

A Thematic Exposition of Romans 13: 1-7 and its Implications on Good Governance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study gave an assessment of Roman 13:1-7 as a premise for the study of the implication of good governance in Nigeria. The study examined the position of Paul's message in Roman 13:1-7 that Christians should co-operate with people in position of authority in the light of democracy and good governance. The Christian's perspectives on contemporary democracy were examined critically. Views of Biblical scholars on Romans 13:1-7 were explored because of the importance it attached to the study. Methods employed in this work include historical, narrative and exegetical. The exegetical study of Roman 13:1-7 facilitated a comprehensive examination of the content and context of the text to enhance precise interpretation. The paper concluded with challenges for Christians in the governance and suggestions on what role the church can play in encouraging Christians in government, by setting good examples of good governance among their fold, then it will be possible to encourage church/state relationship.

Keywords: Good governance, Democracy, Justice, Good authority

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul instructs the Christians in Rome, to submit to the governing authorities because they are ordained by God. The passage is one of the most well-known controversial texts in the Pauline corpus as it has been shown by history to have been used by both theologians and political leaders to justify various political orders, be they benevolent or oppressive in practice. The issue of the relationship of Christians to political authorities is a sensitive one, since the days of the Roman Empire. Paul was writing to Christians in Rome which was the capital of the Empire, authority of the city was embodied by the emperor and his officials. An attempt to interpret this controversial passage centres on an understanding of the recipients of Paul's letter, that is, the situation of the Christian communities in Rome. Based on the contextual reading of the passage, it is discovered that Paul did not set out a rigid doctrine of the state nor of Church – State relations, but rather gave advice to a particular community of faith in particular historical context. His concern was primarily pastoral. He advised the Jewish Christians in Rome to submit to the governing authorities. Many of Paul's readers would have had no love for the Roman authorities. Some of the Christians might have been enslaved by Romans. Others would have seen Romans taking over their countries, yet, Paul says 'let everyone be subject to the governing authorities (13:1). All those living in the empire and Christians in particular, are called to voluntarily submit to them. Regardless of their political views, ethnic origin or religious conviction, they must integrate themselves in the structures of the empire, acknowledge its authority and obey its laws. Such action would keep them from withholding taxes or from becoming involved in any anti Roman protests through sympathy with Palestinian Jewish nationalism.

The issue Christians face is to know to what extent they should submit. Is this an unconditional submission, regardless of what the authorities do? Are Christians really expected to submit to dictators who have no respect for human dignity and who persecute believers? At this juncture, it is expedient to define the main words used by Paul to convince his readers of their need to submit to the authorities.

Exegetical Study of Rom. 13:1-7

The word *hypotasso* (to be subject, to submit) is a hierarchical term which stresses the relation of a person to

his or her supervisors in classical Greek it means ‘to place under’. Gerhard (1958) points out that the subordination which hypotasso connotes may be either voluntary or compulsory. The argument of chapter 13:1-7 itself is that the Christian should voluntarily submit him or herself in love to divinely instituted authorities. Paul emphasized this idea in Ch. 12 (see verses 10, 16, 17), and continued it in Ch. 13, that is, Christians have a duty to serve and to preserve the government because of the supreme authority of God. To be subject normally means to obey, but there may be occasions when it involves disobeying, because we recognise that God’s authority is supreme.

Understanding Paul’s argument in Romans 13:1-7 is the conviction that the authorities have been instituted (tasso) by God. Tasso has numerous nuances meaning to appoint, to order, to ordain or to determine. By establishing authorities, God expresses his absolute sovereignty and shows that He uses people to serve the general well-being. God is thus not solely the God of Christians but also of non-Christians, even of rulers who are idol-worshippers. Such leaders may not know where their authority comes from, but they know that as leaders they should work for the well-being of all citizens. Therefore, Christians should not find it difficult to submit to those who represent power, for God has put them there. There is no authority except that which God has established (13:1).

Consequently, whoever rebels against what God has instituted and those who do so will bring in the phrase judgement on themselves (13:2). *ti tou theou diatage*. ‘In that which God has established’ includes the institutions and laws of the land through which the authorities exercise their power.

John Yoder (1965) has argued that tasso should be translated ‘order’ in 13:2 because God does not take responsibility for the state as such, but ‘brings it into line Ernst Kasemann(1980) asserts that the term deals only with the sovereign action of God by which he makes arrangements in creation. Whether Paul is saying that God instituted or arranged the authorities (*exousia*), it is clear that Paul believes God did not err in his actions regarding the authorities (powers) and rulers.

The Greek terms that refer to the governing authorities (*exousiais hyperechousais*) are *exousia archontes* (rulers). In classical Greek, *exousia* refers to an ability to perform an action; and the right or permission to perform that ‘archon’, while ‘action’ means one who lends and oversees human beings.

When Paul wrote this letter, the Emperor Nero was ruling well, with the help of his provincial governors, army and magistrates. He had not yet begun to persecute Christians. Most people were ready to obey such an Emperor, even though they had not chosen him and could not depose him or influence his decisions. He ruled by force because he controlled the army, and no one could resist his power.

Instituted by God: Paul had no experience of democracy, neither did he distinguish between the various forms of government. He also didn’t consider the way in which rulers were appointed in the Roman Empire often through bribery, deceit or murder. But he did not teach that God has ordained that there should be government in human society, and that no one can be a ruler except by God’s permission and direction. This is true of Nero, of Pontius Pilate, and of the council of the Jews in Jerusalem – even though these men at times disregarded God and misused the authority He had given them.

One difficulty facing an interpreter is the identity of the authorities/rulers (13:1,2,3,4,6). Are they spiritual or secular powers and they spiritual or secular powers and rulers? Should the Christians in Rome submit to their imperial masters, or only to the ‘spiritual powers’ which is the basis of Rome’s power and authority. Oscar Cullmann(1957) believes that the powers are angelic-beings, which he links to a Jewish idea of a supernatural council of nations with a different angel representing each country. The consensus view, however, is that Paul was referring to human beings in positions of authority hence, the New Revised Standard Version’s translation of *exousia* as ‘authorities’.

Walter Wink (1962) has pointed out, however, that Paul did not have a modern secular view of the state, and that it is improper for us to interpret the text by separating the earthly authorities from the heavenly powers, because Paul would have acknowledged their interconnectedness. Nevertheless, it appears that Paul had human powers in mind when he wrote to the Roman church. That the ‘arch ontes’ bear the sword is strong evidence

for the view that Paul was concerned with the type of authorities Roman Christians might encounter in their everyday lives.

V2 Resists what God has appointed: These words seem to mean that revolution or even disobedience is always wrong. This is certainly so, if vv3 end 4 are a true description of the government. But if the government opposes good conduct and supports bad, then it may be our duty to resist, in order to submit to God. Those who do so will certainly be punished by the government; but Paul did not say that to resist the government is necessarily to resist God Himself, but only the authority which He has appointed. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 'What God has instituted includes the institutions and laws of the land through which the authorities exercise their power. These are human institutions, but the purpose they serve is God's. Most of the laws proposed and voted on in our country is intended to guarantee the rights of citizens. They spring from common sense according to some theologians, or from common grace, according to the Reformers. Paul simply affirms that opposing civil institutions and their laws equals opposing God Himself because they come from God thereby bringing oneself under God's judgment. Paul therefore considers it difficult for someone to be both a Christian and in rebellion against God.

V3 Not a terror to good conduct: generally, it is a fact that governments punish thieves, murderers, those who disrupt the peace of society and the likes, but governments also are often guilty of these crimes themselves. Paul could have named many evils done by Rome, but in spite of this, Rome became famous for the justice and peace which her government brought to the world. Both Paul and Peter were eventually condemned and put to death by the government for doing good. But Peter taught that even if that happens, there is still no need to be afraid, because to suffer punishment for the sake of righteousness is really to receive God's blessing (1 Peter 3:13-17; 4:14-16).

Obedying the law is the most basic expression of submission to authorities. Therefore, Paul admonished the Christian to be law abiding citizens. As such, they will not have to be afraid of the rulers even if these rulers are dictators or *tirants*, (yet we should remember that this statement is not true at all times and in all situations. There have been and are areas where Christians are persecuted simply because they are Christians, regardless of whether they obey the laws). We often forget that the same rulers who punish 'those who do wrong' speak well of 'those who do right'. That is why Paul says 'Do what is right and you will be commended.' Today, the degrees and certificates we receive from institutions of learning remind us that authorities do more than just punish and terrify citizens.

V4 God's servant for your good: Paul's call for submission to the authorities is that 'the one in authority is God's servant for your good (13:49). The authorities, particularly those who enforce the law, are God's servants, just as Paul himself is. Alphonse Maillot(1978), opines that: Here, Paul uses the word diakonos (servant) when describing the authorities; in introducing himself he used the word doulos (slave). In much of Paul's writing particularly in the pastoral Epistles, the word diakonos is associated with someone serving in the church: Paul uses this word and the word 'leitourgoi (13:6) to help Christians who are familiar with church vocabulary to understand the role played by government officials. They are God's servants, just as much as deacons and pastors and so on. But they have been called to a different task. Their role is to help us live in peace with everyone and participate in the life of our communities. In fulfilling their duties, at times they also dispense punishment, 'for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason (13:4b). Some scholars have interpreted vv4-6 to mean that rulers are only God's servants only if they act justly. This interpretation is mistaken: according to Paul they are God's servant not because of the way they rule, but because of the way they rule, but because they are appointed by Him.

The Sword: Governments have power of life and death over their subjects, but Christians today hold different opinions about whether or not it can be right for a government to put a person to death even for a serious crime like murder. Paul's teaching in this passage does not help us to decide this question. Many Christians have been put to the sword for their faith. However, in this passage, the sword symbolizes control, warning and, above all justice. It is intended to discourage potential wrongdoers. Those who use the sword abusively to threaten or kill the innocent are answerable to God for what they have done with their power.

Paul uses a parallel construction to make the point that the civil authorities are God's servants both in promoting the general well-being and in punishing the wrongdoer (13:4c),

V5: In verse 5, Paul gave two reasons for being subject to the laws of the state:

- i. Because Christians shall be punished if they are not subject to the law and (ii)
- ii. Because God exercises His authority, in part, through the governments which He appointed; if Christians disobey them, then their conscience will accuse them of rebelling against the authority of God.

V6. You also pay taxes: Governments need money in order to execute important projects and to maintain and care for welfare of the citizens. By paying taxes, government will be able to do their job which God has given them. Rulers have the right to demand taxes from their subjects; but they also have the responsibility to use these taxes judiciously and not to spend them luxurious living for themselves.

V.7 Dues: Paul took the view that the government had the right to demand certain things from its subjects, but he did not suggest that they should obey it when it demanded things (e.g worship) to which it had no right.

Respect... honour: cf 1 Peter 2:17, when Peter wrote, Nero was beginning to rule badly, and cruelty to persecute Christians. It must have been difficult to honour such a man.

All Existing Authority is set up by God

Paul says in 1Cor. 2:8, 'None of the rulers of this age understood the wisdom of God, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory' Paul. Paul was aware that the death of Jesus was the breach of justice that the governing authorities did not praise the good and punish the wrong. They did the opposite. And he knew from his own missionary journeys that the ruling authorities could be a menace to his own ministry (Acts 16:16ff). So, Paul was not so naïve. It is true that all authority which exists has been set up by God. Evidences are found in Daniel and John apart from Paul's writings. Daniel says in 2:21 that it is God who 'removes kings and set up kings', and in 4:22, 'The most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.' This confirms that Daniel knows that even wicked kings have their position and authority from God only. John also taught in the gospel that Pilate under whose authority Jesus was crucified, was a governing authority set and ordained by God. (cf Acts 2:23, 4:27, 28). Therefore, if Pilate, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius and the likes were set in their places and given authority by God, even though they were wicked and did evil, then we can conclude that Paul's assertion that 'there is no authority except from God.' In (Romans 13:1) cannot be denied.

What being subject to Governing Authorities means

Paul does not have in mind the problem of evil governments, when he made the statement in verse 3. 'Rulers are not a terror to good conduct... Do good, and you will receive their praise.' 'This verse and the next must be a general statement of how government should function. Paul has in mind a good government in which doing good will find approval and doing bad will be punished. The fact that God has ordained all authority does not mean all authority should be obeyed. It is right to resist what God has appointed in order to obey what God has commanded. God's appointment of evil rulers may be for our testing (cf Deuteronomy 13:37).

To summarise in few sentences, there is no authority except from God. The greatest human ruler should humbly confess he is where he is by virtue of God's appointment. Some rulers or governments are good, while some are evil, some reward the right, and punish wrongdoer and some do the reverse, so the demand for subjection is relative; it depends on whether the demand of the government requires disobeying God or not. But in all, 'we must obey God rather than men.' God should be Honoured above the state.

On what occasions should Christians refuse to obey the government

- (a) When it commands things which are forbidden by God; or forbids things commanded by God there are biblical examples.

(b) When it is guilty of tyranny, i.e. when it makes it impossible for people to live with proper human dignity. When discrimination against a group of people sets in.

Rulers are bound to rule in the fear of God and for the good of the people; and if they do not, then in resisting them we are doing God service.

Civil Disobedience in Biblical History

There is a long and respected tradition of civil disobedience in biblical history which God not only allows but also praises; it starts in Exodus.

The Israelites lived in Egypt under the rule of the Pharaohs for centuries. They became so many, so the King of Egypt commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children born to the Israelites (v16). But v17 says, 'The Midwives feared God and did not do as the king commanded them, but let the children live'. And v20 adds, 'so God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. It is clear here that these women were not subject to the governing authorities, they saw the command of the king as contrary to God's command. So, they disobeyed the civil authorities and God was pleased with them.

Two other instances are found in the book of Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar made decree that all who heard his music must fall down and worship the golden image of his god. But Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego refused to obey the decree (3:16-18). So, they were thrown into the fiery furnace, and God miraculously saved them and so put his stamp of approval on their civil disobedience.

Then in the sixth chapter of the same book, Darius the King establishes an edict that for thirty days no one should make a petition to any god or man other than Darius himself (6:7). Daniel was one of Darius three chief presidents (6:12), but verse 10 says, when Daniel knew that the document has been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; prayed thrice daily and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.' The result was that he was thrown to the lions, But again God shows His approval of Daniel's disobedience by saving him from the lion.

Similarly, in the New Testament, when Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities and commanded not to speak or teach in Jesus' name, they answer in Acts 4:19, 'whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.' So they went on teaching in public and were re-arrested. The high Priest said to them in Acts 5:28; 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'we must obey God rather than men.'

All of these make it very hard to say that the Bible teaches that since all governing authority is from God, it must therefore be obeyed. Such stories as these make Paul's teaching appear on the surface incredibly naïve. How could Paul say in verse 3, for example, 'Rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad'? How Could he say 'Do what is good, and you will receive the authority's approval'? But for some of Paul's writings, we might think that he lived in an idealistic dream world where good is always rewarded and evil always punished by the governing authorities.

Ways in which contemporary Christians can oppose unjust Government

How should Christians support the government? In Paul's time, they could not do much more than submit, pray and pay taxes. Today, they can and ought to do more, i.e. to vote at elections, try to understand political issues, to remind politicians of their good government responsibility, perhaps to join a political party and play active roles in influencing the government in the direction of righteousness for the greater good of the community. In discussing these problems, Christians should remember that (i) The church has often tended blindly to support the government in power, forgetting to point out injustices, and correcting them. (ii) The true function of the church, as the church, is to proclaim the gospel which alone can truly revolutionize people's lives. It is then the task of those people as individual citizens to go out and change society and influence

government. Both the church and individual Christian should be ready to submit to unjust treatment BUT when groups or individuals have the chance of demanding their rights, then they should do so.

We should remember that the Roman government was not democratically elected. It was imperialist, racist, disliked by the majority of the people, to Christians, often cruel and unjust, especially to slaves and to its subjects. It represented a minority rule over the majority. Yet for 300 years, the church taught that Christians should submit to it (though not necessarily always obey it), and opposed any idea of violence against it. The writer of the Book of revelation describes a state which was demonic and opposed to God, but did not once encourage Christians to oppose it by violence.

What is Good Governance

According to the Chamber's Dictionary governance means to direct, control, rule with authority or to determine. This paper examined good governance therefore, involves all the processes needed in realizing the purpose of government, administering justice and peace, promoting desired development of the people, social infrastructure, and preserving environmental well-being. This paper reveals that Paul does appreciate that Christians are members of a larger community and they belong to states saddled with the responsibility of governance. So, Paul believes that all civil authorities are derived from God, he wants Christians to be obedient to them by discharging all their civil responsibilities to them as a provisional institution willed by God. They should at the same time be mindful of their relation with the authorities, they are members of that eternal kingdom under the rule of Jesus Christ.

In a democracy, Paul's teaching does not seem to prevent Christian's involvement in politics. Since it implies that Christians have a responsibility to make the state better, this can be done politically by electing Christians of good repute or highly principled leaders into the government. Just as they can equally do this morally by serving as an influence for good governance. Looking critically at Paul's instruction in Romans 13:1-7, it is observed that both Christians and all citizens and the government have mutual duties to each other. While co-operating with the authorities by submission and payment of all dues, Christians have duty to ensure that the authorities comply with God's laws that govern his people in order to achieve good governance. Democratic institutions that fail to incorporate Godly principles will in the end be unjust.

The implication of Paul's teaching on Christians' relation to the authorities is appreciated by the Nigerian Christians. Nigerian Christians have been involved in the country's politics since the colonial period; a good number of Christians have been political activists; however, Christians must still participate with determination and a high sense of calling as true Christians – in order to serve as an influence for good in the Nigerian society. Nigerian Christians must remember proverbs 29:2 that says 'When the righteous rules the people rejoice, but when the wicked rules the people groan.'

The Implications of Romans. 13:1-7 on Good Governance in Nigeria

In seeking for Christian standards for good governance, the practice is to seek first such standards in the teachings of Jesus Christ, the teaching of the apostles and that of the Apostolic fathers who were closer to the events marking the beginning of the Christian church. This study has focused on the teaching of Paul, whose teachings corroborate with that of Jesus. Paul teaches that to the Christians, God rules His people through a chosen individual. There is no government that can survive except God allows it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Paul's call for support to civil authorities among the Christians of his day should not be seen as a summon to a 'blind' obedience to government or a declaration that every existing governmental power is inviolable and sacrosanct. This is not so, Paul experienced governmental misuse of power in the hands of governors in the course of his career as minister of the word of Christ. Besides, he also did not forget the unjust crucifixion of Jesus on the order of Pontius Pilate. But he still teaches that authorities should be submitted to. Paul teaches Christians how to be a model citizen submitting to authorities because they are

established by God. It is extremely important to understand that believers submit to their authorities not because the authorities deserve it but as a sign of their own submission to God.

Nigeria has been experiencing poor governance, embezzlement of public funds, insecurity of life and properties, violence resulting in increased poverty, kidnapping, insurgencies and many more. Government intervention has made very little impact on the people and this is a great challenge for the Christians. They do not have to submit, co-operate and pay all dues alone, but they have to stand for the truth, whatever the cost. Like John the Baptist, Christians should speak out to the authorities when truth is perverted. In this way, they will be God's spokes people, who deliver a prophetic message when the need arises.

Finally, Christians should pray for Nigeria always and especially the leaders of this great country. Like Jesus Christ, they implore God's grace for peace to rule so that citizens may go about his/her work, and especially so that the gospel may spread more. In doing this, Christians are acting like Priests who pray for their people; in any case, a Christian's conduct should be guided by what God has revealed as just and righteous when a government become so evil that it no longer has the right to govern or be submitted to.

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