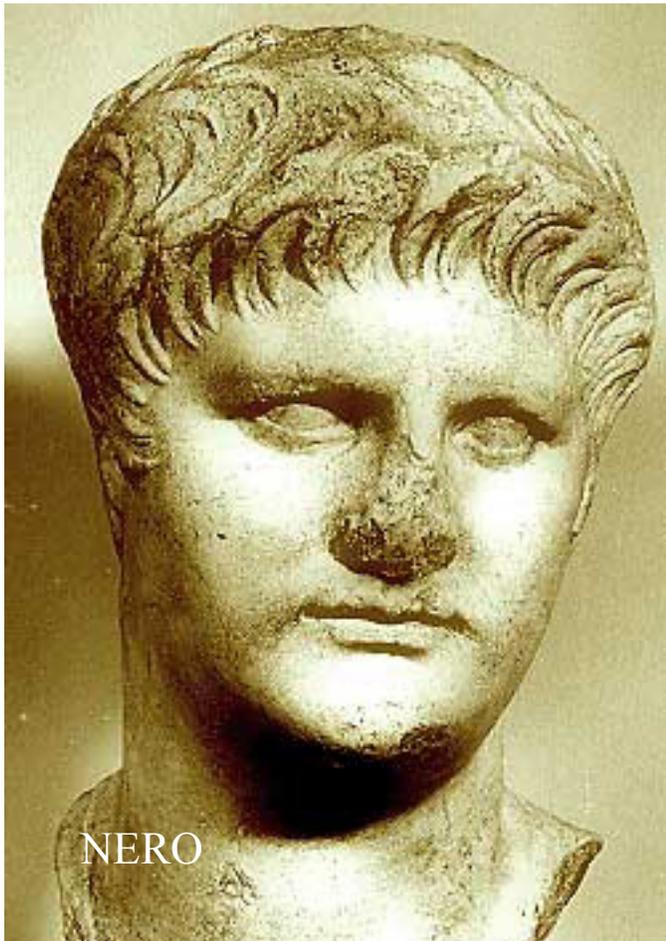


All authority is of God.



Let every soul be subject to the superior authorities, for there is no authority except under God. Now those which are, have been set under God, so that he who is resisting an authority has withstood God's mandate (Romans 13:1-2).

Much as we may dislike it, earthly government is a superior authority. Paul does not employ the word “superior” in the sense of “excellence,” but, rather, of “over.” The elements of the Greek word *huperecho* (“superior”), are OVER-HAVE. If there is any superior authority, that is, if there is government over us at all, Paul plainly states that it is under (literally, “by”) God. We are not required to like it, only to be subject to it.

Paul then makes the even stronger statement that the present superior authorities are set by Him. This agrees perfectly with Daniel 4:35, that “God does His will among the inhabitants of earth,” and with Daniel 4:32, “The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes,” and with Jeremiah 27:5, “I have made the earth...and I will give it to the one who is pleasing in My sight.”

Let us say that the current president is particularly foul. How could it please God to put such a person over the free world? Probably the same way it pleased Him to raise up Pharaoh (Romans 9:17), Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13, Isaiah 10:5-6), Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27:6), and Pontius Pilate (John 19:11). God's ways are higher than humanity's (Isaiah 55:9). This will disappoint some, but I do not apologize for it. Remember, it also “pleased [God] to crush [Christ], putting Him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). Perhaps we human beings are not as smart as we thought we were. (1 Corinthians 3:18). If you ask me, this is comforting

Now consider this: Anyone who resists a superior authority (“resist”: Gr. *antitassomai*, or INSTEAD-SET, that is, to not necessarily break the law of the authority, but to refuse to be subject to the superior authority) is withstanding God's mandate (Gr. *diatagê*, or THROUGH-SET, that is, what has come to be through God—Romans 11:36—set there by Him, Romans 13:1). Are you withstanding God's mandate?



TO BE SUBJECT OR NOT TO BE SUBJECT;
THAT IS THE QUESTION

I am in happy receipt of two letters from a man whom I will call Earl. Though I have not met Earl in the flesh, we are good friends through our correspondence. As Earl's thoughts and arguments on this important subject may well be yours, and as my thoughts and arguments on this subject may well be mine, I now reprint our respective communications for your edification.

Dear Martin, Part 1

I believe that we must consider the context of Paul's comments on the topic of our attitude towards government. The New Testament was written against a backdrop of Roman rule. Under Roman rule, subjects of conquered kingdoms had only two responsibilities: to pay taxes and not cause trouble. The only other choice was to take up the sword. The people were not asked for their opinions or votes. Roman citizens like Paul had some additional rights with regard to trials before punishment and appeals, but even they were expected to contribute little in the way of direct participation in governmental decisions.

This is in contrast to our form of government, hammered out by God-fearing men trying to build something better than what preceded them. In our form of government, it is a civic duty to participate by voting, monitoring representatives and providing input. We still need to be cautious in the use of the word "fight," for in our language and system of government, the word can mean active, respectful participation, or it can mean taking up the sword to exact our own vengeance.

We can use our participation in government as a platform to speak, demonstrate, and live the Kingdom of God in front of others. Because we have both a po-

litical system and court system that invite participation, there are times when our active resistance of evil by arguing Biblical truth is more of a witness than quietly rejoicing when injustice is done. In the Roman system, the only way to witness was to rejoice when injustice was done, since the only other choice was to pull out the sword. In our system, we have other choices.

Unfortunately, we Christians need to mature in both the content and form of our speech and actions, avoiding the disrespect, vulgarity, and scoffing of the world.

In Christ, our only hope,

—Earl

Dear Earl, Part 1

Greetings in Christ. Thank you for your thoughtful and kind letter. We both agree that taking up the sword is wrong. What we need to determine is: Does our system invite participation, as you suggest, or is it a system that simply offers more temptations to participate? Asked another way: do we have more choices than Paul had (concerning demonstrating, even legally, against government), or should we call them enticements?

Paul surely told the men of his day not to commit adultery. As the feminine garb then effectively concealed women, it was fairly easy not to be drawn to another man's wife. Now, however, every television commercial and venture to the mall is a lesson in the female form. Would Paul's injunction against adultery change with the increased opportunity? No. Adultery is a sin and always to be discouraged. It's just much harder today than it was in Paul's day not to cross these borders.

Likewise, the reason Paul recommended quiet subjection to government was because this was the ideal. It gave a person more time and energy to mind things above (Colossians 3:1-2). This was relatively easy in Paul's day because, as you say, there was little choice. Now, however, opportunities abound to change the system. Why?



Because the United States of America has a representative form of government. Does Paul's Scriptural injunction to mind things above change with the increased opportunity to participate in things below? No. Being quietly subject to whatever government is in power is the Scriptural ideal in any age or administration. It's just much harder to stay out of it in a representative government than in an imperial system like that of Rome. My conclusion? A representative form of government is temptation, not invitation.

Dear Martin, Part 2

I don't think that Romans 13 changes with the times. We must, however, apply it to our times and not warp the truths contained there by ignoring important differences in our form of government and the Roman one. Furthermore, we have to deal with Romans 13:3-5, not just verses 1 and 2. How does our approach change when the government is a cause for fear for good behavior? It seems that there is a bit more going on here than a simple "obey the government" statement. — Earl

Dear Earl, Part 2

THE STABILITY OF ROMANS 13:1-5

You say that you don't think Romans 13:1-2 changes with the times, yet you immediately insist that we must not warp it by "ignoring the important differences" between our form of government and the Roman one. Aren't you pulling both ends of the rope? Truth is, the timeless purity of Romans 13:1-2 has been warped *because* humans have noted these so-called "important differences" of government.

Thank you for spotlighting Romans 13:3-5. Let's dig into it.

For magistrates are not a fear to the good act, but to the evil. Now you do not want to be fearing the authority. Do good, and you will be having applause from it. For it is God's servant for your good. Now if you should be doing evil, fear, for not feignedly is it wearing the sword. For it is God's servant, an avenger for indignation to him who is committing evil."

Your question, then, is: "How does our approach change when the government is a cause for fear for good behavior?"

Paul has just stated as emphatically as possible in the two preceding verses that, "There is no authority except under God. Now those which are, have been set under God, so that he who is resisting an authority has withstood God's mandate."

It would be strange for Paul to leave us no "out" in verses one and two, only to imply in verses three through five that it would be the prerogative of the individual to "change his approach" (that is, to suddenly become insubordinate to the magistrates, or superior authorities) if, in his opinion, the magistrates became hostile to the good act. The question we need to answer is: what is the "good act" of verse three that the magistrates would applaud, and what is the "evil act" for which they would wield the sword? Before we answer this question, though, let's investigate Paul's motivation for mentioning these authorities in the first place.

WHERE DOES "ROMANS 13" BEGIN?

Chapter headings, verse numbers, and paragraphs in Scripture are not part of the inspired text, but were added later so that people at sporting events could write "John 3:16" on large signs. Does Paul all of a sudden

start talking about government in the so-called first verse of the so-called thirteenth chapter of Romans, or is this only the continuation of a theme he began in the so-called twelfth chapter?

In the fourteenth verse of the twelfth of Romans, Paul embarks upon a litany of Christ-like characteristics that would surely mark one as His. Please note that these things are not in accord with the wisdom of the world, but, rather, with the wisdom of God; the world (which must include many Christian political activists) believes these things to be quite foolish:

- bless those who are persecuting you: bless, and do not curse
- be mutually disposed to one another, not being disposed to that which is high, but being led away to the humble
 - do not come to pass for prudent with yourselves
 - to no one render evil for evil
 - being at peace with all humanity, you are not avenging yourselves
 - if your enemy should be hungering, give him the morsel, if thirsting, give him drink
 - be not conquered by evil; but conquer evil with good
 - let every soul be subject to the superior authorities

Did you see what I did? I snuck Romans 13:1 into the list of Christ-like virtues from Romans 12. But do you know what? That's just where it belongs. Romans 13:1-5 is not a separate treatise on government, but the continuation of the list of the Christ-like qualities of Romans, chapter 12 that mark true men and women of God.

These rare qualities of Romans 12 ought to fit seamlessly into our actions and attitudes toward the superior authorities of Romans 13. This means blessing (not praying against) those who are raising our taxes; being disposed to the humble (the socially anonymous) rather than the high (political power brokers); not assuming the prudence to know which government best suits God's present purposes; not speaking ill of liberals when they speak ill of us; not becoming agitated at the godless antics of godless people; not secretly plotting the overthrow of bad government; and not being content until having sent our political adversaries a tin of homemade cookies and, at the same time, promising to shut up and leave them alone (unless it is to bless or feed them).

BE GOOD TO THE EVIL AUTHORITIES

Having just determined that Romans 12 runs seamlessly into Romans 13, (remember, chapter headings and paragraphs are uninspired) let's do just that. Watch what happens when we insert a semicolon at the end of the last clause of the last verse of Romans 12 (punctuation, too, is uninspired) and put the first verse of Romans 13 next to it. It is perfectly lawful for us to do this.

“Conquer evil with good; let every soul be subject to the superior authorities.”

Do you catch the gist of it? The “good” of the first clause is the “subjection” of the second, and the “evil” of the first is the “superior authority” of the second. As a semicolon is nearly the equivalent of our “that is,” let us read: “Conquer evil with good, that is, let every soul be subject to the superior authorities.” To unite the two clauses into one, using parenthetical insertions, we would render it: “Conquer evil (the superior authorities) with good (be subject to them).”

Far from proving that we are to be subject to good authorities only, these verses prove the opposite.

It is common knowledge that the authorities of Paul's day were incorrigibly wicked. Did not Paul himself know it? Who were the religious authorities of his day? None other than Caiaphas and Annas, the men who plotted the death of the only sinless Man Who ever lived. Who were the civil authorities? History would be hard pressed to assemble two more infamous names than Pilate and Nero. Paul, carrying the otherworldly injunctions of Romans 12 into the practical arena of the day's brutal authorities, wrote, in effect:

“Be good to the evil authorities.”

This harmonizes with Paul's theme of enduring affliction, persevering in prayer, and conquering evil with good, a theme that begins in the middle of Romans 12 and extends to the seventh verse of Romans 15. An evil authority, then, would be an essential part of Paul's exhortation. Would the saints need to be exhorted to be subject to a good authority? What better way for the saints to display the meekness and grace of Christ than against a backdrop of evil? In fact, it's the only way. —**MZ**

(To be continued next week.)