Common Sense Theology

An Analysis of T. L. Carter's Interpretation of Romans 13:1-7

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Abstract

Common sense theology has been a part of American theology since the time of the Revolution when Evangelicals incorporated ideals from the Scottish didactic Enlightenment into their thought. This paper deals with the work of one particular author, T. L. Carter, and his interpretation and exegetical work on Romans 13:1-7. It deals with the two major presuppositions of his common sense theology, namely that interpretations of any passage of Scripture will adhere to common sense and will result in a value-based ethic. Following this is an analysis of both the strengths and weaknesses of Carter's methodology.

Common Sense Theology

An Analysis of T.L. Carter's Interpretation of Romans 13

Introduction

In his article "The Irony of Romans 13," T.L. Carter attempts to establish the possibility that the apostle Paul was using irony as a rhetorical device to actually teach a method of rebellion against civil authorities. This method was not outright rebellion; rather, Carter believes that Paul's ultimate goal is to "heap burning coals" (Rom. 12:20, *ESV*) on the heads of the ruling authorities.[1] He bases this on an exegesis of Romans 13:1-7 and a method of Roman rhetoric that involves deliberate irony. Carter attempts to support an interpretation contrary to the majority of historical interpretation. He sees Paul fostering rebellion where most scholars have seen him promoting obedience. Carter's approach is rooted in two presuppositions. First, he assumes that the message of Scripture is common sense. That is to say that in some way, the reader should always be able to reconcile the truth he or she knows about the world with what he or she reads in Scripture. And second, he assumes that Scripture delivers a value-based ethic. He assumes that Scripture will teach a code of conduct and values to hold that apply or adapt to most, if not all, situations in life. If one is to understand the strengths and weakness of these two presuppositions, one must know their history as well. Without a proper understanding of their origins, it would be impossible to see the true danger they present to Scriptural interpretation. The strengths and weaknesses of Carter's methodology come from these two presuppositions. Any interpretive approach that is based on common sense and searches for a value-based ethic in Scripture will always draw conclusions that fall short of Scripture's true nature

1. T. L. Carter, "The Irony of Romans 13," *Novum Testamentum* 46, no. 3: (2004): 227.

Carter's Methodology

The Presuppositions

Carter's presuppositions of common sense and value-based ethics are fundamentally a fusion between culture and religion. These two presuppositions are rooted in Western philosophies, specifically the philosophies of the Enlightenment and the Evangelical movements of that period. Common sense reasoning produces a value-based ethic, and this reasoning is best exemplified during the Revolution era in American history.

During the time of the American Revolution, Evangelical thought was struggling to survive. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll exposes the development of common sense reasoning within the church as part of this struggle. He traces it to a fusion that occurred between "Christian convictions and Evangelical ideals"[2] in an attempt to survive the rising tide of anti-traditionalism coming from that era as well as an interest in the emerging philosophies. A specific brand of Enlightenment thought answered the need and captured the attention of Evangelicals.[3] This system of thought was a product of Scottish philosophy known as the didactic Enlightenment. The didactic Enlightenment was a movement, originating in mostly Scottish thought, which emphasized the common capacities of man, "both epistemological and ethical."[4] Unlike

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2. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publish Company, 1994), 67.

3. Noll notes that America rejected many forms of Enlightenment thought, that is to say, none of them took hold as the dominating philosophy of the time. They were incompatible with the way the majority of the population experienced life or wished to view their experience in life. However, the Scottish didactic Enlightenment seemed to describe life as many Americans knew it and answered the questions they were asking (Noll, *The Scandal*, 84).

4. Ibid., 85.

the skeptical and revolutionary Enlightenments in other parts of Europe, this system of thinking sought to "restore intellectual confidence and social cohesion."[5] This meant that any serious study of human capacities and consciousness would yield natural moral laws for a healthy society that were "every bit as scientific as Newton's conclusions about nature."[6] Evangelicals fused this thinking with their high value of Scripture. In doing so, they believed they would uncover moral principles as certain and universal as science. Many Evangelicals saw that a fusion of didactic Enlightenment philosophy and Scriptural truths would ensure the survival of Evangelicals in a rapidly changing cultural situation, one that rejected many previous traditions and depended heavily on the testimony of one's own sense and experience.[7] The Evangelicals felt that they must fuse their convictions to this cultural development or die.

The people in the pews did not explicitly choose a fusion between Enlightenment thought and Scriptural truths. Rather, Enlightenment thought entered the seminaries, and the rising stars in the pulpit preached from the Scriptures with this perspective. Greg Frazer outlines this development in his book *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution*. Frazer notes that, "John Locke and Samuel Clarke were widely read and influential in seminaries along with other rationalists such

5. Ibid., 84.

6. Ibid., 85. Noll emphasizes that while this trend was present amongst the leaders, the first professional scientists, and the major authors of the new nation, the "most articulate" spokesmen were "Protestant educators and ministers" appearing in the instruction of Harvard, Brown, Yale, and Princeton. These trends "defined the mental habits for Evangelicals [in the] North and South." Noll also asserts that this system of thought was present on the frontier as much as it was in the urban settings, thanks to ministers in both locales (cf. Noll, *The Scandal*, 85).

7. Ibid., 88.

as John Tillotson and William Wollaston."[8] Despite the education in the universities, the majority of trained ministers rejected the influence of this rationalist thought at first. George Whitefield said, "As for the Universities, I believe it may be said, their Light is become Darkness, Darkness that may be felt, and is complain of by the most godly Ministers."[9] However, by the mid to late 18th century, most active preachers accepted this doctrine was as the older preachers died or retired and the newly trained seminarians took prominence. Frazer gives an anecdote to illustrate this trend:

> In 1747, Jonathan Edwards called for concerted prayer to reverse moral decay. Forty years later, a group of ministers made a similar call for the same purpose, but "in addition to the necessity of renewed piety, these ministers called for incessant prayer that 'the spirit of true republican government may universally pervade the citizens of the United States.' For the same moral cancer which Edwards had diagnosed, they prayed that God would send the healing of 'true political virtue'"[10]

Within forty years of Edward's ministry, this ideology had anchored itself in the pulpit. Not only that, but Frazer also notes that in a desire to accept the political promises of this Enlightenment thought the people "enthusiastically embrace[d] creative interpretations of Scripture that gave them permission to do what they really wanted to do anyway,"[11] that is, pursue liberal democratic theory and political liberty.

This fusion was not only successful in preserving Evangelicalism, as it remains alive and well today, but it also caused rapid growth among Evangelical congregations.

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8. Greg Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 71.

9. George Whitefield, *A Continuation of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield's Journal . . . The Seventh Journal* (London, 1741), 55, quoted in Greg Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 71.

10. Frazer, *Religious Beliefs*, 78.

11. Ibid., 81.

As a result, Evangelical ministers became some of the greatest champions for this new system of common sense principles.[12] Evangelicals accepted didactic Enlightenment thought as a tool of preservation and growth, specifically the tool of common sense reasoning. However, it did not stop there. Common sense reasoning began to make its way into all areas of Evangelical thought. It was no longer just a method of sustaining cultural relevance, it also moved into Evangelical interpretation of Scripture. When Enlightenment thinking moved into Scriptural interpretation, it gave birth to common sense theology.

Despite its name, common sense theology does not have a strict methodology. It does not have its own rules for interpretation. Rather, it can find its way into any interpretational framework, simply because its driving force is among natural human capacities. Common sense theology draws its power from a timeless phenomenon of human sociology known as a plausibility structure. Peter Berger discusses this concept at length. He defines the plausibility structure as ". . . the social base for the particular suspension of doubt without which the definition of reality in question cannot be maintained in consciousness . . . the individual feels himself to be ridiculous whenever doubts about the reality concerned arise subjectively."[13] Individuals use plausibility structures to maintain his or her primary world in the face of doubt. The primary world is the interpretation of the world they received from childhood. Berger asserts that this primary world begins to break down when children recognize that the interpretation of

12. Noll, *The Scandal*, 85-88.

13. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (NY: Random House, Inc., 1966), 155.

the world their parents gave them is not the only interpretation.[14] When persons are exposed to a plurality of interpretations, they need a mechanism to stabilize and attempt to resolve conflicting interpretations. The plausibility structure is a natural sociological tool for removing doubt from and maintaining the strength of subjective realities.[15] As a human capacity, the plausibility structure is ubiquitously present in world cultures, and western culture is not exempt.

The specific plausibility structure in Western culture varies slightly between specific contexts. However, some general principles remain the same. The Revolutionary era began the development of these principles. Leslie Newbigin outlines a few of these common principles. The first principle of the Western plausibility structure is the strict divide between public facts and private values.[16] Western culture will allow almost anything within the realm of private values. A person may believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster that blesses people with gifts of tomato sauce and meatballs as long as he or she keeps this belief within the bounds of private values. However, as soon as a belief attempts to move from a private value to a public fact, Enlightenment evidentialist

14. Ibid., 138, 142-143. For example, when a child grows up in a home where the parents do not consume alcohol, but makes a friend whose parents do consume alcohol. The child suddenly realizes that not all parents are the same and must resolve these two conceptions of good parents. Granted, in a child's mind right and wrong are like black and white, but as the child grows, the plausibility structure begins to accept a broader spectrum.

15. Berger's definition of "subjective reality" is spot on. He discusses it at length in his chapter on "Society as a Subjective Reality." Subjective reality is the product of secondary socialization's journey through the plausibility structure (what Berger calls "new internalizations"). It often arrives on the other side of its journey in a form consistent with the primary socialization. If, however, it is strong enough, it may in fact alter the primary socialization and require the formation/acceptance of a new plausibility structure. This does not eliminate objective reality. Rather, it is the individual's socially influenced, socially malleable, and often imperfect interpretation of objective reality.

16. Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 14.

thinking and the modern scientific method immediately scrutinize the belief.[17] The Western world accepted the basic from of this plausibility structure during the Revolutionary era. Today, a belief must pass the test of the basic assumptions inherent in the scientific method and only those parts that survive this test may enter the realm of public fact.[18] The application of the scientific method is not always direct or complete. However, the basic assumptions always remain. One must always have evidence for a belief that rests to some degree on a form of, to borrow a term from the Revolutionary era, a self-evident belief.[19] This plausibility structure permeates through most established methodologies in Western culture.

The Western plausibility structure moved into theology and Scriptural interpretation in America. Common sense came to refer to anything that one accepts outright from one's plausibility structure. In the age of the American Revolution, this was the power of reason. According to N. W. Taylor, the legacy of the original Evangelical acceptance of the didactic Enlightenment left Evangelical orthodoxy dependent on "reason . . . our only guide in religion, in examining the evidences of revelation, in ascertaining its import, in believing its doctrines, and in obeying its precepts."[20] At this

17. Ibid., 18.

18. Newbigin uses the example of the Resurrection. Western thought will accept the claim that the disciples had a collective experience that led them to the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. However, Newbigin asserts that the claim that the tomb was actually empty because Christ walked out is, according to Western culture, ridiculous and unacceptable as anything more than private value (Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 62-63).

19. This is one form of evidence known as a basic belief and usually involves information gathered from the senses or reason. The term "self-evident" was born in the Revolutionary era and continues in use today, especially in the field of Epistemology. For a fuller exploration of the topic, see Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Third Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

20. N. W. Taylor, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God*, Vol. 1 (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1859), 382.

point, theology becomes answerable to reason, that is, common sense. Proponents of Enlightenment thought based their justification this breed of reasoning upon the common sense inherent in mankind. One of the foremost thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Thomas Reid, said that ". . . the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious. If any man should demand a proof of this . . . [he must] take for granted the very thing in question."[21] According to Reid, reason rules over all. One must accept its power because one cannot escape it.

Carter's is by no means a novel interpretation. The Revolutionary period saw many such interpretations of key biblical texts in which preachers drew contradictory ideas from Scripture. In fact, John Mayhew delivered a sermon in 1750 in which he interpreted Paul to mean exactly the opposite of what his text states in Romans 13.[22] As an outgrowth of Mayhew's work, Samuel West began one of his writings by "stating the clear sense of Titus 3:1 and Romans 13 but then, to make democratic arguments, had to conclude that the apostle Paul meant the opposite of what he said."[23] West states,

> The doctrine of non-resistance and unlimited passive obedience to the worst of tyrants could never have found credit among mankind had the voice of reason been harkened to for a guide, because such a doctrine would immediately have been discerned to be contrary to natural law.[24]

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21. Thomas Reid, *Selections from the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*, ed. G. A. Johnston (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1915), 156. Reid and his contemporaries laid the foundations for the Western plausibility structure. The modern scientific method is built on an unquestioning acceptance of sensory perception and the natural reasoning faculties of mankind. If you can see it, measure it, and repeat it, then it is fact.

22. Frazer, *Religious Beliefs*, 82

23. Ibid.

24. Samuel West, "1776 Election Sermon," in *The Pulpit of the American Revolution,* ed. John Wingate Thornton, (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2008), 272, quoted in Greg Frazer, *Religious Beliefs*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 84. According to Frazer, this was a trend among many preachers of the era including Simeon Howard, John Tucker, Gad Hitchcock, and Samuel Cooper, to list a few.

Essentially, West claims that simple reliance on the plain words of Scripture is insufficient. They must be weighed against man's knowledge of natural law and his natural capacity for reasoning. Frazer notes the shift that occurred after 1750. Prior to 1750, conformity with Scripture had been a test of reason.[25] However, after 1750, many pastors tested Scripture according to its conformity with reason.

This reign of reason presents a clear and present danger to theology. On this conception, the theologian may dismiss almost any paradigm, command, or claim of Scripture if any of these fail to adhere with conclusions he or she draws from the natural reasoning faculties he or she possesses. Not only did Evangelicals carry this thinking over into the interpretation of Scripture, but they also increasingly treated Scriptural interpretation as a hard science. According to Noll, the interpreters of the Revolutionary era treated Scripture as a "storehouse of facts"[26] that was capable of answering any question or issue as long as the ". . . pieces were arranged by induction...."[27] In an attempt to preserve objectivity, the interpreters of that day also threw off the weight of church tradition.[28] This afforded them the opportunity to reinterpret Scripture in light of their modern understanding, and thus previous church opinion lost much of its influence. If they agreed with church tradition, all was well. If they disagreed with church tradition, the new interpretation took precedence because the undeniable truth of common sense reasoning had established it.

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25. Frazer, *Religious Beliefs*, 85.

26. Noll, *The Scandal*, 98.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

Value based ethics came out of this storehouse of facts. During the Revolutionary era, the political leaders in America found in Scottish didactic Enlightenment thinking, a system that would both "justify the break with Great Britain . . . [and] establish social order for a new nation that was repudiating . . . automatic deference to tradition."[29] Noll asserts that

> . . .the form of reasoning by which patriots justified their rebellion against the Crown instinctively became also the form of reasoning by which political and religious leaders sought a stable social order for the new nation and by which evangelical spokesmen defended the place of a traditional faith in a traditionless society.[30]

This form of ethical social order aims to produce men who are virtuous and happy.[31] Richard Sher, in his analysis of the Scottish Enlightenment, defines this idea of virtuous men as men who are concerned for the welfare of public life, that is, men who have a "zeal for the political and religious status quo."[32] As Evangelicals adopted this form of reasoning, the lines between moralistic philosophy and Scriptural interpretation began to wear thin. Sher notes that Evangelical Scriptural interpretation often reached the identical conclusions as moral philosophy; it simply travelled a different road to get there.[33] The adoption of Scottish didactic Enlightenment reasoning brought America this method of Scriptural interpretation.

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29. Ibid., 87.

30. Ibid., 88.

31. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literature of Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 211.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 210.

Briefly, one should note that the church often misuses the term "moralistic philosophy" today. Often, when people talk about moralistic philosophy, they draw a parallel with legalism. Biblical scholars may liken such a philosophy to pharisaical actions. However, this is not quite the case. Moralistic philosophy, as it was present amongst Evangelicals during the Revolutionary era and continuing into today, attempted to use Scripture to find general truths in order to make men virtuous and happy. It sought to teach a modern audience general principles or values that would allow them to navigate any situation that might arise in day-to-day life. This man-centered approach to Scripture led to a perversion in doctrinal formation. One author summarizes, "Man's need rather than God's Word became the guide in doctrinal formulation."[34] Many in our recent history seek a value-based ethic in Scripture. Hart notes that Jerry Falwell, Sr. and Pat Robertson were both spokesmen for ". . . many Americans who lament[ed] the recent decline of Protestant norms in national culture."[35] While they may not have pursued happiness in the form of instant gratification, they did pursue a form of happiness. Moralistic philosophy does not pursue instant gratification either. Rather, it extolls contentment and satisfaction of a life well lived. This is one of many flavors of happiness. Happiness is found in many forms whether it is long-term happiness in moralism or instant gratification in the "if it feels good, do it" approach. Fallwell and Robertson would have agreed that the behavior commanded in Scripture would lead to a better lifestyle. Falwell and Robertson's supporters recognized the decline of the

34. Sydney Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24, no. 3 (September 1955): 268.

35. D. G. Hart, "Mainstream Protestantism, 'Conservative' Religion, and Civil Society," *Journal of Policy History* 13, no. 1: (2001): 29.

Protestant norms, or put another way, the Protestant values in their day and surmised that America was rapidly going to Hell in a hand basket. They bemoaned the loss of a Protestant culture and of Protestant influence that arose from a culturally accepted "storehouse of facts." The Evangelical acceptance of didactic Enlightenment thinking and culture's previous acceptance of Evangelical norms have left their mark even into our present day and age when we are concerned that the Protestant social norms established in our country are fading, leading to actions that press Evangelical-inspired social agendas.[36] However, unlike many (including Carter) suppose, Scripture does not ultimately aim to establish norms, mores, and values.

Paul's Words

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

Strengths

Carter builds his methodology on the two presuppositions discussed above. This methodology also contains its own set of strengths and weaknesses. One of Carter's primary strengths is that he seeks to establish plausibility rather than certainty for his argument. In his abstract, he states, "This article seeks to establish the possibility that

36. N. J. Demerath III, "The Moth and the Flame: Power in Comparative Blur," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1994): 105.

Paul was using irony...."[37] This allows him to present his ideas without having to directly take on the burden of overthrowing thousands of years of interpretive tradition.

Carter also does an excellent job establishing the literary context of Romans 13. He surveys the entire book of Romans as well as the immediate context of the literary units surrounding Romans 13:1-7. In this, he shows a genuine attempt to be true to the literary context from which he is interpreting. This is standard procedure for most inductive Bible study today.[38] Carter does this well and presents a very strong argument for the thematic elements Paul deals with in the immediate and surrounding literary context.

Finally, Carter explores the historical context of Romans 13, the author, and the intended recipients very well. Carter draws the majority of his historical information from century primary sources rather than modern secondary sources. He draws from eyewitnesses and experts of the New Testament era. He takes accounts from Quintilian, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius. He leans on these sources mostly for accounts of the cruelties at the hands of the government in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire.[39] Carter goes to great lengths to establish the context surrounding the apostle Paul at the time he wrote Romans. However, he does very little work to establish an understanding of Paul. Granted, Carter is working within the limits of a journal article, and this would

37. Carter, "Irony," 209.

38. For a simple walkthrough of common inductive Bible study methods, see J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). According to Duvall and Hays, there are only two ways to interpret Scripture: through reader response or through authorial intent. The question becomes whether the reader creates meaning in the text (reader response) or discovers the meaning the author left there for them to find (authorial intent) [Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 191-235]. While Carter it appears that Carter makes a valiant effort to find authorial intent, on closer examination one sees that there is a distinctive element of reader response to his approach.

39. Carter, "Irony," 215-217, 220-222.

definitely explain his brevity on Paul's biography. It was, however, surprising in light of Carter's thorough examination of the Paul's historical setting that he did not take a closer look at Paul's biography. This may have contributed to his incomplete analysis of Paul's understanding of government.

Weaknesses

There are several weaknesses in Carter's methodology. While the first is not a weakness per say, it would have greatly strengthened Carter's argument if he had reconciled his work with the full body of Scripture, specifically 1 Peter 2:13-17. He does allow 1 Peter 2:13-17 to bring some doubt to his assertion. However, he never engages the tension between his interpretation and 1 Peter 2:13-17. He believes that even if the reader does not accept literary-rhetorical irony in Paul's piece on government, there will always be some form of irony in that the very people Paul praises eventually kill him.[40] Carter certainly identifies a theme present in Scripture, the unfair treatment of believers.

This leads to his first true weakness. Though he identifies this tension, Carter does not deal with this tension between Christians and the ruling authorities well. He spends little or no time dealing with the Scriptural concept of submission, and it is a very important concept. Despite their consistent submission to the law in other areas besides the proclamation of the gospel and their consistent respect of public authorities, people of authority persecuted Christians throughout the New Testament. James Garret notes that this tension exists in Scripture, between the call to submission and the evil of the state, and he asks,

> Rather than to assume that only one applies to the encounter of modern Christians and the modern state, should not Christians recognize, accept, and seek to

40. Ibid., 210.

> implement the dialectical obligations of obedience and of disobedience to which these texts so clearly point?[41]

Eventually, Garret surmises that there must be a balance between the obligation of the Christian to submit to governing authorities, as they are God's servants for good (Rom. 13:1-7) and the obligation of the Christian to spread the gospel despite the persecution of governing authorities (Rev. 13, Acts 5:29). John Marshall labels this approach "hybridity." Hybridity seeks a balance between obedience and disobedience of a ruling power.[42] While this approach has its merits, the true nature of Paul's approach seems to be in a differentiation between submission and obedience rather than a system of obedience with measured disobedience. The example of the apostles and believers throughout the early church give an insight into that difference.

The author of the book of Acts clearly paints the apostles and the members of the early church as law-abiding citizens. This appears to be one of his many purposes in writing the book, to show the obedience of believers and the injustice of governing authorities.[43] The beliefs of the early church were not political nor were they intended to overthrow a political system.[44] However, despite this paradigm of obedience, Acts records clear examples of apostolic disobedience to explicit orders from the governing authorities. When the Jewish council, in Acts 5, commands Peter and John to refrain from

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41. James Leo Garret, "Dialectic of Romans 13:1-7 and Revelation 13," *Journal of Church and State*, no. 19 (Winter 1977): 20.

42. John W. Marshall, "Hybridity and Reading Romans 13," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 2: (2008): 169.

43. John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 1992), 70.

44. Arnold T. Monera, "The Christian's Relationship to the State According to the New Testament: Conformity or Non-conformity?" *Asia Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (2005): 113.

teaching in the name of Jesus, they refuse (Acts 5:29). Many would attribute this to the simple principle that God's law is higher than man's law, however, there seems to be another layer of complexity in the story.

Paul uses the Greek word *hupotassesthō* to describe submission in this instance. Most commentators agree that, while there were many words Paul could have chosen, he specifically chose this one to communicate an important truth about citizens and government. Scholars most often translate this word "submission," and they agree that it only very rarely implies a concept of necessary obedience.[45] According to Gerhard Friedrich, obedience is more often a sign of submission than a synonym for submission.[46] A person in submission to a superior can obey; however, obedience is not the exclusive response.

Friedrich rightly indicates that the origin of *hupotassesthō* is "a hierarchical term which stresses a relation to superiors" in which "the subordination expressed may be either compulsory or voluntary."[47] This term originally described an established authority, sometimes used in a military capacity to describe the relationship of a solider

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45. Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VIII, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1975), 41. Friedrich notes that some gospels use this verb to denote Jesus' submission to His earthly parents. Jesus did not have to obey them by necessity, given that He was the Son of God, but He "adapts Himself to the earthly orders" (cf. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary*, 42).

46. Ibid., 41.

47. Ibid. Friedrich treats this specific usage as an example of the reflexive middle voice; the subject acts upon himself or herself. While Doug Moo treats it as a passive [cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1996), 797], Friedrich presents this tense as an exhortation to act out of Christian liberty upon one's self, rather than a higher authority forcing individual submission. See also, Walter Bauer, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and eds. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1952). Bauer notes on page 855 that this usage often refers to a person worthy of respect, which falls in line with Paul's description of government in the passage. However, this is not an argument for obeying only just government, as Paul claims governments are due respect simply because God ordains them.

to his commanding officer.[48] Douglas Moo states, "[T]o submit is to recognize one's subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have 'authority' over us."[49] Both of these definitions work off of an idea of an established order. Ben Witherington III believes that Paul means that "the person who opposes the power God has set up is . . . opposing the order that God has set up, and so is opposing God."[50] Paul brings the weight of this established order to bear on the duty of "every soul" (Rom. 13:1, *ESV*). This order requires willing submission.

Most scholars agree that there is a distinct difference between submission and obedience. However, Ernst Käsemann rejects this passage as normative for believers because he concludes that a command to obey government stands opposed to Christian freedom.[51] Käsemann equates submission with dutiful obedience and cannot accept that Christians would be bound to another imperfect law, the law of men. James D. G. Dunn takes the other side of the interpretation, claiming that this passage is Paul's way of

48. Very few commentators highlight this connection, however, because it is clear that Paul is not emphasizing a military mindset in Rom. 13:1. Some lexical resources, such as *Vine's Expository Dictionary* [cf. W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1099] make brief mention of this connection. However, the original context is far broader, touching on any kind of hierarchy, not just military.

49. Douglas J. Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1996), 797.

50. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 313. Witherington also notes some similarities between Paul's view of the governing authorities and the views of other Jewish interpreters of the day, specifically Josephus and his claim that "the 'cosmos' was subjected to Rome by God's intent and act (*Wars* 5.366-68; cf. 2.390)" (cf. Witherington III, *Paul's Letter*, 309). The belief that the God of the Jews was God of the whole world was very common in Jewish theology in Paul's day. (cf. Witherington III, *Paul's Letter,* 309).

51. Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 357.

affirming political identity for the Gentile believers.[52] Dunn goes on to explain that Judaism had always been a national religion, one in which the law covered religious, political, and social obligations. However, Paul always affirms the distinct identity of the Gentiles, even though they were, ". . . grafted into the olive tree of Israel . . . " they were "shedding the political identity of ethnic Israel."[53] Gentile believers did not inherit a national identity upon conversion. So Dunn surmises that Paul is assuring the Gentile believers that God ordained their governments, as much as He ordained the Jewish nation. C. E. B. Cranfield also disagrees with Käsemann. Cranfield asserts that Paul's brand of submission is not the same as unquestioning obedience.[54] Submission, as stated previously, is recognizing and playing one's role in an established order. On this conception, obedience is not unquestioning. One must consistently evaluate one's place in the hierarchy and act accordingly. One's conception of the hierarchy, however, will be influenced by one's conception of the One who established the hierarchy.

Joseph Fitzmyer brings an important consideration to the table. He points out the complete lack of Christological references in Romans 13:1-7. Paul does not mention Christ once in this section. From this, he concludes that Paul is most likely trying to make

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52. James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 769.

53. Ibid. Dunn also notes that there was an element of political danger inherent in becoming a Christian. The new Gentile believers no longer worshiped Caesar as a god, nor did they worship the gods of their homeland. They were in danger of seeming seditious and atheistic. Dunn concludes that Paul is assuring them that the God they now serve is the true power behind their governing authorities, and so they may submit to these authorities out of reverence for the God that saved them.

54. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. II, 7th edition (NY: T&T Clark Ltd., 2004), 662. The majority of commentators agree with Cranfield. For a similar interpretation see John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1989), 310; Thomas Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 687; Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary*, 41. All of these differentiate between submission and total obedience.

an appeal to all men, not only Christians.[55] This goes against the majority opinion and the historical interpretation. Most have read Romans 13:1-7 as a paradigm for Christian behavior.[56] However, Fitzmyer raises an interesting possibility, that this passage may be a universal statement to the believer and the unbeliever. Friedrich echoes this concept. In attempting to answer what Paul means by submission, Friedrich says,

> The answer is not that the present state maintains certain presuppositions for the external existence of Christian and on this ground we are not against it. The answer is rather that the authorities are ordained as such by God, and hence [submission of ourselves] is demanded not merely from Christians but from all men.[57]

Friedrich and Fitzmyer make an intriguing observation. In fact, it harmonizes well with Paul's Old Testament background. Both Fitzmyer and Thomas Schreiner indicate the importance of reading Paul against his understanding of Old Testament theology.[58] In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as the God of the whole earth, not only as the God

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55. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible Commentary: Romans: A New Translation and Commentary* (NY: Doubleday, 1993), 663. Fitzmyer does, however, go on to note, that one cannot read Paul's writing apart from his understanding of the "lordship of the risen Christ" (663). And he concludes that while Paul may be trying to communicate to all men, believers still understand that Paul's justification to them is that Christ rules and reigns above all kings and has established them of His own will. Cranfield ends up agreeing with Fitzmyer on this concept of Christ's preeminence, though he arrives by a different way. Cranfield bases his argument on the common assumptions between Paul and his audience, which lead the audience to conclude, along with Paul, that Christ's right to rule is imparted to government as stewards [Cranfield, *Romans*, 653].

56. See Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 660-3; Ziesler, *Paul's Letter*, 310; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 687-8. The general assumption is that this section is specifically addressed to Christians.

57. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary*, 44. As noted above, Cranfield and others agree with Fitzmyer's conclusion that Paul has Christ's authority in mind when he talks about God's ordination of government. However, their line of reasoning is limited by the assumption that Paul is addressing this section specifically to Christians, not to a more universal understanding of "every soul" (13:1).

58. Thomas Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 687-8; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 665. According to Schreiner, this is pertinent to Paul's understanding of government as God's servants. He knew they could be evil, but he also knew that God would use them as He saw fit (cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 688).

of Israel. God had authority over all nations and aimed to redeem all nations.[59] Paul was the self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13), and bringing God's intended order to the Gentiles would probably have been within his concept of his ministry. This interpretation has a strong foundation.

T. L. Carter seems to interpret Paul's call to submission along the same line as Käsemann. This leads him to conclude hastily that Paul's call to obedience is contrary to the character of the apostle and thus likely a cue to literary-rhetorical irony.[60] However, as noted previously, a fuller examination of "submission" provides strong reason to suspect that believers can submit to earthly authorities without seeking a double meaning in Paul's letter. Conscience then becomes the tool of men within the divine order (or divine hierarchy) to evaluate proper action, rather than justification for men to disobey and act in insubordination to this divine hierarchy.

Another weakness resides in Carter's loose definition of irony. He uses the term willy-nilly. While the reader assumes that Carter is dealing with literary-rhetorical irony, Carter never clearly defines his use of the term "irony." In fact, he appears to have two different brands of irony. His first apparent definition of irony appears when Carter surmizes that if Paul meant his audience to take this passage at face value, there is an

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59. Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 322.

60. Carter, "Irony," 223, 225-226. Carter's conclusion on pg. 223 warrants a brief note. Carter concludes that people are not called into unquestioning submission. While this is true, Carter's justification for Christian submission is shaky at best. He concludes that Paul slips "conscience" into the discussion to quietly encourage believers to evaluate government by their conscience and imply that governments are also subject to conscience. Carter draws this from a false definition of submission, as previously discussed, that makes little distinction between submission and obedience, requiring him to conclude that Paul is using literary-rhetorical irony.

emotive irony[61] to it. He describes Paul's language as ". . . pregnant with significance of which he was unaware."[62] He uses this phrase to describe the incongruence between Paul's apparent opinion of the governing authorities and the massacre and atrocities that would the Emperor Nero would carry out just a few years later. He describes the confusion that overlays the Romans 13:1-7 passage as an emotive irony. He believes that if Paul did actually intend a deeper meaning, there is a sad irony in the fact that so many generations of scholars have missed it.[63] Emotive irony is most certainly present in the text.

Carter's second use of "irony" is a literary-rhetorical irony. In literary-rhetorical irony, authors and speakers use verbal cues to imply a meaning they do not explicitly verbalize.[64] This is not only a modern trend. Carter shows that it was a fixture in the ancient Roman world. He quotes Quintilian on the subject and surmises that Paul most likely uses the brand of Roman irony in which the author "[blames] by means of apparent praise."[65] In this brand of irony, after the author gives the verbal cue, everything that

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61. Emotive irony encompasses a broader range of emotions than simply irony alone. In some cultures (especially European cultures) "irony" can have a humorous connotation, though at times the term may also express the reaction one has to a sad coincidence. For instance, an obese comedian may display irony by making a self-deprecating joke about overeating. On the other hand, it would be a sad irony if a bus hit and killed a bus driver. The term "emotive irony" encompasses this and other ironies that elicit certain emotions.

62. Carter, "Irony," 210.

63. Ibid., 228.

64. Marc-Oliver Schuster, "Bi-paradigmatic Irony as a Postmodern Sign," *Semiotica* 2011, no. 183 (February 2011): 360.

65. Ibid., 214.

follows is the mirrored truth.[66] Though he never clearly defines it, it seems Carter ultimately wants to suggest Paul's deliberate use of literary-rhetorical irony.

While Carter's definition of literary-rhetorical irony is certainly clearer, he tends to mingle its uses with his first presentation of irony. He does not differentiate between the two, simply calling both "irony." Carter may have hit upon a genuine side-element of Paul's description of governing authorities as ". . . God's servants for your good . . . " (Rom. 13:4, *ESV*). This letter most certainly highlights a difference between the world as it appeared and the world as it should have appeared.[67] There was and would continue as a discrepancy between God's intended purpose for government and institutions carried out by fallen man. However, pointing to this would not have been Paul's ultimate motivation.

Carter implies that Paul employs literary-rhetorical irony to malign the government out of a fear of repercussions from the ruling authorities. However, this seems to misrepresent Paul's approach to government. While Paul did have a healthy respect for the power of the government, he never allowed it to interfere with the plain gospel message. In Acts 26, Paul used exceedingly respectful, if not slightly flattering, language to address King Agrippa, and in Acts 9 Paul fled the city of Damascus because of a threat against his life. However, in both of these cases, Paul openly and boldly proclaimed his message. In Acts 9, Paul's open and bold preaching forced him to flee. In Acts 26, Paul lays out his message so plainly that King Agrippa asks him, "In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28, *ESV*). Paul clearly

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66. According to Carter (quoting Quintilian), this verbal queue often took the form of an outlandish statement. More often than not it would be a statement contrary to fact. (cf. Carter, "Irony," 212-213).

67. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Paul's Stoicizing Politics in Romans 12-13: The Role of 13:1-10 in the Argument," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29, no. 2: (2006): 169.

understands that governments are dangerous (Rom. 13:4), but he never allows this to convolute the gospel message.

Carter also misunderstands another element of Paul's command. He misreads Paul's reason for commanding submission. Paul explains to the Roman believers that if they resist the government, they resist the one that God has appointed (Rom. 13:2), and that this will incur judgment. So then, Christians submit to government for two reasons. They submit out of respect for government's earthly power and government's heaven-ordained power. Paul's message to the Romans may in fact be much like Gamaliel's message in Acts 5. Gamaliel warns the Sanhedrin not to accidently oppose the work of God. Likewise, Paul may mean that believers must avoid rising up against the ruling authorities because there is a strong chance that God plans to use government, His servants, to accomplish His purposes.

Finally, perhaps Carter's most glaring weakness is how he handles the idea of God's "servant." This also seems to be where he sees the greatest locale of supposed irony. Carter interprets Paul's use of the phrase "God's servants" to mean that the "servants" must be righteous and just people. He argues that this is one of the greatest indicators of Paul's rhetorical irony, as the people of his day would have known without doubt that the government was in no way just to the people.[68] However, this is where Carter's lack of biographical work on Paul hurts his argument. Carter does not take into account Paul's training as a Pharisee. It is certain that Paul knew the stories of the Old

68. Carter, "Irony," 215-217. Carter also mentions the possibility that Paul was ignorant of the injustice to come, as Nero had not yet begun his campaign against Christians. However, Schreiner addresses this point well in his commentary, saying, " The 'good' segment of Nero's reign has nothing to do with Paul's conception of government. Paul would have been more familiar with the 'petty despotism that characterizes human authority' (Käsemann 1980: 356, cf. Delling, *TDNT* 8:30)." [cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 687].

Testament and that he knew the ways in which God had used Israel and other nations as His servants in the past.[69] Therefore, Paul would have known that the Old Testament clearly and repeatedly portrays unjust people serving God's purposes. At some point in the history of Israel, the empires of Babylon, Assyria, and Persia all did God's will, intentionally or unintentionally accomplishing His justice.

Carter's assumption that God's servants must be just in order to accomplish God's just purpose also fails to recognize the impact of New Testament persecution, that is, the spread of the gospel. Paul would have known firsthand the good that could come from the persecution of those in the early church. Paul himself attempted to annihilate the church. Acts 8 records Paul's (at that time Saul) attempts to wipe out the church. He gathered arrest warrants and dragged men and women who followed Jesus to prison (Acts 8:3). The very next verse in Acts 8 tells the readers that Paul's efforts were in vain because despite the loss of life and other hardships, the church continued to grow. God used the scattering to spread the Word. This experience would have informed Paul's view of persecution. While he preferred freedom to imprisonment or persecution of the church, he knew that it could not stop the gospel. Paul tells Timothy that no matter what he suffered, "the word of God is not bound!" (2 Tim. 2:9, *ESV*). Every persecution was either powerless to stop the gospel or only resulted in spreading it. It is, therefore, unlikely that Paul would have considered it impossible for God's plan to further the gospel to include the evil done by the authorities in his day.

Carter also fails to take into account the Scriptural paradigm that God's servants are not immune from judgment. Andy Orlee explains, "Paul is surely not asserting, as an empirical matter, that Nero's government never exceeded its divine authority and never

69. Cf. Lev. 25:42; Isaiah 10:6, 43:10, 44:28, 45:1, 45:4; Jer. 25:9; Haggai 2:23,

would."[70] God establishes governments, and they are able to operate within parameters of justice. However, when they step outside the parameters of just action, God holds them accountable. Paul would have been well versed in the messages of the Old Testament prophets and the recorded history of Israel, both of which bear out this truth. God used the Assyrians to judge the northern kingdom of Israel. They also led the northern kingdom into captivity. God declares that he sends Assyria "against a godless nation" (Isa. 10:6, *ESV*) even though "he [Assyria] does not so intend" (10:7, *ESV*). God moves the unjust nation of Assyria as an unwitting tool of God's justice. However, God also has a warning for this nation. God tells them that despite the fact that He has used them, He will still punish them for their sinfulness. In the same chapter, God says that when He has ". . . finished all his work . . . he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria" (10:12, *ESV*). God goes on to describe the arrogance and cruelty of Assyria (12-15) and then tells the Assyrians that He will judge their unjust actions (16-19). Assyria is arrogant because they assume that they have done everything in their own power. Feinberg makes the point that "[Government] is not to usurp the place of God."[71] God punishes unjust nations through Assyria and also punishes Assyria's attempted usurpation. This is not the only event of its kind in Scripture.

In the book of Jeremiah, God calls Nebuchadnezzar his servant. God says, ". . . Behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant . . ." (Jer. 25:9, *ESV*). However, God

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70. Andy Orlee, "Government as God's Agents: A Reconsideration of Romans 12 and 13," *Stone Campbell Journal* (Fall 2005): 192-193.

71. Paul D. Feinberg, "The Christian and Civil Authorities," *Masters Seminary Journal* (Spring 1999): 99.

again repeats the paradigm He established with Assyria by declaring, "Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation . . . for their iniquity . . ." (Jer. 25:12, *ESV*). Repeatedly, God uses unjust peoples to accomplish His work. However, this neither means that they are innocent nor that their unjust works will go unpunished.

Given the Scriptural paradigm that God will use even the unjust peoples of the world to accomplish His purpose, another interpretation presents itself.[72] It again seems like Paul is exhorting the people not to take the judgment of rulers into their own hands but to let God handle the authorities. They are His servants, and He has shown Himself faithful in the past to remove unjust authorities. If the people oppose the governing authorities, there is a strong possibility that the people may oppose a work of God.

Carter's assertion of the improbability of Paul's call to submission does not take into account the copious Scriptural examples of submission to unjust rulers. It is highly unlikely that Paul would exhort disobedience to God's established authority. The Scriptural take on authority is universal submission.[73] In Paul's immediate context, the apostles consistently submitted to the punishments and jail sentences that the ruling authorities of their day meted out upon them. Paul himself, in the defense of his apostleship, gave a diatribe in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 about the things he suffered at the hands of the ruling authorities. In Acts 16:25-40, Paul remains in prison in Philippi

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72. For further discussion on this topic, see Schreiner, *Romans*, 688. In seeking to qualify obedience to government, this approach actually disqualifies all governments. Schreiner rightly asserts that everyone could "exempt themselves from the exhortations found here by pointing out the injustices present in all governments." No government will ever be perfectly just. If the Christian paradigm is true, and the world is broken, then anytime God uses people, He uses broken people. One cannot seek perfect justice in the broken. God will always use people who have in some way been unjust.

73. Feinberg, "The Christian and Civil Authorities," 92.

despite a miraculous removal of the restraints and doors in the jail. One resounding command also rings out from the prophets. Paul would have been very familiar with the command of the prophet Jeremiah to the Jews who were about to go into exile in Babylon. He told them to "seek the welfare of the city where I [God] send you into exile" (Jer. 29:7, *ESV*). Babylon was notoriously wicked. And yet throughout his prophecy, Jeremiah warns against resisting this power.[74] God used Babylon for judgment, and God charged the Jews going into exile to bring wholesomeness to Babylon. Paul's conception of submission, as discussed above, would hold true in this situation as well.

Conclusion

A hermeneutic based on common sense that expects to find a value-based ethic in Scripture will always render an incomplete account of Scripture's true nature. Scripture genuinely does teach its readers which elements of life they should value and which they should not. However, this is not the same as a value-based ethic. T. L. Carter's approach to interpreting Romans 13 assumes that Scripture teaches a value-based ethic. His inductive method is solid. He draws from the text with both historical and literary integrity. However, his system is flawed from the outset. His two presuppositions that at some level Scripture will agree with common sense and that one should glean a general value-based ethical principle from any passage greatly influence his conclusions for the worse. He assumes he will find principles that are not there.

Paul himself tells his readers that if they go to the gospel expecting to find conventional wisdom, they will be sorely disappointed (1 Cor. 1:21-22). Scripture does not seek to convey conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is insufficient for the

74. For a specific command, see Jeremiah 21:9

salvation of man. God's foolish gospel, which is wiser than men (1 Cor. 1:25), is the only thing sufficient for the salvation of man.

Carter's approach is an example of Western cultural interpretation. His excellent interpretive work is knocked off the tracks by a Western plausibility structure.[75] The instinct of Western culture is to approach the text with incorrect assumptions about the nature of the text. This often leads interpreters to ask questions of the text that it was never meant to answer, treating it like a storehouse of facts. While there are many good general principles within Scripture, they are not the main point of the text. Western culture comes looking for conventional wisdom and individualized values to hold. Western culture requires these types of values to operate politically and socially. Christians and biblical scholars within Western culture assume that the Bible is their designated place to find their values. In America, this fusion between a search for values and Scripture reaches back to her foundation. While these pieces of virtue and value can be found there, they are only fragments of the grander story God is telling in the pages of His Word. When Christians approach the pages of Scripture for values, they leave only with scraps from the banquet table.

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75. As much as this paper has criticized Carter for allowing his plausibility structure and presuppositions to influence his interpretation of Romans 13:1-7, it is incredibly important to note that all interpreters do this to some degree. While some conservative Evangelicals may criticize Carter for coming from a liberal tradition and approaching Scripture without an assumption of its unity and inspiration, it is important to note that where Carter comes looking for interpretations to fit his presuppositions, conservative Evangelicals do the same. Conservative Evangelicals seek harmony within Scripture. As much as Carter looks at Rome and concludes Paul could never call that government God's servant, conservative Evangelicals refuse any interpretation that looks contradictory within Scripture. The principle of harmony reigns supreme. Thus, in any interpretation, it is vital that the interpreter identifies his or her presuppositions and allows Scripture to influence presuppositions rather than the other way around.

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