

U.S. Church Leaders: “Christians must Obey the U.S. Government ... No Matter What”. Resistance to Tyranny is “Obedience to God”.

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Should We Obey Authority ... No Matter What?

A number of Christian leaders say that Christians must obey the government ... no matter *what*. For example, Robert Deffinbaugh – pastor at Community Bible Chapel in Richardson, Texas – [says](#):

Whether the government be totalitarian or democratic, the Christian's obligation to submit to it is the same.

Many ministers tell us we should act like slaves, blindly submitting to the government:

Some even allege that the U.S. government is coordinating with Christian ministers nationwide so that – if the government imposes martial – the ministers will urge their flocks to obey the government. See [this](#) and [this](#).

This is not an unrealistic or abstract concept. After all, most churches in Nazi-era Germany [supported the Nazis](#). The German clergy used the [same rationale](#) to support Hitler that many American churches are using today to demand obedience to authority ... Romans 13:

The German Christians were strongly nationalistic, and adopted ... respect for state authority. This passage in Romans 13 was often cited as proof of a correlation between the Church and State:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists the what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

German church leaders even [criticized](#) Christians for disobeying their “governing authorities” ... by protecting Jewish refugees by hiding them in their homes.

And Hitler shows how tyrannical rulers view those who obey a demand for obedience ...

he [ridiculed](#) German Christians behind their backs for being so submissive in obeying the Nazis:

The Protestants haven't the faintest conception of a church. You can do anything you like with them- they will submit. These pastors are used to cares and worries... they learnt them from their squires.... They are insignificant little people, submissive as dogs, and they sweat with embarrassment when you talk to them.

The Bible Urges Us to CHALLENGE – Not Obey – Bad Government

In reality, Christian (and Jewish) leaders throughout history have explained that we must *disobey* tyrannical governments.

The Book of Maccabees – an ancient Jewish book purporting to document the events which Chanukah celebrates – apparently [says](#):

Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.

([Thomas Jefferson agreed.](#))

Gordan Runyan – pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church – [points out](#) numerous instances in the Bible of men and women who disobeyed their government rulers, and were *rewarded* by God and *praised* as holy.

Indeed, the Bible mentions “justice” more than almost any other topic. The Bible demands that we do justice and to [stand up to ANYONE — including the rich or powerful — who do injustice or oppress the people.](#)

Baptist minister Chuck Baldwin [writes](#):

Did John the Baptist violate God's principle of submission to authority when he publicly scolded King Herod for his infidelity? Did Simon Peter and the other Apostles violate God's principle of submission to authority when they refused to stop preaching on the streets of Jerusalem? Did Paul violate God's principle of submission to authority when he refused to obey those authorities who demanded that he abandon his missionary work? In fact, Paul spent almost as much time in jail as he did out of jail.

Remember that every apostle of Christ (except John) was killed by hostile civil authorities opposed to their endeavors. Christians throughout church history were imprisoned, tortured, or killed by civil authorities of all stripes for refusing to submit to their various laws and prohibitions. Did all of these Christian martyrs violate God's principle of submission to authority?

So, even the great prophets, apostles, and writers of the Bible (including the writer of Romans Chapter 13) understood that human authority – even civil authority – is limited.

Plus, Paul makes it clear that our submission to civil authority must be predicated on more than fear of governmental retaliation. Notice, he said, “Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.” Meaning, our obedience to civil authority is more than just “because they said so.” It is also a matter of conscience. This means we must

think and reason for ourselves regarding the justness and rightness of our government's laws. Obedience is not automatic or robotic. It is a result of both rational deliberation and moral approbation.

Therefore, there are times when civil authority may need to be resisted. Either governmental abuse of power or the violation of conscience (or both) could precipitate civil disobedience."

(Baldwin also notes that Romans 13 teaches that [any government that is a "terror to good works" is acting beyond its authority and must be resisted](#). Therefore, Romans 13 compels us to resist and remove from power all elements of government which are corrupt.)

Reverend Howard Bess [writes](#):

As modern New Testament scholars have reconstructed the context in which Jesus lived and taught, they have realized that Jesus was not simply a religious figure. He was a severe critic of those who controlled the temple, those who controlled the empire, and those who controlled the economic systems that starved and robbed the poor and left the orphan and the widow to fend for themselves. To Jesus, these issues were all tied together.

He advocated overthrow of a corrupt system. He believed the days of the oppressors were numbered. But he believed the overthrow could be accomplished by love, mercy and kindness.

Family Guardian Ministry [notes](#):

The entire basis of the Reformation was that of disobedience to the "governing authorities" of Rome- the Pope and the Emperor, who both demanded submission to the Roman Catholic church as the religious and political establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. When it was demanded of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms to recant of his opposition to papal authority, his only response was as follows:

Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments... I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience. Here I stand. God help me! Amen. [See Philip Schaff, [History of the Christian Church](#)]

Luther's courageous stand against tyranny literally set off the spark which would eventually ignite the Protestant Reformation. As stated by Church historian, Philip Schaff:

Luther's testimony before the Diet is an event of world-historical importance and far-reaching effect. It opened an intellectual conflict which is still going on in the civilized world. He stood

there as the fearless champion of the supremacy of the word of God over the traditions of men, and of the liberty of conscience over the tyranny of authority....

When tradition becomes a wall against freedom, when authority degenerates into tyranny, the very blessing is turned into a curse, and history is threatened with stagnation and death. At such rare junctures, Providence raises those pioneers of progress, who have the intellectual and moral courage to break through the restraints at the risk of their lives, and to open new paths for the onward march of history.... Conscience is the voice of God in man.

This principle of the primacy of the Scripture-bound conscience over human tradition, whether it be magisterial or ecclesiastical, resounds throughout the writings of the most prominent Protestant leaders whom God raised up to defend the faith after Luther. Not one of these great men interpreted Romans 13:1-7 in the way it is so often interpreted today, and that should be sufficient reason to at least reconsider what is so commonly taught from the modern pulpit on the subject of civil obedience and disobedience. Without succumbing to the error of traditionalism, we are nevertheless to look upon the views of godly men of times past with respect.

John Calvin, known even by many of his theological opponents as the “prince of exegetes,” advocated the same position with regards to civil disobedience previously set forth by Luther.

He concluded his exhortations to Christians to submit to the authorities who have been placed by God over them with the following qualifications:

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow. And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offense of Him for whose sake you obey men!

The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When He opens His sacred mouth, He alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates– a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God. [Calvin, [Institutes of the Christian Religion](#).]

Calvin’s purpose for writing his commentary on Romans 13:1-7 was entirely different than that which prompted his discussion of civil government in the Institutes. Therefore, when we turn to the commentary, we find a somewhat different tenor of thought. While still maintaining that it is the duty of Christians to submit to the “governing authorities,” we more clearly see that it is the legitimate rule of the magistrate to which we are to submit ourselves:

The reason why we ought to be subject to magistrates is, because they are constituted by God's ordination.... [T]yrannies and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government; yet the right of government is ordained by God for the well being of mankind.... [T]hey are the means which he designedly appoints for the preservation of legitimate order....

...[Paul] speaks here of the true, and, as it were, of the native duty of the magistrate, from which however they who hold power often degenerate. [Calvin, [Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans](#).]

To ensure that Calvin's point was not missed, Henry Beveridge, the editor of the Scottish publication of the Commentaries wrote the following:

...[I]t is remarkable, that often in Scripture things are stated broadly and without any qualifying terms, and yet they have limits, as it is clear from other portions. This peculiarity is worthy of notice. Power is from God, the abuse of power is from what is evil in men. The Apostle [i.e. Paul in writing Romans] throughout refers only to power justly exercised. He does not enter into the subject of tyranny and oppression. And this is probably the reason why he does not set limits to the obedience required: he contemplated no other than the proper and legitimate use of power. [Henry Beveridge, in John Calvin, *ibid.*, p. 478 (footnote).]

Even the Westminster Confession of Faith is agreed on this point:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word.... So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.... [[Westminster Confession of Faith](#).] ***

When a civil magistrate becomes a tyrant and commands us to do that which the Bible forbids, either explicitly or by necessary implication, then we are not to either fear him or honor him.

Pope Francis recently [criticized](#) governments which allow financial corruption:

The scandalous concentration of global wealth is possible due to the connivance of public leaders with the powers that be. The corruption is itself a process of death ... when life dies, there is corruption. There are few things more difficult than opening a breach in a corrupt heart: "So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich with God" (Luke 12:21). When the personal situation of the corrupt becomes complicated, he knows all the loopholes to escape as did the dishonest steward of the Gospel (cf. Lk 16.1 to 8).

The corrupt does not perceive his corruption. It's a little like what happens with

bad breath ... it's hard for those who have it to know, unless someone else tells them.

For this reason, the corrupt can hardly get out of their internal state by way of remorse of conscience. Corruption is a greater evil than sin. More than forgiven, this evil must be cured.

Corruption has become "natural" to the point of getting to statehood linked to personal and social custom, a common practice in commercial and financial transactions, in public procurement, in any negotiation involving State agents. It is the victory of appearances over reality ...

There are now many international conventions and treaties on the matter ... not so much geared to protect the citizens, who ultimately are the latest victims - particularly the most vulnerable - but how to protect the interests of operators of economic markets and financial companies.

Criticizing such governments is the *opposite* of obeying them simply because they are the authorities.

The influential Christian writer Francis A. Schaeffer [said](#):

If we as Christians do not speak out as authoritarian governments grow from within or come from outside, eventually we or our children will be the enemy of society and the state. No truly authoritarian government can tolerate those who have real absolute by which to judge its arbitrary absolutes and who speak out and act upon that absolute.

Mark Lewis Taylor - the Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Theology and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary - [said](#):

The power of Jesus is one that enables us to critique the nation and the empire. Unfortunately, that gospel is being sacrificed and squandered by Christians who have cozied up to power and wealth.

Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. [castigated](#) the modern-day church for being "so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are."

King noted:

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators" ... They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry [explains](#):

What about the bad governments like the Nazis or the communist regimes where they killed millions? If God is the one who sets up governments, are we supposed to obey those bad governments?

The answer is no.

If a government were to declare that we should kill all Asians or immigrants or people with Down's syndrome, we should disobey. Governments are run by people and often become corrupt.

Finally, Runyan [notes](#) that believing that Romans compels us to blindly obey authority is absurd ... as it would mean that we have to obey the devil and to commit spiritual treason:

If we assert that God approves of all governing authority, regardless of how it came to be or what it does once it gets there, what we are really saying is that we think Might Makes Right.

This is not materially different from the old-world idea of the Divine Right of Kings. All lovers of liberty, and especially those who know their Bibles, should be repulsed by this idea.

As Willson decries concerning this ridiculous idea:

"No doctrine could be more agreeable than this to tyrants, and to all that panders to unholy power; for, if this be Paul's meaning, there is no despot, no usurper, no bloody conqueror, but could plead the divine sanction and, more than this, the devil himself could lay the teachings of Paul under contribution to enforce his pre-eminently unholy authority.

There is nothing in this about serving tyrants, or offering them a passive non-resistance. To insert a wicked government into this Bible text not only overturns the text itself, but would end up committing spiritual treason, by giving aid and comfort to the enemies of God and His Christ. Surely no one having the Spirit of God within would receive an idea like that with anything other than revulsion.

Has Romans Been Mistranslated?

Runyan [argues](#) that Romans may have been mistranslated:

Every person is to submit to the "governing" authorities. The word translated "governing" there by the ESV is the Greek word *huperecho*. It means to excel, to be superior, or better than; to surpass. The King James at this place has "higher powers," which makes room for the idea of being better than something else.

The reason this is of some interest is that *huperecho* appears four other times in the New Testament. Once is in 1 Peter 2:13, in that letter's passage about

civil government. The majority of uses occur, however, in Philippians, where Paul uses it three times, at 2:3;3:8; and 4:7. These are quoted below. For ease of understanding, I've put the English words in ALL CAPS which are the renderings of huperecho.

Philippians 2:3 — “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others MORE SIGNIFICANT than yourselves.”

Philippians 3:8 — “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the SURPASSING worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Philippians 4:7 — “And the peace of God, which SURPASSES all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

As you can see, the Greek word means that which is morally better or excellent or weighty.

In these places, modern English translations usually have some combination of “important,” “significant,” and “surpassing” to translate huperecho. The KJV has “better,” “excellency,” and “passeth” (as in going beyond or surpassing) in the Philippians texts.

All this is simply meant to show that huperecho may legitimately refer to moral excellence, and does in fact, in most of its New Testament appearances. The modern use of “surpassing” in the Philippians passages is a moral surpassing. It is being better, rising above, doing well.

So that, when Romans 13:1 enjoins subjection to the huperecho powers, it's not out of the question that this could be referring to surpassing morality.

On this idea, Willson writes, “Hence, some expositors have been disposed to lay no little stress upon this epithet, as distinctly defining the character of the powers here intended, and as limiting to such the subjection here enjoined, the ‘excelling powers;’ that is, powers possessing a due measure of the qualifications requisite to the rightful exercise of the power of civil rule.” [p.11, The Establishment and Limits of Civil Government.]

Some have suggested that to put “governing” instead of “higher” or “excelling” for huperecho in this place is really more of an interpretation than a word-for-word translation.

Similarly, Family Guardian Ministry [argues](#):

It should be noted that most modern translations, the New King James Version included, have erroneously rendered the Greek phrase “exousias huperechousias” (literally, “authorities above”) as “governing authorities,” rather than “higher powers,” as it appears in the older King James Version.

Whether or not the actual words were mistranslated, one thing is for sure ... the spirit and meaning of Romans has been forgotten.

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