

## **Position Paper on Romans 13:1-7**

The following paper was written to address the issue of how Romans 13:1-7 should be interpreted and applied by a local church in the face of restrictions being placed upon certain activities by secular authorities.

### **Authority over the Church**

#### ***Christ is the Head over.... all things***

In Ephesians 1:22, Paul writes 'He [God] put all things under his [Christ's] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.' Christ is head of the church, but not just the church. He is head over 'all things' - his world-wide church and every government. Christ is the one to whom, as Christians, we give our ultimate allegiance. It is him whom we serve. This means that when he commands us to do something in his word we obey it. He is our sovereign king.

#### ***Elders***

Within the church, God has given elders, pastors, and teachers to oversee, lead, teach and protect the church (Eph 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 3:1-5; Titus 1:5). Regarding these leaders, the Writer to the Hebrews commands us, 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.' (Heb 13:17).

#### ***Government?***

During the COVID pandemic, and in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus, secular governments imposed certain constraints on churches. These included restricting numbers attending; physical distancing; not using a shared cup in communion; not sharing bibles/hymnals; requiring mask wearing; or not meeting at all.

These measures, obviously, raised the question of whether or not the government could impose these things on churches and whether Christians should obey them. Were governments overstepping their authority and, if Christians obeyed them, were they compromising?

In Romans 13:1 Paul writes, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.' In the verses that follow he sets out why. To further understand what Paul writes, and how it applies to us, we need to examine Romans 13:1-7 within its historical and biblical context.

### **1. What is the context of Romans 13?**

#### ***a. Historical context: political/governmental***

Paul wrote Romans sometime between 55-58AD - probably from Corinth. The geo-political setting is the Roman Empire - under Nero. This was no modern Western democracy! The state engaged in emperor worship, and taxes went to support this as well as pagan worship generally. It practised and enforced slavery. There was no state-provided financial social support. Taxation was oppressive, and at the beginning of Nero's reign this was a cause of growing disgruntlement in Rome and the wider empire. In the few years before Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, Jews (including Jewish Christians) had been ejected from Rome due to the tumult caused during the reign of Claudius. It is clear that when Paul wrote Romans 13 he did not have what we would consider good or God-fearing governments in mind.

#### ***b. Paul's own context - and experience of civil authorities***

Paul was a Roman citizen and made use of the privileges of his citizenship to avoid punishment (Acts 22:25). However, he was also beaten by civil authorities numerous times

(Acts 16:22-24; 2 Cor 11:25). Without question, Paul knew all about the realities of pagan governments. Despite this, he worked within their rule of law - both making use of his citizenship and appealing to them (Acts 16:37; 25:10-12). At no time does he resist their jurisdiction. In fact, he expresses gratitude that he can address his case to them (Acts 26:1-3).

### ***c. The context within Romans itself***

In Romans 1 and 2, both the breaking of God's law (chapter 1) and the self-righteous keeping of it (chapter 2) are held up as examples of lives lived in rebellion toward God. They are both forms of self-justification. During the period of COVID we saw the play out in our own situations: the law-keeper looks to his obedient conduct as the grounds of his justification, of feeling good about himself. But the law-breaker did the same - refusing to submit to authorities, and justifying himself in the guise of standing up for 'freedom'.

But in Christ, God is doing something new (chapters 3-6) — he is creating a new people justified by grace through faith.

Then, in Romans 7, Paul shows how God's law both reveals and provokes sin. We are commanded to do something, we don't want to do it, and it reveals the sin within us. In the example that Paul uses, this was the commandment against coveting: it reveals covetousness. In the same way, God's commands for us to obey different types of authorities (whether in the home, church or civil sphere) can reveal the rebel in us. It can reveal our desire to be independent, to be one's own lawmaker, and not have someone else tell me what to do. Romans 7 tells us that it is the law - God's commands - that has this power to reveal our hidden sin of which we may not be aware.

When we react strongly to some situation, for example to government rules during COVID, it should make us think - 'why am I reacting as strongly to this as I am?' Is the command to obey revealing something about me? Is my criticism of those who do obey revealing something about me? Is my criticism of those who don't obey revealing something about me?

### ***The near context of Romans 12***

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul says that we are not to be conformed to the pattern of the world. In the context of the wider argument of Romans and how we are justified before God, this means that when it comes to our response to authority, for example, we are neither to be like those who think themselves righteous because they obey (Ch 2), or who think life is found in disobeying (ch 1). The Christian should be different.

Then, immediately before Romans 13, in 12:14-21, Paul says we are to bless our persecutors. We are to live in harmony with one another and not be wise in our own sight. We are to give thought to what is honourable in the sight of all. We are to live peaceably with all. We are to leave vengeance - God's wrath - to God (and as he makes clear in Rom 13, that may come through the governing authorities!). We are not to be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### ***d. Within the rest of the Bible***

Paul's comments on authority in Romans 13 do not appear in a vacuum. They must be read in the context of the whole of God's word. The first sin was that of rebellion against authority (God's). Obedience to authority - to God (Ex 19:5; 1 Sam 15:22; John 14:15), to parents (Ex 20:12; Eph 6:1; Col 3:20), to church elders (Heb 13:17), to civil authorities (1 Peter 2:13; Titus 3:1), to masters (Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; 1 Peter 2:18) is repeatedly commanded. Obedience is a Christian virtue. Rebellion is a sin.

However, it is also clear that because God is our supreme Sovereign, God's people obey God rather than human rulers/masters when those rulers ask something of them that goes against God's will (see more below). In addition, the call to obey civil authorities does not mean that the Bible is in anyway naive as to the destructiveness of human power. The state can function as a beast (Rev 13 cf Dan 7).

Looking now specifically at Romans 13:1-17:

## **2. Who is to obey governing authorities?**

In v1 Paul says clearly 'Every person'. Is anyone excluded? No. Everyone who comes to Westlake, or to any other church, is commanded by God's word to obey the civil authorities. Indeed, Paul tells Titus that it is his duty as a leader in the church to 'Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient' (Titus 3:1-2). That is worth repeating: God places a requirement on elders to tell the people under their care and authority to obey rulers and authorities (see also 1 Peter 2:13). In addition, church members are commanded to obey their church leaders, and to do this in a way that brings them joy, and doesn't cause them to groan (Heb 13:17). In other words, to obey the authorities God has placed over us should be the disposition of every believer.

## **3. Which governing authorities are we required to obey?**

Paul states this twice, both negatively and positively: no authority is established except from God, and those that exist are instituted by him (v1). Thus, to oppose them is to oppose those whom God has put in place (v2). Again, it is worth remembering that this is written by the same Paul who was beaten by the authorities! Peter is also clear: 'be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution' - emperors and governors (1 Peter 2:13-14).

So, we are to obey governments and institutions, not because they are the government, but because God tells us to. He is our supreme authority.

## **4. If we resist governing authorities, what do we deserve and why?**

If we resist them we will incur judgment (v2). The reason for this is that civil authorities are God's servant, an avenger to carry out God's wrath.

However, both Paul and Peter state that it is the role of governing authorities to approve/praise good conduct and punish bad. For us as Christians, this good and bad conduct must be defined Biblically.

## **5. Biblically, what is the good authorities are to approve, and the bad they are to punish?**

Specifically, given the COVID pandemic, does this include the safeguarding and promotion of public health?

Very briefly, we can define the 'good' as those actions that are in line with God's law as written in our conscience and nature (Natural Law - Rom 1:18-19; 2:14-15) and in his word (see below). In addition we could add that it is those actions that build up the common good (cf Jer 29:4-9). The 'bad' is anything contrary to these things.

To give some (non-exhaustive) examples of areas of good/bad conduct, the word of God suggests governing authorities should concern themselves with:

- **Social justice** and the defence of the oppressed and needy: Dan 4:27; Proverbs 31:8-9. As King Lemuel's mother says, kings are not to open their mouths for wine, but for those who have no voice, for the rights of the destitute, for the poor and needy.

- **Weights and measures** - fair practices. Prov 11:1 tells us that a false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight; and Prov 20:23 tells us that false scales are not good. So some of the the 'good' and 'bad' things authorities are to be involved in will include things as simple as ensuring accurate weights and measures.

- **Crime** - its prevention and punishment. This is why Paul says of authorities 'he does not carry the sword in vain' (Rom 13:4). He is talking of the sword of justice.

- **Health, safety and building regulations.** Deuteronomy 22:8 brings God's law to bear on how we build - we must do so in ways that takes care of our neighbour. That means, as a very practical example, that if a church was building a church building, the state would not be over-reaching their sphere of responsibility in approving the good and punishing the bad by requiring certain standards as they build.

Is there a role for the governing authorities in safeguarding and promoting public health? The Bible indicates that there is.

- **Public Health.** In Leviticus 13-14 (see, for example, 13:4-5) we see the authorities (in this case the priests) restricting personal liberty for health reasons. In Deut 23:12-13 we see instructions regarding public hygiene. Arguably, public health and confinement/quarantine measures are based on Old Testament law. So the 'good' that authorities are to approve could include those measures that stop disease spread; and the 'bad' conduct they are to punish could be those actions that increase disease spread within a community.

This means, for example, that in restricting the size of worship gatherings during a pandemic a government may not be exceeding its powers. However, in addition, in Acts 2:46, we see believers meeting in both larger (in the temple) and smaller (in their homes) groups. This tells us that the early church was not prescriptive about the size of a meeting, or that the entire church always has to meet together for it to be the church. Indeed, the New Testament gives much freedom for how worship services are to be organised (which is one reason Christianity has proven so versatile at permeating all cultures in a way other religions have not). For example, when Paul writes to the church at Rome he says, 'all the churches of Christ greet you' (Rom 16:16), and when writing to the church at Colossae he asks the letter to be sent to the church in Laodicea 'and to Nympha and the church in her house' (Col 4:15). There is no requirement that all these different believers all meet together at the same time in the same place - yet the church is not divided. It is the one Church.

This means there is no Biblical mandate for us to insist on a specific size of our worship gatherings, or even that the whole church must meet together for it to be the church (or else multiple services are unbiblical at best, and sinful at worst).

Is preserving health contrary to God's word? No, it's the opposite. Of course, this principle does not mean we have to agree that every measure a government introduces is effective. But that is a different issue from our biblical call to obey when and where we can.

## **6. Is the authority of government circumscribed in Romans 13:1-7?**

Yes, but this is implied rather than explicit.

Firstly, as stated above, the 'good' and the 'bad' that authorities are to approve/punish must (for us) be biblically defined.

Secondly, Paul raises the issue of conscience (v5) - though we should note that this is in terms of obeying, rather than disobeying government: we obey to maintain a clear conscience.

Thirdly, in v7, Paul says we are to 'pay to all what is owed them.' He is undoubtedly drawing upon Jesus' words in Matt 22:21, 'render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' There are indeed some things - like worship or our ultimate allegiance, that are not owed to government. When the government requires us to worship them or give them our ultimate allegiance, we can and must disobey.

While we cannot speak for other nations, in Switzerland at no point have we come anywhere close to being asked to worship state power or give them our supreme allegiance.

### **7. How do we see these principles worked out in Scriptural examples?**

Disobedience and rebellion against divine authority was the first sin. This should give us pause anytime we are tempted to disobey those authorities God has placed over us. We should carefully consider what lies behind resistance to obedience when obedience is so clearly commanded by God.

**Egypt before the exodus:** There was no campaign of civil disobedience by the mass of the people of Israel, despite them suffering under an oppressive regime. In fact, Moses did not lead the people out of Israel until Pharaoh had given permission (Ex 12:31-32). However, the Hebrew midwives did refuse to comply with the order to murder the newborn infants (Ex 1:15-17) - even though an explicit command against murder (for example, in the Ten Commandments) had not yet been given. This is an example of someone refusing to do that which was against the law of God written on their conscience.

**Babylonian exile:** The Babylonian state was an extremely pagan, violent, totalitarian government, yet Jeremiah instructed the people to surrender to the Babylonians, rather than resist them (Jer 38:17ff). In addition, his instructions to the exiles living under this government are the opposite of civil disobedience. They are to work for the welfare of the city - the flourishing and prosperity of the city (Jer 29:4-9), and he specifically argues against those who are encouraging the people to disengage from civic life there.

Under the same regime, the example of Daniel and colleagues is instructive. They are fully engaged in the work of the government, rising to positions of prominence. This was to the extent that Daniel himself even extended emotional support and compassion to Nebuchadnezzar in the face of imminent judgment (Dan 4:19, 27). Daniel even saw God's hand in the events of the exile itself and the victory of Babylon over Judah (Dan 1:2). God had brought about his purposes through the hands of unbelieving, sinful men.

However, Daniel and his friends were willing to disobey commands when it had to do with whom they worshiped (Dan 3, 6).

### **Return from exile:**

The return of the Jewish people happens after permission is granted by Cyrus, the pagan Persian ruler (2 Chron 36:22-23). There was no move to do so before this permission is granted, and so this becomes an example of God working through the established authority of the day - even a pagan one.

Nehemiah organises his return and rebuilding efforts under the authority of Artaxerxes, the Persian king (Neh 1-2). When he arrives in Jerusalem, the authority to which he makes claim is that of the king (Neh 2:9), not his own or that of the people of God themselves.

In addition, rebuilding in Jerusalem (including the Temple) stops in obedience to the king's orders (Ezra 4) - even though this goes against the desire of God's people. However, the situation is more nuanced than this, as building restarts in response to a prophetic challenge (before new permission is granted) - but takes place alongside an appeal to law - the law of a foreign king (Ezra 5).

### **Jesus:**

Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). The context for this is informative. His opponents were trying to force him into a position of either saying, 'rebel against governing authorities', or 'give your primary allegiance to the governing authorities'. Jesus refuses that binary choice: you are to give Caesar what has his image (your taxes- with all the implications of where this money was spent), but to God the thing that carries his image - which is ourselves - our very life.

Jesus himself is the supreme example of submitting to human authorities - as they beat him and execute him in what is a travesty of justice. Yet through it all, God was working out his will (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). It is this example of Jesus submitting to even unjust authority that Peter tells us we are to follow: (1 Pet 2:21-23).

At no point did Jesus fail to submit to government authorities, even when we examine those areas where he was criticised. For example, there was no law against touching lepers, or healing on the Sabbath. What Jesus did do was correct incorrect interpretations of Scripture. When Jesus cleansed the temple he did so as the Lord returning to his temple - this was *his* temple. Once again, Jesus broke no law. It is precisely this fact that leaves the religious authorities having to invent charges against him at his trial (Matt 26:59-60). There simply was no crime of which to accuse him. To suggest that Jesus either broke Old Testament law (which he perfectly fulfilled) or that he rebelled against divinely instituted authority would come close to accusing him of sin.

### **The apostles:**

The apostles were willing to disobey the authorities when they were told they must no longer preach Christ (Acts 5:27-29). At no point in Switzerland have we been told we cannot preach Christ. If that day comes, we will not obey.

As stated above, Paul clearly worked within the legal structure of the Roman Empire. He repeatedly appeals to Roman law. He doesn't argue with civil authorities and say 'you have no authority over me or the church of God' - he appeals to the Emperor. However, he was also willing to challenge them to obey their own laws (Acts 16:35-40; 22:25-29).