?

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