

# THE LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN LIGHT OF ROMANS 13:1-7

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### Martin Luther's Courageous Stand Against Tyranny at the Diet of Worms

Romans 13:1-7, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."

The popular interpretation of the above passage is as follows: Paul declared that all rulers have derived their authority from God. Therefore, to resist any law of the ruler is to resist the will and command of God. In such an interpretation, civil disobedience is rarely, if ever, an option for the Christian, who is to willingly submit to the dictates of rulers as if submitting directly to God's commands.

This interpretation lacks both historical and exegetical support. In fact, the entire basis of the Reformation was that of disobedience to the "governing authorities" of Rome, the Pope and the Emperor, who both demanded submission to the Roman Catholic church as the religious and political establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. When it was demanded of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms to recant of his opposition to papal authority, his only response was as follows:

“Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments... I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience. Here I stand. God help me! Amen.” (1)

Luther's courageous stand against tyranny literally set off the spark which would eventually ignite the Protestant Reformation. As stated by Church historian, Philip Schaff: “Luther's testimony before the Diet is an event of world-historical importance and far-reaching effect. It opened an intellectual conflict which is still going on in the civilized world. He stood there as the fearless champion of the supremacy of the word of God over the traditions of men, and of the liberty of conscience over the tyranny of authority.... When tradition becomes a wall against freedom, when authority degenerates into tyranny, the very blessing is turned into a curse, and history is threatened with stagnation and death. At such rare junctures, Providence raises those pioneers of progress, who have the intellectual and moral courage to break through the restraints at the risk of their lives, and to open new paths for the onward march of history.... Conscience is the voice of God in man. It is his most sacred possession. No power can be allowed to stand between the gift and the giver. Even an erring conscience must be respected, and cannot be forced.” (2)

### **The Historic Reformed Interpretation of Romans 13:1-7**

This principle of the primacy of the Scripture-bound conscience over human tradition, whether it be magisterial or ecclesiastical, resounds throughout the writings of the most prominent Protestant leaders whom God raised up to defend the faith after Luther. Not one of these great men interpreted Romans 13:1-7 in the way it is so often interpreted today, and that

should be sufficient reason to at least reconsider what is so commonly taught from the modern pulpit on the subject of civil obedience and disobedience. Without succumbing to the error of traditionalism, we are nevertheless to look upon the views of godly men of times past with respect.

John Calvin, known even by many of his theological opponents as the "prince of exegetes," advocated the same position with regards to civil disobedience previously set forth by Luther. Admittedly, this position is not as evident in his treatment of the subject of civil government in the Institutes of the Christian Religion, which was among the first of his endeavors, as it is in his commentary on Romans 13:1-7. This is due to the fact that the former was written primarily to serve as a rebuttal of the Anabaptists' anarchistic tendency to declare all forms of civil government incompatible with Christian liberty. However, he concluded his exhortations to Christians to submit to the authorities who have been placed by God over them with the following qualifications: "But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow. And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offense of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When He opens His sacred mouth, He alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates: a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God." (3)

Calvin's purpose for writing his commentary on Romans 13:1-7 was entirely different than that which prompted his discussion of civil government in the Institutes. Therefore, when we turn to the commentary, we find a somewhat different tenor of thought. While still maintaining that it is the duty of Christians to submit to the "governing authorities," we more clearly see that it is the legitimate rule of the magistrate to which we are to submit ourselves: The reason why we ought to be subject to magistrates is, because they are constituted by God's ordination.... 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 well being of mankind.... They are the means which he designedly appoints for the preservation of legitimate order.... Paul speaks here of the true, and, as it were, of the native duty of the magistrate, from which however they who hold power often degenerate. (4)

To ensure that Calvin's point was not missed, Henry Beveridge, the editor of the Scottish publication of the Commentaries wrote the following: It is remarkable, that often in Scripture things are stated broadly and without any qualifying terms, and yet they have limits, as it is clear from other portions. This peculiarity is worthy of notice. Power is from God, the abuse of power is from what is evil in men. The Apostle throughout refers only to power justly exercised. He does not enter into the subject of tyranny and oppression. And this is probably the reason why he does not set limits to the obedience required: he contemplated no other than the proper and legitimate use of power. (5) We may also quote many other Reformers since the sixteenth century who voiced very similar, if not identical, sentiments regarding the subject of obedience to the civil magistrate. Charles Hodge, for example, wrote: Civil government is a divine institution, and, therefore, resistance to magistrates in the exercise of their lawful authority is disobedience to God.... The actual reigning emperor was to be obeyed by the Roman Christians, whatever they might think as to his title to the sceptre. But if he transcended his authority, and required them to worship idols, they were to obey God rather than man. This is the limitation to all human authority. Whenever obedience to man is inconsistent with obedience to God, then disobedience becomes a duty....

Paul is speaking of the legitimate design of government, not of the abuse of power by wicked men.... Magistrates or rulers are not appointed for their own honour or advantage, but for the benefit of society, and, therefore, while those in subjection are on this account to obey them, they themselves are taught, what those in power are so apt to forget, that they are the servants of the people as well as the servants of God, and that the welfare of society is the only legitimate object which they as rulers are at liberty to pursue. (6)

Even the Westminster Confession of Faith is agreed on this point: God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word.... So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an

implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also....

...Because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.... (7)

It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience sake. (8)

In summary, the Reformers adopted a position with regards to the civil magistrate that required obedience to authority legitimately exercised. Thus, even when the particular magistrate had degenerated into a tyrant (as was the case with the wicked Nero), Christians were at liberty to reject his office en toto and willingly submit themselves to those aspects of his rule which are not in conflict with God's Law. This position was in contradistinction to both the Erastian position, which required unqualified submission, and the Anabaptist position, which advocated rebellion against all forms of "worldly" authority. The Reformers' "middle ground" approach to the subject of civil obedience and disobedience has been virtually forgotten in today's churches, dominated as they are with either papal influence or French revolutionary thought, but it is nevertheless the biblical position.

### **Does the Civil Magistrate Ever Cease to be a "Minister of God"?**

A careful exegesis of Romans 13:1-7 will substantiate the historic arguments discussed above. Before we begin, however, it should be noted that most modern translations, the New King James Version included, have erroneously rendered the Greek phrase "exousias huperechousias" (literally, "authorities above") as "governing authorities," rather than "higher powers," as it appears in the older King James Version. The significance of this discrepancy will be obvious when we discuss how this passage applies to Christians in modern America.

When Paul wrote of the "authorities" which are "appointed by God," to whom did he refer? First of all, such an authority, or civil magistrate, is one who is "not a terror to good works, but to evil" (verse 3a). As such, he is a rewarder of those who do good (verse 3b). Paul then described the primary function of the civil magistrate in verse 4: Romans 13:4, "For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."

According to this verse, the only legitimate function of the civil magistrate is to protect society by executing God's wrath on evildoers. This is clearly a reference to the punishment of criminals, who are an internal threat to the society, and the repelling of attack and invasion by foreign aggressors, which are external threats to the society. Beyond these duties, the civil magistrate has no authority granted to him by God. The Christian's duty in response to the faithful exercise of this office, is to submit to the rule of the magistrate and to pay the taxes that are collected to finance this legitimate function of government. Beyond this, the Christian is under no biblical obligation to render further obedience.

When all is said and done, it is important to take into consideration that this passage was intended to be prescriptive, not descriptive. In other words, it speaks of what the "higher powers" are supposed to be, not what they are intrinsically at all times. As "God's minister," the civil magistrate is obligated to obey God's Law and to properly apply it to the society which he governs. Conversely, any time the civil magistrate becomes "a terror to good works," and rewards evil rather than punishing it, he then has begun to "bear the sword in vain". To this extent, he is no longer "God's minister to you for good" and it is the duty of Christians to resist his unlawful rule as they would the rule of Satan himself. To say that God may deliver His people over to an oppressive civil magistrate as chastisement for sin is one thing; to say that we are to deliver ourselves and our consciences to that which is contrary to God's Word is quite another. To say that the laws of the civil magistrate, whether they be good or evil, are unequivocally the "ordinances of God," is not merely naive, but a blasphemous affront to the holiness of God. The righteous and eternal Judge of the world simply cannot be charged with requiring us to obey contradictory commands.

**Loyalty to God Must Always Take Precedence Over Obedience to Men**

We end our exegesis of this passage with verses 6 and 7: Romans 13:6-7, "For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."

As shown from verse 6, God commands His people to pay taxes to finance the function of government in its capacity as the "avenger" of God's wrath against evil-doers. This is the extent of the magistrate's prerogative to collect tax monies from those under his rule. However, when the civil magistrate levies a tax or custom to finance that which is contrary to his ordained purpose (i.e., abortion, the propagation of sodomy, aggression against God's Church, etc.), the Christian is forbidden by Scripture to pay it. "Caesar" is only entitled to what is his, not what is God's (Matthew 22:21).

Likewise, when a civil magistrate becomes a tyrant and commands us to do that which the Bible forbids, either explicitly or by necessary implication, then we are not to either fear him or honor him. We see this principle in the response of the Israelite youths in Daniel, chapter 3, when they were commanded by King Nebuchadnezzar to "fall down and worship the gold image" (verse 5) which he had set up. Even though the threatened cost of disobedience, in this case, was their very lives, they stood firm in their convictions and their loyalty to God alone: Daniel 3:16-18, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

Loyalty to God's commands must always, and without exception, take precedence over any law written by man. This is a principle that most modern Christians in this country do not understand when they frown upon civil disobedience. In the pious guise of submission to "God-ordained authority," such people are actually engaged in rebellion against God and would do well to immediately abandon such an unholy stance.

### **Tragic Effects of Biblical Misinterpretation on Germany's Churches**

Having thus established Paul's true intention in writing Romans 13:1-7, the question now before us is this: How are we to apply this passage to the current situation in America, where we find an oppressive and tyrannical civil government that has far exceeded the boundaries placed upon it by Scripture and even by its own charter, the U.S. Constitution? Are we as Christians permitted by God to exercise our "right to private judgment" in determining which laws we will obey and which laws we will disobey? More specifically, may we withhold taxes, customs, fear, and honor from the Federal government when it oversteps its limitations and ignominiously seats itself upon God's throne?

It is a tragic commentary on the level of apostasy in modern "Christianity" to find many in today's churches, even some who claim allegiance to the Reformed faith, answering the above question in the negative. A misinterpretation of Romans 13:1-7 has even led some to believe that should an international tax be levied upon American citizens by the United Nations, that we as Christians would be obligated to pay that as well. It is unthinkable that any professing Christian would adhere themselves to such a preposterous notion, and yet such a sentiment was expressed to this writer by a minister of a prominent Reformed church in Denver, Colorado. The following comment by William L. Shirer in his monumental study of National Socialism (Nazism) are instructive: The Protestants in Germany, as in the United States, were a divided faith. Only a few belonged to the various Free Churches such as the Baptists and the Methodists. The rest belonged to twenty-eight Lutheran and Reformed Churches.... With the rise of National Socialism there came further divisions among the Protestants. The more fanatical Nazis among them organized in 1932 "The German Christians' Faith Movement".... The "German Christians" ardently supported the Nazi doctrine of race and the leadership principle and wanted them applied to a Reich Church which would bring all Protestants into one all-embracing body.... Opposed to the "German Christians" was another minority group which called itself the "Confessional Church".... It opposed the Nazification of the Protestant churches, rejected the Nazi racial theories and denounced the anti-Christian doctrines of Rosenberg and other Nazi leaders. In between lay the majority of Protestants, who seemed too timid to join either of the two warring groups, who sat on the fence and eventually, for the most part, landed in the arms of Hitler, accepting his authority to intervene in church affairs and obeying his commands without open protest. (9)

One of the weapons which Adolf Hitler used to beat the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Germany into a docile submission was Romans 13:1-7: The Protestants haven't the faintest conception of a church. You can do anything you like with them---they will submit. These pastors are used to cares and worries... they learnt them from their squires.... They are insignificant little people, submissive as dogs, and they sweat with embarrassment when you talk to them. They have neither a religion that they can take seriously nor a great position to defend like Rome. (10)

Aside from the courageous efforts of a few "rebels," such as Deitrich Bonhoeffer, it was this submission to Hitler, based upon an ignorance of the true meaning of Paul's words, that allowed the Nazis to carry out their diabolical "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem". Many Christians were even criticized by their church leaders for disobeying their "governing authorities" by hiding Jewish refugees in their homes. (11) Can we expect this country to fare any better than Nazi Germany did in the 1930s, when the Protestant churches en masse are buying into the very same philosophies held by the churches in that once great nation? It is to be sure that the blood of millions of people will one day cry out in the ears of God for judgment against His apostatizing Church in our own nation. May God grant repentance to His people before such a tragedy again happens.

### **Our Government Was a Result of "Revolt" Against the British Crown**

Ironically enough, the very government of this country was established by "rebellious" against the "governing authority" of the eighteenth century---the British crown. This fact is virtually ignored by the modern opponents of civil disobedience. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.... That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government.... Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.... But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing

invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”

It is clear from the above quotation that America's fight for her independence from the despotic rule of King George III was in direct conflict with the popular interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 as a command to submit to all government *carte blanche*, regardless of whether it be righteous or evil. Therefore, those who point to this passage to support their opposition to civil disobedience with regards to the statutory laws of the Federal government are defeated by their own premise. After all, since our own country was founded upon the principle of civil disobedience in the face of tyranny, they cannot, without resorting to the most obvious of double-standards, remove this as a viable option for others.

### **Citizens of the States Are Not Under the Jurisdiction of Federal Law**

Finally, this application of Romans 13:1-7 to the subject of civil disobedience with regards to the Federal government demonstrates an inexcusable ignorance of the constitutional structure of our country. From a careful study of the political foundations of America, it is clear that our country is a Republic made up of smaller republics---the several states of the Union. Each of these states was intended to exercise sovereignty within its own jurisdiction, and was never placed under the jurisdiction of the Federal government in Washington, D.C., which existed merely as a servant of the Union. According to the rulings of *Glass v. The Sloop Betsy* in 1794 and *Harcourt v. Gaillard* in 1827: Our government was founded upon compact. Sovereignty was, and is, in the people [of the states]. (12) Each [state] declared itself sovereign and independent, according to the limits of its territory. (13)

The Apostle Paul wrote the Roman epistle to a people who were under the subjection of a dictatorship. The Roman emperor was the "higher power" spoken of, and as far as he ruled justly and did not command that which was contrary to God's Law, Christians were bound to submit to him. We in America, however, are not under a dictatorship, but a Constitutional Republic which was explicitly founded upon biblical principles and modeled, in many ways, after the Israelite theocracy of the Old Testament.

Therefore, Romans 13:1-7 cannot be made to apply in exactly the same way as it did to Paul's initial audience without grossly twisting its intent. In American law, the people which form the several states are the "higher powers," not the Federal government. Of course, in a religious sense, they are to submit themselves to the ultimate "higher power," which is the risen and exalted Christ (Matthew 28:18; Revelation 11:15). Therefore, as constituents of the political sovereignty they are to be self-governed by God's Law, and are thus bound by Scripture to disobey any laws or statutes that interfere with this submission to the Creator. In the words of the founding fathers, "There is no king but Jesus." Any other attitude but this with regards to the subject of civil government is nothing short of idolatry and subject to God's judgment: Exodus 20:3, 5-6, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

#### Endnotes

1. Martin Luther, quoted by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), Volume VII, pp. 304-305.
2. Philip Schaff, *ibid.*, pp. 311-312.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), Book IV, Chapter XX:32.
4. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans* (Baker Book House, reprinted 1993), pp. 478-479.
5. Henry Beveridge, in John Calvin, *ibid.*, p. 478 (footnote).

6. Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprinted 1993), pp. 404-405, 407-408.

7. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XX:2, 4.

8. Ibid., Chapter XXIII:4.

9. William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (Simon and Schuster, 1960), pp. 235-236.

10. Adolf Hitler, quoted in Herman Rauschning, The Voice of Destruction (London, 1940); cited in Joseph Carr, The Twisted Cross (Huntington House Inc., 1985), p. 202.

11. Reference: Phillip Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood be Shed (Harper-Colophon Books, 1979).

12. Glass v. The Sloop Betsy (1794), 3 Dall. 6.

13. Harcourt v. Gaillard (1827), 25 U.S. 12 Wheat.

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