

Romans 13 and Civil Disobedience

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Since mid-2014, I have been involved with the [#LoveMakesAWay sit-ins](#) and prayer vigils in the offices of prominent Government and Opposition MPs in the Australian Federal Parliament. These actions have been the responses of Christians from a variety of denominations to the cruel asylum seeker policies of the Australian government. They have been intentional acts of civil disobedience.

In response to our actions, some Christians have expressed disagreement with our methods, often citing Romans 13:1-7 as a rationale for doing so. A “plain reading” of this passage, which counsels readers to “submit to the governing authorities,” seems to yield a clear and straightforward command that implies the prohibition of civil disobedience.

What follows is a brief attempt to address the question of whether Romans 13 does, in fact, prohibit the possibility of faithful Christian nonviolent civil disobedience. While not a comprehensive study of Romans 13 or the relationship between the church and the state—such would require *far* more space—I hope that what follows is a cause for discussion on this topic and, indirectly, an explanation of some of the thinking behind the methods of a movement like Love Makes a Way.

A note about consistency

We begin with the obvious—Paul writes from within the Roman Empire, which was not a modern democracy. This is no trivial point for interpreting Romans 13 for a contemporary audience. We should not imagine that Paul’s teaching in Romans 13:1–7—a mere seven verses, and far from a comprehensive or systematic treatment of the relationship of church and state—can simply be transferred directly from the context of an ancient empire to a modern democracy.

If we think Paul is positive about “the authorities,”¹ then he is positive about them in the form he knows them, namely imperial dictatorship.² We cannot use Romans 13 to legitimate our preferred governmental structure without, according to the same logic, accepting the implied divine legitimacy of dictatorships. Those of us who live in democracies will likely find such a suggestion unpalatable. It raises the question of whether God ordains particular authorities, or authority in general;³ if we opt for the first option, then we must wrestle with what that means for authorities in North Korea, or Apartheid South Africa, or Nazi Germany. Depending on where things land in coming months or years, such a view may also have implications for our views of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East.

¹ The identity of the authorities (*exousia*) is contested. Some argue that “the authorities” is a reference to demonic or angelic beings that animate human structures. This is certainly a possibility, but in what follows I make the assumption that the authorities are concrete human figures and structures.

² It is worth noting that Romans 13 was certainly not intended to be a comprehensive or timeless political theory, and it is doubtful that Paul would have recognised the existence of what we call “the state” as an abstract entity—Paul would more likely have understood the authorities as being those officials whom Christians might have to deal with on a regular basis. See Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 110; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1980), 354.

³ In Protestant thinking Lutheran interpretation has been associated with the view that God ordains all particular authorities that happen to exist. Reformed thinking, on the other hand has traditionally been associated with the view that Paul is referring only to the state in the abstract. John Chrysostom earlier advocated the latter position: “What say you? it may be said; is every ruler then elected by God? This I do not say, he answers. Nor am I now speaking about individual rulers, but about the thing in itself.” John Chrysostom, *Hom. Rom.*, 13.1.

Romans 13 in the context of the canon

The biblical canon contains episodes in which protagonists commit acts of what we might call 'civil disobedience.' The midwives' noncompliance in the face of Pharaoh's infanticidal command in Exodus 1 is one well-known example. The disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3, and also Daniel in Daniel 6—both in light of idolatrous laws—are further examples. Jesus himself commits acts of what we would contemporarily call civil disobedience, mostly notably in his Sabbath healings and in the clearing of the Jerusalem Temple.⁴ There is also the well-known example in Acts 5 of the apostles' disobedience in the face of the command not to teach in the name of Jesus—"We must obey God rather than men."⁵

Some contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation cast doubt over whether such narrative material can be instructive. This may lead some readers to dismiss these episodes as irrelevant to a discussion of Romans 13. I think they are relevant, however, since they demonstrate that in the biblical story there are important examples of disobedience to different authorities in which such defiance is not simply understandable, but is painted in a positive light. The primary qualification, of course, is that civil disobedience occurs in these episodes when there is a contradiction between God's will and the actions or laws of the authorities. In other words, civil disobedience can never simply be a tool for getting what we want, but must be a response to the injustice or idolatry of the authorities.

We can also point to the more negative attitudes to the state represented in texts like Revelation, in which the Roman Empire is described as a Beast (ch. 13) and a Prostitute (ch. 17), "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:6). Revelation paints a wholly negative picture of the authorities, one that stands in tension with interpretations of Romans 13 that portray the authorities as servants of God. As the Kairos Theologians insisted, one cannot read Romans 13 apart from Revelation 13, and we must pay attention to the fact that "in the rest of the Bible God does not demand obedience to oppressive rulers."⁶ The context of the whole canon does not allow Romans 13 to be the final word on obedience to the state. We might even see a progression between Romans 13 and Revelation 13, such that when human authorities act outside the limits of God's will—attempting to become deities unto themselves—they become the Beast of Revelation. At such a point it would be in keeping with the witness of Revelation 13 to disobey all commands that do not accord with the way of the risen Lamb of God.

More directly relevant to Romans 13 is the reality that the Apostle Paul committed acts of civil disobedience that resulted in his imprisonment, from which he wrote some of his epistles. This same Paul was beaten (e.g. Acts 16:23) and, according to tradition, eventually executed by the Roman authorities. Whatever justification we may wish to give to Paul's disobedience to the authorities despite Romans 13, we cannot simply conclude that Paul's intention was to teach that earthly authority must be obeyed unquestioningly. As Kasemann notes, "In Romans 13 [Paul's exhortation] is not the result of a solid systematic doctrine of the order of creation."⁷ The witness of Paul's life suggests he was either inconsistent, or that a definitive Christian doctrine of the state was not his intention in writing Romans 13.

⁴ I realise the description of these actions as civil disobedience is not self-evident, since some might argue that Jesus, as God Incarnate, is the one who ordains all authority in the first place. Thus Jesus can defy earthly authorities because by definition his actions reflect the will of the authority behind the authorities. There are a number of theological and hermeneutical issues with such a suggestion, but this discussion is not possible here.

⁵ Some might argue that civil disobedience is allowed in such a case because a governing force restricts "preaching the gospel" or similar practices. Such a suggestion would be debatable and simplistic. In any case, it justifies civil disobedience at least in principle.

⁶ See "The South Africa Kairos Document 1985," Chapter 2.1, online at <http://kairossouthernafrika.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>

⁷ Käsemann, *Romans*, 357.

Romans 13 in the context of Romans

While a sustained attempt at tracing the overall argument of Romans is not possible here, we can make some relevant points about the connection of Romans 13 with its preceding chapter. Typically Romans 13:1–7 is appealed to without reference to this literary context. Stripping the passage of this context opens the possibility of filling it with the political assumptions of the reader. Modern presuppositions about the dualism of “politics” and “religion” tend to obscure Paul’s writing.

Paul begins Romans 12 with a startling call to resist conformity to this age (12:1–2). He is speaking to people living in the midst of a powerful and ruthless empire. As such, these people might be tempted to believe that resisting conformity to this age equates to freedom from the need to obey the state *at all*, a point Paul will address in Romans 13. Before getting there, Paul exhorts his audience to love genuinely, to hate evil, and hold fast to what is good (12:9–13). Such encouragement to love applies not only to friends, but also to enemies, those who persecute (12:14). This call to subvert the common desire for retribution is repeated:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17–21)

A clear implication of the gospel that Paul has discussed throughout Romans is the need to love everyone, even enemies, and the refusal to do evil. Who are these enemies that have persecuted the community and must be “overcome” with good? Since Paul seamlessly launches into Romans 13:1–7, with its discussion of the authorities, it is clear that the enemies in view are these authorities. This section is followed by 13:8–14 which counsels the community to “owe no one anything, except to love one another” (13:8), a statement which should guide how we interpret Paul’s command to “pay to all what is due them” (13:7). Though the authorities are their enemies, the church must show love to the authorities because God has shown love to those who were still in rebellion (5:8).

In 13:12, Paul alludes to his previous statement in 12:2 regarding the present age when he says,

the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.

That the section about the authorities (13:1–7) is bookended by such statements about not conforming to this dark age—“the night”—suggests that Paul’s command to submit to the authorities must be read in light of this command to nonconformity.⁸

Paul’s comments about the state have, as Walsh and Keesmaat remark, “ambiguous overtones.”⁹ Read apart from its surrounding context Romans 13:1–7 certainly seems to express unmitigated support for the authorities. Read in this context, however, Paul’s comments take on a different flavour. What, then, might be the meaning of 13:1–7?

Romans 13:1–7 up close

Again we note that only so much can be said in this context, and there is indeed much to be said about Romans 13. Some have suggested that Romans 13:1–7 might be read ironically, the “classic ironic technique of blaming by apparent praise.”¹⁰ In other words, Paul says what he doesn’t mean. While this is a possibility, I will assume that Paul is sincere since this is how

⁸ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 789.

⁹ Brian J. Walsh & Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 185.

¹⁰ Timothy Carter, “Commentary: The Irony of Romans 13:1–8,” *Third Way* 28 (2005): 21.

most Christians read the passage; I hope to show that even a literal reading of the text allows for the possibility of civil disobedience.

The first thing to note is that there is no authority except from (*hupo*) God (13:1). The Greek *hupo* is typically translated “from,” but it can also mean “under.” One’s choice of translation makes a significant difference as to the meaning of this phrase, since “no authority except from God” is a very different reality to there being “no authority except under God.” Whichever option we choose, however, it must be consistent with Paul’s assertion that “Jesus is Lord” (Rom 6:23; 10:9). Such a proclamation is, as N.T. Wright says, a “confrontation with the powers,”¹¹ a denial of ultimate loyalty to any lord other than Jesus, including the Caesars of the world who claim such a status. That the authorities are instituted by God (13:1) means that their authority is not self-generated, but exists only because the authorities have a legitimate place in the created order. In other words, the authority of the authorities is relativised under Jesus’ Lordship.¹² Such a message would in itself have been subversive, “an undermining of pagan totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it,”¹³ and not what the authorities would have like to have heard.

If the authorities have a legitimate place in the created order, then God’s people are to be subject to them. Again, scholarly debate goes on as to the nature of this subjection, but two things guide our interpretation. The first is the aforementioned disobedience of Paul—whatever Paul meant by subjection, it almost certainly did *not* entail unquestioning obedience because he did not act this way. The second interpretive aid is Paul’s claim in 13:2 that “whoever resists (*antitassomai*) authority resists (*anthistēmi*) what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” Paul’s use of *antitassomai* and *anthistēmi*, words that denote organised and/or violent opposition, suggests a reference not to resistance generally, but rather to *violent* resistance—to revolt.¹⁴ Paul’s teaching here is to refrain from violent resistance against the authorities. For Paul, both unquestioning obedience and violent revolt are improper responses to the authorities. On the one hand the authorities must not be obeyed when they are not acting as God’s servants;¹⁵ on the other hand violent revolt does not fall into the category of overcoming evil with love (12:21).

From 13:3 onwards Paul’s picture of the authorities becomes more conditional. He says, “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good.” The issue here is that this picture did not always ring true, even for Paul. The truth is, according to Paul, that the authorities should be feared (13:7) because they bear the sword (and they will use it)—not exactly an enthusiastic appraisal! In other words, don’t be naïve about the violence that the authorities are capable of, and give them no reason for such violence.

¹¹ N.T. Wright, “The New Testament and the ‘State,’” *Themelios* 16/1 (1990): 14.

¹² Yoder goes further than Wright, arguing that God does not even *institute* the authorities, but only *orders* them. In other words, God lines up the authorities according to God’s purposes without having to morally approve of what they do. This view is by far a minority view, but it does have the advantage of avoiding the debate about whether particular authorities are instituted, or just a general concept of authority. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 201.

¹³ N.T. Wright, “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans,” in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically* (ed. C. Bartholemew; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 190.

¹⁴ *Antitassomai* is also used in Acts 18:6 and, according to Johnson, “is Luke’s only use of *antitassomai* (‘oppose’), which has the connotation of an organized front of resistance.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 323. See also Herodotus, *Hist.*, 4.134. According to Wink *Anthistēmi* was a military term; out of 71 uses in the Greek Old Testament, 44 refer to military encounters (“rise against” type language). In Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19, 25 *anthistēmi* refers to Barabbas’ murderous involvement in the “insurrection”, while Acts 19:40 describes the townspeople of Ephesus being in danger of being charged with *anthistēmi*, rendered “rioting”. Walter Wink, “Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus’ Nonviolent Way,” *Review and Expositor* 89 (1992): 199.

¹⁵ At least as far back as Chrysostom subjection to the authorities has been interpreted as having limits, “[L]et every soul be subject unto the higher powers, if thou be an Apostle even, or an Evangelist, or a Prophet, or anything whatsoever, *inasmuch as this subjection is not subversive of religion*,” (emphasis mine). John Chrysostom, *Hom. Rom.*, 13.1.

But Paul's audience are not to let this reality be the final arbiter of how they live their lives. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (13:8) Love is the ethic of the community of God (as opposed to the potential violence of the authorities). Love must be shown, even to the persecutor, even when this requires that the one who loves must suffer as a result of their loving response to evil.

That the authorities are meant to be servants of God but persecute God's Church highlights the ambiguity of what Paul is saying. The "overtones of persecution, fear and bloodshed"¹⁶ suggest that unquestioning obedience is not at all what Paul has in mind in Romans 13. On the contrary, the primary message is to love one's enemies (cf. Rom 12:21), even the authorities. When the authorities are acting as God's servants then obedience to them is an expression of faithfulness to God's ordering of the world. However, what should be done when the authorities are *not* doing God's will? Paul does not say, but of course this is understandable—if Paul was to promote the kind of disobedience that he himself often engaged in, this would be grounds for execution. Paul's life, however, tells us that he thought there were times when respectful disobedience was necessary.

In sum, even when we take Romans 13 as a sincere teaching, there are loose threads that should cause us to question whether blind obedience to authorities is in view. The authorities are themselves subject to God, and their authority is relativised by the fact that Jesus is Lord. Christians should certainly be subject to the authorities for the good ordering of society, but when those authorities step well outside the realm of God's will there may be times when Christians must choose between obedience to God over obedience to Caesar. So John Calvin:

The Lord ... is the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men [*sic*]; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed.¹⁷

In such times violence is not an option for followers of Jesus, according to Paul, for love is the ethic of the church.

Final Thoughts

Douglas Moo, in his commentary on Romans, suggests that the plain meaning of Romans 13 requires Christians to always, in whatever situation, obey whatever their governmental leaders tell them.¹⁸ Yet Moo (no liberal, activist or iconoclast) acknowledges that, when seen in its wider New Testament context, Romans 13 cannot be used to argue such a thing. "Christians should give thanks for government as an institution of God," he says, "But we should also refuse to give to government any absolute rights and should evaluate all its demands in the light of the gospel."¹⁹ For Moo our history, which includes terrible events such as the Holocaust, suggests that genuine Christian devotion to God must sometimes require disobedience to authorities.²⁰ That a Calvinist evangelical scholar concedes this point should cause us to reflect on the limits of using Romans 13 in a world where governments are—thanks largely to technological advances—able to inflict more human suffering than ever before.²¹ Such a situation is, unfortunately, not limited to countries "out there"—it is happening on our own doorstep.

¹⁶ Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 186.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed. J.T. McNeill; trans. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), IV.20.32.

¹⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 806.

¹⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 810.

²⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 806.

²¹ Moo is joined by other evangelical leaders and organisations that agree civil disobedience is sometimes necessary. These include John Piper (<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-romans-13-prohibit-all-civil-disobedience>), The Gospel Coalition (<http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/when->

Karl Barth, who spoke out against the expansion and abuse of state power by the Nazis, provides another helpful viewpoint. I quote the following passage at length:

We certainly cannot escape obedience to God and to the political order. Nor can we evade praying in accordance with I Timothy 2:1–4 for those who administer that order, whoever they may be and however they may do it. This prayer and this obedience may not cease, no matter whether the significance of the political order be clear or obscure. But in certain circumstances the form which this obedience and prayer take as regards the actual administrators and representatives of political power, may be not that of [an active or passive position] but a third alternative. Obedience not to the political order, but to its actual representatives can become impossible for us, if we wish at the same time to hold fast to faith and love. It could well be that we could obey specific rulers only by being disobedient to God, and by being thus in fact disobedient to the political order ordained of God as well. It could well be that we had to do with a Government of liars, murderers and incendiaries, with a Government which wished to usurp the place of God, to fetter the conscience, to suppress the church and become itself the Church of Antichrist. It would be clear that in such a case that we could only choose either to obey this Government by disobeying God or to obey God by disobeying this Government. In such a case must not God be obeyed rather than men [*sic*]? Must it not be forbidden us then to desire merely to endure? In such a case must not faith in Jesus Christ active in love necessitate our active resistance in just the same way as it necessitates passive resistance or our positive cooperation, when we are not faced with this choice?²²

Barth's position is based on a theological framework that is complex and that cannot be explored here. Nonetheless, it reminds us that civil disobedience, even if we accept it as a faithful option for Christians at certain times, cannot be a method for simply getting what we want. Barth asserted that all powers, even those that had fallen prey to the temptation to absolutise themselves, belong "originally and ultimately to Christ," that their purpose was to serve the person and work of Christ.²³ Thus the church should not disobey the state except to witness to it about its true purpose, to act as a servant to the will of God. For this reason the church cannot simply critique the consequences of the sin of the state; it must also critique the idolatry of any state that has sought to usurp God or to advance any agenda that does not reflect the justice of God revealed in Christ. In other words, Christian civil disobedience is rooted in adherence to the way of Jesus Christ, not political or activist ideology.

Finally, I note that nonviolent civil disobedience does not constitute, at least in my view, the refusal to submit to the authorities as per Romans 13. Such a statement is controversial, no doubt. But we must remember that Paul's concern is that his audience does not *violently* revolt against the state. By defending civil disobedience I am advocating no such thing. Inasmuch as the authorities are themselves meant to submit to God, calling them back to their purpose is indeed a form of faithfulness to the will of God.

It could even be argued that acting in civil disobedience and accepting the consequences of such action is, in a way, a kind of submission to the authorities. Principled civil disobedience, in seeking to call the authorities back to their God-ordained purpose, *does not seek to escape the consequences of its action*. On the contrary, the one who engages in principled civil

[should-christians-engage-in-civil-disobedience/](http://www.crucible.org.au/should-christians-engage-in-civil-disobedience/)) and many of the Manhattan Declaration signatories (http://manhattandecclaration.org/man_dec_resources/Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf).

²² Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 229–30.

²³ Karl Barth, "Church and State," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 118.

disobedience is willing to accept the legal consequences of their actions. Martin Luther King Jr. suggests such a person is “in reality expressing the highest respect for law.”²⁴

In this article I have not attempted to discuss the conditions under which civil disobedience might be considered right or necessary; rather I have simply tried to argue, albeit briefly, that Romans 13 does not preclude the possibility of faithful Christian civil disobedience. I am also aware that by not articulating a particular philosophy of nonviolence and civil disobedience I am leaving it to the reader to assume my viewpoint. This is obviously problematic, since some readers may assume I believe certain things that I do not. My hope, though, is that this discussion has been helpful as Christians—particularly those of us who do not currently experience persecution or oppression—try to work out what it means to walk faithfully in Christ in an age of political nihilism and viciousness.

²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.