

An Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7

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I. Introduction

It has been said that a Christian is a person who is “in the world, but not of it.” He is one who is busy living a new life in an old world. Or, to put it in the terms that Luther did, the Christian is, at the same time, a member of the kingdom on God’s right hand and the one on his left. This was a truth that the Lord himself made clear in more ways than one. We think, for example of the words that he spoke in his high-priestly prayer recorded in John chapter 17:

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

On another occasion earlier in his ministry Jesus had demonstrated the same truth only in a slightly different way. His enemies had come to trap him with a difficult question. They said to Jesus: “Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?” By asking this question the Jews hoped to place Jesus squarely on the horns of a dilemma. If he answered yes, the rabble who hated Roman taxation would turn against him. And if he said no, then he would find himself in trouble with the Roman authorities. Either way the Jews thought they had him trapped.

In their question the Jews seemed to imply that a person’s loyalty had to be to either one or the other – either Caesar or God. But notice the Lord’s answer. He did not allow that assumption to stand. Rather he clearly indicated that there are two distinct spheres in life’s obligations – Caesar’s and God’s. What a surprise it must have been for them when Jesus answered their question by saying, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

In responding to the question intended to trap him, our Lord went beyond the point of extricating himself from a difficult situation. He took the occasion to assert the Christian’s double duty – not only to God, but to divinely constituted authority as well.

What the Lord set forth here in the form of a principle had also been the pattern for his own life. Even though as the Son of God he might have set himself above earthly law, Jesus did not do that. He subjected himself to the governmental authority, both Jewish and Roman. Already at the beginning of his ministry Jesus told John the Baptist that he had come to “fulfill all righteousness.” And obedience to human, civil authorities was included in that task.

Nowhere in Scripture is there any indication that Jesus sought to ignore or escape the governmental authority under which he lived. In fact, during his Passion Jesus subjected himself completely to such human authorities. While before Pontius Pilate Jesus acknowledged that this governor of Rome had authority over him, but, at the same time, he reminded him that he exercised that power only through the will and ordinance of God. He said to him: “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.”

When Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.” He made it clear that the Christian has two obligations. One obligation, and the

primary one, is to God. And the other is to the divinely constituted governmental authority. The Christian is to render obedience to both. Only in one instance can the Christian disobey the human, governmental authority – and that is when it forbids what God commands or commands what God forbids.

After the Lord's ascension Peter and John were the first ones faced with a conflict in this area. The Lord had told them to go and preach the gospel to all the world, and the Jewish authorities had forbidden them to preach. Who was to be obeyed, God or the human authority? Peter and John answered correctly. They said, "We must obey God rather than men." This statement did not indicate that they had forgotten what the Lord had said about obedience to living among Christians. He told them that their conduct, over against one another was to be a spiritual worship – a new life in an old world – a life lived in anticipation of the world to come. He instructed the Roman Christians to PP¹⁾ present their bodies as a living sacrifice; ²⁾ practice patience, humility and love; ³⁾ hate evil and do what is good. He told them ⁴⁾ not to conform to the ways of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. He told them ⁵⁾ not to have vengeful thoughts, but to love their enemies, to overcome evil with good, and to live peaceably with all men.

Now in chapter 13 Paul goes on to describe how the Christian is to conduct himself as he lives his life in the secular world. The Christian, though he belongs to the spiritual kingdom of Christ, is not removed from the world. He walks side by side with the secular man. While he lives under God's government, he also lives under worldly, secular government. It might seem at first that these two governments would be mutually exclusive. But in the first seven verses of Romans 13 Paul goes on to show that that is not so.

The Roman government of Paul's day – under which the Roman Christians lived – was an institution identified completely with this world. It was a pagan power supported by pagan religious sanctions. To the Jews it had seemed a monstrous thing to submit to such authority. Some thought of it as a judgment of God on them, and others (such as the Zealots) rejected it as intolerable and passionately rebelled. What about Christians? What about the new Israel – the spiritual Israel of God? Were they to submit to secular authority? Were they to render obedience to the Roman government? Or would such obedience be diametrically opposed to their obedience to Christ?

In Romans 13:1-7 Paul says yes, they were to obey. An active obedience to the governmental power is God's will for the Christian. And not only a neutral and resigned passivity – but an active obedience. In these verses Paul calls for such obedience and explains in detail why the Christian should render it.

II. Overview Reading

In order that we might first of all have a broad overview of the section, I would like to read it to you from the New International Version.

¹Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. ⁴For he is God's servant to do

you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of justice to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience.

⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

III. Greek Study, Translation, Commentary

With that overview we now want to study these verses in detail. In each verse we will be making a study of the Greek, offering a translation, and commenting on the meaning of Paul's words.

Verse 1

Greek

Πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω. οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ, αἱ δὲ οὗσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμέναι εἰσιν.

Translation

Let every person submit himself to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except (it be) from God. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Greek Study

πᾶσα ψυχὴ

- lit. *every soul, each soul*; idiomatic translation would be – *everyone, or every person*. Here the subject of the imperative ὑποτασσέσθω.
- The word ψυχὴ is commonly used to designate a living person. The adjective πᾶσα means *every* – hence no exceptions.
- The primary position in the sentences would indicate that Paul wants emphasis on these words.

KJV *every soul*

NIV *everyone*

NASB *every person*

RSV *every person*

BERK *every person*

NEB *every person*

TEV *everyone*

ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις

- ἐξουσίαις is an abstract noun which means *authority*. In the plural it can refer to those who have authority, hence the *authorities*. In its simplest meaning this noun means *power*.

- ὑπερεχούσαις is the plural participle of the verb ὑπερέχω, which means *to have power over*. Here it is an adjective modifying the noun ἐξουσίαις.
- Both words are in the dative case – governed by the prefix in the verb ὑποτασέσθω. A very literal translation of the two words would be *the authorities, the ones who have power over*. Idiomatically the best translation would be *the governing authorities*.
 KJV *higher powers*
 NIV *governing authorities*
 NASB *governing authorities*
 RSV *governing authorities*
 BERK *governing authorities*
 NEB *supreme authorities*
 TEV *state authorities*

ὑποτασέσθω

- present middle imperative 3rd singular of the verb ὑποτάσσω. In the middle voice this verb means *to submit oneself to, to render obedience to, to obey*. Very literally one would translate it *range oneself under*. Because of the prefix ὑπό his verb takes the dative case.
 KJV *be subject to*
 NIV *submit to*
 NASB *be in subjection to*
 RSV *be subject to*
 BERK *render obedience to*
 NEB *submit to*
 TEV *obey*

οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐξουσία

- γὰρ here is explanatory – *for there is no authority*.
 KJV *For there is no power*
 NIV *for there is no authority*
 NASB *For there is no authority*
 RSV *For there is no authority*
 BERK *for there is no authority*
 NEB *there is no authority*
 TEV *for no authority exists*

εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ

- εἰ μὴ is a conjunction introducing a conditional clause. It is to be translated *if not, unless, or except*. It serves to limit what has just been said.
- ὑπὸ expresses influence, causation, agency when used with the genitive case. Hence the following translations – *under, by, by the agency of, at the hands of*. Here the preposition seems to point to the efficient cause. The translation *by* sounds better in the sentence.

KJV *but of God*
 NIV *except that which God has established*
 NASB *except from God*
 RSV *except from God*
 BERK *except from God*
 NEB *but by act of God*
 TEV *without God's permission*

δέ - This is a simple connective particle to join the two related clauses. Here no contrast is involved but rather an added thought.

αἱ δὺσαι - αἱ is the nominative feminine plural definite article. δὺσαι is the nominative feminine plural participle of the verb εἶμι. Here *authorities* is the understood subject. Hence the translation *the authorities that exist*.

KJV *the powers that be*
 NIV *the authorities that exist*
 NASB *and those which exist*
 RSV *and those that exist*
 BERK *and those in authority*
 NEB *and the existing authorities*
 TEV *and the existing authorities*

ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμένοι εἰσίν

- τεταγμένοι εἰσίν is a periphrastic construction formed with the passive participle and εἶμι.
- τεταγμένοι is a perfect passive participle, nominative feminine plural of the verb τάσσω, which means *ordain, institute, appoint, order, fix, determine, establish*. Literally it means *to place*. Here the best translation would be *to establish*.
- ὑπὸ θεοῦ is the same as above – causation or agency. Here the translation *by* would work well.

KJV *are ordained of God*
 NIV *have been established by God*
 NASB *are established by God*
 RSV *have been instituted by God*
 BERK *are divinely constituted*
 NEB *are instituted by him*
 TEV *have been put there by God*

Translation

Let every person submit himself to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except (it be) from God. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Commentary

In this verse Paul calls for subjection to the governing authorities and lays the obligation on everyone, Christians included. Everyone without exception must submit to the authorities in power. Why? Because there is a religious motivation as well as a prudential one. The authority that exists in the world did not develop in a vacuum. It came directly from God. And therefore all God's creatures are obligated to submit themselves to it. Christians, who are all the more knowledgeable that God is the source of such authority, should be the first ones to submit and obey.

Verse 2

Greek ὥστε ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ ἀνθέστηκεν, οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήμψονται.

Translation Therefore, he who rebels against authority is resisting God's institution. And those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

Greek Study

ὥστε - a particle introducing independent clauses; means *therefore, for this reason, so then, consequently*.
KJV *therefore*
NIV *consequently*
NASB *therefore*
RSV *therefore*
BERK *so that*
NEB *consequently*
TEV (omitted)

ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ

- present middle participle masculine singular of the verb ἀντιτάσσω which means literally *to range oneself against*. From this come the meanings *resist, oppose, rebel against*. Note that this verb has the same root as the verb in verse 1.
- The ὁ in front of the participle makes it a substantive – *he who rebels, the one who rebels*.
- Notice that this verb takes the dative case. τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ is governed by the prefix in the verb.
KJV *Whoever resisteth the power*
NIV *he who rebels against the authority*
NASB *he who resists authority*
RSV *he who resists the authorities*
BERK *the rebel against authority*
NEB *anyone who rebels against authority*
TEV *Whoever opposes the existing authority*

τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ ἀνθέστηκεν

- ἀνθέστηκεν is the perfect indicative 3rd singular of the verb ἀνίστημι which means *to set oneself against, oppose, resist, rebel against*. Takes dative case.
- διαταγῇ means *ordinance, arrangement, institution*.
- τοῦ θεοῦ is a possessive genitive.
KJV *resisteth the ordinance of God*
NIV *is rebelling against what God has instituted*
NASB *has opposed the ordinance of God*
RSV *resists what God has appointed*
BERK *is resisting God's appointment*
TEV *opposes what God has ordered*

οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες

- perfect participle masculine plural of the verb ἀνίστημι. Here with οἱ it is substantized and becomes the subject of the verb.
KJV *they that resist*
NIV *those who do so*
NASB *they who have opposed*
RSV *and those who resist*
BERK *such resisters*
NEB *those who resist*
TEV *anyone who does so*

ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήμψονται

- λήμψονται is the future middle indicative 3rd plural of the verb λαμβάνω. Literally *receive, get, obtain – receive punishment for themselves ἑαυτοῖς*. An idiomatic translation would be *will bring judgment on themselves*.
- κρίμα, of course, does not mean *damnation* as KJV translates it. It simply means an *adverse judgment*. Or it can mean that which follows the adverse judgment, namely *punishment*.
KJV *shall receive to themselves damnation*
NIV *will bring judgment on themselves*
NASB *will receive condemnation upon themselves*
RSV *will incur judgment*
BERK *will incur judgment on themselves*
NEB *will have themselves to thank for the punishment*
TEV *will bring judgment on himself*

Commentary

If governmental authority is to be obeyed and submitted to because it is established by God, then it follows that the one who rebels against authority rebels not only against men, but against God himself. This is precisely what Paul says here in verse 2. Resistance to authority or

rebellion against it is resistance to an order of things established by God himself. And thus it is nothing short of resistance and rebellion against God himself. Paul says that those who rebel will receive an adverse judgment from God. Some who rebel will fail and receive a punishment which reflects God's own anger. Others may succeed in carrying out their rebellion. And they may avoid punishment from the government against which they rebelled. But some day they will have to answer to God and reckon with his judgment.

If such resistance and rebellion against authority is rebellion against God himself, certainly no Christian – no child of God – will follow such a course. Resistance to what he does not like about a particular government is not a viable option for the Christian. Notice again that Paul says absolutely nothing about the character of the government – what kind it is, or whether it is good or bad. He simply forbids resistance on the part of the Christian, when the government is acting in its proper sphere of authority. Of course, as we said already in verse 1, if the government should command us to disobey God or act contrary to his will, we could resist that order in a peaceful way. But in no way would we be allowed to lead a rebellion against the government or seek to overthrow it by force of arms. We can see an example from our Lord himself. When the Jewish authority, the Sanhedrin, tried to muzzle him and keep him from preaching, Jesus refused to obey that order. But notice how he disobeyed. He didn't begin to advocate a revolution or deny the Jewish leaders any exercise of authority, he simply continued to preach. Ultimately of course his disobedience caused him to suffer at the hands of the Jews. The early Christians, too, refused to obey when the Roman government wanted them to curse Jesus and say "Caesar is Lord." But their refusal to obey did not include an attempt to overthrow the Roman government. No, even during the persecution Peter had this advice: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." The Christians were not to obey when commanded to sin against God. But they were to suffer persecution and death rather than rise up in rebellion

Verse 3

Greek

οἱ γὰρ ἄρχοντες οὐκ εἰσὶν φόβος τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἔργῳ ἀλλὰ τῷ κακῷ. θέλεις δὲ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν; τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποίει, καὶ ἔξεις ἔπαινον ἐξ αὐτῆς.

Translation

For rulers are not a cause for fear to those who do good, but to those who do evil! Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority?/ Then continue to do what is right, and you will receive commendation from him.

Greek Study

οἱ γὰρ ἄρχοντες

- γὰρ is explanatory. Paul goes on now to explain the function of government.
- οἱ ἄρχοντες is the nominative masculine plural of a noun which means *ruler*. This term is broad and general and could apply to anyone in a position of authority – religious or secular. Here the context indicates that the secular ruler is being referred to.
- φόβος is that which arouses fear – hence *a terror, cause for fear, a fright*.

KJV *For rulers are not a terror*
 NIV *For rulers hold no terror*
 NASB *For rulers are not a cause of fear*
 RSV *For rulers are not a terror*
 BERK *For magistrates are not dread*
 NEB *For government has no terrors*
 TEV *For rulers are not to be feared*

τῶ ἀγαθῶ ἔργῳ ἀλλὰ τῶ κακῶ

- ἔργῳ here in the dative case means *deed, action*. This noun takes on a moral flavor. The moral character of a man's life can be judged by his deeds – by what he does from day to day. The deeds may be either good or bad. Literally the translation would be, *For rulers are not a terror to the good deed, but to the evil one*. Here the deed itself is used to represent the people who do them. Hence a more idiomatic translation would be *For rulers are not a cause for fear to those who do good, but to those who do evil*.
- ἀγαθῶ is here *good* in the moral sense. And κακῶ is *bad* in the moral sense, or better *evil*.
- ἀλλὰ is an adversative particle indicating a contrast to what precedes. It often follows a negative clause. Here simply translate *but*.

KJV *to good works, but to the evil*
 NIV *for those who do right, but for those who do wrong*
 NASB *for good behavior, but for evil*
 RSV *to good conduct, but to bad*
 BERK *to the person who does right, but to the wrongdoers*
 NEB *for good behavior, but for crime*
 TEV *by those who do good, but by those who do evil*

θέλεις δὲ μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν;

- θέλεις is the present active indicative 2nd singular of the verb θέλω, which means *wish, want, desire*. This verb is almost always followed by the infinitive.

Commentary

In this verse Paul talks about the purpose that God has in establishing worldly government and authority. He makes it clear that the existing authorities are a manifestation of God's goodness. God has established government to restrain the evil that is in the world because of sin. He has put it there as a bulwark against the moral chaos which would otherwise engulf all of mankind. And hence, governmental authorities serve a good purpose for all people, Christians included.

Since government is God's agent against evil and runaway moral corruption, the person who avoids doing what is evil has nothing to fear from it and will benefit from it. It is only the one who does evil that has to be afraid of those who are in authority. In other words, the

government has been placed in power by God to restrain the criminal and to protect those who are law-abiding.

The good citizen, the one who lives within the law and obeys the government, Paul says, will receive “approval” or “commendation” from the one in authority. This may not necessarily be a verbalized commendation, but rather a tacit approval of law-abiding conduct. Simply put, the one who obeys the law receives the divinely appointed benefit of government. The government recognizes him as a good citizen and affords him protection and security.

Paul himself had gained such “approval” of the Roman authorities. When he was in trouble in Palestine and the Jews were about to kill him, the Roman government protected him and gave him the right of appeal all the way up to Caesar. Paul’s Roman citizenship called for obedience to its authority, but it also paid him some very tangible dividends.

Verse 4

Greek θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοι εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν. ἐὰν δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῆς, φοβοῦ· οὐ γὰρ εἰκῆ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ· θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν ἔκδικος εἰς ὄργην τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι.

Translation For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid. For he does not bear the sword in vain. He is God’s servant, an agent of justice, to bring punishment on those who do evil.

Greek Study

θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοι εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν

- γὰρ is again explanatory. Paul goes on to describe further that government is a benevolent institution of God.
- διάκονος is in the predicate position. It modifies the hidden subject in the verb ἐστιν. This noun means *servant, minister, agency*.
- θεοῦ is a possessive genitive. Notice that this word has first position in the clause – an indication that Paul is again stressing the fact that government is *God’s* servant – established by him.
- σοι is an ethical dative.
- εἰς here denotes purpose - *to do you good*.
- A good translation of the whole phrase would be, *For he is God’s servant to do you good*.

KJV *For he is a minister of God to thee for good*

NIV *For he is God’s servant to do you good*

NASB *For it is a minister of God to you for good*

RSV *For he is God’s servant for your good*

BERK *For it is God’s agency for your welfare*

NEB *For they are God’s agents working for your good*

TEV *For he is God’s servant working for your own good*

ἐὰν δὲ τὸ κακὸν ποιῆς, φοβοῦ

- ἐάν is a conjunction – here introducing a clause with a subjunctive verb. ἐάν and the subjunctive denotes what is expected to occur under certain circumstances from a given standpoint in the present.
- δὲ indicates a contrast to what has gone before, namely, government is for your good. *But, if you do evil...*
- ποιῆς is a present active subjunctive 2nd singular of ποιέω.
- φοβοῦ is the present middle imperative 2nd singular of φοβέω which means *to fear, to be afraid*.
 KJV *But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid*
 NIV *But if you do wrong, be afraid*
 NASB *But if you do what is evil, be afraid*
 RSV *But if you do wrong, be afraid*
 BERK *But if you do wrong, then be alarmed*
 NEB *But if you are doing wrong, you will have cause to fear*
 TEV *But if you do evil, be afraid of him*

οὐ γὰρ εἰκῆ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ

- εἰκῆ is an adverb meaning *in vain, to no avail, without cause, to no purpose, for nothing*.
- τὴν μάχαιραν – *the sword*. Here the Roman short sword is what Paul has in mind. This sword was often carried before Roman rulers as a symbol of their authority. It represented the power over life and death. And it was not only symbolical. This sword was actually used for the execution of Roman citizens. In fact, in literature the Romans called the right to inflict capital punishment “the right of the sword.”
- φορεῖ is the present active indicative 3rd singular of the verb φορέω, which means *to bear* or in a prolonged sense *to wear*.
 KJV *For he bearest not the sword in vain*
 NIV *for he does not bear the sword for nothing*
 NASB *for it does not bear the sword for nothing*
 RSV *for he does not bear the sword in vain*
 BERK *for it does not carry the sword without reason*
 NEB *it is not for nothing that they hold the power of the sword*
 TEV *for his power to punish is real*

θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν

- *He is God's servant*. Notice again the positioning of the word θεοῦ in the sentence. Again the stress and emphasis is on the fact that *God* himself is behind government.
 KJV *For he is the minister of God*
 NIV *He is God's servant*
 NASB *for it is a minister of God*
 RSV *he is the servant of God*

BERK *it is God's agent*
NEB *for they are God's agents of punishment*
TEV *He is God's servant*

ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργὴν τῷ τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι

- ἔκδικος is an adjective which means *avenging*. Here in the substantized form it means *an avenger, an agent of justice*. The verb ἐκδικέω means either *to avenge* or *to procure justice* for someone.
- ὀργή can mean either *wrath* or *punishment*. Here the punishment idea seems to work best.
- εἰς is a preposition which introduces a purpose idea.
- πράσσοντι is a present active participle of πράσσω which means *to do, to practice, to commit*. Notice that the force of the present tense implies ongoing action – *the one who practices evil*.
KJV *a revenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil*
NIV *an agent of justice to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*
NASB *an avenger who brings wrath on those who practice evil*
RSV *to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer*
BERK *to bring deserved punishment on the evildoer*
NEB *for retribution of the offender*
TEV *and carries out God's wrath on those who do evil*

Commentary

In this verse Paul further explains that God has a purpose in establishing human government. He tells the Romans that government is “God’s servant” for their good. Government is an agency of God which compels those under it to do good in the sense of “civic righteousness.” And thus it keeps safety and order in the society – at least to a degree. The Christian is to realize that God has established for his good also – to afford him protection and to keep in check the forces of evil in the sinful world in which he lives. If a Christian obeys the government and does what is right in its eyes, he can derive some truly great benefits from it.

But, on the other hand, Paul tells them: “If you do what is evil, be afraid.” If you do what the government in its laws forbids, then you have reason to be fearful. For the government “does not bear the sword in vain.” As we said earlier, the “sword” here refers to the Roman short sword which was used to execute Roman citizens. Because of its use for execution, the sword came to be the symbol of retributive justice. The sword stood for the government’s ability to inflict penalties for wrongdoing – penalties up to and including the taking of human life itself. According to Paul, the government can and should carry out the sentence of capital punishment in certain instances. And when it does, it is acting as God’s agent, as his servant.

Contrary to the opinion of many, the New Testament sanctions the use of capital punishment on the part of the government. In fact, it merely reinforces a principle that God established already in Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God made he man.” It should be noted that while Paul says the government has the right to inflict capital punishment, it does not necessarily have to. If in the light of human reason it decides to abolish the death penalty (as has happened in our country),

the government can do so. But in doing so, it should realize that it may be removing a powerful deterrent against serious crime.

Though Paul does not specifically say it here, the power of the sword undoubtedly includes the ability of government to wage wars of defense against aggressor nations. Just as the government can punish an individual wrongdoer who is jeopardizing the safety of society, so it can also use the power of the sword against an evil aggressor nation that is threatening the safety of the people living under its authority. There are, of course, many questions of a practical nature that could be discussed here, but we will reserve them for later.

Some have made the claim that it Paul had written this section about human government later in Nero's reign (during the persecutions, for example), he would not have called government "God's servant." But this claim cannot be sustained. The Jews had Herod the Great – who was almost as great a monster as Nero. They had the Sanhedrin who crucified Christ and ordered Stephen to be stoned to death. Had these things perhaps slipped Paul's mind? Certainly that was not the case. Paul is here setting forth the principle that human government is a benevolent institution of God. This principle is not in any way mitigated by the fact that there are some governments and some rulers who abuse their authority. Paul knew of such abuse, and yet he very forcefully says that human government is divinely appointed.

We could perhaps see a parallel in the institution of marriage. Marriage was instituted by God for the welfare and happiness of mankind. The institution of marriage stands, despite the fact that there are many who abuse the marriage estate. The same is true of human government. God's institution of human government stands, despite the fact that certain rulers fail to carry out their God-given responsibilities and at times even perpetrate injustices.

Verse 5

Greek διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν.

Translation Therefore it is necessary to obey, not only because of (possible) punishment, but also for conscience' sake.

Greek Study

διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι

- διὸ is an inferential conjunction. It is a particle that introduces a natural conclusion. It is to be translated *wherefore, therefore, for this reason*.
- ἀνάγκη means *necessity*. This noun, together with a form of the verb εἶμι takes on the meaning *it is necessary* or *one must*. The expression is almost always followed by the infinitive.
- ὑποτάσσεσθαι is the same verb as in verse one. Here it is the present middle infinitive. The best meaning here would be *obey*.
KJV *Wherefore ye must needs be subject*
NIV *Therefore it is necessary to submit*
NASB *Wherefore, it is necessary to be in subjection*
RSV *Therefore one must be subject*
BERK *It behooves us, therefore, to be submissive*

NEB *That is why you are obliged to submit*
TEV *For this reason you must obey*

οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν

- οὐ μόνον...ἀλλὰ καὶ means *not only...but also*.
- διὰ is a preposition taking the accusative. It means *because of, for the sake of*. It indicates the cause or reason something should happen.
- ὀργὴν can either mean *wrath* or *punishment*. Here *punishment* seems to fit best.
- συνείδησιν means conscience – the seat of moral consciousness.
KJV *Not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake*
NIV *Not only because of possible...because of conscience*
NASB *not only because of wrath, but also for conscience sake*
RSV *not only to avoid God's wrath...for conscience sake*
BERK *not merely by fear of retribution...by conscience*
NEB *not because of punishment only...for conscience sake*
TEV *not just because of God's wrath...as a matter of conscience*

Commentary

Paul has said that Christians are to submit to the governing authorities because they are of God. He has said that those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. He has fully explained the purpose of government and the way it carries out its God-given duties. He has said that the government in its role of protecting the law-abiding citizen and punishing the law-breaker is actually God's servant. And now, with all that having been said, Paul comes with a natural conclusion. "Therefore it is necessary to obey, not only because of possible punishment, but also for conscience' sake." The Christian, like anyone else, is compelled to obey the government if he wants to avoid punishment. But Paul says the Christian has a better motive for obedience and subjection. He obeys because his conscience tells him that that is God's will. And he recognizes that disobedience would be resisting the hand of God himself. And so, for the Christian obedience to government is not only a civil duty, but also a religious one.

Verse 6

Greek διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε. λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες.

Translation That is why you also pay taxes. For [the authorities] are God's servants, who devote themselves continually to this very thing.

Greek Study

διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε

- διὰ τοῦτο means *therefore, for this reason*.
- καὶ here has the meaning *also*.

- φόρους is the plural of the noun φόρος which means *tribute, tax*. With the verb τελέω it means *to pay taxes*.
 - τελεῖτε is the present active indicative 2nd plural of the verb τελέω which means *to pay*. The form could also be the imperative. But Paul is not admonishing to pay taxes here. He simply is stating that we pay taxes in support of government because it is God's servant.
- KJV *For this cause pay ye tribute also*
 NIV *This is also why you pay taxes*
 NASB *For because of this you also pay taxes*
 RSV *For the same reason you also pay taxes*
 BERK *Pay your taxes, therefore*
 NEB *That is also why you pay taxes*
 TEV *This is also the reason that you pay taxes*

λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν

- λειτουργοὶ is a predicate nominative modifying the hidden subject of the verb εἰσιν. The word means *servants*. While the word can have either a meaning that is religious or secular, it is the secular that is being referred to, that is *public servants*.
 - εἰσιν contains the subject – which is *authorities* understood.
- KJV *For they are God's ministers*
 NIV *For the authorities are God's servants*
 NASB *For rulers are servants of God*
 RSV *for the authorities are servants of God*
 BERK *are God's agents*
 NEB *The authorities are in God's service*
 TEV *for the authorities are working for God*

εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες

- εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο literally, *to this very thing*, i.e., governing as God's agents.
 - προσκαρτεροῦντες present active participle nominative plural of the verb προσκαρτερέω which means *to busy oneself with, to be devoted to, to be busily engaged in*.
- KJV *attending continually upon this very thing*
 NIV *who give their full time to governing*
 NASB *devoting themselves to this very thing*
 RSV *attending to this very thing*
 BERK *who constantly attend to this task*
 NEB *and to these duties they devote their energies*
 TEV *when they fulfill their duties*

Commentary

In this verse Paul reminds the Romans that obedience to government is really nothing new to them. “That is why you also pay taxes,” he tells them. He reminds them that by the simple act of paying their taxes, they were showing themselves to be obedient subjects of their government. The Romans were “rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s” in accordance with the direct command of Jesus. Paul takes it for granted that this word of the Savior is known and practiced in the churches.

The point Paul is making is this. If the Roman Christians are paying taxes in obedience to the Lord’s command, they are already in principle recognizing the place and function of the Roman authorities as ministers of God – intent upon their duties as his servants. Some would take the verb *τελεῖτε* (pay) as an imperative and imply that Paul had to make this exhortation because some of the Roman Christians were balking at paying taxes to the pagan Roman government. But there simply is no warrant for making this assumption. Notice that Paul gives a reason why Christians should pay their taxes gladly and cheerfully. He says that those who are in the work of government deserve to be supported by those who are governed, by those who derive benefit from their service.

Verse 7

Greek ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς, τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον, τῷ τὸ τέλος τὸ τέλος, τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον, τῷ τὴν τιμὴν τὴν τιμὴν.

Translation Give to all what you owe them: tax to whom (you owe) tax; custom to whom custom; respect to whom respect; honor to whom honor.

Greek Study

ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς

- τὰς ὀφειλάς *dues, what is owed.*
- ἀπόδοτε is the 2nd aorist active imperative 2nd plural of the verb ἀποδίδωμι which means *to give, to render, to pay.*
- πᾶσιν *to all, to everyone.* Here obviously pointing to governmental authorities.
KJV *Render therefore to all their dues*
NIV *Give everyone what you owe him*
NASB *Render to all what is due them*
RSV *Pay all of them their dues*
BERK *Pay all of them their dues*
NEB *Discharge your obligations to all men*
TEV *pay, then, what you owe them*

τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον, τῷ τὸ τέλος τὸ τέλος, τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον, τῷ τὴν τιμὴν τὴν τιμὴν

- τὸν φόρον τὸν φόρον Notice here there are two accusatives. The second one is an apposition to ὀφειλάς which is the accusative object of the verb ἀπόδοτε. The first one is the object of the verb *owe* which must be

supplied. This holds true for all of the other three pairs that follow. The word φόρος means *tax*.

- *custom* is the meaning of the word τέλος.

- φόβος means *respect*.

- τιμή means *honor*.

KJV *tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor*

NIV *If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor*

NASB *tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor*

RSV *taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due*

BERK *tax to whom tax is due; custom duties to whom custom duties are due; respect to whom respect is due; honor to whom honor is due*

NEB *pay tax and toll, reverence and respect, to those to whom they are due*

TEV *pay them your personal and property taxes, and show respect and honor for them all.*

Commentary

In the previous verse Paul had put his approval on the paying of taxes for the reason assigned. Now in verse 7 he states this in the imperative. "Give to all what you owe them!" Again, this does not imply any reluctance on the part of the Romans to pay their taxes. It follows upon Paul's instruction in verse 6 and only serves to impress upon the Romans that, as well-instructed Christians, they are to give all their rightful due. If they owe taxes or custom duties, they should pay them willingly. And they should not forget either to pay the debt of respect and honor which is owed to those in positions of authority.

IV. Having now studied the text in detail, I think it would be instructive to look to the writings of Luther, and see what he had to say about the points under discussion in Romans 13:1-7.

In 1520 Luther wrote a lengthy work entitled *Treatise on Good Works*. In this treatise, while discussing the Fourth Commandment, Luther makes the following remarks:

The third work of this commandment is to obey temporal authority, as Paul teaches in Romans 13 and in 1 Peter 2, "Submit yourselves to the king as supreme and to the princes as his ambassadors and to all the ordinances of worldly power." For the task of temporal power is to protect its subjects and punish theft, robbery, and adultery, as St. Paul says in Romans 13:4: "Authority does not bear the sword in vain; it serves God with it, and is a terror to evildoers, but the protector of the good."

Here men sin in two ways. First, if they lie to the government, betray it, or are disloyal to it, neither obeying it nor doing as it orders and commands, whether with their bodies or their possessions. For even when the government commits an injustice, as the king of Babylon did to the people of Israel, God wants the government obeyed without treachery or deception. Second, we sin when we speak evil of government with grumbling and evil words, in public or private.

In all this we are to regard that which Peter bids us regard, and that is that the power of temporal authority, whether it does right or wrong, cannot harm the soul, but only our body and our property – unless of course, it should try openly to compel us to do wrong against God or men, as it did in the early church when the rulers were not yet Christian. For to suffer wrong destroys no man's soul, in fact, it improves the soul. But to do wrong destroys the soul even though all the world's wealth be gained. This is the reason that it is less disastrous when the temporal power goes wrong than when the spiritual power does. Therefore we must resist the spiritual power when it does not do right – and we must not resist the temporal power even when it does wrong. The temporal power is but a very small matter in the sight of God, and too slightly regarded by him for us to resist or disobey, no matter whether the state does right or wrong.¹

In 1520 in his treatise entitled *To the Christian Nobility* Luther chided the German princes for letting the ecclesiastical authorities push them around. He encouraged them to exercise their God-given rights over against the papists who insisted that the church was above temporal authority. But then in 1521 at Worms Luther himself refused to comply with the order of the highest temporal authority of all, the emperor. He refused to recant the numerous books and articles he had written and published. Obviously this was an act of disobedience against the highest official of temporal authority. Luther's action raised a number of questions. Is a Christian obliged to obey such orders emanating from the civil authority? Should he resist them? What about Christ's instructions of non-resistance in Matthew 5:38-41? Must the Christian's submission to the governing authorities be absolute? Luther gave his answers in the treatise entitled *Temporal Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Obeyed?* written in the year 1523. In that work we hear Luther say the following:

First we must provide a sound basis for the civil law so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God's ordinance. The passages which do so are Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. The law of the temporal sword has existed from the beginning of the world. For when Cain killed Abel, he was in such terror of being killed in turn that God placed a special prohibition on it and suspended the sword for his sake, so that no one was to slay him. He would not have had this fear if he had not heard from Adam that murderers are to be slain. After the Flood God reestablished this in unmistakable terms: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Genesis 9:6). This is said of the law of the sword, that a murderer is guilty of death and in justice is to be slain by the sword. The credit or blame belongs to men, if this law instituted by God is not carried out.

Afterwards it was also confirmed by the laws of Moses in Exodus 21:14: "If a man willfully kills another, you shall take him from my altar that he may die." And in the same chapter he talks about taking "a life for a life." In addition, Christ himself confirms it when he said to Peter in the garden: "He that takes the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). This is to be interpreted just as Genesis 9:6. Jesus is actually citing that passage when he speaks to Peter. John the Baptist also teaches the same thing. When the soldiers asked him what to do, he answered, "Do neither injustice nor violence to anyone, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). If the sword were not a godly estate, he should have directed them to get out of it, but he does not. Hence it is certain and clear that it is God's will that the temporal sword and law be used for the punishment of the wicked and protection of the upright.

God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the wicked so that they are obliged to keep still and maintain an outward peace. Thus St. Paul says in Romans 13:3. For this reason one must distinguish carefully between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce the righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other.

The Christian is to be obedient to temporal authority because the sword is the most beneficial for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked. The Christian submits willingly to the rule of the sword. He pays his taxes, honors those in authority, and does whatever he can to assist the governing authority – that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear. Thus in Matthew 17:27 Christ paid the temple tax that he might not offend them.

Thus, while Jesus in Matthew 5 teaches that Christians among themselves are to be governed by the law of love, he does not forbid Christians to serve and be subject to those who have the secular sword and law. John the Baptist did not forbid the soldiers to continue to serve. Cornelius was not asked to stop being a centurion before he could be a Christian. And the eunuch certainly possessed the power of the sword as an official of Ethiopia, and yet he became a Christian.

But how far does temporal authority extend? When would we say that government oversteps its bounds and encroaches on God's kingdom and government? The temporal authority has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth. For God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule the soul. Therefore, where temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches on God's government and misleads souls. Human government and authority cannot possibly extend its rule over souls; it is limited to the external dealings that men have with one another. Jesus himself said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." In temporal things, Jesus says, we owe obedience to government.

But in spiritual things we owe obedience to God alone. Hence, the government is stepping over the line if and when it tries to exert its authority in spiritual matters.ⁱⁱ

It was on this very basis that Luther refused to bow to the demands of the emperor, when he ordered him to recant his writings. Luther writes:

It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious Sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey you. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey; for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you neither have the right nor the authority.ⁱⁱⁱ

Luther cites another example of where disobedience to the civil authority would not be in violation of Romans 13. He writes concerning the order that his German New Testament be confiscated from the people:

They should not turn in a single page, not even a letter. Whoever does so is turning Christ over into the hands of Herod, for these tyrants act as murderers of Christ even as Herod did. If their homes are searched and property and books taken by force, they should suffer it to be done. Outrage is not to be resisted, but endured; yet, we should not sanction it, or lift a finger to conform or obey.^{iv}

While Luther had written quite clearly about obedience to temporal authority, some of the peasants in Germany used certain things that Luther had said as a basis for rebellion and revolt against the landed aristocracy. Spurred on by popular reformers such as Thomas Münzer, the peasants revolted. They came with a list of demands called *The Twelve Articles*. It was these articles and the action of the rebellious peasants that prompted Luther to write a treatise entitled *An Admonition to Peace*. By writing this treatise Luther not only hoped to avert widespread bloodshed and strife, but, in addition, he hoped to make the peasants see that their action was contrary to Scripture. First of all he censured the princes for refusing to moderate their demands and reform their way of living. But then, turning to the peasants, he informs them that though they might have had some legitimate grievances, it was wrong for them to try to rectify the situation through force and violence. Listen to what he says:

“All who take the sword shall perish by the sword.” That means that no one, by his own violence, shall arrogate authority to himself; but, as Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities – with fear and reverence.” How can you get around these passages and laws of God, when you boast that you are acting according to divine law? How can you take the sword in your own hands and revolt against the governing authorities that are instituted by God? Do you think Paul’s in Romans 13 will not strike you? He who resists authority will incur judgment?

You say the rulers are wicked and intolerable. I answer: The fact that rulers are wicked and unjust does not excuse disorder and rebellion. For the punishing of

wickedness is not the responsibility of everyone, but of the worldly rulers who bear the sword. Thus Paul says in Romans 13 and Peter in 1 Peter 2:14. Can you not think it through, dear friends? If your enterprise were right, then any man might become a judge over another. Then authority, government, and law and order would disappear from the world; and there would be nothing but murder and bloodshed. I fear that some prophets of murder have come among you so that they can use you and become lords of the world. Have you not read what Jesus said about resisting evil in Matthew 5? He says that we should not resist evil or injustice, but always yield, suffer, and let things be taken from us. If you will not bear this law, then lay aside then name Christian and claim another that accords with your actions. On the basis on these passages even a child can understand that Christian law tells us not to strive against injustice, not to grasp the sword, not to protect ourselves, not to avenge ourselves, but to give up life and property, rather than to rebel.

Did not Peter have right on his side in Gethsemene? Was it not a terrible injustice that they were doing to take from Christ not only his property but also his life? But look what Jesus did. Even though the injustice was great, he bade Peter to put up his sword and would not allow him to avenge or prevent this injustice. In addition he said, "He who takes the sword shall perish by the sword." This should teach us that we do not have the right to use the sword, simply because someone has done us an injustice or because law and justice are on our side. Even if someone wre to try to take the gospel away, the Christian should suffer rather than retaliate.^v

Shortly after Luther had written the *Admonition* the land was flooded with arson and insurrection and murder. When Luther saw that his advice had been ignored, he wrote the controversial treatise entitled *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. So disturbed was Luther by their rebellious action that he thoroughly condemned them – at times resorting to some very strong language. In his treatise he charges them on three counts: 1) They had violated the Scriptural injunction to be subject to rulers; 2) They had committed serious crimes in the name of Christ and had committed blasphemy; 3) They had robbed, plundered and murdered and thus deserved to be destroyed like mad dogs. Here are some quotes from this treatise:

I will not oppose the ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the gospel, will smite and punish these peasants. He is within his rights since the peasants are not contending any longer for the gospel, but have become faithless, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even the heathen ruler has the right and the authority to punish. Indeed, it is his duty to punish such scoundrels, for this is why he bears the sword. He is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. The prince and lord must remember that he is God's minister and that the sword has been given to him to use against such people. Therefore, let anyone who can smite, slay and stab secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more hurtful or devilish than a rebel. It is just as

when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you and a whole land with you.^{vi}

The rebel peasants were soon defeated by professional soldiers of the Swabian League. Münzer was decisively beaten at the battle of Frankenhausen. Münzer himself was seized, tortured and beheaded. The victorious rulers committed all sorts of excesses and at least 100,000 peasants lost their lives. The charge was made that Luther first incited the peasants and then betrayed them – leaving them to be slaughtered by the rulers. Even Luther’s friends felt that the tract against the peasants had been harsh, and they urged him to retract it. Luther refused, and to answer the charges and explain his position he wrote a treatise entitled *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*. In this treatise Luther chided the rulers for their excesses – but he still would not excuse the peasants for their rebellion against authority. Among other things he said the following:

You have to answer people like that with a fist, until the sweat drops off their noses. The peasants would not listen; they would not let anyone tell them anything. So their ears had to be unbuttoned with musket balls until their heads jumped off their shoulders. He who will not listen to God’s Word when it is spoken with kindness, must listen to the headsman when he comes with his axe. It is God’s will that the king be honored and the rebels be destroyed. My little book was right, even though the whole world takes offense at it.^{vii}

We said earlier that the power of the sword held by government includes the right to wage war for the protection of those under its authority. Luther also had quite a bit to say in this regard. Assa von Kram, a professional soldier and an acquaintance of Luther, was troubled in his conscience. He was having trouble reconciling his confession of the Christian faith with his profession. And so he asked Luther if he would write on the subject. In 1526 Luther published his answer – a treatise entitled *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*. In this treatise Luther says some things that are worth considering. Here are some quotes:

Is the Christian faith compatible with being a soldier, going to war, stabbing and killing, robbing and burning, as military law requires us to do to our enemies in wartime? Is this work sinful or unjust? Should it give us a bad conscience before God? Must a Christian only love and do good, and kill no one? What else is war but the punishment of evil? Why does anyone go to war, except because he desires peace and obedience.

Killing and robbing do not seem to be works of love. And therefore many think that it is not a Christian thing when a soldier does these things. But in truth, in certain instances, killing and robbing can be a work of love. Think of a doctor who has to remove someone’s limb to save him. To the limb that is removed the doctor might appear to be a merciless man. But looking at it from the viewpoint of the body as a whole, the body which the doctor wants to save, he is a fine man doing a fine thing. Similarly, when a soldier is forced to kill, it seems on the surface to be an unchristian thing and in fact contrary to Christian love. But insofar as a soldier is carrying out the mandate of the government to keep peace

and order, he actually performs a godly work. In doing so, the soldier is only doing what the doctor did – amputating a leg or hand, so that the whole body may not perish. The soldier is a servant of the government who yields the sword in accordance with God’s design and institution. It is true, there are soldiers who can abuse their profession and kill needlessly. But that is the fault of the person, not the profession.

John the Baptist did not stop the soldiers from continuing in their profession. And in the Old Testament war was waged at God’s direction. If the waging of war and the military profession were wrong in themselves, we would have to condemn Abraham and Moses and Joshua and David and all the rest who served God as soldiers. Some would argue that in the New Testament it is different. But the words of Peter and Paul would tell us otherwise. Even under the New Testament the sword is established by God’s commandment, and those who use it properly serve God and are obedient to his Word.

If we said that war is wrong in itself, then we would have to admit and allow that the use of the sword is wrong entirely. For if it is wrong to use the sword in war, it is also wrong to use than sword to punish evildoers or keep the peace. For what is war but the punishment of evildoers and the maintenance of peace? If one punishes a thief or a murderer or an adulterer, that is punishment inflicted on a single evildoer; but in a just war a whole crowd of evildoers, who are doing harm in proportion to the size of the crowd, are punished at once. If therefore one work of the sword is right, they are all right and good, for the sword is not a foxtail which is used to tickle people. In Romans 13:4 Paul calls the sword the “wrath” of God.

If worldly rulers call upon Christians to fight, then they ought to and must fight and be obedient, not as Christians, but as members of the state. When Christians fight in a war, they do not do it for themselves as individuals, but as obedient servants of the authorities under which they live. Therefore, when a Christian fights in a war, he does not go contrary to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:38-41 where he says that as Christians we are not to resist evil.

The divine law as stated in Romans 13 is that a person should never rebel against the authority over them. Is there any situation which can develop in which it is just for Christians to act against this law, to be disobedient to rulers, and to fight and depose them? Some would answer yes, and they would find all sorts of just causes why such rulers who were evil should be overthrown. But I do not know of any case where this would be a just action. I know well enough and I have read in the history books of subjects deposing or killing their rulers. The Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans all did this, and God even permitted these nations to grow and prosper in spite of it. But to the Christian such rebellion is forbidden. For to rebel is to assume the right of judgment and vengeance, and that belongs to God alone.

What about equals waging war against equals? At the outset I want to say that whoever starts a war is wrong. And it is only right and proper that he who draws his sword first is defeated in the end. This is what has usually happened in history. Those who have started wars have lost them, and those who fought in self-defense have seldom been defeated. Worldly government has not been instituted by God to break the peace and start war, but rather to maintain peace and avoid war. God tolerates no injustice and he has so ordered things that warmongers must be defeated in war.

Therefore a careful distinction must be made between lust for war and willingness to fight to defend the peace. God is a God of peace, and he is the enemy of those who start wars and break the peace.

Let this be the first thing to be said in the matter. No war is just, even if it is a war between equals, unless one has such a good reason for fighting and such a good conscience that he can say, "My neighbor compels and forces me to fight, though I would rather avoid it." In that case it can be called a just war and lawful self-defense. For we must distinguish between wars that someone begins because that is what he wants to do – and those wars that are provoked when an attack is made by someone else. The first can be called wars of desire, and the second wars of necessity. The first kind is of the devil, and the second is a human disaster. Take my advice, dear rulers. Stay out of war unless you have to defend and protect yourselves and your office compels you to fight. Our conclusion on this point is that war against equals should be fought only when it is forced upon us. Such a war is forced upon us when an enemy or neighbor attacks, and starts the war, and refuses to cooperate in settling the matter through law or arbitration and common agreement.

But suppose my lord were wrong in going to war? I reply: If you know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men (Acts 5:29) and you should neither fight nor serve, for you cannot have a good conscience before God. What if refusing would mean being shamed, or imprisoned, or being deprived of your livelihood? I answer: You must take the risk and, with God's help, let whatever happens happen. He can restore it to you a hundred-fold as he promises in the Gospel.

But if you do not know or cannot find out whether your lord is in the wrong, you ought not to weaken certain obedience for the sake of uncertain conscience.^{viii}

Luther had written a great deal on the power of the sword and all of its practical applications. In the Lutheran Confessions, however, the subject is treated only briefly in Articles 16 and 28 of the Augsburg Confession, and in the Large and Small Catechisms. In Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession we read the following:

Of civil affairs they teach that lawful ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by

the imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make an oath when required by magistrates, to marry a wife, to be given in marriage.

...for the gospel does not destroy the state or the family, but very much requires that they be preserved as ordinances of God and that charity be exercised in such ordinances. Therefore Christians are necessarily bound to obey their magistrates and laws, save only when commanded to sin; for then they ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).^{ix}

V. Summary Statements on Romans 13 and the Matter of Civil Authority

1. Civil authority is a benevolent institution of God designed to keep peace and order in a sinful world. In accordance with the will of God it governs the temporal affairs of men by promoting good and punishing evil.
2. The means that God has entrusted to civil authority to carry out this function are civil law and force – exercised in accordance with human reason.
3. God has prescribed no specific form that civil government is to take. All worldly governments and all human authorities exist by God's providence and with his permission.
4. It does not matter how a particular government came into being, nor does it matter whether its rulers govern nobly or ignobly. It is still to be recognized as existing by God's institution and authority.
5. Since worldly government has been given the power of the sword by God himself, it has the right and the responsibility to inflict just punishment on evildoers – up to and including capital punishment.
6. While it is clear that it is God's will that capital punishment be used by those in authority for the good of society, government may, through the exercise of human reason, decide not to carry it out. If legislation is passed which abolishes capital punishment, the government does so at the risk of removing a God-approved deterrent against violent crime.
7. The power of the sword includes also the right of government to wage war to protect its citizens against an aggressor nation. Those who wield the power of the sword should be extremely careful that the wars in which they engage are legitimate wars of defense. The power of the sword does not include the right to wage wars of aggression for territorial expansion, economic gain, or national prestige.
8. The Christian, who recognizes human government as God's institution, will as a matter of conscience render obedience to the government under which he lives, when it acts within its God-designed sphere. Even though his government acts unjustly or makes laws with which he does not agree, he is obliged to obey. This does not, however, prevent him from seeking to change a given law through proper, legal channels.
9. The Christian will not resort to civil disobedience to make his disapproval of a given law known to his government. Nor will he in any way foster rebellion or revolution against those in authority. To do so would be to rebel against God himself.
10. There is only one instance where a Christian may disobey the governmental authority, and that is when the government oversteps its bounds and seeks to make demands in God's sphere where it has no authority. If government forbids to worship or commands a Christian to engage in something that is against God and conscience, the Christian not only may, but

has a duty to disobey. It should be said, however, that he may disobey only at the point of conflict. Furthermore, his disobedience should be passive and non-retaliatory.

11. If a Christian is called to serve as a soldier in a just war, he should be ready and willing to serve his country. To do so would not be in conflict with his Christian faith.
12. If, however, a Christian has good reason to believe that a given war is unjust, he may have to object and refuse to serve. If refusal to serve means suffering or punishment, he will have to be ready to accept it. If, however, a Christian cannot be sure that a given war is unjust, he had better do what Luther says and stick with certain obedience rather than follow an uncertain conscience.
13. When it comes to his relationship with his government, the Christian must be careful to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, he dare not arbitrarily disobey his government. And on the other, he dare not make such an issue of obedience to government that he fails to exercise his conscience.

ⁱ Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. 1, p. 173-174.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 275 ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. 2, p. 302.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.302.

^v Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. III, p. 305ff.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 349ff.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 362ff.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 432ff.

^{ix} *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 51.

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