

## ROMANS 13: A SHORT PRIMER

### Setting the Stage

Before jumping into an analysis of Rom. 13, we should consider how, when and why civil authority came about in the first place.

From the beginning of history until the great flood of Noah, people had no civil power. The only authority given to mankind at that point was the authority of individuals and families to subdue and rule over the earth, to have children and families, and to take dominion over the earth. This authority did not include either the right of a person to rule over any other person (other than in a parent-child context), or the right of anyone to punish crimes and other legal offenses by others.

The law of nature, being the will of God expressed in the creation, was sufficient (as Ps. 19 and Rom. 1 inform us) to let people know that certain things were inherently wrong, such as theft, murder, adultery, etc. They were wrong, but no one had the authority to enforce these laws. That is why, when Cain killed Abel in Gen. 4, no one could rightfully take vengeance on Cain. In other words, no one had the right to enforce the law of murder, even though murder was wrong. So God put a mark on Cain - not to curse him, but to warn off any potential avengers.

After the flood, as part of God's covenant with Noah in Gen. 9, God for the first time authorized people to avenge (or to punish) the crime of murder. This may be understood as the initial grant of *civil power* to anyone. But to whom, exactly, was civil power given to? At the time the command to punish murder was spoken (Gen. 9:6), there were exactly only eight people on the face of the earth. There were no nations, no civil governments, and no kings. And so the authority to enforce the law of murder, along with all of the other promises in God's covenant with Noah, applied to each person there. And to all of their descendants, which now include everyone alive today.

Nations only came about years later, when people were scattered by language and family groups from the Tower of Babel. Civil governments only came about years after that, when these many separate family groups expanded into ethnic nations and began to organize governments. Notice here a crucial distinction: civil power and the birth of nations both came from God, but the formation of civil governments did not. God created the nations, but people make civil governments. Other than the nation of Israel (and even that is arguable, but for another time), God never made or gave any nation on the face of the earth a civil government. Civil governments are the creation of Man.

So when we get to the New Testament statements about civil government, including Rom. 13, the writers are not establishing any new principles, laying down any new laws, or indeed, saying anything new at all. They are most certainly not issuing any new commands from God. They are merely summarizing in a succinct form, what it is that God expected people to have figured out from the law of nature and from history.

Let me make one last point before we jump into the Rom. 13 text. Nothing in the initial grant of civil power, or the creation of nations and the formation of civil governments, nullified, superseded, or altered the authority which God previously gave to individuals and to families (i.e., the private sector). That which is most important, is that which God gave first. In the beginning, God gave

mankind everything people need to survive and thrive. The addition of nations and civil government into the mix of human society was not a culmination point, but an additional support mechanism designed to help people overcome their abject failure in exercising self-government up to that point.

### **First Principles**

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. (1 Pet. 2:13-14). Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (Rom. 13:1).

The mission of civil government is therefore two-fold: a) to punish wrongdoers; and b) to commend what is right (in the American tradition, to secure individual rights). As to punishing wrongdoers, this includes not only punishing criminals, but also providing a means of redress for private litigants who have disputes over breaches of contract, property claims, injuries to persons, or other damages, etc. These are essentially the same means used for protecting individual rights.

In sum, civil power was granted to protect people from malefactors so the purposes of individual and family authority could be carried on without interference. That is, to restrain evil for the benefit of the private sector. Thus, nations were created, and civil power was granted, to provide a stable society for the safety, prosperity and happiness of the people in their private capacities. God did not create nations because individuals inherently need to be ruled, nor to superintend families, nor to exercise a superior dominion over the earth. Nations and civil government are, in the larger picture, merely facilitators for the private sector, not its replacement.

On the other hand, to “commend what is right” does not mean to do good things, to dole out special favors, or to enforce any alleged rights of the government against the people. Civil governments are not the creations of God, and as such, have no “rights.”

Further, the legitimate role of civil government is very specifically limited to wielding the sword to carry out wrath on a limited class of wrongdoers. Nowhere do the scriptures commend civil government either to: 1) punish evil thoughts; or 2) punish merely moral wrongs which are not also crimes as God defined them. Nor did God ever give civil rulers the power to (re)define crimes as merely any behavior which those in power want to deter. The chief evil of civil government is not that it does too little, but that it seeks to do *too much*.

Thus, Rom. 13 is not a command to obey all purported authorities that people have created – it only applies to authorities *instituted by God*. And there is no presumption that merely because some form of human government exists, it was made (or put there) by God. It is the *laws of God*, which define and restrict all institutions of human authority, that people are to obey and respect.

Even the defenders of the so-called *divine right of kings* back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, never made the argument which people now commonly ascribe to Romans 13 - “the mere fact I am king necessarily proves that God put me here.” You see, the English kings knew that such a claim is easily refuted - all one has to do is assassinate the king and install a successor. Then the new king can claim “it must

have been God's will, because He allowed it to happen." There isn't a whole lot of security in that argument.

It's funny that people today gravitate towards a line of reasoning that at the time, when the divine right of kings was popular, was known to be impractical and foolish. Oh, how far we have fallen!

Which leaves us with a terrible irony. Jesus came to bring liberty (Lk. 4:18) and God intended that civil rulers would be for our good. Yet, the way many people read Romans 13, it brings only bondage and evil. Shame on us! The solution? Change the way we understand the scriptures. And if your pastor or teacher is leading you into submission and subjection as a way of life instead of freedom and liberty, don't just sit there like a dummy.

### **What Is Said and Not Said**

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Rom. 13:1-4.

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. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 1 Pet. 2:13-17.

I purposely gave an extended introduction to these texts to lay a contextual framework for understanding them. First, that God has created no form of government for any Gentile nation, and second, that God has given no direct delegation of civil authority to any Gentile ruler. We need these basic principles firmly grounded before coming to these texts. Let's start by examining three key phrases which pose some interpretive challenges.

***For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.***

I take this text to mean primarily that civil government is not inherently evil, but that when God created the nations He in fact intended them to exercise civil power, and that it was mankind's job to institute such forms of civil government as would carry out God's intention. Note that it is civil *authority* which God has instituted, not any particular *form* of government, nor any specific *persons* as civil rulers. When civil rulers deviate from the authority God intended for them to exercise, our allegiance is to God, not to rulers.

***For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.***

This text indicates that the institution of civil government, consistent with God's purposes and intentions, is a good thing. It is also consistent with the general intention of God that all human institutions - including individual self-government, family government, and church government - are meant to restrain evil. Civil government is likewise tasked with restraining evil - the only difference being the types of evils it may restrain and the means it may use to restrain them when compared to the individual, family and church.

***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.***

It is the nature of all civil governments to have multiple layers or tiers of responsibility. We see this in the system of judges in ancient Israel, which is carried over into the American system of federal, state and local government. All such authority, when properly constituted, is equally entitled to respect and obedience. The listing of emperors and governors is by way of *example* - it is not an exhaustive list. The full list is not even limited to civil rulers. "Every human institution" means exactly what it says - not only civil government, but families, churches, and employers, etc.

What I do *not* see in any of these texts is an injunction for all people to give slavish obedience or unlimited submission to their civil rulers as embodiments of the presence of God among men. First, we must read all of scripture consistent with the rest of scripture and not force an interpretation which does violence to our understanding of many other texts. Second, we must carefully note what the Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2 texts do *not* say, namely,

Civil rulers stand in the place of God over the people, to the extent they may exercise authority which God has reserved unto Himself alone (*i.e.*, authority over the mind and heart, and matters which God has elsewhere delegated to individuals, families or the church). - ***Not!***

God has placed certain people in positions of civil authority, and if you dare to challenge their authority you will incur the wrath of God. - ***Not!***

Everything civil rulers do is by definition approved and sanctioned by God, because the mere fact they are in those positions shows divine approval. - ***Not!***

Every act taken to hold civil rulers to the limited authority God has given them is an act of rebellion against God Himself. - ***Not!***

In other words, *none of these statements (above) are what the scriptures stand for.*

### **Context is Key**

Now, let's take things to the next level by adding what we know about the broader context of human institutions. Namely, the statements *be subject to the governing authorities* and *be subject to every human institution*, **do not refer exclusively to civil government**. For individuals, families and the Church were all instituted by God - they are part and parcel of God's institutional framework and stand on no less than an **equal footing** with civil government as far as being considered *a governing authority* according to the scriptures.

So when 1 Peter commends us to be subject to every human institution, “whether it be to” this civil ruler or that civil ruler, these are to be taken as *examples*, not *limitations*. 1 Pet. 2:13-14 is not *limited* to civil rulers - rather, the respect we show for rightful authority (*i.e.*, authority *actually approved by God* and not merely a pretended authority) extends even so far as to civil rulers when they are acting rightfully.

And when I say that the private sector stands on *no less than an equal footing with civil government*, what I mean, of course, is that the private sector actually stands *above* civil government. Of all the governing authorities, civil government is the *least*, not the *greatest*. Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2 do not *override* God’s authority framework previously established, and somehow elevate civil rulers to the top of the authority pile.

- 1) The private sector gets its authority directly from God, whereas civil government gets its authority from the people, and what God grants is always greater than what people grant.
- 2) The people only ever gave civil government a *portion* of what they have inherently, so that the powers of civil government are always *less* than and *inferior* to the totality of rights and powers of the people. Just because the people have created a government does not mean they have deprived themselves of the ability to engage in self-government, or that ultimate sovereignty does not still reside with them.
- 3) Civil government is the mere agent of the people, not their master. Public officials owe *a duty of allegiance and obedience to follow the will of the people* - that is the consent of the governed, which is the paramount power in any political society.
- 4) All civil governments are disposable. If the people don’t like what the government is doing, they can always change (alter or abolish) the government. Contrariwise, the government has no power to alter or abolish the people. Inherently, the people are greater.
- 5) God placed mankind on earth originally with only private sector authority and no civil power. This was all that was necessary for people to survive and thrive. Civil power only came along almost 2,000 years later. Thus, civil government must be *less necessary* to human existence than the private sector.

Additionally, neither Rom. 13 nor 1 Pet. 2 establish rules of conduct or conscience that are either higher than, or superior to, the Ten Commandments. And if we examine the *Decalogue*, we find the first four commandments directed to the identity, invisible nature, name and holiness of the Creator, followed immediately by a directive to respect the next highest authority among mankind other than God Himself - parents. The rest of the commandments are directed to activities we may squarely place in the sphere of the private sector (murder, adultery, theft, false accusations and coveting).

What’s missing? Nowhere in the Ten Commandments is there a directive to obey monarchs, governors, public officials or any civil authority. Nowhere in the Ten Commandments is there a directive to obey pastors, ministers, church elders or any ecclesiastical authority. Church and state? *Pffff!* They are *nothing* compared to the authority of God, the family, and the private sector. If you really want to please God, you’d better get your priorities straight.