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Where Does Obedience to Government End? Understanding Romans 13:1–7

Abstract

Rom 13:1–7 is the primary passage in the Bible on governmental obedience, yet it is often interpreted out of context. The purpose of this article is not only to provide exegetical guidelines, but also practical application of the biblical mandates. The thesis of this article is that when properly interpreted in its historical context that Rom 13:1–7 is not a strict prohibition against disobeying the government, but that when possible it is desirable to maintain good relations with governmental authorities. This analysis is especially relevant today when church leaders must consider whether or not to obey commands by the government regarding the ability to meet corporately, therefore it is imperative to have a clear understanding of this passage and how to apply it. This article will begin with a review of the basic positions on authority, then historical context, an exegetical analysis, and relevant examples from the Bible of those who disobeyed authorities. Finally, modern examples will be considered in light of the interpretation of this passage.

Keywords

Governmental authority, Obedience to authority, Romans 13, Historical context, Nero, Rome

Cover Page Footnote

Current and Previous Degrees • In progress – PhD in Bible Exposition, Liberty University, Rawlings School of Divinity, 36 credits completed. Expected completion date 2021. • Th.M. – 2014, Liberty University, Rawlings School of Divinity. • M. Div. – 2008, Liberty University, Rawlings School of Divinity. Ministry Positions • 2013 – Adjunct Professor, Washington Bible College. • 2014 – Adjunct Professor, Lancaster Bible College. • 2015 – 2019 – Teaching Elder, Grace Brethren Church of Lanham, MD, 8401 Good Luck Rd., Lanham, MD 20706.

For centuries, many have debated the obligation and extent of a believer's duty to obey governmental authorities. That topic is the focus of Rom 13:1–7, which is the primary passage on obedience to civil authority in the Bible. The problem, however, is that while the passage at first appears clear, context may affect Paul's instructions. While many expositors interpret Rom 13:1–7 as an absolute command to always obey governmental authorities, the historical context of Rome prior to AD 62 shows that when Paul wrote Romans, Nero was an exceptionally good ruler who allowed Christianity to flourish, thus while Paul's guidance in Romans applies when the government is just, the text does not address what to do when tyrannical governments persecute believers or others unjustly.

To prove this thesis, this article will first examine positions that are popular regarding Romans 13 and obedience to authority. After that, it will be necessary to determine the literary and historical context at the time Romans was written, as well as in the years following the writing of Romans. The passage will then be analyzed and after that, other passages related to the same topic will be reviewed. Additionally, it will be necessary to examine biblical characters who did disobey authority and the lessons that can be learned from them. Finally, this will allow an analysis of how others have handled Romans 13 in modern times as well as the moral imperatives involved in these cases. The final step from this is to draw conclusions and guidelines for applying Rom 13:1–7.

Four Basic Positions Regarding Authority

Over the centuries there has been a wide spectrum of opinions on the meaning of Rom 13:1–7 which range from absolute obedience under all circumstances to complete freedom to disobey authority for violating any biblical precept. Debate on these passages, and its impact on political and religious theory, has raged for centuries. According to Käsemann, "The text has been misused for a millennium in the interests of political theory."¹ To understand correct application, it is imperative to understand four basic positions regarding obedience to authority.

While there is variance in each position, they can be categorized into four basic stances. The first asserts absolute obedience to authority regardless of circumstances. The second is a modification of the first position, wherein believers follow the government as much as possible, but if there is a direct command by authority to violate a command from God, then disobedience is

¹ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 1st Paperback Edition 1994/1st Printing edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 355.

permissible. The third moves further along the spectrum toward civil disobedience, endorsing governmental authority, but also providing for civil disobedience for reasons including tangential sin or fighting oppression of others. The fourth, on the far end of the spectrum, supports disobedience against any perceived unjust authority and allows for civil disobedience for almost anything that is seen to violate individual liberties.

The first position, absolute obedience, often points to the fact that Paul wrote Romans 13 at a time when Nero ruled Rome, thus believers should be able to submit to any government. However, this ignores the historical context and the fact that Nero had two distinct ruling periods. Initially, when Romans was written, Nero's reign was known for social reform, justice, and prosperity. Later, it transitioned to cruelty and injustice.

Another problem with this somewhat extreme view is that in the case of an uprising or revolution, the believers must support the existing government no matter what happens. However, if the revolution is successful, it forces believers to switch sides using the same logic. According to Vonck, "Ironically, in the case the coup d'état is successful, the same churchmen will blandly have recourse to exactly the same saying and thus align themselves with the new masters."² Essentially, this means that believers have no positions on political, social, or moral issues because this view demands blind obedience to whomever is in control at that moment.

The second position, where believers follow the government as much as possible unless it violates a command from God, may sound sensible, but lacks specificity. One issue is determining when a direct command is violated. In many cases, either the biblical command or the governmental command may be unclear or open to interpretation. If either command is unclear, then finding the point where civil disobedience is appropriate is especially difficult.

Another potential issue with position two is how it handles situations where the governmental command does not directly violate a biblical command, but the government command enables a violation of the biblical command. For example, if the government passes a law that legalizes brothels, would that be grounds for civil disobedience? While the believer will not frequent these establishments, there is a community impact both on morality as well as potentially on crime. Position two would probably not allow civil disobedience or withholding of taxes to protest this since the believer is not forced to disobey a direct command from God.

A further problem with position two arises when the government passes a law that forces a believer to participate tangentially in sin without direct

² Pol Vonck, "All Authority Comes from God: Romans 13:1-7 - a Tricky Text about Obedience to Political Power," *AFER* 26.6 (1984): 338.

participation. A recent example of this is when Christian bakers have been sued for not providing wedding cakes for same-sex weddings.³ In the case of gay wedding cakes, the question moves beyond simply selling a cake to homosexuals, but instead moves into the area of participating tangentially in the gay wedding itself. In this case, position two would probably not allow for civil disobedience.

The third position moves further along the spectrum toward civil disobedience. This position endorses governmental authority, but also provides for civil disobedience for reasons including tangential sin or to fight the oppression of others. For example, while there are no specific prohibitions in the Bible against slavery, it was Christians who spearheaded the movements to eliminate slavery in Britain and the United States. This position would also allow for civil disobedience in the same-sex wedding cake scenario.

More recently, Jerry Falwell, Jr. raised the possibility of civil disobedience due to proposed Virginia gun laws that appear to violate the Second Amendment.⁴ Here, there is even more distance between the law and the Bible because the case for the biblical command is a multistep application. The primary issue here is the attempted violation of constitutionally protected individual liberties by a government acting against existing Federal prohibitions. No direct biblical command applies, but position three might still allow for civil disobedience.

The fourth position supports disobedience against any perceived unjust authority. This again takes an extreme position that greatly minimizes the passage and allows for civil disobedience for almost anything that is seen to violate individual liberties. In some cases, individuals or groups have even gone to the extremes of proclaiming themselves to be sovereign nations, creating their own currency, refusing to pay taxes, or actively promoting revolution.⁵ While this position is not common among believers, it must be included. While this may sound like a patriotic, or even spiritual, position, ultimately, it can lead to anarchy.

When examining all four positions, each should not be viewed as static, but should instead be seen as four markers on a continuum of obedience versus civil disobedience. As such, specific views can fall anywhere on the continuum. Realizing this, the real difficulty in applying Roman 13 is not in defining the four

³ *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colo. Civil Rights, S. Ct.*, Supreme Court 2017.

⁴ Elizabeth Tyree & Danner Evans, "Falwell Said He Would Support 'civil Disobedience' If Certain Gun Legislation Passes," *WSET*, 15 January 2020, <https://wset.com/news/local/falwell-said-he-would-support-civil-disobedience-if-certain-gun-legislation-passes>.

⁵ Nigel James, "Militias, the Patriot Movement, and the Internet: The Ideology of Conspiracism," *The Sociological Review* 48.2_suppl (2000): 87–88.

positions, but instead in determining at what point civil disobedience is appropriate and defining the appropriate level of disobedience.

Literary and Historical Context

Before examining the historical context, it is important to examine the literary context of Romans, thus understanding how Romans 13 fits into the context of Romans. The literary context and theme of Romans has been debated for hundreds of years. Most of the early reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, saw justification by faith as the topic.⁶ According to Cranfield, the Epistle is broken into multiple sections with the theme being found in Rom 1:16–17.⁷ Others see Romans as a loose collection of topics. Moo goes as far as saying, “...we must be careful not to impose on Romans a single theme when Paul may have never thought in those terms...Romans may, then, have several themes without having any single, unifying topic.”⁸ As can be seen, there is a wide array of positions on the theme of Romans.

The problem is that each interpretation either sees Romans as disconnected topics, or they select an intermediate topic that is only part of an argument. Romans has many memorable sections; however, the key to understanding Romans is to carefully examine the connections between the verses. When examining sections of text, it is inappropriate to see each section as a separate autonomous unit. Rom 1:1 through Rom 12:5, is one continuous thought leading to the fact that the church—including both Jews and Gentiles—now exists; and that because of what God has already done, believers must live transformed lives. This does not minimize the importance of each section, but it does make them part of a larger argument.

In the text, it is helpful to examine certain Greek particles that Paul uses. *οὖν*, often translated as *therefore*, is a very common inferential or transitional particle. As an inferential conjunction, it “gives a deduction, conclusion, or summary to the preceding discussion.”⁹ In Romans, even when it is used as a

⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Featherstone, vol. 19 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), xxx.

⁷ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans 1–8*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 27.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, Second edition., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 24.

⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1997), 761.

transitional conjunction, it typically refers to the previous thought, as opposed to a new topic as is typical in narrative.¹⁰ By using οὖν and other particles, Paul continues to advance a single argument as opposed to a loose collection of topics.

From Rom 2:21 through Rom 12:1, Paul uses οὖν 37 times. In the rest of Romans, Paul uses οὖν 11 times. In First and Second Corinthians combined, which is almost twice the length of Romans, Paul used οὖν 29 times. In the other ten epistles written by Paul, he only uses it 34 times. Thus, in less than ten chapters in Romans, Paul uses οὖν more than in First and Second Corinthians, or in the other ten Pauline Epistles combined.

The difference in occurrences is even more dramatic with the phrase τί οὖν, which is often translated in Romans as *what then?* This connection occurs twelve times from Rom 3:1 through Rom 11:7. In the other twelve Epistles written by Paul, it only occurs twelve times total. For this phrase, which ties the text to what precedes it, Paul averages more than one usage per chapter while in the rest of his writings he only averages once per book. The same analysis could be done for many other connecting particles, but the key is that through Rom 12:5, Paul uses these particles far more than normal to keep a single theme flowing.¹¹

The reason this is critical is because the first section, Rom 1:1 – 12:5, lays the foundation for application that Paul expounds upon in the remainder of Romans. Rom 13:1–7 is in the application section that details practical rules for living as Christians, both inside the church, and outside as well. As will be seen, it is not primarily part of the major theological argument, but instead is practical advice for believers who are trying to live a transformed life.

The next thing to examine is the historical context of Romans. Accurately determining the date and authorship of Romans is critical to understanding the historical context. According to Longenecker, “Questions regarding authorship, addressees, occasion, and the relative date of Romans have often seemed fairly easy to answer... There is today a fairly firm consensus among scholars regarding these rather elementary concerns.”¹² Unlike many New Testament books, there is relatively widespread agreement on the author and date.

¹⁰ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 761.

¹¹ The theory on the connections in Romans, as well as the specific connecting words, is based on original research by the author of this article.

¹² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), 4–5.

Bray places the date “around AD 55–57.”¹³ Dunn states that, “...the letter must have been written sometime in the 50s, probably in the middle 50s, and most probably late 55/early 56, or late 56/early 57.”¹⁴ Cranfield posits that due to the chronology of Paul’s ministry, Romans could not have been written prior to AD 54, and could not have been written after AD 59.¹⁵ Many more estimates could be cited, but this article will accept that Romans was written somewhere between AD 55 and 58.

As to the authorship of Romans, according to Bray, “On the question of the authorship of Romans, virtually all commentators, both ancient and modern, agree: the author of the epistle was the apostle Paul.”¹⁶ According to Moo, “Romans claims to be written by Paul (1:1), and there has been no serious challenge to this claim.”¹⁷ Thus, Pauline authorship will be assumed.

The date of AD 55 to 58 for Romans is critical. Nero ruled from AD 54 to 68. However, most do not realize that Nero’s rule from AD 54 to 62 was completely different from AD 62 to 68. According to Eusebius, prior to AD 62, the relationship of Christians and the Roman government was reasonably good.¹⁸ Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism and “Jews and Judaism... was recognized by Roman law as a *religio licita* and Jewish rights were thus protected.”¹⁹ As such, Christians were protected by Roman law.²⁰ At this time, persecution was occurring by Jewish officials; however, Roman persecution was generally not occurring.²¹

¹³ Bray, Gerald, ed., *Romans: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT Volume 6 [ACCS]*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, n.d.(Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), xvii.

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8, Volume 38A*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David Allen Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), xliii.

¹⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans 1–8*, 1 edition., International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 12.

¹⁶ Gerald Bray, Gerald, *Romans*. xvii.

¹⁷ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 1.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Pub, 1999), 129.

¹⁹ Eva Maria Synek, “The Legal Context of the Findings of Limyra,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 5.2 (2014): 245.

²⁰ Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *Romans: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Revised, Subsequent edition. (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1986), 6:231.

²¹ Eusebius, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 129.

At least through AD 60, Nero was known as a reformer and an excellent emperor. According to Thornton, “In popular legend the emperor Nero has a reputation of the blackest, comparable to that of Judas Iscariot or Bloody Mary. Yet reputation can be built on a very narrow basis of historical fact.”²²

Both Tacitus and Dio state that Nero became Augustus in AD 54 at the age of seventeen.²³ At that time, Nero had two close advisors, Seneca and Burrus, who did much of the governing and who had financial wisdom and experience that put the Empire on a more sound financial footing.²⁴ However, in AD 62, both of his advisors vacated their positions through death and retirement.²⁵ After that, Nero was in full control and change occurred quickly.

The second period of Nero’s reign, AD 62 to 68, was known for cruelty and persecution. The exact date when Nero’s persecution of Christians started is unknown; however, what is known is that by AD 64, when the Great Fire of Rome destroyed large sections of the city, Christian persecution was in full force in Rome and it was depraved. According to Foxe, Nero had live Christians dipped in tar, tied to poles, and then after setting them on fire, used them as lights as his garden parties at his house on Palatine Hill.²⁶ According to Hind, “After 65 the Principate did degenerate into a tyranny, the oppression of an ever-widening circle.”²⁷ Further details of the life of Nero are not critical to this article, but what is important is that according to most historians, Paul wrote the book of Romans during a time when there was good government and peace between the Roman Empire and Christians in Rome.

²² M. K. Thornton, “The Enigma of Nero’s ‘Quinquennium’: Reputation of Emperor Nero,” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 22.4 (1973): 570.

²³ Thornton, “The Enigma of Nero’s ‘Quinquennium,’” 580.

²⁴ Thornton, “The Enigma of Nero’s ‘Quinquennium,’” 573.

²⁵ J. G. F. Hind, “The Middle Years of Nero’s Reign,” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 20.4 (1971): 500.

²⁶ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, Reissue edition. (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1981), 5.

²⁷ Hind, “The Middle Years of Nero’s Reign,” 500.

Analysis of Romans 13:1–7

When analyzing this passage, it is important to answer key questions. The first is, who or what is the authority that Paul is referencing? Next, what are the ramifications for disobeying authority and why does it matter to God? Also critical is determining the state of affairs in Rome when Paul wrote Romans, and whether or not Paul's instructions may be malleable in diverse settings. It is also necessary to examine why Paul gave these instructions to the believers at Rome, especially since this passage appears to be more practical than theological. Also, what is the extent of the obedience to authorities, even when the authorities are behaving justly?

Rom 13:1 opens with Paul's command to believers in Rome to be subject to ἐξουσίαῖς ὑπερεξούσαις, or *the governing authorities*, but who those authorities are must be determined. ἐξουσία is a common word meaning authority that occurs 102 times in the New Testament in 92 verses. It occurs four times in Romans, three of which are in the first three verses of Romans 13. In general terms, ἐξουσία can refer to almost any earthly or spiritual authority.

Considering the various types of authority referenced in the Bible, it would normally be difficult to determine whether ἐξουσία refers to governmental authorities, church authorities, angelic authorities, or all authorities in general. Some have argued that ἐξουσία refers to angelic authorities which rule over earthly governments.²⁸ The first contemporary New Testament biblical scholar to argue this was Martin Dibelius in 1909.²⁹ The argument was developed more fully by Karl Barth, Cullmann, and in his earlier writings Cranfield.³⁰

Regarding using ἐξουσία for angelic authorities, Cullman and Cranfield's assertion is that all other plural uses of ἐξουσία, or where ἐξουσία refers to multiple authorities, refer to "invisible angelic powers."³¹ It is true that Paul uses ἐξουσία elsewhere to refer to spiritual authorities, both good and evil, that rule over human authorities (Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12); however, this does not mean that it refers to angelic beings here. One problem is that ἐξουσία has a wide range of uses. Just because it is used with one meaning in other passages does not guarantee that it means the same thing here, even with the same author. Also, the use of the plural

²⁸ Robert H. Stein, "The Argument of Romans 13:1–7," *Novum Testam.* 31.4 (1989): 328.

²⁹ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 956.

³⁰ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 957.

³¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, Christopher M. Tuckett, and Graham I. Davies, *Romans 9–16*, 2 edition., International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 657.

here could easily be understood in a Roman context where there were levels of authority including the Emperor, Roman government, provincial authorities, and local authorities.

There are also several other strong reasons to reject this meaning. The first reason is the use of *ὑπερέχω*, which clarifies the meaning of *ἐξουσία*. *ὑπερέχω* in all its forms, occurs only five times in the New Testament—once in this passage, three times in Philippians, and once in 1 Pet 2:13, which is a complementary passage to Rom 13:1–7. All three times in Philippians, it is generally translated as *superior* or *surpassing*. Of particular interest, however, is the usage of *ὑπερέχω* in 1 Pet 2:13, which also refers to governing authorities. According to Fitzmyer, “In 1 Pet 2:13 *basileus*, ‘emperor,’ and *hēgemones*, ‘governors,’ are clearly human, and in this context there is nothing that clearly calls for an angelic meaning of *exousia*.”³² As such, in this case, *ὑπερέχω* is clearly stating that the *superior*, in a hierarchical sense, authority is the human governmental authority.

Another clue that this refers to human government is that Rom 13:6 speaks of paying taxes. According to Stein, “The context clearly demands that the primary meaning of this term must refer to governmental authorities to whom taxes and tribute can be given (13:6–7). If the primary meaning of the *ἐξουσία* to whom taxes should be paid must be governmental authorities, there is no need in the passage to seek a secondary reference to angelic powers behind these authorities.”³³ Thus, paying taxes only makes sense in reference to earthly powers.

The point in the passage is that the only true authority is God and that God established the earthly authorities to rule on earth. The clear implication is that, “God himself is the fount of all authority, and those who exercise authority on earth do so by delegation from him; therefore, to disobey them is to disobey God.”³⁴ Without further context or refinement, this would appear to clearly oblige a believer to follow all the commands of civil government.

One question still to be answered, though, is why Paul felt the need to insert a command to obey human authorities. One possibility is that because believers are a new creation in Christ and answer directly to God, the believers in Rome may have seen themselves as above earthly authorities, or at least not subject to their directives.³⁵ Additionally, the Epistle to the Romans would be the

³² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, vol. 33 of *Anchor Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 666.

³³ Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13,” 328.

³⁴ Bruce, *Romans*, 6:233.

³⁵ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 953.

perfect place for Paul to emphasize this obedience since Rome was the seat of power for the entire world. If it applied to Rome, it applied everywhere under Rome's control.

Rom 13:2 continues in the same vein, but further clarifies the seriousness of disobeying civil authorities. The clear message is that disobeying the civil authorities is disobeying God. Further, this disobedience will bring judgment. However, according to Cullmann, few passages have suffered as much abuse as this verse, especially in "...its misuse in justifying uncritical submission to the dictates of totalitarian governments."³⁶ While at first the message appears clear, historical context may shed more light upon the actual meaning.

Rom 13:3 is the first clue in the chapter that the previous verses may not imply blind obedience to all authority at all times. The phrase, "For the rulers are not the cause of fear for good conduct, but for evil," indicates a good government that punishes evil doers. The verse continues to say that those who do good not only have no reason to fear government, but that government will praise them for their good work. Francis Schaeffer goes so far as to say, "God has ordained the state as a *delegated* authority; it is not autonomous. The state is to be an agent of justice, to restrain evil by punishing the wrongdoer, and to protect the good in society. When it does the reverse, *it has no proper authority*."³⁷ Thus, according to Schaeffer, the state only has authority as it obeys God. The conclusion is Rom 13:3 that Paul is referring to a government which honors God by exercising authority in a fair and just manner, not a tyrannical government.

By AD 62, Paul's description of a good government could not possibly apply to Nero or his rule. It certainly could not be said about a ruler who burned Christians alive and terrorized many others during that same period. Rome after AD 62 was not a government that was punishing evil and praising good, but instead those who were doing good had many reasons to fear the authorities. Aside from the historical evidence, which dates the book of Romans and the events in the life of Nero, this proclamation by Paul is solid evidence that Nero's early rule was peaceful and generally good, and that it respected the rights of Christians. Were this not true, verse three would make no sense, as it appears to be reporting on current circumstances in Rome.

Rom 13:4 begins with *θεου γὰρ διάκονός*, which raises the question of how an evil government could be called a servant of God, especially when Paul then says that this servant was there for their good. When examining the historical

³⁶ Bruce, *Romans*, 6:237.

³⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, Fourth Printing. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 91.

context of this passage, the term servant of God should not be underestimated. The government was not just passively acquiescing to God's will but was actively implementing God's plan on earth.³⁸

The government had been given a trust to reward the good and punish those who do evil. According to Moo, "Not only has God appointed them (v. 1b), but he has also entrusted them an important role in maintaining order in society. By punishing those who do wrong and rewarding those who do good, secular rulers are carrying out God's purposes in the world."³⁹ It should also be noted there that it is not necessary for the rulers to be Christians to carry out God's will. At that point in time, the Roman rulers were not Christians. However, while not speaking to the spiritual condition of the government, it does appear that the Roman government must have been acting in a relatively just manner to preserve order, otherwise this verse would not make sense.

Rom 13:4 may also have implications for the current debate on capital punishment which was common in Rome at that time. However, Paul said that the authorities act as an avenger carrying out wrath on the ones doing evil. Since capital punishment was part of this wrath, it appears unlikely that the Bible would prohibit capital punishment in all cases.

One of the key questions in Rom 13:1–7 is whether or not Paul is laying out a theological message or is simply issuing practical advice. Clearly, the previous verses indicate that at least in some circumstances, disobeying civil authority is sin; however, the practical side indicates that if the believer at that time were to obey the Roman government, then the government would allow them to practice their religion in peace.

Further support for the practical nature of the instruction is found in v.5. According to Fitzmyer, "Although there are some principles that Paul derives from the OT, the mention of 'conscience' (13:5) reveals that Paul's discussion of this topic is more rational and philosophical than theological, as he gives a theistic interpretation of the relationship of citizens to the governing authorities."⁴⁰ It is also probable that the primary administrator of the wrath spoken of in v.5 is the earthly authorities, not God. By obeying the authorities, there is no need to worry about earthly consequences. This does not negate God's wrath, but the concept of earthly authorities disbursing wrath on behalf of God is taught throughout this passage.

³⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 801.

³⁹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 800.

⁴⁰ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 663.

Paul also points out that taxes are to be paid to authorities because the rulers are God's servants. This raises some interesting points. The first is that this negates the idea that believers answer directly to God, and thus have no need to follow earthly authorities. In this case, the practical matter of paying taxes is a duty that is owed to the civil authorities by believers.

The second thing to notice is that while verse four and six both refer to civil government as a servant or minister of God, Paul actually used two different Greek words to express this. In v.4 *διάκονός* is used, as would be expected. However, in v.6, the word is *λειτουργός* which ties the servanthood directly to accountability to God, or being the personal aide to God, to carry out his mission. Support for this is found in the use of *λειτουργός* in Phil 2:25 where Epaphroditus is called Paul's servant. According to Hawthorne, this word was employed in the LXX, "To describe the priesthood and the sacrificial system. Thus, when Paul refers to Epaphroditus as ('minister') he may do so because he views Epaphroditus' mission to meet his material needs as a religious act, a priestly function, and Epaphroditus himself as performing the sacred duties of a priest."⁴¹ The usage suggests a close personal relationship and one who is integrally tied into carrying out the mission of the main subject.

Finally, v.7 continues the tax theme telling the believers to pay taxes to those that are owed taxes, which also echoes the words of Christ in Matt 22:21. Additionally, Paul also covers paying duties that are owed to authorities; fearing, or respecting those authorities which should be respected; and even more striking, honoring authorities which deserve honor. The implication is that government is not only to be obeyed, but also is to be respected and honored as well.

Examining the passage as a whole, several conclusions can be drawn. Obedience to a just and fair government is not optional. Additionally, the passage does not appear to demand unquestioning obedience to evil governments as these governments would not fit the description of the authorities listed here. Applying this further, would tend to set limits on the four positions previously described and would eliminate two of the positions—blind obedience under all circumstances, as well as believers placing themselves above civil authorities. The problem then becomes where to draw the line between positions two and three.

⁴¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, ed. Ralph P. Martin et al., vol. 43 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 117.

Other Passages Related to Obeying Governmental Authority

While Rom 13:1–7 is the most exhaustive passage in the New Testament regarding obedience to authority, it is not the only passage. Other passages include 1 Pet 2:13–16, Titus 3:1, and 1 Tim 2:1–3. The first of these, 1 Pet 2:13–16 has already been examined, and as previously noted, mentions multiple authorities. The implication is that it is not just local or imperial government that is to be obeyed, but all layers of human authority. Also, important to note is that in v.13, this obedience is assumed “because of the Lord,” thus emphasizing the spiritual component to obeying civil authorities.

In v.14, Peter echoes Paul’s words that the purpose of the authority is to apply vengeance to evildoers and to praise those who do good.⁴² This again implies a just government as this would not apply to the late rule of Nero. This, however, raises the question of when First Peter was written. For a variety of reasons, First Peter is notoriously difficult to fix an exact date. While an exhaustive examination of the date and authorship of First Peter is beyond the scope of this article, tradition states that Peter was martyred under Nero either in AD 64 or 65⁴³ If that date is accurate, then First Peter would probably date to the early 60’s, however, fixing an exact date for the Epistle is impossible.⁴⁴ Perhaps, one of the most convincing arguments for an early date is because Peter uses similar terms to Paul to describe the existing government in Rome. As such, this would have to be prior to Nero becoming the murderous tyrant that he later became.

The next two passages, Titus 3:1 and 1 Tim 2:1–3, share a common problem related to understanding how to respond to unjust authorities. According to Quinn and Wacker, “The PE [Pastoral Epistles] tend to resist questions about their background and origin, about when they were composed, and by whom; from what place they were sent, to whom, and where.”⁴⁵ According to Mounce, there are simply too many unknown issues in Paul’s timeline to positively date the

⁴² Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 117.

⁴³ J. Ramsey Michaels, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, *1 Peter*, Vol. 49 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David Allen Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), lviii.

⁴⁴ Michaels, Watts, and Martin, *1 Peter*, Volume 49, lxi.

⁴⁵ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary edition., Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1999), 18.

Pastoral Epistles. Possible dates extend from the late 50's to 68.⁴⁶ In both cases, the inability to properly determine the date leaves the interpretation open to multiple options.

If the two Epistles were written before AD 62, the same logic that applied to Romans and First Peter applies to these passages. If it was written between AD 62 and 64, then the interpretation is less clear. During these years, Nero was changing, and the exact date of the change is unknown. Additionally, even if Nero had changed, at that time, it may have been unclear as to whether this was a pattern instead of an aberration. Even if Paul wrote in AD 64 or later, Paul's message might not change if he was being persecuted in Rome, but the recipients elsewhere were not being persecuted. No dogmatic conclusions, either for or against obedience, can be reached based on the dating of these letters.

Titus 3:1 is similar to Romans in demanding obedience to the authorities. One difference, however, is that this verse refers to the authorities as ἀρχαῖς ἐξουσίαις. By specifying *rulers and authorities*, this would tend to indicate that the authorities are human government, and not angelic, and this would agree with 1 Pet 2:13–16. Aside from that, the verse offers little additional insight that has not already been seen in Romans and First Peter.

1 Tim 2:1–3 is different in that instead of speaking about obedience, Paul speaks of praying for the authorities. In this case, praying for authorities might apply even if they were evil. Prayers could be for God to guide and change the ruler so that he would become a godly ruler. What is interesting is that the reason for these prayers by believers are "...so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in godliness and dignity." There is again, as in Romans, a practical purpose for praying for the authorities so that believers can live a holy life and serve God.

Biblical Characters Who Disobeyed Authority

Before arriving at a conclusion as to whether the historical context of Romans modifies the instructions given by Paul, it is important to see if other biblical characters disobeyed civil authority and whether or not that was sin. Perhaps the most famous of these figures, Rahab, is found in Josh 2:1–18. In v.3, the King of Jericho asked that the spies who entered into Rahab's house be brought to him. In v.4–5, Rahab not only hid the Hebrew spies, but she lied to the government officials. Some have tried to raise doubt about whether Rahab lied, but McKinley states, "...the flow of words continues with v. 5 standing as witness to her lying. She cannot 'bring forth' these men, for they have gone, and there is now no question about the 'I do not know.' It is truth that has gone out and not the

⁴⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* Vol. 46 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), xlviiii-liv.

men.”⁴⁷ She also did not just lie about hiding them, but she lied about seeing them leave so the officials went to search in the wrong area.

If this was the complete story, the fact that Rahab lied would be beyond doubt, but it would not answer whether or not it was right. An indicator that Rahab was acting morally by lying is the fact that she and her family were spared in the invasion. She is also included in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew. However, the clear deciding factor as to guilt is found in Heb 11:31 where Rahab is listed among the heroes of the faith where she is praised for acting in faith. According to Bruce, “The next example of faith is the most surprising that we have met thus far—Rahab, the harlot of Jericho.”⁴⁸ In addition to this, in Jas 2:25, Rahab is specifically cited for her good works of lying and hiding the spies.

The fact that Rahab could lie boldly and then be praised leads to the conclusion that in some cases people are presented with conflicting moral imperatives and that choosing the lesser of two evils is the morally correct way to proceed. Unfortunately, this method of resolving moral crises can also lead to equivocating on moral imperatives. Thus, a balance must be maintained. For determining this balance context is critical.

In addition to Rahab, it is important to do a review of other biblical characters whose moral fiber was less questionable and who clearly disobeyed civil authorities. In Exod 1:15–21, the midwives disobeyed the order of Pharaoh and spared the lives of the male Hebrew children who were born. Clearly, this violated the governing authority. Just as clearly, the midwives had no choice but to resolve conflicting moral imperatives by choosing the lesser of two evils.

The book of Daniel has several people who directly violated the civil law because it violated God’s instruction. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego all disobeyed the command of Nebuchadnezzar to bow to the golden image that he made. The law, as well as the penalty, was clearly recorded in Dan 3:10–11, yet the response of these three in v.16–18 made it clear that they would not bow to the image, but instead would follow the law of God. The result was the fiery furnace, but that also raises an interesting question. Would it have been acceptable in this case to either bow, but not mean it, or to lie to the king? In this case, instead of choosing the lesser of two evils, they told the truth and rested on God’s protection. When dealing with conflicting moral imperatives, great care and balance are required.

Daniel faced a similar predicament in Dan 6:7–22. The law and the penalty are found in v.7, where if for thirty days, anyone made a petition to any

⁴⁷ Judith E McKinlay, “Rahab: A Hero/Ine?,” *Biblical Interpretation* 7.1 (1999): 46.

⁴⁸ Bruce, Frederick Fyvie, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 318.

god, other than Darius, he would be thrown into a den of lions. Again, Daniel could have lied, but instead he stood fast. In this case, in v.26, the result was that God was glorified throughout the entire known earth by King Darius.

Not all examples of civil disobedience are from the Old Testament. In Acts 4:19–21, Peter and John both defied authority after their arrest. When the officials went to release them, they commanded the apostles not to preach the gospel. Their response, in v.19–20, is a critical biblical passage regarding obedience to authority. “Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘If this is right before God, to listen to you more than God, you decide.’ For we are unable to not speak of what we have seen and heard.” The apostles disobeyed authority because it conflicted with God’s explicit command. At the very least, this supports the idea that in some cases civil authorities should be disobeyed when they direct believers to act contrary to God’s commands.

Again, in Acts 5, the apostles were arrested for preaching the gospel. This time, when they were commanded not to preach, Peter answered in Acts 5:29 saying, “But Peter and the apostles answered and said, ‘We must obey God more than men.’” This overriding principle should be applied to any situation.

In summary, even though the idea of obeying God instead of man resolves most moral situations, things may still be unclear because what God wants in each situation might be unknown. What can be seen from the Bible is that multiple people who were following God disobeyed civil authority and were praised by God for it. This again makes it highly improbable that the command to follow civil authorities is unconditional.

Guidelines for Applying Rom 13:1-7

Looking at recent history, it is easy to find regimes where there is little question as to whether to disobey authority. In Nazi Germany, the choice was so clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and a pacifist, “Ultimately participated in a plot against Hitler because of the magnitude of evil involved.”⁴⁹ In this case, Bonhoeffer appears to have chosen the lesser of two evils because there was an immediate threat to others who were innocent due to Hitler’s actions. Had Bonhoeffer succeeded, he might have saved countless lives.

Today, “If North Korean Christians are discovered, they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot.”⁵⁰ China has

⁴⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, A New Covenant Commentary (Lutterworth Press, 2009), 156.

⁵⁰ “2020_World_Watch_List.Pdf,” n.d., 7, https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2020_World_Watch_List.pdf.

instituted a new five-year plan to Sinicize all religious beliefs in the country. Additionally, “The latest regulations forbid anyone under the age of 18 from entering church buildings or participating in church activities.”⁵¹ In Islamic countries, following Christ can result in death. In these cases, disobeying authorities often honors God—especially when authorities are seeking out others for torture or death.

Even in totalitarian regimes, however, determining the proper level of resistance can be problematic. To lie to hide someone is one thing, but would it extend to assassination? When the oppression does not reach the level of the previously mentioned totalitarian states, guidelines and a sliding scale must be developed that allows believers to act according to God’s will.

However, before developing guidelines, one other passage must be considered. Jas 4:17 says, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good, and does not do it, to him it is sin.” In this case, the implication is that when the government mandate clearly contradicts the command of God, it is sinful to not disobey. According to Moo, “Sins of *omission* are as real and serious as sins of *commission*.”⁵² Passively accepting evil is not an appropriate response to an abusive authority.

In establishing guidelines, it is helpful first to narrow the scope of possible answers. Both biblical and extrabiblical evidence show that when Paul wrote Romans, the government in Rome was generally a good and fair government that punished evil and praised good conduct. Because of this, and because there are many examples where biblical characters disobeyed civil authority in order to follow God, position one, blind obedience to all government no matter how tyrannical, must be eliminated as a possible solution.

Likewise, position four, disregarding authority for any injustice, must also be eliminated as against the biblical mandate. Almost all the passages examined would be meaningless if this position were accurate. Also, one of the reasons for Paul writing Rom 13:1–7 appears to be to quash the idea that believers are above the law and not answerable to civil authorities.

As such, the answer to the level of obedience must lie between positions two and three—obedience to civil authorities unless there is a specific command from God to do otherwise; and endorsing authority, but also allowing civil disobedience for many reasons including tangential sin or to fight the oppression

⁵¹ “2020_World_Watch_List.Pdf,” 34.

⁵² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 158. (Italics his).

of others. Even with this narrowing of the spectrum, however, the problem still exists as to the interpretation of events as well as to the exact place to draw the line.

For example, is it wrong to withhold taxes if the government will use some of that money to fund abortion on demand? While abortion is a horrific sin, does it justify withholding taxes when the connection is only tangential? If the authority demanded that an individual perform the killing, the answer would be easy and obvious. However, situations are rarely that clear.

While not addressing the tax issue, Francis Schaeffer did address abortion and believers. According to Schaeffer, Christians are obligated to resist the state by using civil disobedience including “sit-ins in legislatures and courts, including the Supreme Court, when other constitutional means fail.”⁵³ Schaeffer also states, “There does come a time when force, even physical force, is appropriate.”⁵⁴ Again, the real issue here is when to resist and how forcefully. That believers are to resist the government on some level on issues like abortion is not debatable.

Determining exactly where that line exists for all situations is impossible. As such, the guidelines must have some flexibility. In drafting guidelines, the overarching principle must be that God is to be glorified. According to Larry Pettegrew, “Who God is must be the root for standards of right and wrong. God’s glory must be the goal of ethics.”⁵⁵

Additionally, it is imperative that the guidelines be established within an ethical system that has a locus of authority that is external to human standards. “What God decides is holy and moral and required of human beings is thus neither based on some standard outside of God, nor arbitrary. God wills certain values because they reflect His nature.”⁵⁶ By using the glorification of God, and God’s character, as the basis of the ethical system that is used to define further guidelines, the goal of an unchangeable system with an external locus of authority is possible.

From this, the first guideline should be that if there is no conflicting moral imperative, then the choice is to do whatever is right and whatever glorifies God. This is the easiest guideline to define since there is no conflicting moral imperative. The problem is that this only represents the simplest of situations, thus additional guidelines are needed.

⁵³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 120.

⁵⁴ Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 117.

⁵⁵ Larry Pettegrew, “Theological Basis of Ethics,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* Fall (2000): 139.

⁵⁶ Pettegrew, “Theological Basis of Ethics,” 149.

The second guideline is that when there are conflicting moral imperatives that jeopardize other people, the least morally objectionable choice should be made. This should correspond with the goal of glorifying God and being consistent with his character. While this may sound like equivocation, there are times where all the choices are bad and the least bad choice must be selected. When Rahab lied to protect the spies, she was choosing the least bad choice and God honored and protected her because of that. Since humans are not omnipotent and cannot simply issue a command to correct a situation, this is still consistent with God's character.

The third guideline is that in cases where there are conflicting moral imperatives, but the danger only applies to the person or group threatened, there is an option to place themselves in danger and trust that God will deliver. However, the third option is not mandatory and should be considered carefully. Had the spies at Jericho been captured, their options would have been to admit who they were or to lie to protect their mission. While a definitive answer is not possible, it is likely that without God's direct command, either options would have been acceptable.

A fourth guideline is to determine whether the state's command specifically undermines God's work. For example, if a law improperly infringes on individual liberty, it is often still better to obey the authorities. However, if the liberty infringed upon is sharing the gospel or otherwise advancing the work of the Lord, then according to the example of the apostles, it is probably best to reason with the authorities, and if that fails to disobey the authorities.

How would these guidelines apply to an issue like abortion in a country like the United States? While believers face relatively little persecution in the US, there are cases where believers have lost everything for their beliefs. What are Christians to do in the US when their tax dollars are being used for immoral activities? Each year, the government gives hundreds of millions of dollars to Planned Parenthood, the largest abortion provider in America. Does that justify believers disobeying the government by withholding taxes that might be used in part to fund abortion providers?⁵⁷ While most believers would oppose abortion, in this case the moral clarity is far less obvious than when dealing with Nazis, communists, and Islamists.

Michael Bray, a Lutheran pastor from Maryland became so upset with the killing of infants through abortion that in the 1980s he began bombing abortion clinics. Bray absolutely believed that he was doing God's will by destroying the clinics. After being released from jail in 1989, Bray was asked whether he would resume his bombing activities. His response, that he was, "No longer called to the

⁵⁷ Kevin Martin, "Stranger in a Strange Land: The Use of Overbreadth in Abortion Jurisprudence," *Columbia Law Review* 99.1 (1999): 176.

ministry of bombing,”⁵⁸ was an attempt at humor, but it also revealed a true conviction that Bray believed in what he was doing. In this case, while Bray’s intentions were to serve God, he appears to have gone beyond the permissible bounds of Scripture, even though an argument could be made that his actions may have saved lives.

Another example is governmental authorities shutting down churches due to concerns over viruses, or health issues. John MacArthur has been one of the most vocal advocates of disobeying the government when they attempt to stop churches from meeting under these circumstances. While it is important to attempt to coexist with the government when possible, two circumstances appear to tip the scales in MacArthur’s favor in this case. The first is that the churches were making an attempt to respect physical distancing and other health requirements, as well as attempting to work with the government. The second is that churches have often been placed under more severe restrictions than both businesses and political gatherings. As such, aside from First Amendment issues, this appears to cross into the territory of the situation that the apostles faced in Acts. While there may be practical considerations that might dictate otherwise, it appears that MacArthur is at least within what is permissible, and possibly mandated, by the biblical guidelines.

As these guidelines and examples illustrate, when cases are extreme, the right thing to do is clear; but guidelines are needed for cases that are less transparent. Obviously, believers may have differing standards for specific individual circumstances; thus, these guidelines are designed to accommodate conscience as well as any explicit commands found in the Bible.

Conclusion

Presented above and after following the guidelines—when believers are within the scope of accurately applying Rom 13:1–7—the best alternative is for believers to allow conscience to determine where the line is to be drawn in each situation. This would not apply, however, when believers are outside the allowable scope of glorifying God and obeying him.

The four guidelines offered are suggestions, but they may not be the only possible prescriptions. In considering the obligation of the believer to obey the state, Rom 13:1–7 is a key passage that must be considered. However, in this case, the text itself does not tell the complete story because of the unusual historical situation.

What has been demonstrated is that while many expositors interpret Rom 13:1–7 as an absolute command to always obey governmental authorities, the

⁵⁸ Based on statement that Bray made to the author of this article in a personal meeting.

historical context of Rome prior to AD 62 shows that when Paul wrote Romans, Nero was an exceptionally good ruler who allowed Christianity to flourish. Thus, while Paul's guidance in Romans applies when the government is just, the text does not address what to do when tyrannical governments persecute believers or others unjustly. This requires a deeper examination of each situation for determining conflicting moral imperatives, then developing scripturally moral guidelines for following God to the best of one's ability, in submission to God's holy character.

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