

1. COVID CAPERS: The Christian and the Government

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Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God (Romans 13: 1).

During the global “pandemic” I have often heard this verse cited with such an air of assurance that, to the quoter at least, it is considered to be the final word on how a Christian must respond to our governments’ Covid “emergency measures” – “Just obey the Government’s mandates for this is your Christian duty!”

But is **Romans 13: 1-7** a slam-dunk proof-text teaching that Christians must comply with the governments’ mask and vaccine mandates, sign in on the QR codes to every venue, follow lockdown isolation and social distancing rules for businesses, restaurants, schools, churches, and yes, even to have kids as young as 5 years of age get the recommended “jab”?

Does **Romans 13: 1-7** give a blanket-justification to comply, when asked by business-owners, for proof of vaccination status? Such information used to be considered private and sacrosanct information between an individual and their doctor. Thorny questions!

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER

I have in my possession a letter which an anonymous writer from the congregation where I attend worship posted to me, and to others in our church, because we were not wearing the mandated masks on a particular Sunday morning. The opening sentence read;

Some verses from God’s word for you to consider with respect to your non mask wearing in church as mandated by many governments around the world including our own.

A few Scripture verses were cited, plus a printout from the government Public Health Directive, as well as some other sage advice with the not-so-subtle allegation that I (we) non-mask wearers were disobeying God.

I would normally consign an unsigned letter of this nature to the “circular filing cabinet” (ie. the shredder!). Anybody not prepared to put their name and signature to their letter is rather cowardly, wouldn’t you agree? Christians must not operate in the dark.

Turns out the person who wrote the letter was making an unjustified assumption. It obviously did not cross their mind that I have a medical exemption from wearing a mask, nor could they have possibly known the various reasons for the “non-compliance” of the others who had also received their letter of implied condemnation.

I imagine that most Christians are like me and have always felt it right to be ‘good law-abiding citizens’. We want to uphold the principles of justice and respectful order

which we have inherited from the Judeo-Christian worldview brought to us at great cost and sacrifice over many generations. But sadly, Covid has brought into sharp focus tensions within church congregations — and even within Christian families — about what exactly should be the relationship between the individual, the Church, and the State, as taught in the New Testament.

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF CHURCH AND STATE

So, let's unpack **Romans 13: 1-7** and be sure we rightly understand it before lobbing it at our brothers and sisters like a hand-grenade thrown from the trench of anonymity meant to blow up all contrary opinion and behaviour.

The first thing to note is that this passage is *specifically addressed to every believer* in Christ — **Let everyone** (literally, *every soul*) **submit himself/herself to the governing authorities ...**

There's no getting around it: The followers of the Messiah are commanded to give due respect and civil deference to the State and it's agents because — and it's emphasized three times — the State authority **is a servant-minister of God** for our **good** (vs. 4, 6).

And let's not dodge the fact that these instructions were written to Christians living in Rome, the Imperial Capital, *circa* the years A.D. 56-58 — where capricious and often tyrannical emperors, no less, ruled. Paul taught — in agreement with his Lord Jesus — that the State governments **exist** and **are established by God**. (¹)

To say then, that God Himself has **ordained** and **established** the civil governments as His ministers must have been a hard pill for some in the church *in Rome* to swallow! The word used to describe the rulers representing the government in **verse 4** is **deacon** — **He is God's servant** [*diakonos*]. You will recognise this as the very same word describing those in the church who hold official church positions for anointed Christian service! (²)

The apostle, don't forget, was himself a citizen of Rome and, when occasion arose, appealed to Caesar for the advantages his Roman citizenship entailed. It is only reasonable that State services carry reciprocal obligations.

Paul's Roman citizenship was not servile, however. Sometimes he held the blow-torch to the feet of overreaching government officers when they abused their God-given powers (see for example, **Acts 16: 35ff; 22: 25ff**).

Yes, Paul certainly saw the State as God's agent in helping to maintain order and to provide the very conditions helpful to spreading the Gospel message. So yes, he viewed even the **pagan** Roman Empire as a divinely ordained instrument **for good** to respect and submit to!

¹ Our blessed Lord Jesus at his trial said to Pilate the governor of Rome, **"You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above ... (John 19: 11)**. Jesus knew that Roman civic authority was placed there by God his Father.

² The third time Paul calls the civic authority in **verse 6** **"God's servant"**, he uses a different word, *leitourgoi* which means "public servants".

THE WIDER CONTEXT OF THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

The man-made chapter breaks in our modern Bibles often predispose us to miss things that are connected, and it's often overlooked what Paul wrote in the lead up to chapter 13. Failure to connect the preceding dots lessens the impact of this revolutionary teaching in the matter of the Christian's duty to the State.

In the previous chapter Paul tells us that we must **not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you **will be able to test and approve what God's will is — His good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12: 2). (³)**

He then goes on in the rest of chapter 12 to give guidelines for what Christian character looks like, both in the Church of Christ, and in the wider society. He says that we must not react badly even to those who are downright hostile towards us (**bleed those who persecute you ... do not repay evil for evil**) and that we are not to take vengeance into our own hands, but to **live peaceably with all as far as it depends on us** and, that we are to **overcome evil with good (12: 14,17,18,21)**.

The next chapter, chapter 13, continues the same theme — how does the life of Christ show itself practically in the world in which we live? How do we demonstrate God's **good and perfect will** in daily civic life? How do believers **overcome evil with good**? The surprising answer is:- *By the way we conduct our civic duties to the State and its representatives!*

To be quite blunt, Paul says ***the way we behave towards those who exercise the rule of government over us, is a demonstration of how we are being renewed in our minds and how we are demonstrating to the world the good and perfect will of God through the transformational power of the Gospel of Christ!***

In fact, the believer **who rebels against the [government] authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and will bring judgment upon themselves (v. 2)**. **Christians doing what's good and right in their civic duties are fulfilling the rule of love and cherishing God's plan for peace and order in this chaotic world.**

EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY

To underline how literally and how seriously the Christians of the first few centuries interpreted the apostle, it is a matter of historical record that even when Rome's persecutions against the Church grew ever worse (Christians were soon regarded as outlaws by the State under subsequent imperial administrations) Christian leaders were still echoing Paul's teachings to **pray for kings and those in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all goodness and honesty (I Tim. 2: 1-2)** and that, the Christian must **be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work (Titus 3: 1)**.

For instance, **JUSTIN MARTYR** in his *Apology 1:17* wrote:- **Everywhere, we, more readily than all men, endeavour to pay those appointed by you the taxes, both ordinary and extraordinary, as we have been taught by Jesus. We worship only God, but in other things**

³ The next time that word **good** appears is **Romans 13: 3-4** where it occurs 3 times describing the government!.

we will gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that, with your kingly power, you may be found to possess also sound judgment. (⁴) And,

TERTULLIAN in *Apology 30* writes:- We offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God, whose favour, beyond all other things, they must themselves desire ... without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection for the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful Senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest — whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish. Caesar is more ours than yours because our God appointed him. Now that's revolutionary! And that attitude definitely impressed the pagan world and helped promote the spread of the Gospel. (⁵)

CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE GLAD TO PAY THEIR FAIR SHARE OF TAXES!

So, because the State is a divine institution and is God's deacon and servant, it was not only the universal teaching of the Church that every believer must pray for and give respectful obedience to the civil powers, but also pay taxes to the State. Paying taxes is as much a part of our Christian service as are our "tithes and gifts" to the Lord's work in the Church!

We know that Jesus taught that we are to **render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God, the things that are God's** (Luke 20: 22). The apostle echoes his Lord when he writes; **For because of this you pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; revenue to whom revenue is due; respect to whom respect; honour to whom honour.** (Rom. 13: 6- 7) (⁶)

Clearly, we honour God by paying the proper taxes and revenues to the State and clearly, the Christian who cheats in this area is disobeying the specific teaching of Scripture and should expect the appropriate penalties for such evasion.

This does not mean however, that we should not seek for every legitimate deduction which the government itself authorizes. It's your fault if you pay more tax than is lawfully required — or perhaps you consider your extra tax a thank-offering to the Lord's work?!

THE SWORD

In passing, we note that the State under God has the power for capital punishment for, **if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it [the State] does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is**

⁴ As quoted by **William Barclay** in *The Letter to the Romans: The Daily Study Bible*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Sixth Impression, 1966, p186

⁵ *Ibid*, pp 186-187 (Underlining mine.)

⁶ The word for 'taxes' *phoros*, can mean tribute paid to a foreign ruler and implies a dependent status. It's the word Jesus used in **Luke 20: 22**. And the word for 'revenue' *telos*, pertains to indirect taxation in the form of toll or custom duties.

a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil (vs. 2f). (⁷)
(⁸)

THE CAVEAT

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad ... [so] ... do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God's servant for your good (vs. 3-4).

The Christian is to submit to the directives and laws of the government because it is serving God **for your good**. But does this mean that if we consider the State is perverting the ideal of God's intentions that it can no longer be considered God's servant? Does the Bible allow for Christians to disobey what we consider are unjust or immoral demands? (⁹)

I think there is a caveat here.

The Bible is full of countless examples where prophets, priests, and ordinary subjects of the government spoke out against and yes, disobeyed unjust demands by the civic authorities.

Remember the civil disobedience of **the Hebrew midwives** after Pharaoh ordered the murder of the baby boys? **The midwives feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do (Ex. 1: 18)**.

In fact, these God-fearing midwives told outright lies to the king of Egypt and that **God was kind to the midwives ... because they feared God**. God rewarded them with children and families of their own. God honoured their civil disobedience!



Remember the brave **Hebrew lads** who refused to submit to the Babylonian king's edict? They refused to fall down to the music and disobeyed the mandate to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol. God blessed their civil disobedience with a mighty miracle of deliverance still inspirational to this day.

Or, what about a lesser known incident when **King Saul** ordered his servants to slay the Levitical priests from the town of Nob. Saul wanted the priests killed because they had helped the fugitive

⁷ In the context of **Romans 13: 1-7** it goes without saying that **the sword** is directed to civic crimes rather than to military engagements. It's not talking about conscription for war. The history of our Western democracies is that "conscientious objection" by Christians has been considered an acceptable form of civil disobedience for people of faith!

⁸ I have expressed my understanding of this 'hot potato topic' elsewhere. See my article **Genesis ... Back to the Beginning (Adam & Eve)**.

⁹ I suggest you read those verses I quoted earlier where Paul himself spoke out against the overreach of the civil government ... (**Acts 16: 35ff; 22: 25ff**).

David. The king bellowed to his men, “Turn and kill the priests of the LORD because their hand also is with David ... (I Sam. 22: 17). They refused the king’s directive.

After World War Two at the Nuremberg Trial, the Allies did not accept the excuse of the Nazis who argued that they were “just following orders”. Compliance and silence in the face of injustice is a crime. What we are prepared to walk past is the standard we set. The Biblical principle is that when the claims of earthly authorities conflict with divine authority over faith and morals then we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5: 29).

In some cases failure to comply with the government is a civil Christian obligation!

But is the Covid question such a time as this?

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