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COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**ROMANS 13:1-7**

*AN HISTORICAL AND EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS*

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
IN EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Romans 13:1-7 provides a general overview of the apostle Paul's understanding of the role of government in society and the responsibilities of the members of society toward the government. The aim of this thesis is to analyze the history of interpretation on Romans 13:1-7, and then to provide a fresh interpretation of it, with interaction from modern commentaries.

Some key questions about Romans 13:1-7 have arisen over the centuries: (1) To whom does Paul refer when he talks about the "governing authorities"?; (2) Whose judgment does Paul reference in vs. 2? Is God the judge in view, or is it the governing authorities?; (3) Does Paul condone capital punishment in vs. 4, where he references the sword?; (4) Does "wrath" refer to eternal condemnation, or temporal punishment in vs. 4?; (5) What does Paul mean by referring to the governing authorities as "God's servants" and "ministers of God"? Is he putting them on a par with ecclesiastical authorities?; (6) Is this passage supposed to be understood as a universal rule for the Church throughout history, or was it intended to be guidance for the Christians in Rome around A.D. 55?

After a concise introduction, there is a detailed annotated translation of Romans 13:1-7, which provides insight into the translational and interpretive decisions made by the author. After a general introduction in Chapter 1, then Chapters 2-4 present an analysis of some key figures in the history of interpretation from the Early Church to the Reformation. Specifically, we examine commentaries and sermons written by Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Peter Abelard, William of St. Thierry, Nicholas of Lyra, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Chapter 5 is devoted to a new examination of Romans 13:1-7 by the present author

and modern commentaries are consulted throughout to provide an accurate interpretation of the passage.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings. After a brief discussion of some of the other important passages of Scripture that deal with the Church and State, the thesis concludes with a concise discussion of contemporary application from this important passage of Scripture.

I dedicate this work to my supportive and loving wife, Shelly. She has been a constant helper and encourager from the beginning of my theological studies. Not only has she sacrificed time with me so that I could work on my thesis, she has moved numerous times and endured long periods of me living away from home while I was gone for training. Only God knows how much she has done to contribute to the completion of this paper.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the NT</i> by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i>
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
LXX	<i>Septuagint</i>
NA28	<i>Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece 28th Revised Edition</i>
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NET	<i>New English Translation</i>
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NJB	<i>New Jerusalem Bible</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
NT	<i>New Testament</i>
OT	<i>Old Testament</i>
P46	Papyrus 46
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>

**PART I**

**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER 1.

### THESIS INTRODUCTION

What is the proper relationship between the Church and the government? This question is what sparked the present writer's interest in formulating a theology of government. Unfortunately a master's thesis does not afford enough space to cover the topic in its entirety, so we must narrow our focus. Seeing as how this is supposed to be an exegetical thesis, it became obvious that examining a particular passage of Scripture would be appropriate. In a list of Bible passages that deal with the topic of government, Romans 13:1-7 is a *sine qua non*. It is a foundational passage for a theology of government, and a full grasp of its implications is necessary for one to formulate a robust version of that theology. This is, then, the first stone laid of a foundation for an entire theology of government.

With that in mind, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the apostle Paul's argument by pulling from some of the major contributors to the interpretive history, including this writer's, and make some conclusions about the main questions that have arisen about it. In order to accomplish this, we will examine major interpreters in an effort to mark the boundaries of responsible interpretation on Romans 13:1-7. Once we reach the Reformation era, our focus will be on commentaries—fully knowing the limitations of this—since we must limit the scope of the study for purposes of space. These limitations will be felt most in the chapter on the Reformation era with Martin Luther, whose commentary is rather scant. Unfortunately our discussion must be limited to the commentaries or else we

would go far afield into secondary sources and sermons. That would be suitable for a doctoral dissertation of a few hundred pages but not for a master's thesis.

The first three chapters will discuss the Early Church, Medieval, and Reformation eras and some of their major interpreters. By listening to those historical voices, we will learn what is long-established and what is novel in the history of interpretation. The fourth chapter will draw from Modern commentaries and include exegetical notes from the present writer. Prior to doing any exegesis, an annotated translation was completed on the passage. The annotated translation appears immediately after this introduction, in order to provide a translation for the reader and in order to remind the reader of key features of the Greek text. Important vocabulary, grammar, and translation notes are included in the annotated translation. The main questions that will be answered are ones that came to the fore during the course of research. These main questions are: (1) to whom does Paul refer when he talks about “governing authorities”? Was it the civil authorities in general, or the emperor specifically? Or, was Paul referring to the spiritual forces that stood behind earthly authorities (a view espoused by some major 20<sup>th</sup> century interpreters)?; (2) whose judgment does Paul reference in vs. 2? Is God the judge in view, or is it the governing authorities?; (3) does Paul condone corporal/capital punishment in vs. 4 where he references the sword, or does he limit the power of the governing authorities to the mere threat of force, as some Anabaptist interpreters would assert?; (4) does “wrath” refer to eternal condemnation, or temporal punishment in vs. 4?; (5) what does Paul mean by referring to the governing authorities as “God’s servants” and “ministers of God”? Is he putting them on a par with ecclesiastical authorities?; (6) is this passage supposed to be understood as a universal rule for the Church throughout history, or was it intended to be guidance for the Christians in Rome around A.D. 55?

There will be other secondary interpretive questions answered along the way, such as the question of civil disobedience, but the six listed above form the main interpretive foci of the paper. The reason civil disobedience is only dealt with in passing is because it is not directly addressed by the apostle in this passage. In order to remain faithful to the intent of the original writer this paper deals primarily with his assertions.

## 1.1 Romans 13:1-7 Annotated Translation

1 <sup>1</sup>Let every person be subject<sup>2</sup> to the governing<sup>3</sup> authorities. <sup>4</sup> For there is no authority except from<sup>5</sup> God and those that exist are put in place<sup>6</sup> by God. 2

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<sup>1</sup> The variant reading (found in NA28) in the initial phrase of this verse is an early one, according to Longenecker. He notes, “In both its omission and its insertion, this variant seems to represent an attempt to expand the significance of the phrase ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις from referring to ‘the city officials *at Rome*’ to including ‘*all* governing authorities *wherever* and *whenever they might rule*’” (italics original). Richard Longenecker, *Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 945-46. Longenecker also cites Metzger, who thinks it may have been introduced by the scribe of P46- then carried on by a number of Old Latin translators, Vulgate editors, and Western commentators in order to be less formal or to avoid Hebraic idiom. Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 467. Metzger’s note seems more likely than Longenecker’s theory because the authorities in the city of Rome included the Roman emperor, who exercised oversight of the entire Roman world of the day. It is unlikely that the variant reading would make the reader think more generally than the entire Roman Empire. Cranfield thinks it is due to the accidental omission of ψυχῇ by an early scribe, and considers the variant to be “an ancient but worthless reading”. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975-1979), 2:656. Whether the variant is dismissed because it was used instead of the Hebraic idiom or because it was used to make sense of an omitted ψυχῇ, it has no real support from the major commentators and exegetes.

<sup>2</sup> Ὑποτασσέσθω Present passive imperative 3<sup>rd</sup> person sing. The imperative is used for a command. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 525. Other relevant occurrences of the root are: Titus 3:1 and 1 Peter 2:13 dealing with government, Ephesians 5:21 and Colossians 3:18 dealing with marital relationship, Luke 2:51 dealing with Jesus submitting to his parents.

<sup>3</sup> BDAG gives the definition and uses this verse as a translation example; “have power over, be in authority (over), be highly placed,” and translated as “those who are in high positions,” 1033.

<sup>4</sup> “The lexical sense of ἐξουσία in Romans 13:1 can be defined as ‘those persons who have the authority to rule or govern,’ with ‘authorities’ or ‘rulers’ as possible translation equivalents,” Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: UBS, 1989), I:477. “The focus of this sense is on the *persons* who exercise authority and not on the *right, domain or means* of authority.” Jan Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority?* Emory Studies in Early Christianity 4 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 42. Most modern translations use “governing authorities” as the translation of this phrase. KJV translated as “higher powers”.

<sup>5</sup> This passage is cited by Wallace as an example of Ultimate Agent. “The ultimate agent indicates the agent who is ultimately responsible for the action, who may or may not be directly involved (though he or she usually is).” Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 432-433. We should also note that there is a variant for this preposition (ὑπὸ is traded for ἀπὸ with some manuscripts). This does not change the classification of the prepositional phrase + gen. because Wallace notes that ἀπὸ is also sometimes used for the Ultimate Agent.

<sup>6</sup> Τεταγμέναι This is an intensive perfect. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 575. Wallace notes that the KJV often translates the intensive perfect better than some modern translations because the translators of the KJV knew their English much better. This verse is cited as an example of that. The intensive perfect should “emphasize the results or present state produced by a past action” (575). The KJV, Tyndale, and NASB use the intensive, whereas the ESV, NET, NIV, NJB and others translate it as a past completed action without reference to its present state. BDAG uses this verse and translates as, “the (structures of authority) presently existing are put in place by God,” 991.



Therefore,<sup>7</sup> the one who opposes<sup>8</sup> authority opposes the order<sup>9</sup> of God, and those who oppose will bring<sup>10</sup> judgment<sup>11</sup> upon themselves.<sup>12</sup> **3** For rulers are not a terror to good<sup>13</sup> work<sup>14</sup> but to bad. Would you not fear authority? Do good and you will

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<sup>7</sup> BDAG translates this occurrence as “for this reason, therefore, so,” 1107. Inferential conjunction. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 673.

<sup>8</sup> Is the opposition to authority something that stems from an internal opposition to God in the heart? On another note, BDAG points out that this only appears in the middle in early Christian literature but has an active form, 90. Acts 18:6, James 4:6 & 5:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 use this root and they all have the middle form. In the LXX there are two occurrences with reduplication and two regular occurrences; F. C. Conybeare and St. George Stock, *Grammar of Septuagint Greek* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 77. Reprinted from the edition originally published by Ginn and Company, Boston, 1905. First printing expanded edition—February 1995. It is quite possible that by the time of Paul this word was deponent for all intents and purposes. I was unable to find a known use in the LXX or early Christian literature that has an active form.

<sup>9</sup> Louw and Nida translate this with the past tense of the perfect, “he opposed what God has ordered”, 1613:33.326. James D. G. Dunn notes that this word has only been used three times in biblical Greek (Ezra 4:11 LXX, Acts 7:53 and here) and once in the Apostolic Fathers (1 Clement 20:3). James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 762. Of those occurrences it seems to have the sense of an order or direction. The whole sentence should probably be translated with a present tense gnomic (for the verb) rather than the past tense as Louw and Nida translated.

<sup>10</sup> BDAG translates this clause, “will bring punishment upon themselves,” 584. This maintains the reflexive sense of the middle, but Wallace lists this as a true deponent, *Greek Grammar*, 430.

<sup>11</sup> Defined in BDAG as “legal decision rendered by a judge, judicial verdict,” 567. BDAG cites this verse and translates as “be condemned.” All other uses of it in Romans refer to God as the source of the judgment.

<sup>12</sup> Probably a dative of interest (disadvantage) with the idea of “against”. Wallace cites 1 Corinthians 11:29 as an example, which uses this same combination of ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα, just order and number being changed. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 143. He translates it as “judgment upon himself.”

<sup>13</sup> “It is noteworthy that Paul, when speaking about believers’ relations with outsiders, employs the category of the ‘good’, and when speaking about their relations within the Christian community, he uses the category of ‘love’.” Colin Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 489-90.

<sup>14</sup> ESV, NET, NRSV use “conduct”, NASB “behavior”, NIV “do right”, KJV “good works”. It is singular. BDAG says, “that which displays itself in activity of any kind, deed, action...of the deeds of humans, exhibiting a consistent moral character, referred to collectively as τὰ ἔργα” 390. Options are work, deed, conduct, behavior.

have approval<sup>15</sup> from<sup>16</sup> the same.<sup>17</sup> **4** For he is God's servant<sup>18</sup> for<sup>19</sup> your good. But if you do bad,<sup>20</sup> be afraid,<sup>21</sup> for he does not carry<sup>22</sup> the sword<sup>23</sup> to no purpose;<sup>24</sup> for he is

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<sup>15</sup> BDAG notes, “the act of expressing admiration or approval, praise, approval, recognition” from humans toward humans, this passage is cited, 357. ESV, NJB, NRSV use “approval”; KJV and NASB use “praise”; NET and NIV “commend(ation).”

<sup>16</sup> Augustine makes his main point on this verse from the Latin grammar. He points to the Latin translation for “you will have praise of him” (*habebis laudem ex illa*) and says that it does not necessarily mean that the ruler is the one doing the praising; if that were the case it would have been translated “the authority will praise you” (*laudabit te postestas*). Augustine, *Augustine on Romans*, trans. Paula Fredricksen Landes (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 42-43. The Greek is ἐξ αὐτῆς. Wallace notes that there are six possible uses of the preposition: source, separation, temporal, cause, partitive and means; see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 371. The possible uses for this case are source (the approval comes from the authority), cause (the approval is because of the authority), partitive (this would be Augustine's understanding, the approval is of, or out of, the authority), and means (the approval is by means of the authority). Cranfield is sympathetic to the view of Augustine (Origen also takes a similar view, although not based on the grammar), but his view of the passage is based on logic rather than grammar. Cranfield, *Romans*, 665. At the end of the day, the Greek is somewhat ambiguous in this case, but if we are to go with what is probable rather than possible, we will likely classify the preposition as one of source in this case. Cf. 1 Peter 2:14 for another instance of the ruler being the source of the praise.

<sup>17</sup> ESV, NIV, RSV use “he” or “his”; KJV and NASB use “the same”; NET, NJB, NRSV use “its”. Feminine αὐτῆς likely has antecedent in previous clause with ἐξουσίαν.

<sup>18</sup> Defined in BDAG as “one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, agent, intermediary, courier...of officials understood collectively as a political system agent...the (governmental) authorities” 230. In Romans Paul refers to himself in connection with a form of this word three times (11:13, 15:25, 15:31); Jesus once (15:8); other believers once (12:7); and Phoebe specifically (16:1). It occurs twice in this passage referring to governmental officials. ὑπηρέτης is used often in the NT for various kinds of officers or servants (see Louw-Nida on διάκονος), but Paul only uses it once in 1 Corinthians 4:1.

<sup>19</sup> εἰς + accusative= advantage, Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 369. Technically the translation would be “to you for good.”

<sup>20</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> person sing, subj. – conditional subjunctive, Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 469-470.

<sup>21</sup> Paul uses the imperative 2<sup>nd</sup> person sing. to emphasize the individual fear one ought to have for doing bad.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note this word is used rather than φέρω. BDAG says this is “frequentative of φέρω...to carry or bear habitually or for a considerable length of time, bear (in contrast to φέρω) constantly/regularly, hence wear clothing” 1064.

<sup>23</sup> This could be a sword or a dagger. BDAG cites this passage as an example of when it should be seen as “sword...the power of authorities to punish evildoers” 622.

<sup>24</sup> BDAG translates this phrase, “carry the sword to no purpose,” 281.

God's servant, an avenger<sup>25</sup> for<sup>26</sup> wrath to the one who does bad. **5** Wherefore, it is necessary to be subject, not only on account of<sup>27</sup> wrath, but also for the sake of<sup>28</sup> conscience. **6** For on account of this you pay<sup>29</sup> taxes,<sup>30</sup> for they are ministers<sup>31</sup> of God, continually attending to this very thing.<sup>32</sup> **7** Give<sup>33</sup> to all their due,<sup>34</sup> to [the one

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<sup>25</sup> Wallace points out that an adjective that is being used substantively usually has the article, *Greek Grammar*, 294. It is not always the case and is not in this case. BDAG defines this as “pert. to justice being done so as to rectify wrong done to another, punishing, subst. one who punishes...agent of punishment,” 301. ESV, NASB and NJB use “avenger”; KJV “revenger”; NIV “agent of wrath”.

<sup>26</sup> The preposition (ἐἰς) probably is being used as a preposition of reference (“avenger *with respect to* wrath”), but it has been kept neutral with the generic “for” instead. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 369. Richard Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 94.

<sup>27</sup> διὰ + accusative= cause, Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 369.

<sup>28</sup> “For the sake of” is used instead of “on account of” because it offers rhetorical flourish.

<sup>29</sup> BDAG cites this passage and defines as “to pay what is due, pay,” 998.

<sup>30</sup> BDAG cites Romans 13:7 (same word) and gives the definition, “that which is brought in as payment to a state, with implication of dependent status, tribute, tax,” 1064.

<sup>31</sup> BDAG cites this verse and defines as “one engaged in administrative or cultic service, servant, minister,” 591. They then note that this passage is referring to Greco-Roman officials and translate it as “servants of God.”

<sup>32</sup> ESV, KJV, RSV all basically use “attending to this very thing”; NASB has “devoting themselves to this very thing”; NET has “devoted to governing”; NJB has “even as they are busily occupied with that particular task”; and Tyndale translated as “serving for the same purpose”. BDAG cites this passage and defines as “to persist in someth., busy oneself with, be busily engaged in, be devoted to,” 881.

<sup>33</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> per pl imperative. BDAG defines this as, “to meet a contractual or other obligation, pay, pay out, fulfill”, 109. I went with the more generic “give” here because it does not make sense to pay fear or honor, as the verb is applied to the last two nouns. Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that Paul intermingles these contractual and social/moral uses of the verbs in verses 7 and 8.

<sup>34</sup> ὀφειλή This is the noun form of the verb that Paul uses in verse 8 (ὀφείλω). BDAG defines the noun as, “that which one owes in a financial sense, obligation”, 743. It is plural to go along with the plural πᾶσιν. Literally “dues” but conventional English does not typically make use of the plural form of that word.

owed] taxes [give]<sup>35</sup> taxes, to [the one owed] customs<sup>36</sup> [give] customs, to [the one owed] fear [give] fear, to [the one owed] honor [give] honor.

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<sup>35</sup> The implied verb is give. The awkwardness of this sentence in English demands that we fill in the implied verb, etc. The Greek is concise and to the point, but our modern English conventions of writing do not like too many implied parts to a sentence.

<sup>36</sup> BDAG cites this passage and defines as “revenue obligation, (indirect) tax, toll-tax, customs duties,” 999.

## 1.2 Historical Background

For the letter to the Romans, questions of authorship, provenance, date and audience are generally agreed upon among New Testament scholars.<sup>37</sup> Richard Longenecker notes:

Questions regarding authorship, addressees, occasion, and the relative date of Romans have often seemed fairly easy to answer... There have, of course, been a number of opposing views on such matters during the past couple centuries of NT scholarship. But there is today a fairly firm consensus among scholars regarding these rather elementary concerns.<sup>38</sup>

At the time of writing this paper, his commentary is the latest major commentary in English on the book of Romans. He spends very little time discussing the elementary issues in the introduction to the commentary, presumably because that is not where the debates are to be found for this letter. For the sake of laying the foundation of this paper we will discuss those elementary issues briefly.

### 1.2.1. Authorship

There is very little disagreement over the fact that the apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Romans.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Schreiner goes so far as to say, “No serious scholar today doubts that Paul wrote Romans... Pauline authorship [of Romans] is one of the assured results of NT scholarship, and thus further discussion on this issue is unnecessary.”<sup>40</sup> Tertius (16:22) and Phoebe (16:1-2) also had a hand in the composition and transport of the letter. Longenecker also notes that it is possible that the members of the church in Corinth and Cenchrea helped

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<sup>37</sup> All recent major commentaries and introductions consulted agree on this point.

<sup>38</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 4-5.

<sup>39</sup> “The Pauline authorship of Romans has rarely been seriously questioned.” Colin Kruse, *Romans*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 2.

with the content of the letter.<sup>41</sup> At the end of the day, the letter must be ascribed to the apostle Paul. It was penned under his direction and, most assuredly, under his watchful editorial supervision (assuming Tertius served as amanuensis).

### 1.2.2. Provenance

Very little debate has arisen over the provenance of Romans. Most scholars agree that Paul wrote it during a stay in Corinth. Assuming chapter 16 is part of the original letter,<sup>42</sup> Gaius (16:23) is most probably the same one mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14.<sup>43</sup> Phoebe is also mentioned (16:1) as one who probably took the letter to Rome. She was a resident of Corinth's port city, Cenchrea.<sup>44</sup>

### 1.2.3. Date

Although there is no exact date agreed upon among scholars, dates range from A.D. 51 through A.D. 59.<sup>45</sup> Longenecker opts for a date of A.D. 57-58.<sup>46</sup> Kruse gives this helpful synopsis:

[Paul] had completed his mission in the eastern Mediterranean (15:23); the churches of Macedonia and Achaia had made their contributions to the collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem (15:26-27), which places the writing of Romans after that of 2 Corinthians 8-9; and Paul is about to embark on his trip to Jerusalem to convey the collection monies there (15:25). After that he hopes to visit Rome en route to Spain (15:28). While the date of writing can be confidently placed after the writing of 2 Corinthians 8-9 and just prior to Paul's departure for Jerusalem, there are differences

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<sup>41</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> There is debate over that section of the letter but it is outside the purview of this paper since chapter 13 is the focus. There are helpful discussions in the aforementioned commentaries on the integrity of the final chapters of this letter.

<sup>43</sup> Kruse, *Romans*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Kruse, *Romans*, 13. Kruse also notes that it is possible that Erastus (16:23) is the same one cited by an inscription found in 1929 at an archaeological site in Corinth.

<sup>45</sup> Schreiner gives the list of major commentators and their respective dates, *Romans*, 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 5-6.

of opinion concerning the allocation of an exact chronological date, generally put by scholars somewhere between A.D. 54 and 59.<sup>47</sup>

This range of dates places the writing of the letter sometime in the first half of emperor Nero's reign.<sup>48</sup> That would be prior to his persecution of Christians and prior to the government of Rome differentiating between Jews and Christians.

#### 1.2.4. Audience and Occasion

Questions related to the audience and occasion of the letter are more difficult to determine. There is significant disagreement among scholars over who the recipients were and what situations in the church gave rise to the writing of the letter. Was the Roman church made up of mostly Gentiles or was it mostly Jews? Was the church half and half? Were there Judaizers in the Roman church or was it entitled Gentiles who were the main target of Paul's logic? Douglas Moo goes into detail discussing the audience of the letter to the Romans and concludes that it is addressed to a mixed audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians.<sup>49</sup> It was probably mostly Gentile Christians, with a healthy dose of people who were previously God-fearing Gentiles in the Jewish synagogues. After the expulsion of the Jews—which would have included Jewish Christians—the church would have become mostly Gentile until the Jewish Christians were allowed to re-enter Rome again. The re-entry of the Jewish Christians would have possibly caused some friction because the Roman church probably looked differently than it had before they left (i.e., it would have had less

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<sup>47</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> It must be noted that the first few years of Nero's reign were not as oppressive to Christianity as his later years.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 12-13.

Jewish traditional influence than before). This might explain the instructions from chapter 14.<sup>50</sup>

### **1.2.5. Life setting of Paul**

Frank Thielman summarizes Paul's situation during the writing of Romans as a happier period of his ministry.<sup>51</sup> It was a three month period while he was in Greece near Corinth (as seen in Acts 20:1-3). It was happier because the Corinthians' relationship with Paul was restored, the churches in Achaia had freely contributed to the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem, and Paul was ready to continue his ministry all the way to Rome.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Both Schreiner and Moo posit these possible occasion and audience scenarios.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 342.

<sup>52</sup> Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 342.



## **PART II**

### **HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION ON ROMANS 13:1-7**

**CHAPTER 2**  
**HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION ON ROMANS 13:1-7**  
**THE EARLY CHURCH<sup>53</sup>**

The phrase, Early Church, refers to the generations after the apostles until the Medieval period.<sup>54</sup> There are two basic epochs in the Early Church era which demand distinction, the ante-Nicene and the post-Nicene periods. The ante-Nicene era goes from the post-apostolic period up to the Council of Nicaea (which followed shortly after the Edict of Milan),<sup>55</sup> and the post-Nicene begins after the Council of Nicaea and continues right up to the Medieval Church.

**2.1. Earliest Christian Views of Civil and Military Service**

The Edict of Milan in AD 313 radically changed the situation of Christians in the Roman Empire, and, in turn, changed their perspective on civil and military service.<sup>56</sup> After the Edict of Milan the Church found herself in uncharted territory, struggling with how to

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<sup>53</sup> The term “Patristic” is often used synonymously with Early Church and encompasses both the ante and post-Nicene eras.

<sup>54</sup> The timing of the beginning of the Medieval Church era will be discussed in that section.

<sup>55</sup> Initially this paper was going to discuss only those interpreters who wrote in the ante-Nicene period. The Apostolic Fathers up to Origen would have been the focus, but it became apparent that there are very few commentaries or direct discussions in letters that are extant prior to Origen. This early dating of what is often called the Patristic period might exclude some important interpreters, such as Augustine and Chrysostom, therefore it became necessary to include the post-Nicene interpreters of major importance. They have been distinguished as ante-Nicene and post-Nicene because of the huge shift in teaching on how Christians should relate to the state.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 63.

relate to political authorities who had always been hostile, but, who now took an active and positive role in the life of the Church. Mark Noll comments:

“On May 20, 325, the Christian church entered a new era. On that day about 230 bishops gathered at Nicaea....The occasion marked the first ‘ecumenical,’ or worldwide, council of churches....What made the council such an extraordinarily important turning point was not just the doctrinal question at stake but the way in which political and social forces combined with the critical theological issue. The idea for the council did not come from the bishops. Rather, they had been summoned by the great Roman emperor himself, Constantine (ca. 288-337). After such a summons and after dealing with such an issue, the church would never be the same.”<sup>57</sup>

This event stands out as a remarkable difference from the ante-Nicene era. Noll comments about the time immediately leading up to Constantine, “[The early fourth century saw] the last major persecution of Christians...under the emperor Diocletian in the years that followed 303. Diocletian...attacked the church because he saw it as a divisive force in the Mediterranean world....[He] hoped that the elimination of Christianity would reduce disruption from religious conflict.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast to the post-Nicaean era, it was a time when the Church was forced to live in a society that was antagonistic toward it and civil authorities were forced to pledge total allegiance to the Roman Emperor. With that in mind, the ante-Nicene era is marked by three main facts, according to Kirk MacGregor:

“First, from the close of the New Testament era until 174 CE, no Christians served in the military or assumed government offices. Second, from 174 until the Edict of Milan (313), the ancient church treated those Christians who played such roles, including previous office-holders who converted, with great suspicion. Third, underlying this ecclesiastical antipathy to state positions exerting compulsion stood a

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<sup>57</sup> Noll, *Turning Points*, 48. Noll may be simplifying the historical events in this case. It is debatable that the council was entirely Constantine’s idea.

<sup>58</sup> Noll, *Turning Points*, 49. We must remember that the Edict of Milan did not make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire; rather it made Christianity a viable option for Roman citizens. It was not until under Emperor Theodosius I, in AD 380 that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

theory of nonviolence hermeneutically derived from Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God."<sup>59</sup>

Although it would be difficult to prove that "no Christians served" in the military during this time period, MacGregor's other points are valid. This does not necessarily mean that everything they said was anti-government or that they were antagonistic toward pagans who served in these roles. Another perspective on the ante-Nicene period is found in Ruyter, who says: "[I]t should be clear that there are two divergent but accepted views in the early Church: a rigorist stance that opposed all military service, and a more lenient stance which hesitantly accepted it under certain conditions."<sup>60</sup> In his article he traces the "hesitant acceptance" view of the early church toward civil/military service in which they allowed such service as long as the governing official did not pledge total allegiance to the state or practice immoral rites of service, etc.

In addition to this debated perspective, consider the letter of First Clement (ca. AD 95-97),<sup>61</sup> which has a prayer in it that is highly commendatory and supportive of the governing authorities. The prayer goes as follows:

"Give harmony and peace to us and to all who dwell on the earth, just as you did to our ancestors when they reverently called upon you in faith and truth, that we may be saved, while we render obedience to your almighty and most excellent name, and to our rulers and governors on earth. You, Master, have given them the power of sovereignty through your majestic and inexpressible might, so that we, acknowledging the glory and honor that you have given them, may be subject to them, resisting your will in nothing. Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, harmony, and stability, so that they may blamelessly administer the government that you have given them. For you, heavenly Master, King of the ages, give to human beings glory

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<sup>59</sup> Kirk MacGregor, "Nonviolence in the Ancient Church and Christian Obedience," *Themelios* 33, no. 1 (2008): 16.

<sup>60</sup> Knut Willem Ruyter, "Pacifism and Military Service in the Early Church," *Cross Currents* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 54-70.

<sup>61</sup> Holmes discusses the possible date and concludes that it was most likely in the last two decades of the first century. He cites the longstanding tradition of a date of 95-97. Michael Holmes, trans. and ed. *Apostolic Fathers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 36.

and honor and authority over the creatures upon the earth. Lord, direct their plans according to what is good and pleasing in your sight, so that by devoutly administering in peace and gentleness the authority that you have given them they may experience your mercy.”<sup>62</sup>

Considering that the church underwent multiple times of persecution around the time of the writing of 1 Clement, it is clear that not all church leaders were antagonistic to government in general. It must be reiterated that the ante-Nicene sources will be different in their interpretations than the post-Nicene interpreters. The reason for including both is that they offer valuable insights into how Christians of 1500+ years ago understood this topic. The sources chosen follow the lead of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture for the book of Romans. In the introduction Gerald Bray notes that Patristic references to Romans 13:1-7 are very scattered and with little context prior to Origen (ca. 185-253). When pre-Origen Patristic sources quote or allude to this passage, they were likely making a point other than interpreting the passage, therefore caution must be used when citing them.<sup>63</sup> We will concentrate on Origen and those who came after him. Next, we will focus on John Chrysostom, who lived in the post-Nicene era (ca. 347-407). He is also a Greek father but he came from the Antiochene school of thought, which saw itself as an alternative to the Alexandrian school, of which Origen was the chief expositor.<sup>64</sup> The third Early Church interpreter we will discuss is Augustine. Perhaps no single theologian has exerted as much influence as Augustine on the Western Church. He was contemporary with Chrysostom but

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<sup>62</sup> 1 Clement 60:4-61:2 in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 127.

<sup>63</sup> Gerald Brey, and Thomas Oden, eds., *Romans*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), xxii.

<sup>64</sup> For a helpful examination of the two schools of thought see, Frances Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis,” *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Alan Hauser and Duane Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), vol. 1. We will not analyze the differences between the two schools in this paper other than to comment on things that need extrapolation for purposes of understanding the viewpoint of one of the interpreters.

was a Latin father. By way of format, there will be brief introductions of each interpreter and then after all three are introduced we will examine their commentaries verse by verse, alternating between the three.

## 2.2. Introduction to Three Early Interpreters

The most voluminous (and probably the most influential) work at this early date in the history of interpretation comes from Origen. It must be noted that Origen is a controversial figure in the spheres of theology and exegesis. The Fifth Ecumenical Council (ca. 553) issued condemnations against some of the teachings ascribed to Origen; however, they may have been better ascribed to his over-zealous followers.<sup>65</sup> His exegesis has been highly influential in the history of interpretation throughout the Medieval Church up to the time of the Reformation. His exegetical method is described as “spiritual exegesis”,<sup>66</sup> which Nassif elaborates as follows: “The controlling hermeneutic that dominated Origen’s approach to Scripture was the interconnectedness of God, his Logos and humanity...Insofar as humans contemplate the Bible’s spiritual message, they fulfill their own human nature as spiritual creatures made in the image of God.”<sup>67</sup> He goes on to explain that Origen promoted the Platonic trichotomy of body, soul and spirit, and further proposed the idea that the Bible has a trichotomy of meaning—historical, figurative (or moral) and spiritual.<sup>68</sup> Most importantly, in order to understand Origen, we must remember that his concerns were primarily pastoral and apologetic. In the words of Anthony Thiselton:

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<sup>65</sup> Bradley Nassif, “Origen,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald McKim (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 789.

<sup>66</sup> Nassif, “Origen,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 793.

<sup>67</sup> Nassif, “Origen,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 794.

<sup>68</sup> Nassif, “Origen,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 794.

“Origen and the Alexandrians were primarily concerned about the *readers*, and the *effect* of the text upon them.”<sup>69</sup>

The next Early Church interpreter for us to examine is the deacon and priest of Antioch, who later became the bishop of Constantinople, John, called Chrysostom (golden-mouth). Margaret Mitchell writes of Chrysostom, “An impassioned preacher and pastor, Chrysostom was one of the most prolific, important and influential exegetes in the early church.”<sup>70</sup> He is known for his strict adherence to the text of Scripture and his reverential esteem for the same. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin looked to Chrysostom for his insights on the Bible and they both apparently poured over his homilies.<sup>71</sup> He was esteemed in the West and had many followers in the East and has been recognized as a mediating influence between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools of thought.<sup>72</sup>

In order to round out our analysis of the Early Church it seemed fitting to end with Augustine. Not because he is considered one of the best exegetes of the early church era but because of his impact on all later generations and for his perspective as a Latin Father of the church. Some consider him to be the last of the Early Church Fathers prior to Medieval Christianity, a proto-Medieval theologian, but this is debated.<sup>73</sup> At any rate, he is a good theologian to discuss as a transitional figure in the life of the Church. His interpretations

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<sup>69</sup> Italics original. Anthony Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 107.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Mitchell, “John Chrysostom,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 571.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, “John Chrysostom,” 575. Calvin’s copy of Chrysostom’s writings has been preserved with his marginal notes included.

<sup>72</sup> Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 113. This is a debated point. For the purpose of this paper, Augustine fits as one of the later post-Nicene interpreters. We do not need to settle the debate over who the last interpreter prior to the Middle Ages really is.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Hill, *History of Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 79.

contributed to many aspects of the theology of the Roman Catholic Church and many of her Protestant offspring. Of Augustine, Richard Norris writes:

Augustine's hermeneutic...was by no means without influence on later thinkers and writers. On the other hand, his exegetical writings themselves were probably not as influential in the Latin west as those of Jerome, Ambrose, or Ambrosiaster....In his exegetical practice there is little that is original: he is, in the end, an heir of the Alexandrian tradition....The distinctive characteristic of his hermeneutical thought is the way in which he ties together exegetical (*modus inveniendi*) and expository (*modus proferendi*) techniques, philosophical reflection on the theory of signs and theological understanding of the communion of human persons with one another and with God—all in a single vision of what is going on in biblical interpretation.<sup>74</sup>

An heir of the Alexandrian tradition, yes, but he was not slavishly dependent on an Origenist<sup>75</sup> way of interpreting the text of Scripture. James Wood writes, “The restless spirit of Augustine was not fully satisfied with allegory. His developing mind could not ignore the claims of the written word. Allegorical interpretation could be but one stage in a process.”<sup>76</sup> He had his own unique flare and interacted quite extensively with rules of biblical interpretation, seen in his *On Christian Doctrine* and the summary given in it of *The Book of Rules* of Tyconius, a Donatist interpreter of Scripture.<sup>77</sup> Augustine was not a specialist in the biblical languages, in fact, he failed to master Greek and never studied Hebrew,<sup>78</sup> but he was a master rhetorician and was completely devoted to the trustworthiness and value of studying Scripture.

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<sup>74</sup> Richard Norris, Jr., “Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period,” *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Alan Hauser and Duane Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1:406-407.

<sup>75</sup> Although, even Origen was not tied strictly to allegorical interpretation. He must be viewed from his situation and his primary concerns in order to properly understand why he expounded the text as he did.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Norris, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 1:399-400.

<sup>78</sup> Norris, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 1:389.



With these things in mind, we will now examine the Early Church’s witness on Romans 13:1-7. The references will descend in order from earliest to latest chronologically for each verse.<sup>79</sup>

### 2.3. Verse by Verse Analysis

We will now examine the three interpreters’ comments on each of the verses of Romans 13:1-7 verse by verse. We will look at each interpreter on the verse before moving to the next one.

#### *Origen (v. 1)*

In the first verse of Romans 13 Origen posits his Platonic trichotomy of flesh, soul and spirit. He does this because his interpretation of the verse distinguishes between levels of believers,<sup>80</sup> those that are carnal, those that “are shackled by pre-occupations”<sup>81</sup> in this life (the soul-ish), and those who are spiritual. Origen states, “It does not seem very commendable to me here that what he commands to be subject to the authorities he calls the soul. For he would never have said, Let every spirit be subject to authority, but ‘every soul.’”<sup>82</sup> He goes on to direct this command to those who have not been made one in spirit with the Lord: “And indeed, if we are such that, having been united with the Lord, we are one spirit with him,<sup>83</sup> we are said to be subject to the Lord. But if we are not yet that way,

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<sup>79</sup> The structure of this section will follow the verse format and use the translation from my annotated translation.

<sup>80</sup> It is unclear whether Origen refers here to believers or people in general. My understanding is that he is speaking to believers (that is who Paul is addressing, after all); Mark Reasoner also takes that view: “Origen makes the point that this command is really for those believers who still have a foothold in the world.” Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 130.

<sup>81</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Thomas Scheck and eds. Thomas Halton et. al. Fathers of the Church 104 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 222.

<sup>82</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 222.

<sup>83</sup> Note 1 Corinthians 6:17.

but there is still a common soul within us that still possesses something of this world...the Apostle lays down precepts for it and tells it to be subjected to the authorities of the world".<sup>84</sup>

Origen predates the monastic movement<sup>85</sup>, but he puts forward an idea that hints in that direction at the end of his comments on this verse: "He who does not have [possessions] has nothing to render to Caesar nor, therefore, what he should subject to the higher authorities. But he who has money or possessions or any worldly preoccupations should listen up: 'Let every soul be subject to the higher authorities.'"<sup>86</sup> This statement, and sentiments like it, paved the way for the monastic movement to begin only about twenty years after the death of Origen with Antony the desert monk (ca. 270), who is thought to be the first.<sup>87</sup> In this exhortation Origen exempts all Christians who are spiritual (i.e., those who do not have their feet planted in this world), from obeying the command. He will elaborate on this later in verse seven, but for now we see that Origen makes a hard distinction between the spiritual and the fleshly. The fleshly and moral (those of middle spirituality, the soulish) are expected to follow Paul's instruction toward temporal rulers, whereas the spiritual are not bound in obedience to them. Origen next answers the question, "What then? Is even that authority that persecutes God's servants, attacks the faith, and subverts religion, from God?"<sup>88</sup> He responds by using the human senses as an illustration of how God gives the gifts of sight, thought and hearing; he then notes that we are held accountable

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<sup>84</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 222.

<sup>85</sup> See Noll, *Turning Points*, 85-86. He was considered an early ascetic, a sort of precursor to monasticism.

<sup>86</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 223.

<sup>87</sup> Noll, *Turning Points*, 86.

<sup>88</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 223.

to God for how we use them. In the same way, “[T]he judgment of God will be just in respect to those who govern the authority they have received in accordance with their own impieties and not in accordance with God’s laws.”<sup>89</sup>

*John Chrysostom (v. 1)*

Chrysostom begins his comments on Romans 13:1 from a very different perspective than did Origen (approximately a century prior). No longer under the black cloud of persecution from the state, Chrysostom speaks out of a situation where the governing authorities brought palpable order and structure, in which the Church was able to flourish. His initial comments are:

Of this subject [Paul] makes much account in other epistles also, setting subjects under their rulers as household servants are under their masters. And this he does to show that it was not for the subversion of the commonwealth that Christ introduced His laws, but for the better ordering of it, and to teach men not to be taking up unnecessary and unprofitable wars.<sup>90</sup>

Christians have enough trouble in this life trying to live faithfully to God without bringing about undue pressure on themselves from the authorities. Somewhat different than Origen, Chrysostom exhorts every person to obey this command of Paul by saying it applies to, “priests, and monks, and not for men of secular occupations only...if thou be an Apostle even, or an Evangelist, or a Prophet, or anything whatsoever, inasmuch as this subjection is not subversive of religion.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 223.

<sup>90</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. B. Morris and W. H. Simcox, ed. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 11 (1876; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 511.

<sup>91</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 511.

The next thing Chrysostom addresses is the issue of whether the “higher powers” is about “individual rulers” or the “thing in itself”.<sup>92</sup> He thinks Paul is referring to the governing authorities *per se*, rather than each particular ruler. Using the concept of marriage from Proverbs 19:14, “It is by the Lord that a man is matched with a woman,”<sup>93</sup> he illustrates how God made marriage in general, not that God puts each individual man and woman together. Since many marriages—that were entered into lawfully—go badly, we cannot attribute each of them to God. In order to preserve peace in the world, God has instituted different levels of honor and subjection.

*Augustine (v. 1)*

On verse one of Romans 13, Augustine goes back to the distinction of physical and spiritual, citing the fact that, as humans, we are both body and soul; therefore we should submit to the temporal authorities in things temporal.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, in things spiritual, we should not submit to temporal authorities in such a way that our submission damages faith. In his own words, “But concerning our spiritual selves, by which we believe in God and are called into his kingdom, we should not submit to any man desiring to destroy that very thing in us through which God deigned to give us eternal life.”<sup>95</sup> This is reminiscent of Origen’s quotation (on verse two below) of Acts 5:29 and the early idea that the apostles allowed civil disobedience when the authorities contradicted God’s revealed will. Augustine says that a Christian “lapses into great error” if he thinks himself inferior to a civil ruler

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<sup>92</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 511.

<sup>93</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 511.

<sup>94</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 41.

<sup>95</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 41.

(*arbitretur*)<sup>96</sup> and submits in such a way as to allow the ruler to authoritatively decide on matters of his faith.

Augustine rounds out his comments on this verse by citing Matthew 22:21, using Jesus as an example of rendering to Caesar what is his (our temporal submission) and to God what is his (our spiritual submission, per Augustine). In so doing, Christians do their part in upholding the “everyday social order” in this life.<sup>97</sup>

*Origen (v. 2)*

The attitude of mistrust toward the governing authorities is palpable in Origen’s commentary. He opens his comments on this verse by saying, “Here [Paul] is not speaking about those authorities that instigate persecutions against the faith; for in such cases one must say, ‘It is necessary to obey God rather than men.’”<sup>98</sup> His quote comes from Acts 5:29 where Peter and the apostles had been arrested for preaching that Jesus is the Christ, and then the Jewish authorities charged them not to preach in Jesus’ name anymore. The quote is their response to the call to submit to the Jewish leaders. Origen’s quotation of Acts 5:29 is a very early use of the idea that civil disobedience can sometimes be warranted. The question to ponder is, when are the authorities commanding something that contradicts God’s commands? Origen uses Paul’s own words from verse 3, “good” and “evil” as guidance for when an authority has crossed that line. If a believer opposes an authority that has not

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<sup>96</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 42-43. Landes translates *arbitretur* as “officer” but it seems the sense is more of a general administrator or ruler.

<sup>97</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 43.

<sup>98</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 223.

crossed the line, then “[he] procures condemnation for himself for the quality of his own deeds.”<sup>99</sup>

*John Chrysostom (v. 2)*

Chrysostom begins his comments on this verse with keen insight into the attitudes of his culture. Knowing that many of his listeners would bristle under the requirements of this command, he comments: “lest the believers should say, You are making us very cheap and despicable, when you put us, who are to enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven, under subjection to rulers, [Paul] shows that it is not to rulers, but to God again that he makes them subject in doing this.”<sup>100</sup> The Christian is assured that he is submitting to God by giving due submission to the authorities that have been put in place by God. Chrysostom points out that Paul intends to instill proper awe in his readers by saying that disobedience to the authorities is disobedience to God. They must understand that to kick against the authorities is to fight with God. Chrysostom takes the view that the judgment mentioned in this verse is also God’s judgment, not just that of the civil authorities.<sup>101</sup>

*Origen (v. 3)*

Origen looks beyond the praise of earthly rulers to the eschatological praise of God at the final judgment. In his own words: “[I]t is certain that on the day of judgment, even on the basis of [human] laws, the one who has not committed anything against the enacted laws will receive praise in God’s presence”.<sup>102</sup> This verse is a perplexing one in Origen’s

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<sup>99</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 224.

<sup>100</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 512.

<sup>101</sup> There were no comments from Augustine on this verse.

<sup>102</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 225.

commentary. On the face it appears that he teaches some version of universal salvation,<sup>103</sup> but it might be that he merely asserts that God will praise people who have obeyed rulers for the good of the moral order. On further reflection, we must remember to whom Origen refers when he speaks about submission to earthly rulers. Unless he has switched his views mid-commentary, Origen would have the carnal and moral “souls” in mind. These are Christians, as we explained in verse one, who still have one foot planted in the world. These are the ones who will receive ultimate praise from God for their contributions to the moral order.

The reason Origen cites for not discussing the praise of earthly authorities is that there was no “tradition for secular authorities to praise those who fail to become criminals.”<sup>104</sup> He again asserts that the spiritual person has no need of these earthly laws because “he who does good, i.e., he who does what is good not out of fear of the law but out of love for the good, no longer lives under the law of the letter but under the law of the Spirit.”<sup>105</sup> This is reminiscent of Paul’s earlier discussion in 7:6 where he says that believers have been released from the law and “we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”<sup>106</sup> Whereas Paul applies it to all believers, Origen applies it to the spiritual Christian.

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<sup>103</sup> Universal salvation is one of the doctrines for which Origen was very controversial. It is unclear whether he really did teach it or not. Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 57.

<sup>104</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 225.

<sup>105</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 226.

<sup>106</sup> ESV.

*John Chrysostom (v. 3)*

Verse three is used by Chrysostom to encourage his listeners. He comforts his audience with the fact that wrath is unnecessary for those who do what is good. In tender words, Chrysostom says, “You see how [Paul] has made him friends with the ruler, by showing that he even praises him from his throne. You see how he has made wrath unmeaning.”<sup>107</sup>

*Augustine (v. 3)*

Perhaps one of his most interesting notes, Augustine hangs his interpretation of this verse on the Latin grammar, stating that the praise for those who do what is good is to be found “either when you win it by your allegiance to God, or when you earn the crown of martyrdom by persecution.”<sup>108</sup> He points to the Latin translation for “you will have praise of him” (*habebis laudem ex illa*)<sup>109</sup> and says that it does not necessarily mean that the ruler is the one doing the praising; if that were the case it would have been translated “the authority will praise you” (*laudabit te potestas*).<sup>110</sup> Unfortunately this is a case where even the Greek can be a bit ambiguous.<sup>111</sup> But it does seem that the Greek probably lends itself to the idea that the authorities are the source of the praise (or approval). All that being said, Augustine’s (and Origen’s) concern is a real one. How can Paul say that the authority will approve of those who do good when he fully knows that sometimes it is the authorities who persecute the

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<sup>107</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 512.

<sup>108</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that *illa* is feminine and likely refers to *potestas*. Points to the idea that the Vulgate translator took it to refer to the authority.

<sup>110</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 42, 43.

<sup>111</sup> See notes in annotated translation.



church for doing what is good (i.e., proclaiming Christ)? Maybe the basis for Augustine's argument is not the soundest, but his point is well taken. No matter what, God will place his mark of approval on all of the faithful in the end, whether they experienced that same courtesy from the temporal authorities or not.

*Origen (v. 4)*

The blunt honesty with which Origen begins his comments on this section is refreshing and telling. Rather than skirting the issue or not commenting on it at all, Origen comes out and says, "Paul troubles [me] by these words"<sup>112</sup> His comments are telling in that he lets us know that this is a hot button issue for him (and the church of his time). The ante-Nicene era of the Church was fraught with many reprobate emperors and other leaders. For Origen, to think of someone like Emperor Decius (under whom he suffered torture and died from complications of his time in prison three years after he was released)<sup>113</sup> as God's servant must have been a hard task.

Origen ends up concluding that since the apostles in Acts 15:23-24 only commanded the Gentile Christians not to participate in anything sacrificed to an idol, to abstain from blood, from anything strangled and from fornication, he concludes that the rest of God's law is fulfilled through the natural laws of the state. "From this it is clear that the worldly judge fulfills the greatest part of God's law. For all the crimes that God wants to be punished, he has willed that they be punished not through the priests and leaders of the churches, but

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<sup>112</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 224.

<sup>113</sup> Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 48.

through the worldly judge.”<sup>114</sup> For that reason, Paul can refer to secular authorities as God’s servants.<sup>115</sup>

*John Chrysostom (v. 4)*

Far from merely stating that his listeners must heed the instructions of this verse, Chrysostom goes into detail about how both the civil authority and church leadership work hand in hand for the good of the people. He calls upon his audience saying: “And consider: I give you counsel to be sober-minded, and [the ruler], by the laws, speaks the same language. I exhort you not to be rapacious and grasping. And he sits in judgment in such cases, and so is a worker together with us, and an assistant to us, and has been commissioned by God for this end.”<sup>116</sup> All that being said, if the audience finds themselves on the wrong side of the law, it was their own wickedness that put them there; and the fear which they experience would be a just consequence.<sup>117</sup>

In order to deal with Paul’s glaring show of force in this verse, Chrysostom addresses the second part of verse four. He points to a soldier standing guard as a terror to evildoers. It is God’s law that the authority enforces, even if he does not know it. He urges his hearers not to shy away from the fact that many good things come from wrongdoers who only do what is right out of fear. In his own words, “there are many who first practiced virtue through the fear of God. For there are a duller sort, whom things to come have not such a

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<sup>114</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 225.

<sup>115</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 224-225.

<sup>116</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 512.

<sup>117</sup> Remember that Chrysostom would have been in a situation where he would have witnessed the laws instituted by Theodotian that increasingly made Christianity the single official religion of the Empire.

hold upon as things present.”<sup>118</sup> The fear of the sword posed by the authorities keeps even wrongdoers in the right, thus showing how they are considered ministers of God.

*Augustine (v. 4)*

The comment from Augustine on this verse is short but pointed. Building on the idea from the previous verse, he proposes that the authority ultimately brings about praise for those who do good, whether the authority means it for their good or not. It might even be “for [the ruler’s] own evil.”<sup>119</sup> This is probably meant to refer to eschatological punishment for the authority who brings persecution upon God’s people.

*Origen (v. 5)*

The necessity of submission thrust forward by Paul is recognized rather simply by Origen. He has propounded a Christian-Platonic vision for how this passage might be understood in the preceding verses, but here he says baldly, “By these things Paul sets the rule for the Church of God not to oppose secular rulers and authorities. Through the quietness and tranquility of life it should practice the work of righteousness and piety.”<sup>120</sup> He surprisingly admits that Paul here seems to be setting a universal rule for the Church. Origen goes on to consider how Christians must make sure that when they are persecuted it is for the right reason. Reasoner comments: “Martyrdom, such as Origen’s father received and Origen himself almost attained, functions as a driving idea...of this passage. He interprets 13:5-6 along the lines of quietism, stating that if Christians disobey the government in such civil matters as tax payment, they might deserve execution by the government, but such

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<sup>118</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 43. Probably better translated as “ill” or “harm” rather than “evil”.

<sup>120</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 226.

execution would not be viewed as a martyrdom.”<sup>121</sup> Origen does not remark on the idea of conscience until the comments for verses 7 and 8. He says, “In the conscience too a person is subjected, since he has something in him that will be accused by conscience.”<sup>122</sup> This comment refers to the carnal person, who still holds onto the many sinful things of this world. That person’s conscience accuses him.

*John Chrysostom (v. 5)*

For this verse Chrysostom hones in on the phrase, “not only for wrath,” and he discusses its meaning. In my translation it is, “not only on account of wrath”. He takes Paul to mean that a person is doing the following things by not subjecting themselves: resisting God, piling up “great evils for thyself, both from God and the rulers,” and also rejecting the many blessings of civil institutions.<sup>123</sup> In Chrysostom’s comments he seems to be taking the view that Paul has in mind wrath from both earthly and heavenly authority. He goes on to point out that removing the blessing of civil institutions would in itself be judgment enough, notwithstanding the active judgment of God that would then follow. The whole world would lie in ruin and the “more powerful [would] devour the weaker.”<sup>124</sup> He closes his comments on this verse by calling his hearers to cultivate a conscientious warm-heartedness toward their “benefactor[s]”, (i.e., the authorities).<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Reasoner, *Romans*, 130.

<sup>122</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 227.

<sup>123</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

<sup>124</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

<sup>125</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513. This is my understanding of his brief phrase, “[O]n this ground thou oughtest to be subject, that thou mayest not seem devoid of conscience and feeling towards the benefactor.”

*Augustine (v. 5)*

Augustine takes this verse to the extent that Christians “should not submit simply to evade the authority’s anger, which you could do deceitfully; but you should be submissive knowing surely in your conscience that you do this out of love for him.”<sup>126</sup> This is done because the Lord has commanded us to do it. Ultimately, we express our love for Christ by willingly (and lovingly) submitting to the authorities.

*Origen (v. 6)*

In the note on verse five this topic was briefly covered, but we will reiterate that Origen was concerned that Christians suffer for a worthy cause, not because they were disobeying the call to pay taxes or some other minor civil matter. In his own words, “if we supposed that believers in Christ are not subject to secular authorities, that they do not have to pay taxes...would not the weapons of leaders and rulers deservedly turn against them? Would [such Christians] not make them justified persecutors, but themselves guilty?”<sup>127</sup> What is the point of suffering at the hands of the authorities if it is not going to bring some reward from God? Suffering because of the confession of faith is a worthy cause, not because a person wants to thumb his nose at the existing powers.

*John Chrysostom (v. 6)*

Probably his most helpful passage on this section, Chrysostom makes a few points that uncover the genius of Paul’s logic. It had been somewhat perplexing to me why Paul would use the idea of taxation to prove his point, since there are a multitude of other things he could have held up as an example of the benefits of the state; but Chrysostom ably

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<sup>126</sup> Augustine, *On Romans*, 43.

<sup>127</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 226.

reveals the intention of Paul in this verse. Unable to improve on his wording, we will let him speak for himself:

For that thou art benefited by [the authority]...thou bearest witness thyself, by paying him a salary. Observe the wisdom and judgment of the blessed Paul. For that which seemed to be burdensome and annoying—the system of imposts—this he turns into a proof of their care for men. What is the reason, he means, that we pay tribute to a king? Is it not as providing for us? And yet we should not have paid it unless we had known in the first instance that we were gainers from this superintendence.<sup>128</sup>

No doubt, the work of ecclesiastical administration must have helped Chrysostom to see the toil which the civil authorities must exert in order to maintain order and peace. Paul again asserts that this system is set by God's decree. Chrysostom adds, "Then to show the pains [the authorities] take, and their hard life, [Paul] proceeds, 'Waiting continually upon this very thing.' For this is their life, this their business, that thou mayest enjoy peace."<sup>129</sup> He elaborates on this verse by citing 1 Timothy 2:1-2 and urges his audience to go beyond the mere paying of taxes and to pray for the authorities. He then finishes his comments by using the old logic; abuse does not negate proper use.

*Origen (v. 7)*

Interestingly, Origen includes verse 8 along with this verse in the quotation. Most likely this is because Paul uses the same root (ὄφειλ-) for the noun in verse 7 as the verb in verse 8, thus connecting the passages. One of the best reasons for reading ancient commentators is in order to get their sense of the flow of the biblical text. They were much closer to the literary world of the New Testament, and they even spoke its language as their

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<sup>128</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

<sup>129</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

own native tongue. Origen was in tune with Paul's literary genius in a way that modern translators might miss.

With an interesting turn of thought, Origen instructs his readers that to those who are spiritual the only tax they must pay is the one owed to the Lord. Having given up most of his worldly possessions and committing himself completely to the work of study, writing and teaching, Origen thought of himself—and others like him—as tilling the Lord's vineyard. That being the case, he comments: "For if we till the Lord's vineyard and cultivate the true vine, who is Christ, within us, we do not pay taxes from that vineyard to the ministers of the world, but we return fruits in time to the Lord himself."<sup>130</sup> In order to deal with the plain meaning of this text, Origen points out that even Jesus paid taxes to the earthly rulers. He cites Matthew 17:24-27 and notes that the Lord did so, not because he owed anything to the earthly rulers, but so as not to be a stumbling block.<sup>131</sup> He puts all the spiritual people in the same category.

*John Chrysostom (v. 7)*

My comments at the beginning of Origen's exegesis of this passage are applicable here as well. Linking up the end of verse 7 with the beginning of verse 8, Chrysostom sees the grammatical connection between the two. He addresses the question, why does Paul instruct the church to fear the authorities here but in verse 3 show us how we ought to live in order to not have fear of them? He believes the fear spoken of in this verse is exceeding respect, not the fear "which comes from a bad conscience".<sup>132</sup> He goes on to show the

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<sup>130</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 227.

<sup>131</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 228.

<sup>132</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513.

reason for the use of ἀπόδοτε: “[It] is not ‘give,’ that he says, but ‘render’ (or ‘give back’), and then adds to it, the ‘dues.’ For it is not a favor that you confer by so doing, since the thing is matter of due.”<sup>133</sup>

Contrary to Origen, Chrysostom counsels his audience not to think of themselves as lowering their standards by showing honor to the authorities. He proposes an early version of inaugurated eschatology in this section. He reminds his audience that their time is not yet here, but in the future they will be revealed for who they truly are, “when thou shalt appear brighter than all.”<sup>134</sup> But for now their true identity as the children of God is hidden in Christ. They do not debase themselves by properly honoring the authorities, especially in a time (Chrysostom’s era) when the authorities are friendly toward Christianity.<sup>135</sup>

#### **2.4. Early Church Conclusions**

The main findings from this chapter are the following:

- Government service was viewed with suspicion or completely disallowed in the ante-Nicene church, whereas post-Nicene Christianity was friendlier (even laudatory) toward governmental service.
- By using Platonic philosophy in his hermeneutical method, Origen exempts the “spiritual” from full obedience to the governing authorities. His ante-Nicene perspective jives with the above point that governmental service was viewed with suspicion. Origen also puts the responsibility of executing justice on the authorities, who must rule with equity or else be judged by God. Augustine goes along with

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<sup>133</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 513-514.

<sup>134</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 514.

<sup>135</sup> There are no comments from Augustine on this last verse.



Origen's Platonic dualism in this verse and says that Christians should not submit to the governing authorities in things spiritual. He also puts the onus of executing justice on the shoulders of the authorities.

- Origen proposes a very early theory of civil disobedience when the governing authorities require something that is contrary to God's will. Christians must evaluate their civil duties based upon what is good and evil. If they disobey a good command from the governing authorities then they "procure condemnation" for themselves. Chrysostom views the judgment as that of God, not the governing authorities. Augustine promotes the idea of civil disobedience as well.
- Origen views the praise of verse 3 as eschatological praise from God. Augustine goes along with Origen on this point. Chrysostom views the praise as that of the governing authorities.
- Origen admits that Paul must be setting forth a universal rule for the Church with this passage. He exhorts Christians to submit to the governing authorities in order to be able to live a quiet and tranquil life.
- Origen urges Christians to suffer for a worthy cause (i.e., only disobey the authorities when they are certainly requiring something contrary to God's will). Chrysostom seems to propose the interpretation that the wrath in this passage is that of the authorities and God.
- In this chapter the argument for or against corporal punishment from the authorities is somewhat inferred. There were no comments from any of the three interpreters that challenged the right of the authorities to punish with force those who do evil. They only required them to do so with equity.

- Paying taxes is a primary example of how one must submit to the authorities.

According to Chrysostom, taxes are a tangible means of providing for the proper administration of government, which, in turn provides for society.

- Origen makes an early argument in favor of the Pauline authorship of this passage (and its original inclusion in the letter to the Romans) when he includes verse 8 along with his comments on verse seven. He links them by the vocabulary of obligation. Chrysostom also makes this vocabulary connection.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION ON ROMANS 13:1-7**  
**MEDIEVAL CHURCH**

An entire chapter could be written on when the Medieval era (also called the Middle Ages) officially began. That would take us far afield from the focus of this paper, so for our purposes we will assume that it began around AD 500, soon after the fall of Rome, and continued until the beginning of the Reformation, soon after AD 1500.<sup>136</sup>

**3.1. Introduction to Three Medieval Interpreters**

The format of this chapter will be to focus on three medieval interpreters, Peter Abelard, William of St. Thierry, and Nicholas of Lyra. Each one's thoughts will be considered in a verse-by-verse format, like in Chapter 2. Insights from each one will be examined, but very little time will be spent revisiting insights that are essentially redundant articulations of the interpreters of the previous era. The thoughts of the previous era's interpreters were elaborated on in more detail due to the fact that they were original to them. The reasons for choosing these three interpreters out of the many possible candidates are: they are squarely centered in the Middle Ages, which leaves little to doubt their medieval perspective on the passage; they represent the western segment of the Church and, therefore, the further unfolding of the earlier interpretive history of which we are a part; they each have extensive commentaries on this passage of Romans, thus giving us the

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<sup>136</sup> This rough time frame is supported in Noll, *Turning Points*, 84; and Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 124 ff.

opportunity to examine their interpretations; their writings on this passage are available in English;<sup>137</sup> lastly, they represent different threads of thought from the Medieval Church.

*Peter Abelard*

Abelard (ca. 1079-1142) is one of the more colorful figures from the pages of Church history. An academic genius, he is considered the primary person responsible for making Paris a center of intellectual activity.<sup>138</sup> But his personal life has also been the subject of much scandal due to his infamous love affair with Heloise. Somewhat ironically, one of the main things Abelard is known for is his emphasis on love in the atonement of Christ. He is regarded as the father of the subjective theories of the atonement.<sup>139</sup> More to the point of this paper, Abelard spent much of his time discussing biblical interpretation.<sup>140</sup> In the introduction of Abelard's commentary on Romans, Cartwright discusses the exegetical methods employed by Abelard:

Abelard's methods of expounding Romans are one of the distinguishing features of this commentary. He uses both traditional exegetical methods and relatively new ones....These methods include everything from his citation of the text of Romans to his use of dialectics and questions as means of resolving difficulties within the text.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Aquinas has a commentary on Romans, but I was unable to find it in English, although I have read that it will be made available soon; but fortunately, Nicholas of Lyra depended heavily on Aquinas for his work, giving us a similar interpretive approach as Aquinas.

<sup>138</sup> Lorna Shoemaker, "Peter Abelard," *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald McKim (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 824.

<sup>139</sup> Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 145-147.

<sup>140</sup> Shoemaker, "Peter Abelard," *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 824.

<sup>141</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Gregory LaNave, et al., trans. Steven Cartwright, *Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 12:15.

Abelard's citations of Scripture were different than the typical commentary format of his day in that he only cited a brief section of a passage before commenting on it. He was able to analyze each phrase of the text more thoroughly with this method.<sup>142</sup>

The medieval threefold scheme of the senses of Scripture guided Abelard's interpretation in his commentary, but references to the moral and spiritual senses were very limited—Cartwright cites only one time where Abelard used the moral sense of a passage.<sup>143</sup> As a rule, Abelard was more interested in discerning the literal sense of the text. For that reason, this commentary is a good sample of the medieval era and what one of its chief academics gleaned from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

*William of St. Thierry*

William (ca. AD 1080- 1148) is not known for his colorful escapades or academic genius, rather, he is known for his committed life of monasticism and his emphasis on the centrality of divine grace. Breaking from normal monastic tradition of the day, William wrote a commentary on the letter of Romans rather than the Song of Solomon.<sup>144</sup> William was not interested in bringing novel ideas to the table in his commentary, rather he assured his readers that it would be acceptable because he relied upon the Fathers of the Church—primarily Origen and Augustine.<sup>145</sup> That being said, William does bring some novel elements (maybe anomalies) of his own; for example, he favors the Greek text over the Vulgate.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 15-16.

<sup>143</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 22.

<sup>144</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. John D. Anderson, trans. John Baptist Hasbrouck, Cistercian Fathers Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 27:4.

<sup>145</sup> Ian Levy, et al., eds., *Letter to the Romans*, Bible in Medieval Tradition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 26-27.

<sup>146</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 4.

William wrote his commentary in part as a response to Peter Abelard's commentary, and he collaborated in the work with his good friend St. Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>147</sup>

One thing that stands out with this commentary is that the source material for the commentary comes from what is believed to be the original handwriting of the author himself.<sup>148</sup> It might possibly be one of the earliest manuscripts for which we have the author's own hand still extant. This is usually a problem in the textual criticism of Medieval authors because there are so few copies of manuscripts of extra-biblical ecclesiastical writings. This commentary would have very little debate surrounding it because we might have the first-generation copy.

Besides his misgivings with Peter Abelard's commentary, William's main reason for writing his commentary are "that the joy of contemplating God's grace and glory and the need that these things be preached," were what compelled him to write.<sup>149</sup> The commentary has a contemplative feel about it, almost like it exudes the very aura of the monastery in its pages. It should be taken for what William intended it to be, an anchor of traditional Catholic orthodoxy.

### *Nicholas of Lyra*

Our final stop in the medieval church, Nicholas of Lyra, lived in the latter part of the middle ages (ca. AD 1270-1349), and represents the full flowering of orthodox medieval thought. He was a Franciscan who wrote comments on most of the Bible following the postill method of commentary.<sup>150</sup> "[Nicholas'] commentary is not famous in the long

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<sup>147</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 26.

<sup>148</sup> William, *Romans*, 4-6.

<sup>149</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 27.

<sup>150</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 50.

tradition of Romans commentaries, but it is influential because of its encyclopedic nature and balance...In a postill the text is followed immediately by brief explanatory comments, often not in complete sentences.”<sup>151</sup> Nicholas is known for his developments with the double-literal interpretation of Scripture; however, this is not pertinent to our passage since Paul does not directly quote any Hebrew Scriptures in it. Not a stand out figure for his Romans commentary because of originality, rather because of his conservatism, this exegete is a good pick for our discussion because he falls in the line of the interpreters of the church down through the ages. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are two of his favorite commentators. Nicholas will give us a good grasp of how orthodox Catholic theologians viewed this passage toward the latter parts of the Middle Ages.

### **3.2. Verse by Verse Analysis**

We will now examine the three interpreters’ comments on each of the verses of Romans 13:1-7, verse by verse. Each interpreter will be examined before moving to the next verse.

*Peter Abelard (v. 1)*

“Every person” is translated “every soul” in the commentary, and Abelard takes it to mean “every rational creature”.<sup>152</sup> For “be subject” he asserts that it means “obey willingly”.<sup>153</sup> Abelard depends heavily on Origen in this commentary. As mentioned before, we will not make note of many of the comments which seem to be reiterations of Origen or one of the Ancient Fathers. Abelard comments that God allows sins in rulers in order to

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<sup>151</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 50.

<sup>152</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 343.

<sup>153</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 344.

accomplish his will, although he himself does not establish them.<sup>154</sup> He cites the devil's persecution of Job as an example of this idea. Abelard's concept of God's permissive and decretive will is a development not seen in the earlier commentaries.

*William of St. Thierry (v. 1)*

William asserts that both nurture and temptation come from the authorities. Which one we experience depends on the moral goodness or baseness of the authority. In his words: "If those in power are good, they nurture us; if they are evil, they tempt us. But let us love to be nurtured and let us not avoid being tempted. For both are from God. Therefore, let us be subject to God and not as to men."<sup>155</sup> No matter what we experience, we are responsible to respond out of a sense that either one comes from the hand of God for our ultimate good; or in William's words, "so that the patience of the just can be proved".<sup>156</sup> Not only is it for the good of the righteous but it is also for the punishment of the evil. Finally, William reminds rulers that they owe love to those under their power just as much as subjects owe love to their rulers. In his commentary, William directly addresses his readers in the comments, almost like he is using the written word as a medium of his preaching.

*Nicholas of Lyra (v. 1)*

Nicholas compares the relationship between the stars and the elements, the higher classes of angel and the lower, to that of human relations in society. He says, "every person must be wholly governed by the more worthy part...to the prelates in spiritual affairs and the earthly princes in temporal affairs."<sup>157</sup> He refers to the governing authorities as "the

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<sup>154</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 344.

<sup>155</sup> William of S Thierry, *Romans*, 237-238.

<sup>156</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 238.

<sup>157</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 268.



superior” and the governed as “the inferior”. Nicholas makes a clean distinction between the spiritual authorities and the civil authorities.

*Peter Abelard (v. 2)*

Using “power” instead of “authority” and “damnation” instead of “judgment”,

Abelard comments thus:

“[They] deserve to be condemned for [resisting], because they resist God rather than man. It is one thing to resist the tyranny of an evil ruler, and another thing to resist his just power, which he received from God. For when he does something through violence that does not pertain to his power and rule, truly when we resist him in this, we oppose his tyranny more than his power, the man, namely, rather than God, because he claims this wrongly through himself; he does not do this through God. But when we resist him in these things for which he was legitimately established, then we infringe on his power.”<sup>158</sup>

His comments on 13:2 are almost completely quoted here because this is a new development in the thinking on this verse. Whereas Origen gave an opportunity for exceptions to obedience, Abelard distinguishes between the right operation of a ruler and wrongful abuse of authority as a time when it is right to oppose authority. When tyrannical authority is opposed, that opposition is directed at the wrongful acts of the tyrant, not his God-ordained office *per se*.

*William of St Thierry (v. 2)*

William’s comments are brief on this verse. He simply says: “However, if the power commands what God prohibits, then, Christian, spurn power...For it threatens punishment, but God threatens hell.”<sup>159</sup> No elaborate distinctions like Abelard on this verse, William simply restates something the Church had always affirmed. It is better to fear God than man.

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<sup>158</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 344-345.

<sup>159</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 238.

*Nicholas of Lyra (v. 2)*

In an unexpected turn of proof-texting, Nicholas says, “Therefore they who resist...will incur judgment, whence the Savior says, in Luke 10:16, ‘They who reject you reject me.’ The same applies in temporal affairs in which people are punished in body or in material possessions.”<sup>160</sup> Apparently he understands rejection of the governing authorities as equivalent to outright rejection of the Lord.

*Peter Abelard (v. 3)*

Concisely commenting on this verse, Abelard says, “Do good, and by sparing you [the ruler] will approve your works, and he will bear witness that you act well.”<sup>161</sup> Unlike Origen, Abelard sees this verse referring to the temporal authorities rather than God. This would agree with our conclusion in the discussion on Augustine’s interpretation of this verse. Rather than explicit praise, Abelard thinks the mere fact that an authority leaves one alone is praise enough.

*William of St. Thierry (v. 3)*

Taking the source of praise to be the temporal authority, William breaks with Origen and Augustine and interprets this verse in line with Chrysostom. He notes that whether it is praise or slaying which we receive from the authorities, we ultimately receive their praise either way. God’s stamp of approval is upon us whether we live with the approval of the authorities or with their judgment because of our commitment to the Lord.

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<sup>160</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 269.

<sup>161</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

*Peter Abelard (v. 4)*

A couple points of note stand out in these brief comments by Abelard. First, he sees Paul making reference to the right of authorities to carry out capital punishment; second, he thinks the wrath carried out by the authority is against the evildoer's misdeeds rather than his person (an early version of the saying, "hate the sin not the sinner").<sup>162</sup> On capital punishment, he says, "not without reason is [the authority] instructed to kill, because...he serves God in this, who established him for this purpose: that he may punish evil."<sup>163</sup> Not only does Abelard see permission granted to the authorities to carry out capital punishment, he sees a positive instruction to do so in this verse.

On the second idea, Abelard says, the authority carries out wrath "against [the evildoer's] malice rather than against his substance."<sup>164</sup> This shows that Abelard takes Paul to mean that the judgment is from the temporal authorities, not God. He also makes a distinction between deeds and substance in the evildoer.

*William of St. Thierry (v. 4)*

The only thing of note that William says is "There is a proper time to fear; namely, when a bad conscience deserves punishment. For it is bad to sin, but much worse not to fear punishment when one is in the wrong."<sup>165</sup> Otherwise he restates concepts that have been previously discussed, including the idea that secular judges carry out the greater part of God's law so that the prelates of the church do not have to punish wrongdoers.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

<sup>163</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

<sup>164</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

<sup>165</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 238.

<sup>166</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 238.

*Nicholas of Lyra (v. 4)*

Simply put, Nicholas sees the double-edged sword of the Lord wielded by both civil authorities (the “material sword”) and ecclesiastical authorities (the “spiritual” sword).<sup>167</sup>

*Peter Abelard (v. 5)*

In this verse, Abelard calls on his readers to obey the governing authorities as if they are obeying God himself. He reminds us that they are the ministers of God. Obedience is expedient because by obeying those in authority wrath is avoided. Positively, obedience recognizes that the authorities perform the task of restraining malice.<sup>168</sup>

*William of St. Thierry (v. 5)*

William understands the reference to conscience as a reference to one’s own conscience. He says, “[H]e who so orders so wills, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake, not only to avoid offending men, but also to have a good conscience toward God who so ordained.”<sup>169</sup>

*Peter Abelard (v. 6)*

Departing from Origen, Abelard takes a practical view of this verse and sees Paul commenting on the fact that taxes cover the costs involved in running the government. In his own words, “because they receive taxes, they are able to fulfill their duty, which they by no means could exercise without these payments, and therefore, because you are conscious of this or because in this way they serve God as soldiers.”<sup>170</sup> The reference to soldiers is an

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<sup>167</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 269.

<sup>168</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

<sup>169</sup> William of St Thierry, *Romans*, 239. Nicholas of Lyra adds nothing substantial to v. 5, therefore no comments are included from him.

<sup>170</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 345.

uncommon take on this verse; however, it does bring to mind the preparation and training involved in performing the duties of a soldier. The phrase, “continually attending to this very thing,” might reference the collection of taxes, which is something enforced by soldiers and/or police.

*William of St. Thierry (v. 6)*

William’s comments on this verse are quoted in the entirety:

Therefore, by the authority of the Lord himself, since you are children and free, you do [not] pay tribute, but you give it, since you will receive it again from him whose precept and example in this matter you hold. For they are ministers of God, serving unto this purpose, and servants should be paid their salaries. Therefore, the Lord prescribed that the ministers of the gospel live from the gospel.<sup>171</sup>

Once again, we have an interpreter making a point about giving rather than paying tribute. Presumably this idea is the same that can be traced back to the early church where Origen (on verse seven) commented in a similar vein. At the end of his comments, William puts civil servants on the same plane as ecclesiastical servants.

*Nicholas of Lyra (v. 6)*

Briefly, Nicholas comments that the governing authorities render their service “to God and to all persons preserving the republic.”<sup>172</sup>

*Peter Abelard (v. 7)*

In this instance, Abelard quotes Origen and Haymo on the distinctions between the types of tributes listed by Paul. Haymo goes into detail about how Romulus divided the people of Rome into senators, soldiers and farmers and taxed accordingly.<sup>173</sup> At the end of

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<sup>171</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Romans*, 239.

<sup>172</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 269.

<sup>173</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 346.

his comments on this verse, he makes an intriguing note about how to show proper fear to those in authority: “Fear should especially be shown to angry people in power, lest the anger of the one aroused punish more than is fitting. The gentle should be more greatly honored to the extent that patience makes them more worthy and beneficent.”<sup>174</sup> Honor should always been given to one in authority but the level of honor is contingent upon the exercise of that authority.

*William of St. Thierry (v. 7)*

William’s logic in this passage is somewhat difficult to follow. His first point is that Paul addresses this command (give to all their due) to Christians who thought they were exempt from contributing to the public welfare. By contributing “you faithfully cause to be your debtor in obedience him to whom you do not refuse to be debtors.”<sup>175</sup> William goes on to categorize unwillingness to pay taxes as a violation of the laws of hospitality, since we are strangers on the earth only passing through.

In a flourish of colorful language, William hits hard on the idea of showing proper respect for the governing authorities. He says: “It is stupid madness to want to fear no one because of an arrogant holiness, and it is the shallowest sort of pride to wish to honor no one. Fear is owed to high power, honor is owed to humble service, and love to benevolence.”<sup>176</sup> His parsing of the three types of respect and the reasons for them is helpful for us to think about. Power in and of itself ought to be feared because of the consequences that might follow from the exercise of that power. A powerful person who exercises that

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<sup>174</sup> Abelard, *Romans*, 346.

<sup>175</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Romans*, 239.

<sup>176</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Romans*, 239.

power with humility deserves to be honored. And a powerful person who is also benevolent ought to receive the love of those under his authority.

*Nicholas of Lyra (v. 7)*

Nicholas views the first debt as being due to the princes; it is “a tax which is paid for the whole country.”<sup>177</sup> The second is like a toll, such as one would pay to a toll keeper. The third is respect, which should be given to a lord. The final due is honor which is to be given to “the virtuous and dignified who are the custodians of virtue.”<sup>178</sup>

### **3.3. Medieval Church Conclusions**

Many of the themes begun in Origen, Chrysostom and Augustine carry right through to the end of the Middle Ages. Abelard depends heavily on Origen and promotes his Platonic ideas in his comments (i.e., “rational creature” for “every person”).

- Abelard proposes a new idea with the concept of the divine decreative vs. permissive will in ordaining civil authorities.
- Nicholas makes a hard distinction between the sacred and secular authorities.
- Abelard distinguishes between the right operation of a ruler’s power vs. tyrannical abuse of power. This is a development in the idea of civil disobedience. William supports the concept of civil disobedience when the governing authorities command what God prohibits. Tyranny is to be opposed, whereas proper exercise of power is to be obeyed.
- Abelard and William both view the praise of verse 3 as the praise of the governing authorities. Noteworthy is the comment on verse 4, where Abelard supports the

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<sup>177</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 269.

<sup>178</sup> Levy, *Romans*, 269.

concept of capital punishment as a legitimate exercise of governmental power.

Nicholas grants that civil authorities have the right to punish physically and materially, whereas the sacred authorities do so spiritually.

- Abelard also sees the judgment as coming from the governing authorities against the evildoer's misdeeds, not God against the evildoers *per se*.
- William puts civil authorities on the same plane as ecclesiastical authorities for verse 6, and in verse seven he claims that Christians who do not pay taxes are inhospitable since we are strangers on earth only passing through. Nicholas affirms that the governing authorities render their service to God and the people.
- All three commentators make note of the idea that there are different levels of honor that should be shown to those in authority.



**CHAPTER 4**  
**HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 13:1-7**  
**REFORMATION CHURCH**

The beginning of the Protestant Reformation could be traced back to John Wycliffe or Jan Hus, but for our purposes we will use the most widely accepted figure for the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther. Deciding which interpreter to evaluate after Luther was not difficult for someone standing in the Presbyterian tradition. John Calvin was an obvious pick because of his voluminous commenting on Scripture. Beyond these two interpreters there was little by way of commentary from the Anabaptist tradition of the Reformation era. Roman Catholic interpreters added little beyond what has already been observed from the Medieval chapter of this paper.

**4.1. Introduction to Two Reformation Interpreters**

This chapter will focus only on Luther and Calvin's commentaries on the passage. The writer acknowledges the limitations this imposes on deep interaction with their views, but the purpose of the paper and limitations on space constrain our focus to the commentaries. Interaction with secondary and other primary materials on this topic would take us far afield. Since few famous commentaries from Anabaptist reformers remain in common use, we shall focus this chapter on the Lutheran and Reformed perspectives with Luther and Calvin. In the final section of commentary (in a later chapter of this paper) the Anabaptist tradition will be analyzed, especially for their discussion of pacifism in this passage of Scripture.

### *Luther*

Luther was born in AD 1483 and died in 1546. He came on the world stage at a time when a new technology was invented that would revolutionize the way information spread. The printing press had only recently been put to use when Luther wrote his controversial treatises that sparked debate and revolution throughout Germany and beyond. One of his most famous writings is his *95 Theses*, his collections of discussions around the dinner table to his students referred to as his *Tabletalks*, and his commentaries on books of the Bible. He wrote his Romans commentary as a set of lectures to his students at the University of Wittenberg about two years prior to the debate over indulgences seen in his *95 Theses*. His interpretations in the Romans commentary are, thus, a useful peek into that pivotal time period just before the Reformation had begun in full force. Luther's understanding of Scripture in this period was still very much Roman Catholic, but his early commentary also shows departure from the Medieval Roman Catholic tradition in important ways. After Luther wrote this commentary, he sought the protection of the civil magistrate, Elector Frederick, from the Holy Roman Emperor, which eventually led to the Thirty Years War. This would have impacted his later writings on the topic, but for our purposes and for sake of space his early commentary will be the focus.

### *Calvin*

The other Reformation interpreter we will analyze is John Calvin, the great Geneva Reformer. He is sometimes considered the consolidator of the Reformation, while Luther is considered the hammer of the Reformation. Calvin is known for his three main types of works, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his commentaries, and his sermons. We will focus on his commentary, although his *Institutes* is also a fine place to look for guidance on issues related to the role of the governing authorities in society. Known for his brevity, the

commentary on Romans is actually quite meaty compared to Luther's. Calvin's style was to comment on Scripture verse by verse, even in his sermons and Bible studies for the laity of Geneva.<sup>179</sup> His goal was to uncover the mind of the inspired author of the text.<sup>180</sup> His method was to follow a literal historical-grammatical hermeneutic, which improved upon Medieval exegetes and built upon the interpretations of the ancient fathers. Calvin is an exegete *sine qua non* in the history of biblical interpretation, and his commentary on Romans is essential reading for anyone in the Protestant tradition studying Romans. Surely his work of interacting with the city council of Geneva and the politics of the day would have weighed on his mind while he wrote his commentary on Romans.

#### 4.2. Verse by Verse Analysis

This chapter will follow the same format as previous chapters; there will be a verse cited and then each commentator will be discussed on that verse.

##### *Luther (v. 1)*

According to Luther, even wicked rulers' governmental powers are good *per se*.<sup>181</sup> He cites John 19:11, which says, "Jesus answered [Pilate], 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.'"<sup>182</sup> Luther notes that the previous chapter of Romans addresses the need for Christians to respect the institution of the Church, whereas this chapter addresses the need for them to respect the institution of the State.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Barbara Pitkin, "John Calvin and the Interpretation of the Bible," *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Alan Hauser and Duane Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:352.

<sup>180</sup> Pitkin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 2:354.

<sup>181</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 179.

<sup>182</sup> ESV.

<sup>183</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 180.

The first clause of this verse receives uncertain commentary from Luther.<sup>184</sup> He says, “Is there a hidden meaning in the use of ‘every soul’ for ‘every person’? Perhaps [Paul] means to stress the thought that Christians must show a sincere subjection that comes from the heart.”<sup>185</sup> He goes on to assert that Christians are dual beings—spirit and body, but also says that the soul is between the spirit and body. In the spirit, the Christian is lord of all things, and by faith he makes everything subservient to his salvation, not being ruled by this world or trusting in it. Luther then says that the soul and spirit are the same, and by being subject to “every ordinance of man” the soul “obeys God and desires the same as God.”<sup>186</sup> By his submission to the temporal powers, the Christian overcomes the world.

The second clause of this verse receives repeated assertions from Luther that boil down to this one statement: “Wherever there is governmental power, there it is instituted by God. That is, wherever governments exist, they are ordained solely by God.”<sup>187</sup> He qualifies that with the idea that abuse of power does not negate its legitimacy any more than theft negates the proper use of money.<sup>188</sup>

### *Calvin (v. 1)*

The reason Calvin believes that Paul wrote this section was because he wanted to dispel any thoughts that Christian liberty cannot be exercised under the yoke of earthly rulers. According to Calvin, “Paul was induced to establish, with greater care than usual, the

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<sup>184</sup> Reasoner says that Luther uses Origen’s comments as a spring board but ends up coming to a very different conclusion than Origen; see Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle*, 135.

<sup>185</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 180.

<sup>186</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 181.

<sup>187</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 181.

<sup>188</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 181.

authority of magistrates.”<sup>189</sup> On the term “higher powers” Calvin comments, “[They are] not the supreme, who possess the chief authority, but such as excel other men.”<sup>190</sup> In other words, Paul refers to any civil authority, no matter how local or imperial.

No one is immune from this command. In the term, “every soul”, Calvin sees that Paul “removes every exception, lest any one should claim an immunity from the common duty of obedience.”<sup>191</sup> The governing authorities have been placed where they are by the Lord’s hand.

Calvin asserts the divine ordination of civil magistrates when he says:

“For since it pleases God thus to govern the world, he who attempts to invert the order of God, and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on war with him. Understand further, that powers are from God...because he has appointed them for the legitimate and just government of the world. For though tyrannies and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder...are not an ordained government; yet the right of government is ordained by God for the wellbeing of mankind...hence the Apostle commands us willingly and cheerfully to respect and honor the right and authority of magistrates, as useful to men.”<sup>192</sup>

The only qualification Calvin makes is that tyranny and unjust exercise of power are not ordained by God, but that does not negate the divine right for government to rule over men.

*Calvin (v. 2)*<sup>193</sup>

On the phrase “those who oppose” Calvin equates opposition to the governing authorities with opposition to God’s providence. “Let us then beware, lest we incur this

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<sup>189</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 478.

<sup>190</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 478.

<sup>191</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 478.

<sup>192</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 478-479.

<sup>193</sup> There are no comments from Luther on verse 2.

denunciation.”<sup>194</sup> He also understands the judgment to be two-fold; both that of the temporal authorities and that of God.

*Luther (v. 3)*

Luther briefly comments on this verse by saying: “They (the rulers) deter us not from good works...but from evil. That justifies governments and laudably commends them. Why should we despise rulers, even if (by this) we would not displease God?”<sup>195</sup> Luther’s intent in these words is to say that even if God did not care one way or the other, it makes sense for us to respect governments for the mere fact that they commend what is good and deter what is evil.

*Calvin (v. 3)*

Commenting on this verse at length, Calvin puts the words of Paul into proper perspective: “[Paul] now commends to us obedience to princes on the ground of utility...Now, the utility is this, --that the Lord has designed in this way to provide for the tranquility of the good, and to restrain the waywardness of the wicked.”<sup>196</sup> His interpretation of this passage is reminiscent of Chrysostom’s comments for 13:5. Calvin, like Chrysostom, goes on to bring the reader to the logical conclusion of a world without civil authorities: “[A]ll things would come to an entire confusion. Since then this is the only remedy by which mankind can be preserved from destruction, it ought to be carefully observed by us, unless we wish to avow ourselves as the public enemies of the human race.”<sup>197</sup> The conclusion is clear—we must show proper respect and obedience to the governing authorities. In Calvin’s

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<sup>194</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 479.

<sup>195</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 181.

<sup>196</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 480.

<sup>197</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 480.

view, the only reason someone would want to shake off the authority of magistrates is because that person is of “evil conscience” and is prone to “devising some mischief” that cannot tolerate someone in authority holding them accountable.<sup>198</sup> He even goes so far as to say that evil princes are the Lord’s “scourge to punish the sins of the people,” for which they have no one to blame but themselves; but the natural order of things is for the authorities to bless those who do good.<sup>199</sup> That being said, Calvin makes a point to argue that even evil authorities serve a good purpose: “princes do never so far abuse their power, by harassing the good and innocent, that they do not retain in their tyranny some kind of just government: there can then be no tyranny which does not in some respects assist in consolidating the society of men.”<sup>200</sup>

Calvin’s final note on this verse is helpful, and it is the first time I have encountered the idea in my readings. He refers us to philosophers who, along with Paul, have proposed the two things which make for a well ordered commonwealth: reward for the good and punishment for the wicked.<sup>201</sup>

#### *Luther (v. 4)*

This is the last verse that Luther explicitly makes comment on in his commentary. He spends the rest of his time until verse eight contradicting the idea of works righteousness and discussing Christian liberty. His comments on verse four are brief: “Even if evil persons (rulers) do not desire to serve God, He directs all things in such a way that the good which

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<sup>198</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 480.

<sup>199</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 480.

<sup>200</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 480. This is admittedly a stretch when one thinks of the reigns of men like Adolph Hitler, but even a situation like Nazi Germany is preferable to anarchy.

<sup>201</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 481.

they possess and which they misuse...must serve Him.”<sup>202</sup> These words echo Paul’s words in Romans 8:28 that everything works for the good of those who love God. Luther here says that everything—even the misuse of authority—works for the common good in God’s world.

One has to leave Luther’s commentary and go to his other works to find what he says about this section of Romans 13. Mark Reasoner says of Luther on this section:

“Luther...uses 13:1-7 to empower secular authorities and encourage their independence from the Vatican. But he shows no evidence of interpreting this paragraph in Romans in a manner that would highlight the moral responsibility of the secular authorities...and allow for civil disobedience when this responsibility was broken.”<sup>203</sup>

Luther’s historical situation, being protected by Frederick of Saxony when the other authorities were seeking his destruction, no doubt played a part in Luther’s understanding of this passage. He did later condone the quelling of the Peasant’s Revolt, which resulted in the killing of many lower class members of society. Luther also had a more positive view of the secular authorities compared to the ecclesiastical authorities, who were mostly corrupt in his view.

*Calvin (v. 4)*

Typical of Calvin, he remains thoroughly balanced in his approach to this verse. Immediately after giving glowing support for the governing authorities in the previous verse, he then supports the common man by pointing out that magistrates are clothed with authority for the express purpose of seeking the public good, not their own interests. Calvin

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<sup>202</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 181-182.

<sup>203</sup> Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle*, 136.



says: “[Magistrates] are responsible to God and to men in the exercise of their power. For as they are deputed by God and do his business, they must give an account to him.”<sup>204</sup>

On the topic of the use of force, Calvin makes no qualms about his position on the matter. He goes right to the heart when he says:

“It is another part of the office of magistrates, that they ought forcibly to repress the waywardness of evil men, who do not suffer themselves to be governed by laws, and to inflict such punishment on their offenses as God’s judgment requires; for he expressly declares, that they are armed with the sword, not for an empty show, but that they may smite evil-doers.”<sup>205</sup>

And he further comments on the next part of the verse:

“[The magistrate] is an executioner of God’s wrath; and this he shows himself to be by having the sword, which the Lord has delivered into his hand. This is a remarkable passage for the purpose of proving the right of the sword; for if the Lord, by arming the magistrate, has also committed to him the use of the sword, whenever he visits the guilty with death, by executing God’s vengeance, he obeys his commands. Contend then do they with God who think it unlawful to shed the blood of wicked men.”<sup>206</sup>

It is hard to find an interpretation that goes as far as Calvin’s in support of the powers of the governing authorities. Before accusing him of excessive wordiness on the topic, we should remember that Calvin is known for his brevity and intentionality. These comments must be taken as his true thoughts on the verse, and they must be given their full weight in the consideration of the history of interpretation.

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<sup>204</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 481.

<sup>205</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 481.

<sup>206</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 481-482.

*Calvin (v. 5)*<sup>207</sup>

Of the wrath mentioned in this verse, Calvin understands it to be that of the magistrate for the punishment that comes from them “for the contempt of their dignity.”<sup>208</sup> He goes on to urge his readers to respect the governing authorities for the mere fact that they should do it out of respect for God’s order. His reason is that “it belongs not to a private individual to take away authority from him whom the Lord has in power set over us.”<sup>209</sup>

*Calvin (v. 6)*

In the phrase, “ministers of God”, Calvin sees Paul’s intent as both reminding governing authorities and those who are governed of their obligations. The governed must remember that the civil authorities are doing the work that God has appointed them to do. In order to do it they must levy taxes to pay for their work. The governing authorities must remember that it is their obligation to levy only what is necessary for the public good, not their own private gain.

*Calvin (v. 7)*

There are three things that we must walk away from this passage and remember, according to Calvin: “that [subjects] are to hold [magistrates] in esteem and honor—that they are to obey their edicts, laws, and judgments—that they are to pay tributes and customs.”<sup>210</sup> In conclusion Calvin remarks:

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<sup>207</sup> There are no more comments from Luther on this passage.

<sup>208</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 482.

<sup>209</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 482.

<sup>210</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 483.

“We ought to obey kings and governors, whoever they may be, not because we are constrained, but because it is a service acceptable to God; for he will have them not only to be feared, but also honoured by a voluntary respect.”<sup>211</sup>

### 4.3. Reformation Church Conclusions

The main points to gather from Luther are that government *per se* is good and originates from God. Christians overcome the world by their obedience to governmental authority (although this is a vague concept and Luther leaves it as such in his commentary). Governments should be obeyed simply because they commend the good and punish the bad. Lastly, good and bad governments are used by God for the common good.

Calvin’s thoughts are extensive and require more summary.

- First, Calvin emphasized that a Christian’s liberty must be exercised under the yoke of authority, even governmental.
- The authorities he thought Paul had in mind were any civil authorities, no matter how local or imperial.
- No one is exempt from the command to obey the government, because it is divinely instituted and it is, therefore, an offense against divine providence to oppose it.
- The government maintains order in the world, and rewards good but punishes evil. At the same time, the governmental authorities are accountable to God and the public for how they rule.
- The governmental authorities receive the sword from God’s hand, and they obey God when they execute judgment.
- The wrath in view in verse 5 is that of the governing authorities.

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<sup>211</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 483.

- Taxes are a necessary part of funding the duties of the governing authorities, but they must seek the public good, not their own private gain with those resources.
- Finally, we are called to honor, obey and pay: honor the governing authorities, obey their commands, and pay our taxes.

## **PART III**

### **INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 13:1-7**

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 13:1-7

In this chapter we shall now proceed to analyze the text of Romans 13:1-7 directly, with interaction from modern commentaries. The preceding chapters informed us about the historical discussions surrounding this passage, and they opened our eyes to the types of questions that arise from the text. The interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 will follow a division of the passage into its main points. The main points are divided as follows:<sup>212</sup>

1. Every person must submit to the authorities (v. 1a)
2. The authorities are put in place by God (v. 1b)
3. The authorities judge those who resist (v. 2)
4. Rulers are a terror to bad work (v. 3a)
5. Rulers approve good work<sup>213</sup> (v. 3b)
6. Rulers are God's servants (v. 4a)
7. Rulers bring God's wrath on evildoers (v. 4b-c)
8. Obedience is required for the sake of conscience (vv. 5-6)
9. Honor those in authority (v. 7)

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<sup>212</sup> This list is adapted from Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority?*, 176. My list is loosely based on Botha's because his is based on the linguistic analysis of the passage. He lists 11 main points but two of them were repetitive and could be joined with others in order to cover the point of the passage. He also used implied points while I used the explicit wording of the passage. Stein also sees a similar structure in the passage: Robert Stein, "The Argument of Romans," *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 4 (Oct. 1989): 343.

<sup>213</sup> The question and answer points to this being the main situational issue Paul is addressing in this section of the letter, according to Paul Fowler, *The Structure of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 47-54.

Longenecker divides the passage into four “subunits of material” which are broken down as follows:<sup>214</sup>

1. An opening exhortation in 13:1a: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities,” which functions as the thesis statement for 13:1b-7.
2. The primary theological argument of 13:1b-2, which is set out in support of the opening hortatory thesis statement of 13:1a – with that primary supporting argument focused on God’s establishment of human governmental authority and his judgment on those who oppose what he has instituted.
3. A series of further “logical” and “practical” supporting arguments in 13:3-5, which urge subjection to “the governing authorities” in order that Christians might avoid “possible punishment” and be true to their own “conscience” as based on the message of the Christian gospel and enlivened by God’s Spirit.
4. The specific application in 13:6-7 of Paul’s hortatory statements of 13:1-5, with particular reference to controversial matters that were then confronting the Christians at Rome: (a) the paying of the city’s taxes, (b) the paying of other tolls and governmental revenues, (c) respect owed to governmental authorities generally, and (d) honor owed to the city’s officials in particular.

### **5.1. Interpretive Analysis**

The structure of this paper will follow the sentence/clause structure of the passage rather than something similar to Longenecker’s outline because it will offer more opportunity to cover in detail each subsection of the passage. Nothing will be unaddressed or lost in the shuffle of dealing with the larger subunits. However, Longenecker’s structural

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<sup>214</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 954-955. The outline is quoted from Longenecker’s commentary.

outline is helpful and instructive and ought to be taken into consideration by anyone studying this passage.

### 5.1.1. Every person must submit to the governing authorities (v. 1a)

The conclusion of the previous chapter, where Paul instructs his audience in how they should conduct themselves toward outsiders, links chapter 12 with this passage. It is sometimes argued that this passage is a later addition to the letter, but as Kruse comments, “In 13:1-7 the apostle continues to give instructions concerning believers’ relationships with outsiders, in particular their relationship to the governing authorities....The theme of doing good or evil in relation to outsiders connects 13:1-7 and 12:17-21.”<sup>215</sup> Kruse’ point is well taken and it shows that the transition between chapters is intentional and purposeful in Paul’s logic. Paul is here showing the next step to having good relations with outsiders.

Moule makes a valid observation:

A new subject is here treated—Civil Obedience. It is not isolated, however, from the previous context, in which (from xii. 19) subjection to individuals in private life was considered. And it passes in turn into a different but kindred context again, in ver. 8 below.<sup>216</sup>

Moo (along with Dunn<sup>217</sup>) refers to the lack of grammatical connection (asyndeton) between 12:21 and 13:1 and proposes different options<sup>218</sup> as to why this passage might have been included by Paul, but he does not land on the thematic connection like Kruse, Schreiner and

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<sup>215</sup> Kruse, *Romans*, 489.

<sup>216</sup> H. C. G. Moule, *Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (London: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 214.

<sup>217</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 759.

<sup>218</sup> Some of the explanations given by Moo, *Romans*, 791-792, are: this passage is an already developed Christian tradition (791); Paul uses this passage to stifle a triumphant extremism among the Roman Christians due to an over-realized eschatology (791); this passage fits into the larger theology of the Christian life in this world (792). Concluding that these considerations are sufficient to explain why this passage is placed here by Paul, Moo ends up conceding that the thematic connection is probably the best explanation for our question.



Moule do. Kruse highlights that in this passage Paul uses the category “good” rather than “love”, which was used for the relationship between believers.<sup>219</sup> Origen quotes verses 7 and 8 together for comment,<sup>220</sup> which emphasizes that Paul connects the two verses with the noun and verb form of ὀφειλή and ὀφείλω. Moo notes, “Paul cleverly uses the idea of ‘obligation’ to make the transition from his advice about governing authorities...to his exhortation to love for the neighbor.”<sup>221</sup>

### *Every person*

On Paul’s use of the phrase “every soul”, Dunn comments that it “is semitic...with the soul as the center of earthly life...standing for the whole person by metonymy.”<sup>222</sup> In the immediate context of the passage, Paul addresses the Christians who were in Rome. “Every person,” then points to every kind of person who lived in Rome and was a follower of Christ.<sup>223</sup> On further reflection, however, one realizes that this cannot be restricted to the church in Rome around AD 60, because the city of Rome functioned as the capital of the known world in the first century. Every letter Paul wrote—or any of the other apostles, for that matter—would address Christians who were under the rule of Rome to a greater or lesser extent. “Every person” encompasses the whole spectrum of Christians.<sup>224</sup> Whether

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<sup>219</sup> Kruse, *Romans*, 489-490.

<sup>220</sup> Origen, *Romans*, 226.

<sup>221</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 810.

<sup>222</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 760.

<sup>223</sup> “‘Everyone’...is emphatic, implying that none in Paul’s audience should regard themselves as exceptions as far as obedience to this rule is concerned,” Kruse, *Romans*, 492.

<sup>224</sup> Contra John Toews, “[Paul] is exhorting specific behavior for a small, local group of Christians. He is not outlining a theology of the state or a balanced view of civic responsibilities,” John Toews, *Romans*, Believers Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 317. However, we would agree with Toews that Paul is not setting forth a complete theology of civil government because he here only addresses those who are subject

Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, slave or free, man or woman, old or young—every person is called on here to submit to the governing authorities. Can we say that this instruction should also apply to non-Christians? It is a question that goes beyond the scope of Paul’s intention. He was not concerned with how unbelievers behaved; rather his focus was on making sure the church knew its role in society.<sup>225</sup> Suffice it to say that the church should be the model of how every person is supposed to live, therefore, this does serve as an indicator of how all people should relate to the governing authorities. In addition, it is not a stretch to see how this *applies* to non-Christians in society, because Paul appeals not to Christological or eschatological grounds for the command, but creational.<sup>226</sup>

### *Submit*

Paul’s use of the word “submit” is the same word as he employs in Titus 3:1, where he says, “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work.”<sup>227</sup> It is used throughout the New Testament for different situations of authority and submission. It is written of Jesus when he submitted to his parents (Luke 2:51), wives submitting to their husbands (Ephesians 5:21), slaves submitting to their masters

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and who resist those authorities. One has to go elsewhere in Scripture for God’s words to the governing authorities and their responsibilities, etc.

<sup>225</sup> Verse 1 refers to every person, “which suggests that this injunction applies to both unbelievers and believers, but given that Romans was written to believers the latter must be especially in view,” Schreiner, *Romans*, 682. Also Moo, “[The] immediate reference must be to Christians. But we should probably not limit the reference to Christians only. Submission to governing authorities is especially incumbent on Christians who recognize that the God they serve stands behind those authorities, but it is required even for those who do not know this,” Moo, *Romans*, 794-795. Stein also extends the intent of this command outside the boundaries of the church when he says, “While addressed to the Christians at Rome, ‘every person’ clearly indicates that all people, Christian or non-Christian, should obey this command,” Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1-7,” 326.

<sup>226</sup> Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1-7,” 329-330.

<sup>227</sup> ESV. Paul instructs Titus concerning church-government relations.

(Titus 2:9) and it is found in 1Peter 2:13 in the same connection as this passage for governmental authorities.

*Aside on 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Submission to Authorities*

It is helpful to see how this is used in 1 Peter 2:13-14, “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”<sup>228</sup> There are a few similarities between our passage and the one found in 1 Peter: the use of “submit”, the object of that submission (government), punishment meted out for wrongdoers, praise for do-gooders. Although this is not a Pauline letter, 1 Peter helps us understand the early Christian teaching on the relationship between Christians and government. There is some uncertainty about what type of persecution is referred to in 1 Peter, but there is the possibility that it was some kind of unofficial governmental persecution. More likely is that it was unofficial<sup>229</sup> persecution from other pagan citizens of the Roman Empire.<sup>230</sup>

Both Paul and Peter instruct Christians in how to live for the sake of outsiders (1 Peter 2:12 and Romans 12:17-21). Peter uses the images of the Old Testament people of God in order to invoke references from Israel's history as God's light to the nations (1 Peter 2:4-11). 1 Peter 2:9 harkens back to Exodus 19:5-6, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These

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<sup>228</sup> ESV.

<sup>229</sup> It may also have been local/regional persecution under Nero, AD 64: see D. A. Carson, and Douglas Moo, eds., *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 639.

<sup>230</sup> Carson, *Introduction*, 638-639.

are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”<sup>231</sup> Wright comments on this passage, “The universal perspective...is explicit in the double phrase *all nations* and *the whole earth*. Although the action is taking place between YHWH and Israel alone at Mount Sinai, God has not forgotten his wider mission of blessing the rest of the nations of the earth through this particular people whom he has redeemed.”<sup>232</sup>

The same applies in the New Testament. Paul and Peter do not forget God’s mission for all nations when they address the church. Implicit in these instructions is a missionary mindset, in both Peter and Paul. They are concerned with how the watching world perceives God’s people, the church. One of the best ways for God’s people to shine as lights in the darkness is to show honor and submit to the governing authorities. Not only are Christians to submit to the governing authorities, they should pray for their welfare and prosperity.

The New Testament era is not the first time the people of God had found themselves exiled in a place where they were persecuted and sidelined. Referring to Jeremiah 29:7, Wright comments: “The exiles had a task—a mission no less—even in the midst of the city of their enemies. And that task was to seek the welfare of that city and to pray for the blessing of YHWH upon it. So they were not only to be the *beneficiaries* of God’s promise to Abraham...they were also to be the *agents* of God’s promise to Abraham that through his descendents the nations would be blessed.”<sup>233</sup> That mentality pervaded the Old Testament and Paul and Peter would have known it well, especially after Jesus’ instructions on the mountain to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mathew 5:44).

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<sup>231</sup> ESV.

<sup>232</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 224-225.

<sup>233</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 99-100.

*Governing authorities*

The phrase “governing authorities” has been the subject of much debate in the last century. Commentators have interpreted it as referring to human governmental rulers, spiritual powers, or both. Longenecker provides an excellent summary of the argument of Cranfield in his commentary with great detail.<sup>234</sup> Longenecker cites Cranfield’s later interpretation of this passage and notes how he switched from his earlier view that it refers to spiritual powers, to the understanding that it refers to human authorities. Suffice it to say that Longenecker concludes with these insights: “And with [Cranfield’s later] understanding I agree—recognizing (1) that thesis statements of speakers and writers, both of antiquity and today, are often expressed in a highly condensed fashion, and (2) that Paul expected that the overall content of his letter to believers in Jesus at Rome would provide for his readers an obvious understanding regarding those to whom he wrote, as well as much of what he had in mind, in this thesis statement.”<sup>235</sup>

According to Schreiner, there is only one notable commentator who thinks this refers to synagogue rulers, otherwise all others see it as either human governmental authorities alone or spiritual powers influencing human rulers.<sup>236</sup> Schreiner argues that this must be a reference to human rulers alone with the following points: “Paul forcefully

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<sup>234</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 957-959. Cranfield spends almost four pages in his commentary on the question of to whom does “authorities” refer. He ends up backing away from his earlier thought that there is a double reference in Paul’s mind, both to governing civil authorities and spiritual influences behind those civil authorities. To quote him: His previous thought was that “while the double reference of ἐξουσίαις in Rom. 13:1 has not been conclusively proved, it has been shown to be very highly probable. But, as we have gone over this ground again and again in subsequent years, we have become more and more uneasy [with that conclusion]...While we still think that the double reference interpretation of ἐξουσίαις has often been too cavalierly dismissed, we have now come to regard it as less probable than the interpretation according to which Paul in using ἐξουσίαι here had in mind simply the civil authorities as such.” Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:659. For the best arguments in favor of the double reference interpretation Cranfield points to Oscar Cullman.

<sup>235</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 959.

<sup>236</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 681.

contests the idea that believers should be subservient to angelic powers (cf. Col. 2:8-15)...[T]he call to pay taxes in verses 6-7 demonstrates that earthly rulers alone are intended since it is impossible to pay taxes to angels.”<sup>237</sup> It must be noted that Colossians 2:8-15 is a difficult passage to interpret, and using it as support for the idea that we are not to submit to angelic powers presents unnecessary complication to the argument. In addition, it is possible to submit to human authority out of respect for spiritual authority. The people of antiquity sometimes offered sacrifices or paid tribute to a human agent (a temple priest) in order to show respect for a spiritual power. However, I do agree that the authority in view is human authorities. Schreiner cites Titus 3:1 as support because that passage refers to human authorities, and he also notes that the word ὑπερχούσαις was used in other writings for human rulers.<sup>238</sup> Moo argues that verse 3 uses the parallel term “rulers”, which refers to secular governmental authorities.<sup>239</sup> Those who would argue the case for an interpretation of spiritual powers would have to show how this word would be used in a different way than it is ever used in the NT. Murray rightly concludes: “The governing authorities are those in whom are vested the right and the power of ruling in the commonwealth (sic) and the evidence does not indicate that any other than human agents are in view.”<sup>240</sup>

### **5.1.2. The authorities are put in place by God (v. 1b)**

The next main point of the passage is the fact that the authorities, which we have established are human governmental authorities, have their origin in God’s appointment.

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<sup>237</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 682.

<sup>238</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 682.

<sup>239</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 796. Moo makes the assertion that this is one of the strongest arguments against the spiritual interpretation of this verse in footnote 22.

<sup>240</sup> John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 147.

There is a twofold instruction in this assertion by Paul: (1) that those who are subjects of the authorities need to recognize their origin comes from God; (2) that those who are in positions of authority must recognize that they have been put where they are by God.<sup>241</sup>

*For there is no authority except from God*

The γάρ at the beginning of this phrase is an explanatory conjunction.<sup>242</sup> It gives the reason (or grounds) for the previous statement.<sup>243</sup> It is hard to know if this is the reason or grounds in this case. Paul is stating the fact, like a bedrock truth, that God is the one who is responsible for appointing the authorities. It is upon this fact that he makes his initial assertion that every person must submit.

The idea that God appoints human authorities is not a new concept in the NT. Paul and his Jewish readers were well aware of the OT perspective on God's sovereignty over human rulers. Psalm 2, Jeremiah 27:5-6 or Daniel 5:21 are a few examples of the OT teaching on this topic. Adolf Schlatter saw a connection between the OT book of Daniel and this passage. He poses the question, "Did Paul read Daniel, and how did he appropriate the historical picture given by Daniel?"<sup>244</sup> The obvious answer to the first part of the question is, yes! The answer to the second part of the question is a little more complicated.

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<sup>241</sup> "Paul insists, over against normal imperial rhetoric, that earthly rulers are not themselves divine, but are answerable to the one true God. They are God's servants, and as servants they can expect to be held accountable. This passage actually represents a severe demotion of the rulers from the position they would have claimed to occupy." N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 78.

<sup>242</sup> Wallace defines the explanatory conjunction as, "This use indicates that additional information is being given about what is being described," Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 673.

<sup>243</sup> Longenecker classifies this as an explanatory conjunction, *Romans*, 959. Richard Young gives this helpful explanation of the use of this conjunction: "γάρ is often used to show that one independent unit semantically supports another. For example, γάρ may give the reason, grounds, or clarification for an adjoining sentence." Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 182.

<sup>244</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans., Siegfried Schatzmann (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1995), 244.

Schlatter was one of the few scholars of his day to focus on the importance of the OT and Intertestamental Jewish literature for understanding the NT writings.<sup>245</sup> Most German scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century spent their time linking ancient Greek philosophical writings to the NT. Ahead of his time, Schlatter recognized that the main influence behind the theology of the NT writers was their Bible, the OT, in the Hebrew and LXX. Much of the first-century vocabulary of faith came from the LXX. In Daniel is found the most occurrences of any other LXX book of the word ἐξουσία. The idea of authority and God putting those authorities in place fits hand in glove with the topic of Romans 13:1-7. The main point that Schlatter sees in connecting Daniel and Romans 13:1-7 is that the “transfer of power to the authorities happens through God’s decree.”<sup>246</sup> It is seen in Daniel, with the progression of the different beasts and their rise to power being attributed to God, as well as explicit statements such as Daniel 5:21, “the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.”<sup>247</sup>

Schreiner makes a poignant observation about how far this statement applies: “This notion of God’s sovereignty over all governing authorities is not unique to Paul....Nor is this theme denied even in Rev. 13, which describes the rule of the beast. There the refrain that his power “was given”...to him predominates.”<sup>248</sup> The one who gives the authority, even to the beast, is God. Moo asserts that this is a universal rule. “Paul’s dependence on [the OT and Intertestamental] tradition and his all-inclusive language (“there is no authority

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<sup>245</sup> Robert Yarbrough, “Schlatter, Adolf,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald McKim (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 884.

<sup>246</sup> Schlatter, *Romans*, 244.

<sup>247</sup> ESV.

<sup>248</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 682-683.



except”) make clear that he is asserting a universally applicable truth about the ultimate origin of rulers.”<sup>249</sup>

The forcefulness of the statement, “except from God,” cannot be overlooked in this passage. It is a preposition of ultimate agent.<sup>250</sup> Whether you take the NA28 reading or the variant of ἀπο, it is still a preposition of ultimate agent, being translated as either “by God” or “from God”. Christians often struggle with why a certain individual has been elevated to a position of authority when they clearly lack the integrity or managerial skills to execute their official duties productively and beneficially for those under their authority. It is a potent reminder from the Apostle that every person who has been elevated has their origin from God. Murray notes, “When [Paul] says they are ‘of God’, he means that they derive their origin, right, and power from God.”<sup>251</sup> Although Paul does not address the misuse of governmental power, governing authorities who misuse or abuse their power will be held accountable to God either now or later—but they will have to give an account of how they have exercised their power. Yet the thrust of Paul’s exhortation is on the obedience required of the governed, not on the responsibility of those who govern.

*[The authorities] that exist are put in place by God*

The intensive perfect here, τεταγμέναι, should be translated with a present force.<sup>252</sup> It emphasizes the present state or results of a past action. This phrase is an elaboration and reiteration of the preceding phrase, making it even more emphatic.<sup>253</sup> Schreiner asserts, “No

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<sup>249</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 798.

<sup>250</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 433.

<sup>251</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 148.

<sup>252</sup> See notes in the annotated translation.

<sup>253</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 682.

political power is attained apart from the sovereign will of God.”<sup>254</sup> This begs the question: are the existing authorities then given God’s stamp of approval for their decisions while in office? Some have cited this passage as a proof-text of that idea. Murray says:

In these verses there are no expressed qualifications or reservations to the duty of subjection. It is, however, characteristic of the apostle to be absolute in his terms when dealing with a particular obligation. At the same time, on the analogy of his own teaching elsewhere or on the analogy of Scripture, we are compelled to take account of exceptions to the absolute terms in which an obligation is affirmed.<sup>255</sup>

Toews disagrees with most translations of this phrase and prefers “ordered” over “ordained” or “appointed”. He says, “Paul does not talk about the powers being ‘ordained’ or ‘appointed,’ that is, somehow specially blessed by God, as in most translations. Rather, he talks about the powers being ordered.”<sup>256</sup> Although it is similar to our translation of “put in place”, the reasons for it are not the same. Toews views this passage from an Anabaptist perspective that hinders him from seeing civil authorities in a positive light. Any way it is translated, the governing authorities are put in a place (ordered) above the governed. Maybe that does not necessarily mean they are specially blessed, but it does mean they are put over others functionally. Toews’ focus on the semantics of the passage seems to be an attempt at avoiding the necessary meaning of the passage, but it does not accomplish his goal. Within the semantic range, no matter how it is translated, the meaning remains largely the same. Paul does not focus on the mechanisms by which the governing authorities are put in

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<sup>254</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 683.

<sup>255</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 149.

<sup>256</sup> Toews, *Romans*, 315.

place<sup>257</sup> (i.e. democratic, monarchical succession, etc), he merely states that they are put there by God—by whatever means a given society operates under.

### 5.1.3. The authorities judge those who resist (v. 2)

This next section of the passage brings us to the consequences of disobedience to the civil authorities. Paul equates it with disobedience to God. This one section is developed in verse two of the passage and follows a similar structure as the previous verse, statement and reiteration (or elaboration).

*Therefore, the one who opposes authority opposes the order of God and...bring judgment upon themselves*

ὥστε is an inferential conjunction here, showing the “deduction...to the preceding discussion”.<sup>258</sup> The logical deduction of the fact that God has put in place the authorities is that to oppose them is to oppose God. Moo thinks it is more consequential in use.<sup>259</sup>

Wallace notes of the result conjunctions that they give “the outcome or consequence of an action. The focus is on the outcome of the action rather than on its intention.”<sup>260</sup> Wallace observes that ὥστε is the most common of the resultative conjunctions,<sup>261</sup> but the focus is not on the outcome of the previous assertion (that the authorities are put in place by God), rather it is on the implications of the truth he has asserted. If the Christian community in Rome is willing to accept that God has put the authorities in place, then they must also be willing to accept that opposition to the same is opposition to their ultimate authority, God.

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<sup>257</sup> Contra Jon Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility: Romans 13:1-7,” *Direction* 32, no. 1 (2003): 36.

<sup>258</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 673.

<sup>259</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 799.

<sup>260</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 677.

<sup>261</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 677.

Paul has switched to the perfect tense with the last two verbs.<sup>262</sup> It is possible that the grammar supports an interpretation that Paul is referring to a settled disposition of heart, which is opposed to authority. If so, then the use of the perfect participle in this case marks the person under discussion as one who has a continually opposed disposition with ongoing results. In the annotated translation I asked the question: is the opposition to authority something that stems from an internal opposition to God in the heart? The answer to this question may be the reason why some of the commentators have viewed the judgment in this verse as the eschatological judgment of God rather than the temporal judgment of earthly rulers. If it is viewed as internal opposition to God which manifests itself as opposition to earthly authorities, then it is easy to see why some of the interpreters of Romans have taken the view that this has in mind God's eschatological judgment. If, however, it is temporal judgment from earthly authorities, then the focus would most likely not be on the disposition of the heart. There is also the option that Paul has primarily in view temporal judgment with eschatological judgment as the eventual outcome of the temporal. How should we understand Paul's intention here?

Moo takes Paul to mean eschatological judgment in this passage.<sup>263</sup> He argues that Paul has not developed his point enough to take it as temporal judgment, in which God's judgment is present in the judgment of the authorities. Rather, what is in view is the fact that opposition to God's order ultimately leads to condemnation in the eschatological sense. "It is better to understand the judgment here to be the eschatological judgment of God: those who persistently oppose secular rulers, and hence the will of God, will suffer condemnation

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<sup>262</sup> See notes in the annotated translation.

<sup>263</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 799.

for that opposition.”<sup>264</sup> This is a highly debated conclusion. It leaves the Christian wondering if they are in danger of eternal damnation for any time they find themselves in opposition to the authorities. Is this Paul’s intention? It is important to remember the note from earlier that this is a settled disposition of opposition. Do Christians, who truly seek to live according to God’s will find themselves in a position where they are constantly opposed to the authorities? Is there a time or place for opposition to authorities? Is opposition different than disobedience?

Schreiner thinks the judgment in view is temporal judgment from the earthly authorities based on the structure of the passage.<sup>265</sup> Longenecker is frustratingly silent on the question of the source of the judgment. Murray sees the civil magistrates performing God’s work and thus dispensing God’s judgment in their decisions.<sup>266</sup> Murray states, “We have here in this term ‘judgment’ the twofold aspect from which it is to be viewed. It is punishment dispensed by the governing authorities. But it is also an expression of God’s own wrath and it is for this reason that it carries the sanction of God and its propriety is certified.”<sup>267</sup> Moo cites the other occurrences in Romans of the word κρίμα as support for his interpretation. There are 2:2, 3; 3:8; 5:16 and 11:33 (11:33 being the only one not using it to refer to God’s eschatological judgment).<sup>268</sup>

It is difficult to say for certain if those uses of κρίμα are referring to God’s temporal judgment in this life or his eschatological judgment of eternal condemnation. As noted in my

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<sup>264</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 799.

<sup>265</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 683. He does not substantiate what he means by “structure of the text”.

<sup>266</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 149.

<sup>267</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 149.

<sup>268</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 799.

annotated translation, all other uses of κρίμα in Romans refer to God’s judgment. There must be a strong reason for us to take this particular use of the word in any other way.

Cranfield reminds us, however, that even if we understand the subject to be God, it does not necessarily refer to the final judgment alone.<sup>269</sup> We should take the approach that it is final if the person is inwardly opposed to God and the authorities. If the situation is such that someone is being wrongfully condemned by the authorities, then the judgment is not final in the eschatological sense. In other words, the authorities are not acting as God’s agents when they wrongfully condemn an innocent person.

#### 5.1.4. Rulers are a terror to bad work (v. 3a)

This is the first time in the passage that the word “rulers”<sup>270</sup> is used by Paul. It refers to rulers in a general sense. Hodge says this verse links back to verse one and that the word “rulers” is used synonymously with “governing authorities”.<sup>271</sup> Murray points out that good work and bad are “personified” in this passage, “[f]or what is meant is terror to the person performing evil.”<sup>272</sup> He also goes on to lay out two main ideas of this clause:

“(1) The thought is focused upon the punishment of evil-doing. It is significant that the apostle mentions this first of all in dealing with the specific functions assigned to the civil magistrate. There is the tendency in present-day thinking to underestimate the punitive in the execution of government and to suppress this all-important aspect of the magistrate’s authority. It is not so in apostolic teaching. (2) It is with the *deed* that the magistrate is concerned. Paul speaks of the good and evil *work*. It is not the prerogative of the ruler to deal with all sin but only with sin registered in the action

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<sup>269</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:664.

<sup>270</sup> ἄρχοντες – BDAG defines this word as follows: “one who has eminence in a ruling capacity, ruler, lord, prince...gener. one who has administrative authority, leader, official” (140). BDAG cites our passage on the second part of the definition because they believe it refers to a general sense of authority rather than to an executive authority figure such as a prince, etc.

<sup>271</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans*, eds. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 361. Schreiner also agrees and says that it refers back to the word ἐξουσία in verse 1. Schreiner, *Romans*, 681.

<sup>272</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 151.

which violates the order that the magistrate is appointed to maintain and promote.”<sup>273</sup>

Cranfield, however (similar to Origen), struggles with the assertions of this verse. He proposes that there are three ways it can be understood: (1) that Paul was unaware of the possible evils of governments; (2) that Paul was speaking of governments in the ideal form; (3) that governments praise good works either by approval or disapproval (i.e., even a martyr’s death brings praise from the government).<sup>274</sup> He lands on the third option as the most probable.<sup>275</sup>

Schreiner thinks Cranfield and others go too far with that interpretation. He says: “It is unnecessary...to understand the praise from the government in absolute terms. Paul merely states what usually occurs when one does what is good.”<sup>276</sup> On the “good” referred to in this verse, Schreiner thinks it refers to “what is good in society, civil well-being.”<sup>277</sup> Dunn proposes that the “good” and “bad” antithesis “signals that Paul is expressing himself in terms which would gain the widest approbation from men and women of good will.”<sup>278</sup> He sees good citizenship as the good spoken of, the broadest understanding of “good”, rather than specifically Christian good.

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<sup>273</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 151.

<sup>274</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:664-665.

<sup>275</sup> This will be addressed in the next section.

<sup>276</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 683n20.

<sup>277</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 683n20.

<sup>278</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 763.

Longenecker limits the exhortations of this passage to the city of Rome during the early part of Nero's reign, which was largely viewed favorably by Roman citizens.<sup>279</sup> He does not think Paul intended to write a general principle for the Church of all ages because Paul thought of his era as the last days, therefore he would not have expected history to continue on for another 2,000 years. Longenecker's interpretation of the passage seems too restrictive. Assuming it was primarily intended for the Christians of the church in Rome at around AD 54, does that mean it has no bearing on the Church throughout the ages? There are clearly other passages that are similar to this one in the NT witness (1 Peter 2:13-17; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1-2) and in the OT and Intertestamental literature (Jeremiah 27:5-7; Daniel 2:21, 4:17; Wisdom of Solomon 6:1-11; Josephus *JW* 2.8.7 §140<sup>280</sup>), which complement it as well. The statements in our passage are grounded in God's providential guidance over human government. If Paul could say that the Roman city officials were God's servants, how could that not apply more universally, considering that one of those officials was the Roman emperor? At the end of the day, it seems futile to limit the words of this passage to a specific place and time, when they must be applied more universally. God is the God of order who has created a world with structure and roles in the family, the church, and society.

#### **5.1.5. Rulers approve good work (v. 3b)**

The role of the governing authorities is to punish bad and approve (or commend) good. Hodge says, "This means that government is not an evil to be feared, except by evil-doers. As the magistrates are appointed for the punishment of evil, the way to avoid

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<sup>279</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 964-966.

<sup>280</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 682, notes the Josephus reference among others.



suffering from their authority is not to resist it, but to do what is good.”<sup>281</sup> The clause in this passage is not difficult to unravel and needs little comment to understand what Paul is saying on the face. The difficulty is found in the practical implications of it. Experience tells us that governments often promote what Christians know to be bad (i.e., abortion, same-sex marriage, racial discrimination, slavery, etc). How can Paul make a blanket statement like this? The problem is not resolved by limiting Paul’s words to Rome around AD 54, because even during the beginning of Nero’s reign there would have been many practices promoted in Rome that would have been considered bad by Christians. Is Paul proposing a generalized principle on how the world usually works, or is he engaging in wishful thinking?

Note again the earlier comment that the “good” spoken of is probably civic in nature. Whatever promotes societal well-being is what Paul probably had in mind; this entire section deals with the civil authorities and their sphere—society. No one can accuse Paul of naïveté when it comes to the potential evils committed by civil authorities (cf. Acts 16:19-24, 24:26-27). We must conclude that Paul is speaking generally of what governments do, similar to the general statements in the Proverbs about what will happen when one follows the ways of wisdom. It is not a promise but a general rule. It is also the way things ought to be, and it can serve as a guide for what is to be expected of government. Stein submits, “Governments, even oppressive governments, by their very nature seek to prevent the evils of indiscriminate murder, riot, thievery, as well as general instability and chaos, and good acts do at times meet with its approval and praise.”<sup>282</sup> Ridderbos is helpful here:

“[Paul’s position] is not founded...on what is to be expected from the civil authorities, but what one owes them for God’s sake. That this last is posited with so much force proves rather that Paul does not have a specific government or

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<sup>281</sup> Hodge, *Romans*, 361.

<sup>282</sup> Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1-7,” 334.

prevailing order in mind, but that he speaks from a deeply rooted conviction, one that is not assailed by the misdeeds of a specific government...[T]here emerges here the faith of the apostle that the world is the creation of God, has not been abandoned by him, and has therefore been placed under his ordinances. That the authorities themselves can abandon entirely the distinction to be maintained by them between good and evil and place themselves at the service of evil (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7, 8) does not prevent him from continuing to elucidate God's purpose with government, nor from giving expression to his faith that God upholds his purpose, continues to establish justice on earth through government, and thus continues to press it into the service of the well-being of the world."<sup>283</sup>

We may also carry Ridderbos' thought just a little further and make the point that Christian ethics should not be considered mysterious to the rest of the world. Professor C. John Collins made this point very well when he said, "the nation [of Israel] was established in order to mediate the Abrahamic blessing to the whole world. For this reason it is no surprise to find common ethical property between Israel at its best and the rest of mankind at its best."<sup>284</sup> He goes on to assert that "[w]e are... under no obligation to suppose that the biblical covenants are in every way *over against* what we find elsewhere among mankind."<sup>285</sup> Taking this idea and applying it to our present discussion, we should not find it hard to see how the known moral law, which guides our inter-personal relationships, is somewhat agreed upon among societies,<sup>286</sup> and that the governments of those societies ought to maintain it. It is the transgression of the known moral law by governments that is most

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<sup>283</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 322-323.

<sup>284</sup> C. John Collins, "Proverbs and the Levitical System," *Presbyterian* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 12.

<sup>285</sup> Collins, "Proverbs and the Levitical System," 12.

<sup>286</sup> The specifics of what is right and wrong may not bear this out, however, common law should be generally agreed upon.

abhorrent, but there is very little recourse for people who find themselves in a society that is governed by lawless authorities.<sup>287</sup>

### 5.1.6. Rulers are God's servants (v. 4a)

“He” refers back to “authority” in the previous verse. The governing authorities are God's servants. As was noted in the annotated translation, Paul uses this word, or a form of it, throughout Romans to refer to himself (11:13, 15:25, 31), Jesus (15:8), other Christians (12:7), and Phoebe (16:1). Here he uses it to refer to the governing authorities as servants of God for the common good. Once again, the good spoken of should be understood generally and probably has civic meaning.

Dunn thinks Paul's use of the word “servant” in this instance serves to undercut the false dichotomy between sacred and secular service.<sup>288</sup> “Breaking down the barrier between cult and everyday, between ‘chosen’ and Gentile, remains a preoccupation in the back of [Paul's] mind.”<sup>289</sup> Moo points out that the use of *διάκονος* was common for civil authorities in the OT (Jer. 25:9; Isa. 45:1 LXX) and in secular literature of the day.<sup>290</sup> Murray is most helpful in his comments on this verse:

“The first clause in verse 4 states what is, positively, the chief purpose of magisterial authority. The ruler is the minister of God for good. The term ‘minister of God’ harks back to verses 1 and 2 where the ‘authority’ is said to be of God, ordained of God, and the ordinance of God... This designation removes every supposition to the effect that magistracy is *per se* evil and serves good only in the sense that as a lesser evil it restrains and counteracts greater evils... [The ruler] is invested with all the

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<sup>287</sup> Think of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The only thing that brought about a change in that society was the utter destruction of the government because it was ruling contrary to the moral law in its most basic form. We will not deal with the ethical dilemma posed by such situations in this paper. The question of whether someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right to seek the destruction of the Nazi government is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>288</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 764.

<sup>289</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 764.

<sup>290</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 801.

dignity and sanction belonging to God’s servant within the sphere of government...[H]e is the minister of God for that which is *good*. And we may not tone down the import of the term ‘good’ in this instance. Paul provides us with a virtual definition of the good we derive from the service of the civil authority when he requires that we pray for kings and all who are in authority ‘that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity’ (I Tim. 2:2). The good the magistrate promotes is that which subserves the interests of piety.”<sup>291</sup>

Although some charge that Murray may take his comments too far into the sphere of morality, it is not a stretch to say that a peaceful society subserves the interests of piety inasmuch as the church is then able to practice its faith without disturbance. At the end of the day, the section on verse 3 is the central point of this pericope,<sup>292</sup> which views the governing authorities in a positive light. The first part of verse 4 describes the governing authorities as God’s servants because of that central point—that the governing authorities promote good in the world. Much like Murray said, far from being the lesser of two evils, the human institution of government should be seen as a blessing akin to the family and the church. It is a force for good in the world, and its corruption is something to lament.

#### **5.1.7. Rulers bring God’s wrath on evildoers (v. 4b-c)**

This point will be broken out into two sections for v. 4b-c.

*But if you do bad, be afraid, for he does not carry the sword to no purpose;*

Paul uses the second person singular conditional subjunctive ἐὰν...ποιῆς (“if... you do”) presumably because it is meant to deter his audience from committing the bad conduct, which would lead to the judgment described. He uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular also to narrow the focus of this potential judgment down to the individual person committing the bad act. Government ought to hold each person accountable for their own actions. The use of the

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<sup>291</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 151-152.

<sup>292</sup> See the first page of this chapter.

imperative φοβοῦ (“be afraid”) is also 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular. Paul points to each person in his audience individually in the verse. If you (singular) commit a bad act, then you (singular) be afraid!

On the use of φορέω rather than φέρω, note that the former is the frequentative of the latter, thus emphasizing the constancy of bearing the sword.<sup>293</sup> The sword (μάχαιρα) in this verse is not a small dagger,<sup>294</sup> rather it is the same word used in Gen. 34:25; Lev. 26:25; Deut. 13:15, 32:41; 2Sam. 15:14; 1 Chron. 5:18; Isa. 2:4, 27:1; Jer. 12:12; Eze. 26:11(OT references from LXX); Matt. 26:51, 55; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; Acts 16:27; Heb. 11:37. The references listed are associated with judgment and death, often from rulers and their armies or enforcers. On occasion even the Lord is the wielder of the sword (i.e., Isa. 27:1). The word can be used for a dagger, knife, or sword, but usually when it is associated with judgment or war, it is a sword.

Schreiner comments on Paul’s reference to the use of the sword thus:

“The reference...is to the broader judicial function of the state, particularly its right to deprive of life those who had committed crimes worthy of death. Paul would not have flinched in endorsing the right of ruling authorities to practice capital punishment since Gen. 9:6 supports it by appealing to the fact that human beings are made in God’s image. Precisely because human beings are so valuable as God’s image bearers, it follows that one who intentionally takes the life of another should be deprived of his or her own.”<sup>295</sup>

Murray goes so far as to say, “to exclude the right of the death penalty when the nature of the crime calls for such is totally contrary to that which the sword signifies and executes....The sword is so frequently associated with death [in the NT]...that to exclude its

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<sup>293</sup> BDAG, 1064. A rare word in the NT, this word is also used in 1 Cor. 15:49 for bearing the images of Adam and Christ, respectively.

<sup>294</sup> BDAG, 622.

<sup>295</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 684. Cf. Abelard, Calvin, Hodge, Murray, Dunn, Stein, Moo.

use for this purpose in this instance would be so arbitrary as to bear upon its face prejudice contrary to the evidence.”<sup>296</sup> At the same time, Murray rightly notes that the wielding of the sword does not refer to the death penalty exclusively: “It can be wielded to instil (sic) the terror of that punishment which it can inflict.”<sup>297</sup> The sword was the final use of force option on the continuum of first-century soldiers and police, but not the only option. The majority opinion throughout the centuries—that the civil authorities have the right to execute punishment—is supported by this passage.<sup>298</sup> Paul would not have used the image of the sword if he only meant for his audience to think of the *correcting* rod of discipline or punishment.<sup>299</sup> Instead he used the image of the sword, which carries the full weight of final punishment.

The reason for civil authorities carrying the sword is for them to use it when necessary. Paul says they do not carry the sword “to no purpose.” Calvin’s words on the subject are most fitting: “[Paul] expressly declares, that they are armed with the sword, not for an empty show, but that they may smite evil-doers.”<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 152-153.

<sup>297</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 152.

<sup>298</sup> See previous chapters in this paper for Early, Medieval, and Reformation interpretations on this passage.

<sup>299</sup> Paul could have used that word (ῥαβδον) because he was familiar with its use in his own life (Acts 16:35, 38) along with the cognates ῥαβδουχος (police/constable) ῥαβδίζω (beat with a rod or staff). That word group appears in connection with discipline of shepherds (Ps. 23:4, in LXX 22:4), rulers (Acts 16:22), and parents (Prov. 22:15 LXX).

<sup>300</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 481.

The interpretations proposed by some pacifist interpreters run contrary to the history of interpretation<sup>301</sup> and the plain meaning of the passage.<sup>302</sup> Jon Isaak<sup>303</sup> is an example of the pacifist tradition's attempts at re-interpreting Romans 13:1-7 from their perspective: "While it may seem presumptuous to reverse centuries of interpretation, I join a vocal minority of voices calling for a reassessment of Christian political responsibility (see Yoder, Toews, Hays, Johnson, Wink)."<sup>304</sup> One ought to be very careful in reversing centuries of interpretation without citing at least a few dissenting voices from throughout the centuries, but Isaak only cites contemporary voices to his own (the oldest dating back to 1972!). Such novelty must be examined meticulously.

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<sup>301</sup> "[T]he historic Christian position on ruling authority and its power was motivated by... a fear of the injustice of chaos, the free reign absence of political order gives to individuals to pursue their private selfish ends to the detriment of others. I could cite many examples from the whole range of Christian thinking on politics and just war from Augustine through the Reformers"; see James Turner Johnson, "Aquinas and Luther on War and Peace: Sovereign Authority and the Use of Armed Force," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 11. Turner notes that the Just War stream of thought places the authority to take up arms in the governing authorities, not private individuals.

<sup>302</sup> One of the more honest pacifist approaches is the article by Susan Boyer, where she admits that the Brethren Church has struggled to interpret this passage throughout its history. Susan Boyer, "Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7," *Brethren Life and Thought* 32, no. 4 (1987): 208-216. Though her article is honest, it gives very little helpful guidance to the Anabaptist movement on how to understand this passage from their perspective. She is to be commended for not going beyond sound exegesis and performing interpretive back-flips, but her guidance falls short in that she does not end up giving an interpretation of the difficult parts of the passage, nor does she even mention anything about the use of the sword in her article. She recommends that Christians be responsibly active participants in society—which is helpful and is an application of verses 6-7. She also cites the 1970 Statement of the Church of the Brethren on War: "The church holds that our supreme citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, but we undertake to render constructive, creative service in the existing state... We believe that good citizenship extends beyond our own national boundaries and will there serve to remove the occasions for war" (215). Her article does not debunk the historical interpretation of the Church that the government has the right (and prerogative) to use force in its exercise of rule, and that it is good for God's people to serve in that capacity, as seen in the glowing terms used to refer to the governing authorities in this passage of Scripture. Toews' comments on the sword are another example of good Anabaptist commentary on this verse, wherein he affirms the plain meaning of the passage—even to the detriment of his pacifist position: "The metaphor of *the sword* has many meanings in Greek literature. It can be a symbol of authority. For example, the police soldiers who accompanied Roman tax collectors were often called 'sword bearers' to legitimate the tax collecting function. But it also was an instrument of capital punishment," Toews, *Romans*, 315-316.

<sup>303</sup> Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility," 32-46.

<sup>304</sup> Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility," 35.

To begin with, Isaak's discussion about the forms of government is a distraction from the issues at hand.<sup>305</sup> Isaak's thinks Paul's instructions are not directly applicable to modern readers because the forms of government now are different than Paul's day. Paul did not concern himself with the forms of government; he spoke of it in general terms, such as "rulers" and "governing authorities" and "servants of God". It makes no difference how the authority came to be in his position; the mode of ascendancy to the position of authority is not in view.<sup>306</sup> Secondly, Isaak's assertion is that the powers being "ordained", "established", or "instituted" suggests "God's endorsement and are too strong a translation of the Greek word *tasso*. Instead, the powers are 'ordered' by God...The state can only claim qualified endorsement by God."<sup>307</sup> This runs contrary to all of the major translations, which all translate as "appointed", "placed", "established", "instituted", and "ordained". However, along with the annotated translation at the beginning of this paper, the NLT uses "placed", which is close to the translation of "ordered". My translation, "those that exist are put in place by God" emphasizes the general nature of Paul's teaching by attempting to translate the force of the intensive perfect.<sup>308</sup> Isaak's point is that the governing authorities are

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<sup>305</sup> Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility," 37-38.

<sup>306</sup> That is not to say that Christian political reflection should not concern itself with these questions in order to promote fair and equitable political practice. It is simply not what Paul is concerned to address in our passage.

<sup>307</sup> Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility," 40. Toews contradicts Isaak here, "The rulers are established by God for the purpose of promoting justice and order. The clear implication is that they will be held accountable by the God who established them," Toews, *Romans*, 318.

<sup>308</sup> Quoted from footnote #6 of my annotated translation: τεταγμέναι This is an intensive perfect; see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 575. Wallace notes that the KJV often translates the intensive perfect better than some modern translations because the translators of the KJV knew their English much better. This verse is cited as an example of that. The intensive perfect should "emphasize the results or present state produced by a past action" (575). The KJV, Tyndale, and NASB use the intensive, whereas the ESV, NET, NIV, NJB and others translate it as a past completed action without reference to its present state. BDAG uses this verse and translates as, "the (structures of authority) presently existing are put in place by God," 991.



brought “into line”<sup>309</sup> by God, not ordained or instituted. In other words, they are put into their place in the order of society. It is unclear what this does to further our understanding of Paul’s teaching, and it does little to undermine the other translations that Isaak intentionally avoids. He makes a point to avoid the “strong” language of the other translations but his translation ends up supporting the common interpretation anyway. The ruler’s place in society is above—in authority—the people under his direction. It is, of course, a functional superiority. This order serves the common good, and Isaak ends with saying, “Paul reminds the Roman Christians that they should not be insubordinate to the state, because it is a temporary institution serving God’s purpose.”<sup>310</sup>

Thirdly, Isaak comments that “[t]he claims of the state are subject to evaluation; they are not absolute, but must be measured by the claims of love.”<sup>311</sup> He gathers this from verses 6-7 of Romans 13. Although this may be true, it is not the point of Paul’s exhortation in these verses. Isaak’s point may fit better in a systematic theology, where he could argue it from the totality of Scripture, but for an exegesis of Romans 13:1-7 it goes beyond Paul’s words. Sometimes we must leave the awkward baldness of the statement alone so that it may do its work. Paul wanted to exhort the Church to submit to the governing authorities, period. Is there room to discuss the ethical implications of this passage and to corroborate it with other Scripture in the study of ethics or theology? Yes, of course! The uncomfortable outcome of this passage—if we let Paul be Paul—is that Paul speaks glowingly of the role of

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<sup>309</sup> Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility,” 39.

<sup>310</sup> Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility,” 40.

<sup>311</sup> Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility,” 41.

the governing authorities in the world.<sup>312</sup> They are God’s servants for the common good.

Perhaps what Isaak tries to avoid is the logical conclusion that maybe Christians can serve in that capacity. This is what makes Romans 13:1-7 so difficult for the pacifist Christian, but that is getting into the discussion of theology and ethics, which is beyond our scope.

Finally, Isaak drastically re-interprets Paul’s words in verse 4. He starts off by asserting that Paul is only talking about a dagger, not a sword. “The sword...in 13:4 refers to the small dagger used by the police to ensure compliance....There is nothing said here about the state’s right or duty to exercise capital punishment. Until the fifth century, this text was understood as a call to peacemaking in relation to the government.”<sup>313</sup> The idea that even a small dagger used for compliance somehow excludes the use of deadly force is incomprehensible. Does Isaak think the soldiers were carrying butter knives? The necessity of force is an unfortunate reality of our world until the Lord returns, but it is a reality nonetheless; evil exists and it must be met with force when it comes in the form of lawless evil-doers. God has given the governing authorities the sword so that they might punish evildoers and make it possible for civilized society to carry on its business. The pacifist puts himself in harm’s way in order to rescue the oppressed and brings them back to the safety of a society where government upholds the common good. Then he calls that same government to lay down its sword and expose the very same oppressed to the dangers of outside threats overtaking it. There would be no safe-havens if there were no governments upholding the common good. Unfortunately, Isaak does not cite any authority on his

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<sup>312</sup> Which even Toews does a good job of affirming: “[Paul’s] language, when combined with the positive assertions Paul makes about governmental officials, reflects an amazingly high view of public office,” Toews, *Romans*, 318.

<sup>313</sup> Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility,” 42. Again, even Toews disagrees with Isaak about the idea of capital punishment possibly being in view; see Toews, *Romans*, 316.

assertion that there is no support for the doctrine of capital punishment or the right to bear arms in government service until the fifth century. Our reading of the Early Church suggests otherwise.<sup>314</sup> At the end of the day, Isaak's interpretation of verse 4 is unsatisfactory. We do sympathize with his desire for peace and we look forward to the day when Isaiah 2:1-5 will come to fulfillment. We will all beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, and we will walk in the light of the Lord—to paraphrase the prophet.

*For he is God's servant, an avenger for wrath to the one who does bad.*

Paul refers to the ruler as God's servant (διάκονός) again,<sup>315</sup> as if it was not enough the first time. It is no wonder it was so hard for Origen to swallow this passage!<sup>316</sup> He then uses a substantive adjective (ἐκδικος) which BDAG renders "to rectify wrong done to another, punishing, subst. one who punishes...agent of punishment."<sup>317</sup> While individual Christians are not to seek to avenge themselves (Rom. 12:19), God has put in place his servants, the governing authorities, to bring his wrath to bear on those who do evil. Paul uses the same language for "avenge" and "wrath" in 12:19 as he does here in 13:4. Paul's parallel use of these terms in close proximity supports the idea that the governing authorities mete out God's wrath here on earth.

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<sup>314</sup> See the earlier chapter on History of Interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 in the Early Church, where Origen is highly bothered by Paul's words because they go too far in his estimation in support of the divine right of the government. Also refer to Ruyter, "Pacifism and Military Service in the Early Church," 54-70. Ruyter says: "Against the background of what has been summarized here, it should be clear that there are two divergent but accepted views in the early Church: a rigorist stance that opposed all military service, and a more lenient stance which hesitantly accepted it under certain conditions," 62.

<sup>315</sup> If the question of accountability to God arises in the text, this would probably be the place. Implied in the idea of servant-hood is accountability to one's master. The authorities are held accountable for their rule to the ultimate Ruler, God.

<sup>316</sup> "Paul troubles [me] by these words," Origen, *Romans*, 224.

<sup>317</sup> BDAG, 301.

The preposition (εἰς) is probably being used as a preposition of reference (“avenger *with respect to* wrath”).<sup>318</sup> As Murray points out, this is the first time the word “wrath” has been associated with the governing authorities.<sup>319</sup> He concludes that the wrath is God’s wrath and the authorities are the agents who execute God’s wrath.<sup>320</sup> Either the wrath is that of the authorities, or God, or both. The connection between 12:19 and this passage leads to the conclusion that it is either God’s wrath or the wrath of both, not only the wrath of the authorities. Murray’s theory that it is God’s wrath executed by agency of the authorities is appealing. It seems to do justice to the context and the wording of the passage. Dunn also helpfully comments:

“As in 12:19, ὀργή denotes divine wrath...but not the final eschatological wrath of 2:5 (more clearly in view in v. 2). As in 1:18ff., Paul’s point is that the structures of the world are God-given—there the moral structures, here the social structures (cf. 13:2)...The thought of nations being used by God as agents of his wrath is, of course, firmly rooted in Jewish history.”<sup>321</sup>

From the preceding quote we also affirm that it makes sense of the biblical worldview as a whole. Dunn’s assertion that final eschatological wrath is not in view also resolves the problem of when authorities wrongly condemn a person (even to death). The judgment of earthly authorities is not necessarily final in the eschatological sense, because God will judge each person on the last day and determine their final destiny. Among God’s people, those who have been wrongly convicted and punished on account of the gospel will be finally vindicated (Rev 6:9-11 and 20:11-15). In other words, Christians need not fear that the

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<sup>318</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 369. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 94.

<sup>319</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 153.

<sup>320</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 153.

<sup>321</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 765. Schreiner agrees, “The wrath spoken of here should not be separated from God’s wrath...but the wrath of God is exercised through the ruling authorities,” Schreiner, *Romans*, 685.

judgment of the governing authorities automatically subjects them to the judgment of God. At the same time, that does not negate the need for Christians to advocate proper use of capital punishment on the part of the government. Justice should always be enforced equitably.

The following phrase, “to the one who does bad”, should have the nuance of “to the person who practices bad conduct.” τῷ...πράσσοντι is a substantival participle (the one who does) that “is concrete, speaking of the *person who* or *thing which* does.”<sup>322</sup> It is hard to say whether this participle has the idea of continuous or habitual practice behind it; it is possible, but probably loads too much freight into the participle, to insist that Paul certainly had that in mind when he chose the present active substantive participle of πράσσω.<sup>323</sup> The “bad” in view is probably that which is generally bad for society.<sup>324</sup> However, as we discussed before, civil good and moral good overlap to the point that they become almost synonymous.<sup>325</sup> To conclude this section, Murray makes a very insightful comment to sum up the instruction from this section of the passage:

“Thus the magistrate is the avenger in executing the judgment that accrues to the evil-doer from the wrath of God. Again we discover the sanction belonging to the ruler’s function; he is the agent in executing God’s wrath. And we also see how divergent from biblical teaching is the sentimentality that substitutes the interests of the offender for the satisfaction of justice as the basis of criminal retribution.”<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Quoting P. R. Williams in Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 620; italics original.

<sup>323</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 620.

<sup>324</sup> Moo says it must be “evil in the absolute sense: those acts that God himself condemns as evil,” *Romans*, 802. Murray asserts the same, *Romans*, 152.

<sup>325</sup> See earlier comments from Ridderbos and Collins on the common moral ground of society and the Church.

<sup>326</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 153.

The governing authorities have two primary functions—approve the good<sup>327</sup> and punish the bad.

### 5.1.8. Obedience is required for the sake of conscience (vv. 5-6)

This passage does not conclude Paul’s thoughts on the matter, as is evidenced in the fact that he uses an infinitive (ὑποτάσσεσθαι) rather than imperative, which he saves for verse 7. He uses a different construction with the noun ἀνάγκη + the infinitive ὑποτάσσεσθαι, which literally is “a necessity to be subject”; however, BDAG notes that one may supply ἐστὶν since it is probably implied.<sup>328</sup> Dunn notes that “the use of ἀνάγκη here is striking, since its philosophical use in reference to divine or immanent necessity—the way things are (laws of nature) and have to be (fate, destiny)—would be well known....Paul appeals to this sense of the (divine) givenness of things.”<sup>329</sup> At first glance, Hodge seems to go too far in his assertion that “[s]ubjection to governing authorities is not only a civil duty enforced by penal statutes, but also a religious duty and part of our obedience to God.”<sup>330</sup> But Murray expands on what Hodge asserts, “Paul uses this word ‘conscience’ frequently and it is apparent that the meaning is conscience toward God (cf. Acts 23:1; 24:16; II Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11; I Tim. 1:5; 3:9; II Tim. 1:3).”<sup>331</sup> Taking Murray and Hodge’s interpretations into consideration, we can view these two verses as asserting the same truth—because our consciences are bound to God, it is necessary for us to obey the governing authorities since

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<sup>327</sup> This is a very high calling for the governing authorities! They are called to approve of what is good, i.e., what promotes the common good of society.

<sup>328</sup> BDAG, 61.

<sup>329</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 765.

<sup>330</sup> Hodge, *Romans*, 362.

<sup>331</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 154.

they are the servants whom God has put in place over us. BDAG gives alternative definitions of συνείδησις “awareness of information about something, *consciousness*...the inward faculty of distinguishing right and wrong, *moral consciousness, conscience*...attentiveness to obligation, *conscientiousness*.”<sup>332</sup> Fitzmyer maintains that Paul is using a Greek philosophical idea when he refers to conscience. He says: conscience “is the capacity of the human mind to judge one’s actions either in retrospect (as right or wrong) or in prospect (as a guide for proper activity).”<sup>333</sup> The idea behind the use of this word in this passage is that the Christian now knows (i.e., has an awareness of God’s involvement in the social structures of society) God has put the governing authorities into place, therefore they ought to be attentive to the knowledge that God has instituted these structures and obey them—thus *prospectively* keeping a clear moral consciousness. Murray summarizes the thought well:

“The meaning here must be that we are to subject ourselves out of a sense of obligation to God. The thought then is that we are not only to be subject because insubjection brings upon us penal judgment but also because there is the obligation intrinsic to God’s will irrespective of the liability which evil-doing may entail. God alone is Lord of the conscience and therefore to do anything out of conscience or for conscience’ sake is to do it from a sense of obligation to God. This is stated expressly in I Peter 2:13: ‘be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake’. The necessity, therefore, is not that of inevitable outcome...but that of ethical demand.”<sup>334</sup>

The next part of this section is the beginning of verse 6, which begins with διὰ τοῦτο. There is debate over what this refers to, either backward or forward—or both. The most persuasive understanding is that it refers back to everything prior in the passage and

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<sup>332</sup> BDAG, 967-968.

<sup>333</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 33:311. Cf. Murray: 154, Dunn: 765, Stein: 337, Moo: 803, and Schreiner: 685 for agreement on the use of conscience. Fitzmyer may be right, however, it is possible that Jewish thought could have mediated this philosophy into its worldview. Second Temple Judaism seems to have done that; for example see the Deuterocanonical book, *Wisdom of Solomon*.

<sup>334</sup> Murray, *Romans*, 154.

the immediately following clause, rather than just verse 5.<sup>335</sup> In essence, Paul says, for all of these reasons: the governing authorities exist and are put in place by God, are ordered by God, carry out God's judgment and wrath, approve of what is good, and are God's servants. In addition, you will have a clear conscience if you obey, because the authorities are God's ministers—for these reasons you pay taxes.

The use of the word λειτουργοί has caused some discussion because of the association it has with cultic ministry. Does Paul intend to associate governing authorities with ecclesiastical ministers? A survey of Lucan and Pauline uses of the word (and its cognates) show it to always be either diaconal or gospel-oriented service in view (Lk 1:23 is priestly), with the exception of this one occurrence (see Acts 13:2; Rom. 15:16 and 27; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17, 25 and 30). In Hebrews the word is used of angels (1:7, 14) Jewish priests (10:11), Moses (9:21) and Christ, who is our great high priest (8:2, 6). It seems that there is a decidedly ecclesiastical (or cultic) flavor to the word in NT usage. If Paul did not intend for his audience to think of governing authorities with some association to diaconal or cultic nuance, then why would he use this word? He felt perfectly fine calling them διάκονος twice earlier in the passage. It might be similar to our common English word "minister", which has both ecclesiastical and governmental meaning. When we refer to the Prime Minister of England, we assume no cultic nuance to the word. Is that what Paul was doing with this word in Romans 13:6? The most helpful interpretation of this is in Barrett, where he sees no

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<sup>335</sup> Cranfield thinks it refers back to v. 5, maintaining a good conscience, *Romans*, 2:668 (also Moo: 803-804). Stein notes that nowhere in the Pauline corpus does διὰ τοῦτο refer only to a preceding word, rather it refers to a general thought or argument (and he lists a catalogue of references to support his claim); Stein, "The Argument of Romans," 340. Stein also maintains that διὰ τοῦτο can be shown to refer both retrospectively and prospectively, and lists another catalogue of references to support his claim; Stein, "The Argument of Romans," 340-341. He makes a good argument (which Schreiner follows, *Romans*, 685) for the claim that διὰ τοῦτο "acts as a relative phrase which refers back to Paul's earlier teaching concerning the state which is repeated later in the verse by the γάρ clause," Stein, "The Argument of Romans," 341.



necessary cultic nuance to the word *per se*, but that it gains “theological significance from the genitive, ‘of God.’”<sup>336</sup> The context drives the meaning of the word within its possible range of meaning, as should be the case!

The final clause of this verse is variously translated but most translators agree on the basic force of the clause.<sup>337</sup> προσκαρτεροῦντες is defined by BDAG as: “to persist in someth., busy oneself with, be busily engaged in, be devoted to.”<sup>338</sup> Fewer commentators agree on the use of τοῦτο in the clause. There are three general interpretations on how “this very thing” is supposed to be understood, summarized by Stein, with some changes: (1) It refers to the rulers being appointed “to administer wrath upon evil doers” and promote good; (2) Rulers being appointed to collect/receive taxes; (3) Rulers being appointed to “be the ministers of God” with the focus on their service.<sup>339</sup> In favor of the first view are Barrett (227), and possibly Moule (217).<sup>340</sup> In favor of the second view are Hodge (362-363), Murray (155), Cranfield (669), Dunn (767), Fitzmyer (669), and Matera (296). In favor of the third view are Stein (342), probably Käsemann (359), Moo (805), and Schreiner (686). The most persuasive view is the third (Stein, et al.). Although the immediate context seems to suggest the second,

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<sup>336</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Epistle to the Romans*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 228. Many other commentators follow Barrett here (cf. Dunn, 767; Moo, 804; Schreiner, 686), and Murray sees an enhancement of the dignity ascribed to civil officials but no necessary cultic nuance; see Murray, *Romans*, 154-155. Schreiner says they serve a “divine service (not in a cultic sense) in collecting taxes!” Schreiner, *Romans*, 686. Surprisingly, Toews is the one who ascribes the most cultic flavor to the word and thinks there is “sacred character” ascribed to government officials in this word; see Toews, *Romans*, 318.

<sup>337</sup> As noted in the annotated translation: ESV, KJV, RSV all basically use “attending to this very thing”; NASB has “devoting themselves to this very thing”; NET has “devoted to governing”; NJB has “even as they are busily occupied with that particular task”; and Tyndale translated as “serving for the same purpose”.

<sup>338</sup> BDAG, 881.

<sup>339</sup> Stein, “Argument of Romans,” 342. The present writer has made some changes to Stein’s summary in order to encompass the other views that have been proposed.

<sup>340</sup> Although Moule could take Paul to refer to everything, including the collection of taxes.

the fact that Paul uses the *τοῦτο* twice in this verse leads one to look back at the first one for guidance on the second. Earlier we took the view that Paul was referring to the work of the servants of God (i.e., governing authorities), therefore he is probably referring to the title (*λειτουργοὶ...θεοῦ*), which summarizes their service when he uses *τοῦτο*. Although we agree with Käsemann, we disagree with his interpretation that it only refers to tax collection, because that is not the only thing the authorities do. Paul could be using tax collection as an example of what the authorities do and how they exercise their dominion, without saying it is all they do. At the end of the day, it is hard to come to a definitive conclusion on what exactly Paul had in mind when he penned that phrase. The important thing to walk away from this verse with is that Paul “has in view the ideal of civil service as dedicated public service (a high view of public service, even collection of taxes, as a vocation can clearly be developed on the basis of this text),” and the third view encompasses the other two in it.<sup>341</sup>

### 5.1.9. Honor those in authority (v. 7)

Paul commands all of his readers (hearers) to give to everyone what is due them; he uses the second person plural imperative, *ἀπόδοτε*. At the beginning of this passage he employed the third person singular combined with *πάντα ψυχῇ* in order to address each individual, but now he addresses the whole group at once. We must remember the advice of John Chrysostom when he pointed out that the giving is “not ‘give,’ that [Paul] says, but ‘render’ (or ‘give back’)...For it is not a favor that you confer by so doing, since the thing is matter of due.”<sup>342</sup> Even though it has been translated as “give” here, it is not in the sense of an undeserved gift, but it is giving in the simple transaction of handing over something to

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<sup>341</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 767.

<sup>342</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 76.

another person. We take to heart Chrysostom’s counsel and recognize that the governing authorities are due certain things—those things which Paul outlines.

ὀφειλή is the plural noun form of the verb that Paul uses in verse 8 (ὀφείλω). BDAG defines the noun as, “that which one owes in a financial sense, obligation”.<sup>343</sup> This correlates with Chrysostom’s aforementioned insight. The question then follows, what do we owe to the governing authorities? Paul answers with taxes, customs, fear, and honor. Is this an exhaustive list? We might say it is a list of the basic debts we owe to those who govern and rule over us in society. Some commentators have pointed out that the list has a poetic (or artistic) symmetry to it—φόρον... φόβον and τέλος... τιμὴν.<sup>344</sup> That may well be the case, but it is also likely that the Apostle would have seriously considered the items included in this poetic list of debts. He was not only concerned to make his letters appeal to the artistic sensitivities of his audience; he also most certainly wanted to provide real guidance for their lives on what exactly they owed to their rulers. It seems correct that this final command at the beginning of verse 7 is a specific exhortation, which fleshes out the general command of verse 1.<sup>345</sup> It probably cannot serve as an exhaustive list of what we owe to the governing authorities, although it is a good summary of our general debts to the government. To require much more from citizens might be an overreach on the part of a government.<sup>346</sup> One

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<sup>343</sup> BDAG, 743.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. Toews, 317; Stein, 342; Schreiner, 687.

<sup>345</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 355; Stein, “Argument of Romans,” 342.

<sup>346</sup> Any other form of debt to the government would probably fit under the heading of one of the four things Paul lists (i.e., participation in society via voting or serving as a juror, or praying for the governing authorities, would both fit under the heading of honoring the rule of those authorities since they tell us that voting or serving on a jury are civic duties). By giving a generalized list, Paul’s broad list can encompass many forms of government as well.

ought not get hung up on looking for deeper meaning to the words Paul chose; rather, they should keep their simple meanings. Taxes and customs are in view. Fear and honor—the “two words overlap and describe the respect and honor that should be rendered to those who have authoritative positions.”<sup>347</sup>

## 5.2. Interpretive Conclusions

We can summarize this chapter by pointing out the major interpretive conclusions in the following points:

- “Every person” applies at the very least to all Christians, and probably to all people.
- “Governing authorities” refers to civil authorities, not spiritual forces.
- The governing authorities are put in place by God.
- Defiant opposition to the governing authorities demonstrates a disposition of heart that is opposed to God.
- The judgment of this passage is temporal in nature with possible (but not necessary) eternal consequences.
- The judgment in this passage is God’s judgment meted out by agency of the governing authorities.
- Paul’s admonitions in this passage are supposed to be understood as universal instruction for the Church of all ages.
- The role of the governing authorities is to punish bad and commend good.
- The good spoken of is civic good, with spiritual consequences.
- Paul’s use of force continuum would include the use of deadly force, when necessary.

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<sup>347</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 687.

- The Pacifist interpretation excluding capital punishment is not supported by this passage.
- Christians must not seek personal revenge; rather, they should leave vengeance to the Lord and his agents (i.e. governing authorities).
- The wrath in this passage is God’s wrath executed (temporally) by way of his agents.
- It is good and right to fulfill our obligations to the governing authorities (i.e., pay taxes, show respect, etc).
- Paul ascribes theological significance to the peacekeeping work of the governing authorities.
- Tax collection is an example of how society should submit to the governing authorities.
- Taxes, customs, fear, and honor summarize our debts to the governing authorities.

In conclusion, William of St. Thierry gives sage wisdom on this verse when he says:

It is stupid madness to want to fear no one because of an arrogant holiness, and it is the shallowest sort of pride to wish to honor no one. Fear is owed to high power, honor is owed to humble service, and love to benevolence.<sup>348</sup>

Likewise, Calvin urges:

It is clear “that [subjects] are to hold [magistrates] in esteem and honor—that they are to obey their edicts, laws, and judgments—that they are to pay tributes and customs...We ought to obey kings and governors...not because we are constrained, but because it is a service acceptable to God; for he will have them not only to be feared, but also honoured by a voluntary respect.”<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Romans*, 239. William obviously takes verse 8 as an extension of this verse, whereas we view it as the beginning of a new section where Paul picks up on believers’ personal and church relations again. However, Paul connects the flow of thought by using the language of owing.

<sup>349</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 483.

## **PART IV**

## **CONCLUSION**

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the earliest days of the Christian Church we saw that governmental service was viewed with suspicion by some and outright disapproval by others. Following the reign of Constantine and the ante-Nicene era, governmental service became more accepted, even celebrated in the Church. From that time onward, the Christian Church largely viewed government as a divinely ordained means of maintaining peace and order in the world. Origen, being the last of the major interpreters to chafe against the laudatory wording of Romans 13:1-7, still acknowledged the apostle Paul's instructions in this passage; and though he spiritualized some of the concepts proposed, he nevertheless encouraged his readers to obey the governing authorities unless they directly contradicted Christian faith.

From the earliest interpreters up to the Reformation, we saw no indication that the governing authorities mentioned by Paul were anything other than the reigning earthly civil authorities of the day. It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we first encountered the idea that the governing authorities might be spiritual forces at work behind the earthly powers. Such novel interpretations bear the burden of proving their necessity before gaining our acceptance, and we found no necessary reason to view the passage differently than did our forefathers of the previous nineteen centuries. The governing authorities of this passage are the earthly civil authorities of one's context, whether local, regional, national, or international. Paul had not only the emperor of Rome in mind when he penned this passage,

nor did he have only the local Roman city authorities in mind. Paul's intent was universal, in both geography and time.

Along the way, we read about how there were some differences of opinion on whose judgment Paul referred to in vs. 2. Early interpreters said either God was the judge in view, or the governing authorities were in view. Later in the history of interpretation we began to see that some of the commentators deemed this question as an unnecessary conflict. It is possible that Paul meant for us to regard the judgment as both God's and the governing authorities'. It is God's judgment meted out by agency of the earthly governing authorities.

The next question we focused on would have been what type of judgment and wrath are in view? Does God condemn people to eternal judgment by agency of the governing authorities, or does Paul have temporal punishment in mind? As we discussed in chapter 4, the disposition of heart and the reason for judgment change the answer to this question. If the person being judged by the authorities has an obedient disposition of heart toward God, then even if the governing authorities judge incorrectly or wickedly, the person under judgment will not experience final condemnation from God. If, however, the person judged has a heart of opposition to God, then it is very likely that final condemnation will be the result. It must be clearly understood that the governing authorities have no say over final judgment, that is the concern of God alone. The governing authorities must be limited to the temporal sphere of judgment.

Following on the heels of the previous paragraph, this then reminds us of the discussion about capital/corporal punishment. We discovered that nowhere in our research (albeit limited) did we find any denial of the right of the governing authorities to execute some form of material and physical punishment for crimes committed. It was not until the Reformation era that the pacifist strain of thinking began to take hold, and eventually



flowered into a fully formed belief that the right of capital punishment is not granted to the governing authorities. Following on that, the Modern era gave impetus to the Anabaptist movement, which promoted a very limited view of what God calls the governing authorities to do. As we discovered, the *threat* of force was the extent to which our Anabaptist brethren allowed Paul to speak in this passage. But as we know from our study, Paul unreservedly hands the sword to the governing authorities and gives them the power to use it to the fullest extent of its purpose. Capital punishment is supported by Romans 13:1-7.

Giving that kind of power to all manner of civil authorities, whether Christian or not, shows the level of respect God expects from his Church, as well as the general population of a given society. This passage fosters an attitude of respect toward the government. This was one of Paul's primary purposes in writing it; however, Paul was not naïve enough to think that all governing authorities would wield their power properly.

This brings up our last issue, that of civil disobedience. We saw some of the interpreters throughout history struggle with the one-sidedness of this passage and conclude that there must be some way to counteract wicked governing authorities. Paul does not concern himself with that issue in this passage,<sup>350</sup> but for our sanity, we find it necessary to ask how other parts of Scripture instruct us to conduct ourselves as Christians who want to take Paul's admonitions seriously. One of the strong exhortations we must take away from Romans 13:1-7 is that anarchy is evil. However, Acts 5:29 reminds us that Peter and the other apostles did find it necessary to disobey the governing authorities, because they were prohibiting them from preaching the gospel. Their response was rightfully, "We must obey

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<sup>350</sup> At least not directly, but we did see that the use of the word "servant" has an implied accountability in it.

God rather than men.”<sup>351</sup> We might gather that a key biblical requirement for civil disobedience (not to be confused with revolution) is that it is only permitted when it is necessary because a government is requiring something wicked, or not allowing what is good.

Other important biblical passages on the topic of governing authorities would be Mark 12:13-17, where Jesus instructs his followers (in much the same way as Paul in our passage) to pay their taxes; 1 Peter 2:13-17, where Peter also instructs believers (again, in much the same way as Paul) to be subject to the governing authorities, and to use their freedom for the purpose of doing good; and Revelation 13, where, as Schreiner says, “the state can function as an evil beast.”<sup>352</sup> Taken together, Mark 12:13-17 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 show us much the same picture that Paul has already given us. Revelation 13 (which is difficult to interpret, to say the least) must be dealt with separately and given a careful analysis in order to see how it informs our understanding of a biblical approach to the relationship of the Church and government. After an exegetical analysis is completed on Revelation 13, a synthesis must be completed to see how these four passages correlate into a complete Christian theology of the Church and government.

Returning to Romans 13:1-7, Longenecker gives some helpful pointers for reflection on how to go about applying it in our day:

“Further, it may legitimately be said, based only on Rom. 13:1-7, that Christians need always to work out a biblical theology for the subject of ‘Christians and the state’ in terms of at least three considerations: (1) an overriding conviction regarding God’s sovereignty in the affairs of all nations and all people...(2) the necessity to respond positively to governmental authorities...(3) the necessity to allow God’s Spirit

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<sup>351</sup> ESV.

<sup>352</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 688.

through a Christian's 'transformed' and constantly 'renewed' mind to make proper judgments in particular matters of civic and political concern."<sup>353</sup>

The third point might be improved if it is augmented to say, *within the context of the Christian community*. Individualistic decision making, no matter how 'transformed' and 'renewed' ones mind may be, is a precarious road to walk.

In conclusion, we learn from the apostle Paul that we are called by God to subject ourselves freely to the rule of the governing authorities, and that we ought to pay our taxes and show them proper respect. The governing authorities are intended by God to punish evil-doers and approve of those who do good, thus keeping the peace and promoting civic welfare. When governments turn corrupt and promote wickedness instead of civic good, it is a truly tragic state of affairs.<sup>354</sup> Civil disobedience is certainly not an ideal course of action; however it sometimes becomes the only choice for those who find themselves under governing authorities who are corrupt. Good governments make the world a place where peace and justice reign, and ultimately the Church may spread the gospel of peace unhindered. The ordinance of government is meant to be a blessing to the world. God has instituted it and God will use it to bring about his good purposes until the end.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

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<sup>353</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 970.

<sup>354</sup> In reality it is more than tragic. When civil governments rule to evil ends they are rejecting the origin of their authority and serving their own selfish purposes. Civil government is limited in its authority by God, and its overreach is very dangerous.

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