

ROMANS 13 TOOLKIT



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LIBERTARIAN CHRISTIAN
INSTITUTE

Introduction

Thank you for subscribing to our Romans 13 Toolkit!

The mission of LCI is to equip Christians with the tools to make the Christian case for a free society. We have found that one of the most misunderstood passages of Scripture is Romans 13, which begins:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Rom. 13:1-2, NRSV)

We've created this toolkit to help Christians, who are also libertarians, approach this controversial passage in a Biblically sound and level-headed manner. If that's you, we hope you find this helpful!

This is the first of five emails you will receive as a part of this toolkit. Each will include articles and resources that address Romans 13 from the following angles:

1. Understanding the Theology of Romans 13
2. What is a Biblical View of Government?
3. What are the Dangers of Government?
4. What does Romans 13 mean for Americans?
5. The Bible and a Stateless Society

Thanks again for subscribing! We hope this series equips you with a better understanding of how to discuss this controversial passage of Scripture with others and communicate the message of liberty even more effectively!

Sincerely,

Doug Stuart

CEO, Libertarian Christian Institute

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UNDERSTANDING THE THEOLOGY OF ROMANS 13

Theology Doesn't Begin And End With Romans 13

By Dr. Norman Horn

[13-minute read]

Romans 13 is not a shortcut to being right about government. People like sound bytes, quick ways of responding to scenarios – and that is basically the way most Christians attempt to treat Romans 13. However, you absolutely cannot discern the whole of what the Bible says about the state by Romans 13. It sounds good, but it won't work.

On Easter Sunday, I joined a Facebook thread where the role of government and Romans 13 were discussed. A number of points about the Christian's relation to government were aired, including citations of Leo Tolstoy, and a major theme was the idea of Christian anarchism. When this happens, of course, Romans 13 is invariably brought to the table. It seems to me, though, that this is not a good starting point for discussion of statism in the Bible.

A major problem we encounter in Romans 13 is the definition of "submission." It is a tricky word to understand at times. For instance, Paul says in Ephesians that we should "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Then he says "wives submit to your husbands." James 4:7 calls us to "Submit [yourselves] to God." Obviously, we do not believe that "submission" in these verses means the same thing as Romans 13. Indeed, we repeatedly see great men and women of the Bible – Jesus, Paul, Peter, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, David, Elijah, Elisha – defying the State.

Understanding submission in the context of a Biblical theology of the State is what matters. Thus, what the Bible has to say about the State, its nature, its origin, its destiny, and its relation to God is prior to understanding what submission means.

Enter Genesis, First Samuel, the Gospels, and Revelation. I will quickly overview some key points from these selections, although each of these could all be additional studies in and of themselves and there is much more to study than just these four.

Exhibit A: The Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) is the “origin story” of the state. We learn here that the State is organized as an opposition against God. The State is rebellious and idolatrous, and desires to become/replace God.

Exhibit B: 1 Samuel 8 is the incident where Israel asks for a king (i.e., organized monarchy / primitive “State”). God speaks through Samuel and lets him know what this government is going to do... and you know the rest of the story. Besides the “glory years” of David and Solomon, Israel was a complete disaster.

Exhibit C: The Gospels, especially Matthew, are very clear that the Kingdom of God is nothing like an earthly kingdom (read: State), and that the Kingdom of God repeatedly conflicts with the kingdoms of earth.

Exhibit D: The symbols of Revelation, if we are to give them any global meaning in the physical world, must first be interpreted in light of the Roman Empire in conflict with the coming Kingdom of God. Since there really were not any other significant States to consider at the time of the writing of Revelation, our extension of the symbols into present meaning can and should include present States, unnamed but there in principle. We discern that the destiny of the State is destruction.

Now, we can turn back to Romans 13 and wonder what the proper “submission” response entails to an entity that is:

- rebellious and idolatrous
- abusive toward people
- constantly in opposition to the real King and the real Kingdom
- destined for destruction

The answer has to be that submission to the coercive power of the State is first and foremost prudential. Don't be stupid, don't compromise the church or your family, don't

blow your witness to the world. However, you don't have to settle for the status quo either. I have written about this more extensively in [my exegesis](#) of Romans 13:1-7.

In the words of many of the the American founders, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." But we don't even need to pick up a sword to do it. The State's legitimacy rests on tacit consent of the people (Etienne de la Boetie), and thus our greatest weapons are to renew our own minds and then in turn to help renew others (hat tip to Hayek a la St. Paul). Turning people's minds away from the State and back to the King of Kings is the goal.

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WHAT IS A BIBLICAL VIEW OF GOVERNMENT?

Start With Jesus As King

by Jeff Wright

[11-minute read]

American Christians just can't quit our addiction to power. We have no problem with the notion that a majority should be able to use the coercive power of the State to impose its preferences on the minority. We have no problem with advancing Christian ethics by force. We have no problem with tolerating a certain level of corruption, violence, and deceit as we partner with the State to advance the "common good" just so long as it's at the hands of the men and women we endorse. There's a culture war to win, after all.

Christians don't really have a problem with the fact that a single individual, the President of the United States, wields a staggering degree of power over the lives of millions of individuals across the country and around the globe. We just have a problem with this guy. We hear things like the following:

"Trump is not playing by the rules of the game."

"He doesn't get along well with others. He's undignified."

"He's even a white supremacist." ("racist" just doesn't have the same sting anymore).

"He's beyond the pale."

"Of course, he's not a Christian. That's obvious. But neither is anyone who voted for him."

"Actually, unless you've publicly denounced him you're probably not a Christian. And judging by Twitter, you're supposed to denounce him every day #RESIST."

Within conservative Christianity, Liberty's President got his President but the ERLC's President didn't get his. So, the Religious Right has been othering one another this year. The Russell Moore faction of the Religious Right now uses "Religious Right" as an epithet

against the Jerry Falwell, Jr. wing of the Religious Right. The guys who wanted the Mormon CIA agent to be the standard bearer for the good, the true, and the beautiful in America don't want to be associated with the label any longer. Those Trump supporters are the Religious Right now. In fact, if truth be told, they're probably Alt-Right (denounce them or we'll denounce you!). Those guys are idolatrous, not us. They are carrying their golden calf into Steve Bannon's battles. And so we wait for Ben Sasse to declare his candidacy for President after the 2018 mid-term elections so all can be made right with politics again. There'll be no more problem with Christianity's reputation if folks begin to associate "evangelical" with being Sasse-y!

Christians are missing their opportunity to finally step out of a statist paradigm where no distinctions are made between government and society and political power is nearly worshipped. Trump will be the perfect scapegoat in three years. We'll cast all our hatred, fear, division, and suspicion upon him and hope we're successful in sending him out of the camp. Then we can get back to normal. We'll cling to our belief that if we can just get the right person in office, this time we'll make it work.

Trump has been so demonized that we think the problem is with this one man. Christian conservatives think the problem, along with Trump, is the Alt-Right infiltration of the Republican party. It will be a great victory if they can re-take the party and replace Trump. Then things can get back to how they're supposed to be. Seminary presidents, leaders of denominations, and Christian professors can get back to serving on the Dignity of Life and Religious Liberty advisory boards of the good politicians (it's not an endorsement if you're merely serving on a board, by the way. In no way are you signaling to your people that this is who you're supporting and they ought to too, wink wink). Politics is an idolatrous, golden calf for the Trumpists but not us.

We're so inebriated with the lust for power and caught up in the strife of our partisanship that we fail to ever step back and ask if ruling over others is consistent with following Christ. We're so caught up in the rivalries and personalities of the political contests that we fail to question the validity of "winning" through coercion. We've become blinded to

the ways we're using aggression and compulsion to create the conditions for the kingdom of God (so we think, either explicitly or implicitly).

Christian: the political figure we ought to keep our eyes on is Jesus the Christ. Forget who is President, if you can, and remember who is King. Our nation rages and the people plot in vain. We look to earthly rulers as they take counsel together and we forget that He who sits in the heavens laughs and that the Lord holds them in derision (Psalm 2). We ought to feel the weight of Christ's kingship over the nations so heavily that the all trifling drama of partisan politics pales in comparison.

So do we withdraw? Forget about Charlottesville? Ignore the Alt-Right and Antifa? Have no opinion on taking a knee? Do nothing about immigrants? Don't be concerned about North Korea? As Paul loved to say, may it never be! If we don't withdraw and shouldn't seek the welfare of the city (Jeremiah 29:7) through coercive, power-over politics, what do we do?

First, let's firmly embrace the kingship of Christ. Jesus is our King no matter who is President. If you are a Christian, if God has taken your heart of stone and given you a heart of flesh, then you abide in Christ and Christ abides in you. You are a member of the body of Christ and the kingdom of God. So, make this paradigm shift: our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom ought to be identified so clearly, felt so deeply, and shine so brightly that all other possible allegiances are the faintest blip in comparison. Our Lord Jesus Christ "is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen" (1 Timothy 6:14-15).

We know who our leader is, Jesus. This doesn't change every four years. We need to think and act and feel as if our real and true political leader is the sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords because he is. We fall into the trap of giving political leaders more authority and power over us than they deserve. We lazily allow our political thought and action to be formulated in contradistinction to the prevailing powers. Or, more accurately, as we perceive the prevailing powers as filtered through what the media decides to show us. We're "not Trump" so we resist. We're not "Alt-right" so we denounce them. We're "not

Hillary” so we vote for anyone else with a pulse. We allow ourselves to become divided according to the world’s terms. We act as if we have no core identity of our own in Christ so we end up like the double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:6-8). We rage at every word and deed of Trump or whoever the “other” is for us. Knowing that we serve the great, high King should end all this (simply understanding total depravity should end this). Because all other allegiances and agendas fade away in comparison to our allegiance to and identity in Christ, we are free to be about the work of the kingdom which leads to the next point.

Second, remember that the kingdom of God is here, although not fully present, and you are a member of this kingdom. You are a member of the church. Comparing church and kingdom is not our focus here but Scot McKnight’s insights on the subject are helpful: “The church is the Body of Christ and Jesus is the king of the kingdom. You can’t have one without the other. Kingdom mission is church mission, church mission is kingdom mission, and there is no kingdom mission that is not church mission.” The passion that we have for politics partly comes from our assumption that kingdom work is much larger than the church and is primarily accomplished through the State. Therefore, we must get our people in control of the State so our vision of the kingdom will be the one enacted. This is wrong. There is no kingdom without its King and the King works through the Body of Christ. This is why we say there is no kingdom mission that is not church mission.

You are a member of Christ’s church and his kingdom. So, make this paradigm shift: your identity as a member of the church is way up here while your identity as an American is way down there. Your allegiance to the kingdom of God far surpasses your loyalty to a political party or ideology. Try this as a spiritual discipline: quit your political party. Change your registration from Republican or Democrat to Independent or none. Could you do it? Picture yourself taking all the time and attention and all the passion and visceral reactions you currently spend on your political tribe and imagine devoting all that energy to your local church. What if the passion that fuels our very important tweets were channeled into some sort of action taken together with our brothers and sisters in

our local churches? We serve the world and seek the welfare of the city in the love of Christ which is unique to those who are in Christ.

In his book, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, McKnight writes, “What Christians want for the nation should first be a witnessed reality in their local church.” Could you imagine if Christians really believed this? We would take all the energy behind our social media posts, all the time and money spent on getting the right people into office, all the time spent debating what politicians do, and devote at least a portion of that to our churches (I do believe Christians should remain engaged with the political process but what that looks like is a subject for another time).

Let’s briefly return to the issues of the day I mentioned above. Charlottesville, Alt-Right, Antifa, taking a knee, immigrants, wars and potential wars, and on and on. What do we want for the nation after watching what happened in Charlottesville? What are the righteous and just outcomes we desired? What was behind our anger? What exactly was it that we wished to never see happen again? What would it take to prevent that from occurring in our city? How could we make this a reality in our local church and cooperatively among the churches in our city? What would it look like for this to be a witnessed reality in the church? What sort of impact would this witness have in the world?

Working to make what we desire for our nation to become a witnessed reality in the local church is really difficult work which is part of the reason we avoid it. It’s much easier to watch the news, complain, and offer opinions on social media (which I realize this article is a form of). But if Christians truly shift our identity and allegiance to Christ the King and his kingdom, the people who are governed by the King, then it would become second-nature to look at the church as our reality-making laboratory rather than the State and its various manifestations. “Us” and “we” would be the church rather than we Republicans versus those Democrats and we Americans versus those foreigners. The witnessed reality of the church is what we could persuade others to voluntarily join rather than coercing them against their will through partisan politics. Start with Jesus as King.

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WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF GOVERNMENT?

Taxation is Theft. Yes, Really.

Dr. Jamin Andreas Hübner

[11 minute read]

The Acton Institute's excellent Powerblog recently published a piece by Jordan Ballor entitled "Is Taxation Theft?" Ballor's answer is essentially "no in principle, but it can be." His short argument is: "The picture the Apostle Paul paints is rather different. The point of departure for my thoughts on taxation is his instruction: 'Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes.' So the moral status of taxation as such doesn't seem to be problematic." He goes on to conclude that "there is a divine standard of justice to which those who require and those who pay taxes must both adhere."

This position is essentially the same as that in Samuel Gregg's recent (and excellent) volume *For God and Profit: How Banking and Finance Can Serve the Common Good* (New York: Crossroads, 2016). Gregg, another member of Acton, stresses that "Christian ethics has never disputed that governments may engage in taxation" (p. 14, cf. 15, 67). However, as I have written in my upcoming review of the book (in *Faith and Economics*):

Whether this is true historically or not (and there are doubts about this), it is certainly not true today. Many Christian scholars in the liberal, libertarian, and anarcho-capitalist traditions consider taxation a form of legalized theft on the basis of the same property rights that Gregg espouses. This is why when I recently spoke at the "2016 Christians for Liberty Conference" the statement "taxation is theft" was met with overwhelming applause. Maybe these are exceptions, but they exist nevertheless.

But are crazy Christian libertarians like myself going too far, spoiling the credibility of libertarian progress by irrationally demanding an end to all taxation? Are they being too ideal with their property rights and anti-aggression principles? Acton's intentional distancing from those who claim "taxation is theft" would suggest that this is the case.

But what if the "taxation is theft" creed is consistent with both Christian and libertarian ideas, and that all things considered, taxation really is theft? And what if we're simply misreading or misappropriating the New Testament? This wouldn't be a comfortable or popular conclusion to draw, but it might be the case nevertheless.

Taking someone's property by force is a basic violation of property rights, and property rights is an essential framework within both Christian worldview and libertarianism. Whether theft is legal or not, whether the one being stolen from is wealthy or not, and so on, doesn't change the basic nature of what is happening. This is not to suggest that there are no lines, conditions, or qualifiers with regard to what is and is not "stealing." Obviously, not everything perceived or labeled as stealing necessarily is. The difference, it seems, is where one draws the circle for "theft." Some hold to a larger range of what qualifies, while others a smaller range, excluding taxation and perhaps other things. The merits of each view have to be weighed and evaluated.

The weight of Ballor's presentation does not appear to be substantial enough to prove his point. First, the reference of Romans 13 is an unfortunate case of proof-texting. "Life is meaningless" (Eccl 1), "greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor 16; Rom 16; 2 Cor 13; 1 Thess 5), "women should be silent in the churches" (1 Cor 14), "this is my body and blood" (Jn 6), "pay all that is due them—taxes" (Rom 13), etc. I want to suggest that the theology of the New Testament—and especially the method of ethics to be employed by such theology—is a bit more complex than waving a hand (with or without a meme) and citing a few sources—whether one is speaking of holy kisses, women's head coverings, or taxation. Besides, Paul isn't providing a "picture" of taxation and the state at all, but presenting a pixel. Maybe our "starting point" should be Paul's primary source—the life and teachings of Jesus. These are just suggestions.

Second, the observation “So the moral status of taxation as such doesn’t seem to be problematic” is also a bit uncritical. A similar argument could be used to legitimize (to use one example) slavery, since no NT writer condemned it outright, even when given the obvious chance to do so (e.g., Paul in Philemon). One must obviously be careful about permanently legitimizing moral statuses on both the absence of condemnation and the presence of affirmation. How does one do ethics in this dynamic environment? I can only point readers to some good starting points—Richard Hays’ (Professor of NT, Duke University) *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, in conjunction with *The Politics of Jesus* by John Yoder (Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame) and *Justice* by Nicholas Wolterstorff (Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Yale University). William Webb’s *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* is also worth mentioning.

Finally, the statement “there is a divine standard of justice to which those who require and those who pay taxes must both adhere” is more complicated. Those who commit theft (obtain taxes) are thieves, but there are actually a right and wrong ways to sin (e.g., steal) as redemptive history shifts and shapes. (This may sound strange at first, but stay with me.) The First Testament—during wars, sacrifice, property arrangements, etc.—involve countless “right” and “wrong” ways of committing these actions. “If you have to sin, sin honorably” seems to be the pattern. The same is true in the New Testament. There are specific instructions in how to deal with slaves (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything”)—though no direct condemnation of the institution. It is similar for how to treat women in a society where it is assumed they are inferior (“submit to your husbands in everything”). Yet, in all of these cases, there are still ethical expectations. Ballor’s observation may be on to something.

Why sin honorably? we might ask. Why not avoid ungodliness altogether? Because that sometimes isn’t possible in our world. Sometimes all the options aren’t good. To use the examples from above, 1/5 in the Roman Empire were slaves; calling upon their immediate release would not work. It was similar for the position and rights of women in society. Of course, God isn’t going to leave his people alone without direction—as we witness in both Testaments. What the post-Incarnation NT authors do is what they can: transform, in so

far as it is possible, these social arrangements and sinful patterns into something holy for the moment, but ultimately (and more ethically) pave the way for their destruction at the same time. Thus, slavery and women's subordination is and will (we hope) come to a close. And our judgment on those issues are not based on proof-texting and an overly static view of the Bible, but (to borrow language from Hays) on the basis of the moral vision of the New Testament.

The same goes for taxation and violence-based governing authorities, which are as immoral as all of the other sinful societal arrangements in a given society. Like slavery, women's subordination, and otherwise, the early church finds a way to live with it and yet live against it.

How and why do we find what we find in the NT scriptures regarding taxation? We cannot answer this without at least surveying the cultural landscape of the first century.

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WHAT DOES ROMANS 13 MEAN FOR AMERICANS?

America's Christian Libertarian Roots

By Samuel Smith

[15-minute read]

The United States of America were blessed to be founded on documents that reflect the biblically-informed libertarian worldview of many of their authors. The founding fathers' study of Scripture and philosophy led them to the inescapable conclusion that man's rights from God and responsibilities to Him are indispensable and inseparable. Just as fulfilling man's God-ordained social, material, and spiritual responsibilities requires that man possess certain unalienable rights, so too the security and safety of the liberties that come with those rights depend on the infinite benevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience of a personal creator God. To the extent that man is allowed to live freely within this context, the divinely designed laws of economics (i.e., the positive and negative consequence for freely made decisions) will guide him to enormous prosperity in obedience to God's command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Therefore, the sole purpose of government is to uphold this rights-responsibilities relationship between God and man by protecting it from forceful interference in a fallen world. This is the basis of Christian libertarianism: governments are subservient to God and therefore cannot grant or take away liberty from individuals or, by extension, institutions. They also cannot create or plan material, social, or spiritual prosperity.

The original thirteen colonies declared their independence by penning this very idea: that man obtains unalienable rights and pursues prosperity through his relationship with his Creator rather than from the state, and that government must therefore not interfere with God's design. Constitution signer John Dickinson recognized the sacred value of

unalienable rights as those “which God gave to you and which no inferior power has a right to take away.” John Adams acknowledged that our liberties are “antecedent to all earthly government” and are “derived from the Great Legislator of the Universe.” The American colonists believed that King George III was not the Romans 13 defined “minister of God for good” but rather a usurper of the sacred rights-responsibilities relationship between the Creator and His creation. While appealing to 1 Samuel 15:23 as his biblical authority, influential colonial minister Jonathan Mayhew said of the king’s Stamp Act: “The king is as much bound by his oath not to infringe the legal rights of the people, as the people are bound to yield subjection to him. From whence it follows that as soon as the prince sets himself above the law, he loses the king in the tyrant. He does, to all intents and purposes, un-king himself.” Reverend Jacob Duché (first chaplain of the Continental Congress) argued in favor of the American position, explaining:

“Inasmuch as all rulers are in fact the servants of the public and appointed for no other purpose than to be “a terror to evil-doers and a praise to them that do well”(c.f., Rom. 13:3), whenever this Divine order is inverted—whenever these rulers abuse their sacred trust by unrighteous attempts to injure, oppress, and enslave those very persons from whom alone, under God, their power is derived—does not humanity, does not reason, does not Scripture, call upon the man, the citizen, the Christian of such a community to “stand fast in that liberty wherewith Christ hath made them free” (Galatians 5:1). The Apostle enjoins us to “submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake,” but surely a submission to the unrighteous ordinances of unrighteous men, cannot be “for the Lord’s sake,” for “He loveth righteousness and His countenance beholds the things that are just.”

Because of the king of England’s “long train of abuses and usurpations” of the boundaries that God had placed on government, the American colonists believed that it was “their right ... their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

It is important to note, however, that the colonists emphasized, in declaring their independence from a king-turned-tyrant, they were pursuing liberty by restoring their rights-responsibilities relationship with their Maker to its proper place. In stark contrast

to the French Revolution, which overthrew God along with the king in favor of the goddess Reason, American revolutionaries declared as their motto: "We recognize no sovereign but God and no king but Jesus!" George Washington humbly recognized that reason alone was not enough to secure man's liberty and is credited with observing: "It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible." He demonstrated understanding of the essential connection between rights and responsibilities when he asked, "Where is the security for prosperity, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in the Courts of Justice?" Upon the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Samuel Adams rejoiced, "We have this day restored the sovereignty to Whom all men ought to be obedient. He reigns in heaven and from the rising to the setting of the sun, let His kingdom come." John Quincy Adams later concurred with his relative by observing that "The highest glory of the American Revolution was that it connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity."

After winning their independence, many in the states exercised care to avoid entering a system in which government would try to "improve" upon God's designs for society. American founder Benjamin Franklin echoed this sentiment when he wrote: "To relieve the misfortunes of our fellow creatures is concurring with the Deity; it is godlike; but, if we provide encouragement for laziness, and supports for folly, may we not be found fighting against the order of God and Nature, which perhaps has appointed want and misery as the proper punishments for, and cautions against, as well as necessary consequences of, idleness and extravagance? Whenever we attempt to amend the scheme of Providence, and to interfere with the government of the world, we had need be very circumspect, lest we do more harm than good." Half a century later, political economist Frederic Bastiat expounded upon this view by stating that while socialists claim that their plans are necessary to correct the deficiencies in the designs of God, "If the natural tendencies of mankind are so bad that it is not safe to permit people to be free, how is it that the tendencies of these organizers are always good? Do not the legislators and their appointed agents also belong to the human race? Or do they believe that they themselves are made of a finer clay than the rest of mankind?"

Indeed this was the message of Nimrod, the first great tyrant, as he unified mankind in rebellion against God at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-4). Jewish historian Josephus described this event in his Antiquities of the Jews:

“Imagining the prosperity they enjoyed was not derived from the favor of God, but supposing that their own power was the proper cause of the plentiful condition they were in, did not obey Him. . . . Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. . . . He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God as if it was through His means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence upon his power. He also said he would be revenged on God, if He should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach! And that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers!”

Nimrod established the two-part argument for tyranny: (1) God is not a good, perfect Creator and therefore (2) Mankind must turn to a ruling elite to secure their future prosperity and safety. As previously stated, such claims are an affront to Romans 13 which clearly establishes God as superior to and the designer of government, limiting its power to serving the good of society by protecting God’s beautiful design through punishing evil and rewarding good. When a person or organization posing as government steps beyond this simple and limited purpose in an attempt to “fix” God’s design for society, they usurp God’s authority and prove themselves to be tyrants rather than God-ordained government.

In large part due to the rise of Secular Humanism, the inseparable link between our rights and our Creator is sadly a lost concept to many in these United States today. Economist and theologian Dr. Gary North points out in his Economic Commentary on the Bible that though many philosophers, economists, and politicians have brilliantly made the case

that liberty and free markets are superior to central planning, they have failed to make the key distinction that liberty is only superior and trustworthy because it is a gift designed by the wisdom of God (Proverbs 8:22-36). Their atheism renders their arguments self-refuting: while they affirm belief in a universe governed by random chance rather than a sovereign, unchanging God, they also declare that the free market is superior because the laws of economics are reliable and unchanging. This inconsistency opens the door for socialists to prey on mankind's fear of his uncertain future in a purposeless, godless cosmos in their argument for centralized planning. Like Nimrod, they claim that the only way to protect mankind from future calamity is to direct his evolution through the greater wisdom of a global scientific and political elite. Unfortunately, this argument has carried the day, appearing to our increasingly godless society as the only viable solution to man's imperfections. We see its manifestation in growing centralized government power and economic planning as well as in attempts at global governance and treaties such as the United Nations and the Paris Climate Accord. This sad state of affairs confirms the prescient observation of liberty-loving founding father Patrick Henry: "It is when people forget God that tyrants forge their chains." Truly, the only remedy for the destructive allure of tyranny is the message of God-given liberty as adopted by the American revolutionaries.

Tragically, many of us who have the antidote for tyranny (i.e., Bible-believing Christians) are either ignorant or have an incomplete picture of how the Scriptures speak to political and economic philosophy. Worse still, many are guided by their spiritual leaders into a misunderstanding of Romans 13 and its applications to the principles of liberty and our nation's founding. An unfortunate example of this is highly respected Bible teacher, pastor, and author John MacArthur's statement:

"Over the past several centuries, people have mistakenly linked democracy and political freedom to Christianity. That's why many contemporary evangelicals believe the American Revolution was completely justified, both politically and scripturally. They follow the arguments of the Declaration of Independence, which declares that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are Divinely endowed rights. Therefore those believers say such rights are part of a Christian worldview, worth attaining and defending

at all cost including military insurrection at times. But such a position is contrary to the clear teachings and commands of Romans 13:1–7. So the United States was actually born out of a violation of New Testament principles, and any blessings God has bestowed on America have come in spite of that disobedience by the founding fathers.”

With these demobilizing influences in the church, the burden falls on us – the libertarian Christian community – to reach our brothers and sisters in Christ with the freeing truth of Scripture (John 8:32) and restore our nation to its biblically-based libertarian foundation.

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THE BIBLE & A STATELESS SOCIETY

Romans 13 and Stateless Civil Governance: A Reformed View

By Gregory Baus

[15-minute read]

The Reformed theological tradition historically holds to an interpretation of Romans 13 that, in its basic outline, is compatible with libertarian anarchism, or ‘stateless civil governance.’ Not all libertarian Christians are anarchists or confessional Reformed Protestants (Calvinists), of course. But this little known perspective on the passage may be helpful for all libertarian Christians. After addressing four preliminary issues, I’ll summarize a libertarian view of civil governance compatible with the interpretation, and then present that interpretation in its key points. [See here](#) for relevant references and additional resources.

Preliminaries

First, this view is not about the Libertarian Party and it’s not about any particular political candidate. Rather, what I’m about to outline is a political philosophy or a view of civil governance that’s based on a particular view of what persons are, what property is, inherent rights, and specifically, the legitimate use of coercion.

Second, concerning the legitimate use of coercion: the initiation or ‘first use’ of coercion (sometimes we restrict the word ‘aggression’ to this meaning) against others or their property, for example: murder, assault, theft, fraud, the credible threatening of these things; none of these things are ever legitimate. The initiation of coercion is always illegitimate, and the only legitimate use of coercion is in proportional response to prior initiation of coercion. Coercion is only legitimately used responsively. This principle or

norm of 'non-initiation of coercion' is a universal God-given norm, and it's seen in the sixth and eighth commandments: do not murder, do not steal. Interestingly, Proverbs 3:30 also has some implications for this. "Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm." This proverb has a legal nuance that means do not bring the law (also understood as force or coercion) against someone who has not done so to you.

Third, we must distinguish between what is sometimes called 'vice' (or things that are imprudent or sinful), and what is 'crime.' The realm of morality, which centers in loving your neighbor, this is distinct from what justice is, which has to do with what is 'due' to others. In civil matters, failing to give someone what is due to them is always unloving, but not necessarily vice versa. For example, lying and coveting are sinful, violations of the norm of love and morality, but they are not necessarily criminal offenses. They are not initiations of coercion against others or their property. This distinction between vice and crime helps us understand what is a matter of civil governance and the legitimate use of coercion, and what is not.

Fourth, we must also distinguish between, on the one hand, what we own and owe with respect to God, and on the other hand, what we own and owe with respect to other people. We could refer to this in terms of the 'vertical' (towards God) and the 'horizontal' (towards our fellow persons). The norm of non-initiation of coercion has to do with the horizontal; what we own and owe with respect to other people. Of course, God owns everything, and we owe everything to God. But with regard to one's neighbor, there are some things one owns; namely, those things God has given us as stewards, such as one's life and property. And if a neighbor were to initiate coercion and take those things away, then that would be murder and stealing.

Stateless Civil Governance

The most basic distinction involved here (that gets to the heart of what stateless civil governance is about) is between the 'state,' as a particular form of political-legal order, and civil governance as such. Civil governance is basically the adjudication of civil disputes involving persons or their property. This has to do with rights. Rights are enforceable normative claims regarding your person or property. And so civil governance has to do,

centrally, with the adjudication of disputes over those things, and with the rules and the enforcement that accompanies that adjudication.

However, a state is a territorial monopoly on coercion. A state's monopoly is a claim to certain exclusive prerogative or forcible control over a territory that it does not actually own. Such a monopoly involves the initiation of coercion against people and their property, and so, the state is inherently unjust. Moreover, states, because they have a monopoly on coercion, are in principle (and always increasingly tending in practice) totalitarian. A coercive monopoly means in principle the state is not limited. In contrast, stateless civil governance takes the idea of limited government to its consistent conclusion; that is, non-monopoly.

Romans 13

1. Some background

The following historic Reformed view of Romans 13 (which might be called the “political resistance” view) is clearly represented in Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* (1644). Charles Hodge in his commentary on Romans (1835) —while he didn't follow through with it consistently— also reflects this view in at least two statements. Hodge says: “Paul, in this passage, is speaking of the legitimate design of government, not the abuse of power by wicked men.” In other words, Paul is not telling us that we need to submit to tyrants or to any unjust laws. Paul is not talking about *de facto* rulers, those that are in fact claiming power presently. He's not talking about God's ‘providential’ ordination, or institution of government, but rather, of the prescriptive or legitimate design of governance.

Hodge also comments: “No command to do anything morally wrong can be binding, nor can any which transcends the rightful authority of the power whence it emanates.” In other words, it's not only the command to sin that we don't have to obey when it's issued by any would-be authority, but further, we don't have to obey anything coming from would-be civil authorities beyond the requirements to act justly and submit to justice, because that's the limit on their God-ordained authority.

This view is also reflected in the Westminster Confession (1646) where it talks about various authorities being limited in scope and to “things lawful.” And all the Reformation confessions have similar language.

2. The passage itself

Whatever terms the translations use, “the powers that be” or the “existing” or “governing authorities” in verse 1, to which we must submit, this doesn’t mean the de-facto powers who claim authority. Rather, the meaning here is only those whom God authorizes, ordains, or institutes (whatever word is being used) are actual legitimate authorities. That’s the meaning. In Scripture, the word ‘ordain’ can sometimes mean God’s providence; that is, whatever takes place in history, whatever actually occurs by God’s determination. But that same word, ordain, is also used for His ‘moral authorization,’ prescription, or requirement. So how do we decide how it’s being used here? The immediate context of the passage shows us that it is about God’s authorization, because the text goes on to specify in verses 3 & 4 that God only authorizes or ordains the use of the sword (coercion) to administer actual civil justice. So in one translation, it says “not a terror to good conduct, but to bad... approving of the good... God’s servant or minister for your good, a sword-bearing avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” In other words, God ordains the punishment of violations of, and the commendation of, civil justice.

To answer a possible objection: when the passage in verses 6 & 7 says: “For this reason you must also pay tribute (or taxes) for they are God’s ministers attending continually upon this very thing” (that is, the administration of justice), “render, therefore, to all their dues. Taxes to whom taxes are due...” and so on, you’ll notice that this passage does not say, and no Scripture ever says, that anyone, in fact, owes a tax. Rather, it says if you owe, then pay what you owe. And this word here for ‘tax’ can refer to things such as road tolls. In which case, as everyone understands, if we choose to take a toll road, then we would owe the toll.

3. The broader context

Here’s how this basic interpretation put forward by Samuel Rutherford, and other theologians, really comes to light and makes sense in the context of the whole epistle:

The previous exhortations (in the preceding chapters in Romans) to not conform to the world, to discern and hold fast to what is good, to abhor evil, to avoid vengeance, to live at peace—you could readily conclude, or you can imagine someone might think, “hey, the government is contrary to these things; it’s contrary to God’s revealed moral will, it conforms to the sinful world, they’re doing what’s evil, they’re being vengeful, they’re not supporting peace, etc, etc... and so we should resist all government.”

Moreover, Paul knew the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus. Hosea 8:4 says: “They made kings, but not through Me.” That is, not all so-called rulers were according to God’s ordination. And in Mark 10:42, Jesus refers to those who are ‘considered’ to be rulers of the Gentiles. This word ‘considered’ is significant because it means ‘assumed to be, but not actually’ authorities. Paul also lived in the real world and certainly took as granted that some in positions of power, and some forms of power, are obviously evil and illegitimate.

So in light of all this, in Romans 13, Paul sets out to clarify that despite the evil of the empire and the state, God has nevertheless established a legitimate role for civil governance (administration of civil justice), and that our submission to the sort of civil governance that God prescribes or ordains is also in accordance with His moral will.

More Scriptural Support

There are other passages that help clarify this understanding of Romans 13; for example, 1 Corinthians 6. We see that Paul cannot have been referring to the Roman Empire in Romans 13, when he says to the church in Corinth: “When one of you has a grievance against another does he dare go to the law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world, and if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that you’re going to judge angels? How much more than matters pertaining to this life!”

So, the Roman Empire and its so-called rulers are called unrighteous, i.e., they are unjust, and therefore they are not legitimate authorities to which believers can submit their civil disputes. If the Roman so-called rulers were ministers of God for their good,

administering civil justice, then Paul couldn't have forbidden Christians from seeking adjudication from them.

And further on in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 Paul says "For although there may be so-called 'gods' in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many 'gods', many 'lords,' yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist." And so, among other things, this is to say that many so-called 'lords' or rulers have no more genuine civil authority from God than so-called 'gods' have genuine deity or divinity.

Summary

In summary, according to Scripture, what Romans 13 and other related passages teach, then, is that those who by God's sovereign control of history may be in positions of power are not necessarily those who have God's moral authorization or ordination. God's Word doesn't require our submission to unjust so-called rulers. The sword-bearing power that is ordained of God, according to Romans 13, is the administration of civil justice: punishing criminals and defending victims of crime. Further, we recognize that the 'state' as a monopoly involving the initiation of coercion against persons and their property, is inherently unjust and is therefore not authorized or ordained by God.

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