

ROMANS 13:1 AUTHORITY

“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.”¹

Throughout their long history as a people of faith, Baptists have consistently opposed any diminution of the rights of the individual to seek and to pursue their own faith, or for each person to decide to be without faith if that is the choice. Though Baptists enjoy a measure of respectability within contemporary North American society, they have been on the receiving end of state sponsored religious oppression, not occasionally, but frequently.

The First Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts was organised on June 7th, 1665, in defiance of two laws which had been passed by the General Court of the colony. One law stated that all persons wishing to form churches must first obtain consent of the “magistrates and elders of the greater part of the churches within this jurisdiction.” A second law declared that “if any person or persons within this jurisdiction shall ... condemn or oppose the baptising of infants ... such person or persons shall be subject to banishment.”

Thomas Gould, the first pastor of that congregation, and Henry Dunster, a member of the congregation who was also the first President of Harvard College, had each refused to have their babies baptised. Dunster was forced by the General Court to resign his Harvard position because of his refusal to permit his infant child to be baptised. In the years that followed, many members of that congregation were punished by the government for holding to the Baptist “heresy.” They were arrested, jailed, publicly beaten, fined and often proscribed from speaking in their own defence.

It is astounding to witness such action by the state of Massachusetts, particularly since the colony was established by Puritans seeking religious freedom. Because a group seeks freedom from persecution does not mean they will not persecute others. Freedom of the conscience is a rare commodity among religious people. Such was the religious climate in the early days of the migration to the New World.

One Sunday in 1680, worshippers found the doors of their church building nailed up by order of the General Court, with the following notice posted:

“All persons are to take notice that by order of the Court the doors of this house are shut up and that they are inhibited to hold any meeting therein or to open the doors thereof, without license from Authority, til the General Court take further order as they will answer the contrary at their peril, dated in Boston 8th March, 1680, by order of the Council.”

Undaunted, the congregation met outdoors in the cold and rain. The following Sunday, inexplicably, the doors were found open never again closed by the authorities.²

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Information found on the following website for the First Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts <http://www.firstbaptistchurchofboston.org/history/history.html>, accessed 6 June 2011

Baptists understand that authority is limited by God, from Whom all authority devolves. The social order, as we know it, is dependent upon authority which God has appointed. Peter teaches those who confess Christ as Master of life, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor” [1 PETER 2:13-17].

This is a lawless day—many of God’s professed people have grown self-centred and callused. Multiplied laws, many of which are irrelevant to peace and good order, are routinely ignored. Nevertheless, parliaments and legislatures continue to produce yet more laws designed to regulate thoughts, morality and attitudes. In such a reckless environment, what is a Christian supposed to do? To whom shall we look? What should be our attitude toward our various governments, as they grow increasingly irrelevant?

THE CHRISTIAN IN THE MODERN 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.” Central to any understanding of the message is the question of what role a Christian plays in our modern, increasingly pagan society. Must we obey unjust laws? Is the power of the state absolute? Is there a place for disobedience? These vital questions deserve an answer; and it is my intention to seek answers over the course of our studies in this particular chapter.

I confess that this chapter is controversial. J. C. O’Neill reportedly wrote that, “These seven verses have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses in the New Testament.”³ I question whether this is an accurate assessment, but the verse figures prominently in many criticisms of the Faith. Certainly, one argument advanced by Islamic scholars for the superiority of their religion is that they are not required to submit to non-Muslim authorities.

The teaching of the Word of God is that a Christian is responsible to be a good citizen, seeking peace within the state. Clearly, this is the intent of the Word of God. “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” [1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4].

The implication is that we honour God through showing honour to those in authority. However, the expectation of honour is not absolute—honour extends only so far as such authorities fulfil the divine intention to ensure that good is the result of their service and that wrongdoers are held to account. The intent of this passage must be clarified in light of all that the Apostle has written preceding this portion of Scripture and in light of what follows. Good is defined as approval of anything that honours God; whereas evil is defined as anything that dishonours Him.

³ Cited by James Montgomery Boice, **Romans, Volume 4, The New Humanity, Romans 12-16** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1995) 1640, who in turn cites Leon Morris, **The Epistle to the Romans** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1988) 457

Good is that which leads to peace and security, both nationally and individually. Thus, that which is good is the revealed moral law of God [cf. **ROMANS 7:12**]. The revealed will of God is good, or virtuous [see **ROMANS 12:2**]. Though these are general statements, they are nevertheless true statements. Why is murder against the laws of Canada? The reason is that it violates the moral law of God. Why is theft against the laws of Canada? Again, theft violates the moral law of God. Good is that which is moral and righteous.

Government is to have as its guiding principle, good. Except the people of a nation uphold moral conduct, society soon degenerates into a corrupt system where individuals misuse the authority of government to obtain what they want at the expense of others. John Adams, second President of the American Republic, was correct when he observed, “We have no government armed in power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.”⁴ The Constitution Acts of 1867 and of 1982 spell out the form of Canadian government, but the power for sound government is the virtue of the Canadian people. If Canadians are neither a moral nor a religious people, the nation will prove ungovernable. Good cannot arise from that which is against God.

That which is wrong is easier to name once we know how to define what is good. According to what Paul has previously written, suppression of the knowledge of God is wrong, as is haughtiness and self-exaltation (idolatry) [see **ROMANS 1:18-23**]. Homosexual acts and attempts to coerce approval of such acts are wrong [see **ROMANS 1:24-27, 32**]. Likewise, greed, malice, murder, conflict, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, disobedience to parents, together with a ruthless attitude are wrong [**ROMANS 1:28-31**].

Government was never meant to be our master—neither as a ruthless monarchy, a dictatorship or an oppressive parliament. The American founding fathers were convinced that people have the full power to govern themselves, and that people may choose to give up some of their rights for the general good and the protection of rights. Nevertheless, each person should be self-governed, and this is why virtue is so important for citizens.

So long as government fosters what is “good,” we Christians approve of it. In as much as government promotes what is “wrong,” we are compelled to disapprove of it. This does not necessarily mean that we are in rebellion against government, but instead we seek what leads to peace so that we may worship God and thus honour Him.

THE SOURCE OF ALL AUTHORITY — “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” There are two reasons given for Christians to practise subjection to governing authorities. First, there is no authority except from God. Second, those authorities that do exist have been instituted by God. “While civil magistrates or judges are divinely ordained, that ordination carries with it no status in the church: they are ‘men who count for nothing in our community’ [**1 CORINTHIANS 6:4 NEB**].”⁵

God is sovereign. There is no authority except that which comes from God. Every right we hold as citizens devolves from the fact that we are created in the image of God. For this reason, the founding fathers of the American Republic spoke of *unalienable rights*—including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And these unalienable rights have been endowed by the Creator!

⁴ http://quotes.liberty-tree.ca/quote_blog/John.Adams.Quote.08DA, accessed 7 July 2011

⁵ F. F. Bruce, **Romans** (Rev. Ed.), TNTC (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1985) 223

Paul is not setting here an absolute condition for our relationship to government. “What we have here is a general exhortation that delineates what is usually the case; people should normally obey ruling authorities. The text is not intended to be a full-blown treatise on the relationship of believers to the state. It is a general exhortation setting forth the typical obligations one has to civil authorities.”⁶

The state is a divine institution with divine authority. Christians are neither anarchists nor subversives, but rather realists. In commenting on this verse, John Stott writes, “We need to be cautious... [Paul] cannot be taken to mean that all the Caligulas, Herods, Neros and Domitians of New Testament times, and all the Hitlers, Stalins, Amins and Saddams of our times, were personally appointed by God, that God is responsible for their behaviour, or that their authority is in no circumstances to be resisted.”⁷

What is clearly taught is that all human authority is derived from divine authority. You will perhaps recall the account of Jesus standing before Pilate. Pilate boasted to Jesus, “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” To this claim, Jesus responded, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” [JOHN 19:10, 11]. Pilate misused his authority to condemn Jesus, though He was innocent of any crime against the Empire; nevertheless, the authority Pilate wielded had been delegated to him by God.

The underlying point is that God is sovereign; all authority is derived from Him. Authority [*exousía*] lies within the purview of God. The concept implied by this word is “freedom of choice” or “jurisdiction.”⁸ Thus, all human authority is divinely delegated and limited. The corollary to this point is that if all authority resides in God, then likewise all rights are derived from Him. Until we confess Him as God, the Author of rights and the possessor of authority, we enjoy neither rights nor authority.

The issue of authority was a problem for the scribes and the Pharisees, especially as they witnessed Jesus at work during the years of His ministry. Unlike the religious leaders, Jesus taught “as one who had authority” [MATTHEW 7:29]. His healing ministry was a demonstration that He had authority to forgive sins [MATTHEW 9:6]. The authority which He possessed and demonstrated was conferred on His disciples [MATTHEW 10:1].

Christ, as God, possesses authority; His is the divine authority which God alone possesses. You will no doubt remember that the Great Commission is prefaced by the Words of the Master, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” [MATTHEW 28:18]. We who are believers in the Risen Christ have received authority—authority to build one another in the Faith [see 2 CORINTHIANS 10:8; 13:10], authority to set one another free. In COLOSSIANS 2:10 we are instructed that we “have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” The authority which man seeks is authority over the lives of others—authority to coerce and not for the good of others.

Jesus cautioned His people, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” [MATTHEW 20:25-28].

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, **Romans, ECNT** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1998) 687

⁷ John Stott, **Romans: God's Good News for the World** (InterVarsity Press, Wheaton, IL 1994) 340

⁸ O. Betz, **Might, Authority, Throne** (art.) in Colin Brown (ed.), **The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 2** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1976) 608

Long before Jesus confronted Pilate's abuse of power, Daniel declared of God,

“He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings”

[DANIEL 2:21].

On another occasion, Daniel pronounced sentence against Nebuchadnezzar, the king under whom he served. Daniel warned the autocratic ruler that the divine sentence he pronounced would be carried out “till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” [DANIEL 4:25b]. After years of experiencing the hand of God against him, Nebuchadnezzar confessed,

“His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, ‘What have you done?’”

[DANIEL 4: 34, 35]

The humbled king concluded with these wise words that everyone should take to heart. “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all His words are right and His ways are just; and those who walk in pride He is able to humble” [DANIEL 4:37].

To say that we accept God as sovereign in the affairs of nations is easy, especially if we have good rulers, or at least benign rulers. However, what should be our response when we are placed under a despotic rule or autocratic rule, such as that experienced by those compelled to live under the Iranian Mullahs or under Taliban rule? What of Christians who live in Pakistan, or in Viet Nam, or in Cambodia—lands in which Christians have no rights under the law? More pertinent to our particular situation, what should we do when we feel betrayed by leaders who appear to abuse their office for their own benefit, such as appears often to be the case both with some Canadian leaders and with some American leaders? ROMANS 13:1 instructs us that even these authorities have been established by God, and that we have a legitimate (though not open ended) responsibility to be subject to them.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO AUTHORITY — Christians did not promote revolution against Rome as result of Paul's words, nor do God's people promote revolution in this day. The preaching of Christians re-established not only spiritual, but also political freedom in the world. The King is not God walking upon the earth. The State is not God. The ruler must be limited in authority. The ruler, as the head of state, does have authority, but “only in the Lord.” A ruler's authority is limited, and the obligation to submit to that rule is limited to the rightful exercise of that authority. Any head of state who rebels against his God-ordained position may be lawfully opposed. Always and only, however, must such opposition be conducted in lawful ways, which rules out lawless revolution.

Note that Paul calls on Christians to “be subject to the governing authorities,” rather than commanding us to obey them. His choice of words may indicate more than we imagine. As one knowledgeable theologian observes, to be subject “is to recognise one’s subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have ‘authority’ over us... Such a posture will usually demand that we obey what the governing authorities tell us to do. But perhaps our submission to government is compatible with disobedience to government in certain exceptional circumstances. For heading the hierarchy of relations in which Christians find themselves is God; and all subordinate ‘submissions’ must always be measured in relationship to our all-embracing submission to Him.”⁹

In general, Christians are to be a people reflecting a submissive attitude. Christians are to submit to spiritual leaders [1 CORINTHIANS 16:16; HEBREWS 13:17], and to one another [EPHESIANS 5:21]. Christian slaves were to submit to their masters [TITUS 2:9]. Prophets are to exhibit a submissive attitude toward one another [1 CORINTHIANS 14:32]. Christian wives are to submit to their husbands [EPHESIANS 5:22; COLOSSIANS 3:18]. Younger Christians, especially younger elders, are to be subject to those who are more mature [1 PETER 5:5]. Voluntary subjection demonstrates confidence in God’s sovereignty and thus pleases Him. Voluntary submission was the example Christ modelled. Though such an attitude seems antithetical in contemporary society, it is precisely this attitude of voluntary submission that reveals a Christian’s power and ultimate authority.

I mentioned previously, that the power of a state, and in particular for our understanding, the power of the Canadian government, lies in the virtue of the people. The virtue desired of a people is revealed in the Bible. This was the reason that for decades biblical morality was taught in the public schools. Government officials could not take office if they would not declare their belief in God. The rationale was that if one did not believe in God, he could not operate from a proper moral base. By failing to have a foundation from which to work, an individual could destroy the community.

What if the authorities themselves are unrighteous? What if Caesar, not content with receiving what is rightfully his, lays claim to ‘the things that are God’s?’ Caesar could so far exceed the limits of his divinely given jurisdiction as to claim divine honours for himself and wage war against the saints. In fact, that is what will happen in the last days of this present age [cf. REVELATION 11:7; 13:1-18], and it is actually what has happened at various times throughout history! Paul saw the day coming when the restraint of law would be withdrawn and the lawless one would reign [2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-8]. Augustine, in the City of God, writes, “without justice, what are kingdoms but great gangs of bandits?”¹⁰

James Ireland, a courageous Baptist preacher, has been largely forgotten in this day of relative ease of life. Ireland was one of thirty Baptist ministers imprisoned in Virginia between 1768 and 1770. The brave minister of Christ was standing on a table and preaching in an open-air meeting in Culpeper County, near Orange, Virginia. When he bowed his head in prayer, two men grabbed him by the collar and jerked him off the table. They hustled him off to jail for preaching without proper authority. In the face of the charge, Ireland gave as his authority, not the Church of England, but the Author of the Gospel, but that was not good enough for Virginia Anglicans.

⁹ Douglas Moo, **The Epistle to the Romans**, NICNT (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 797

¹⁰ Augustine, **City of God** 4.4 (Penguin Books, London 1984), cited in Bruce, op. cit., 221

He ended up in a small cell with a rowdy, drunken tough. During his five months in jail, in an attempt to kill him, someone set off a home-made bomb. Later, someone else took pods of Indian pepper, stuffed with brimstone, and set them on fire at his door and window in an attempt to suffocate him. Not long after that, the jailer allowed the delivery of poisoned food. In spite of cold, hunger, persecution, plots, threats, rough cellmates, and a jail infested with mice and spiders, Ireland never lost faith and courage.

He preached through the grated windows of his cell. Authorities rode horses through the crowd to try and disperse them, but the people came back. Eventually, William and Mary's Toleration Act of 1770 forced his release.¹¹

Another Virginia Baptist, John Weatherford, also preached from prison through a barred window. When he stuck his hands through the bars in a gesture of emphasis, a coward slashed his hands with a knife. He kept on preaching, so authorities built a brick wall ten feet high outside his window to keep people from seeing and hearing Weatherford. When the people gathered, they raised a pole with a handkerchief above the wall to signal that they were ready for a sermon, and the fearless, leather lunged Weatherford would oblige them. Eventually, Patrick Henry secured his release from jail.

Though the American colonies were settled by people seeking religious freedom, they did not necessarily wish others who dissented from them to be free. The Anglicans in Virginia were no worse or no better than the Congregationalists in Massachusetts. Baptists held strong convictions concerning freedom of religion and they paid for their convictions with severe persecution. Ultimately, they obtained what they sought.

Perhaps now you will understand the significance of the First Amendment to the American Constitution, the first principle, if you will, of the American Bill of Rights. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people to peaceably to assembly, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Religion, worship of Almighty God, was the great centre from which other freedoms flowed. Among those freedoms which were both dependent on and supportive of faith and conscience are freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. Religious liberty is the first great liberty; it is the fount of all other liberties.

Can it be shown that Paul's demand for submission is not absolute? Clearly, authorities can abuse their God-given positions. What happens when they abuse those positions, reversing their duty so that they commend those who do evil and punish those who do good? What happens when government commends homosexuality and punishes those who would resist approving that which is clearly against nature? Does the requirement to be subject to such authorities still stand in such a morally perverse situation? That is the question which confronts conscientious Christians in this day.

The answer to these questions is an emphatic "No!" "The principle is clear. We are to submit [to government authorities] right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God."¹²

¹¹ Bynum Shaw, **Divided We Stand—The Baptists in American Life** (Moore Publishing Co., Durham, NC 1975) 74

¹² Stott, op. cit., 342

The concept of resisting submission in this instance is usually referred to as civil disobedience. Civil disobedience refers to deliberately disobeying a particular human law because it is contrary to God's law. Trespass, organising sit-ins, obstructing police in the performance of their duties, may also in certain circumstances be justified. However, in such cases, the term which should be applied is "civil protest," since the laws which are being broken in order to publicise the protest are not themselves intrinsically evil.

Black Americans suffered under Jim Crow laws in the southern United States until the civil rights movement of the sixties was galvanised under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King. Prior to these massive demonstrations of civil disobedience, blacks were unable to eat in the same diners as whites. Water fountains were segregated, as were toilets. What was still more intolerable was the fact that the individual's right to vote was determined by the colour of his skin.

In our own nation, Baptist preachers were routinely jailed in Quebec for disobeying the laws of that province. The greatest oppression appears to have occurred during the 1960s. I have been privileged to have known two preachers who were jailed for the terrible crime of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ in defiance of church and state. At the time I knew him, Orville Small served as registrar of Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. As a young man, Orville was a Baptist preacher labouring to establish a church in the province of Quebec. On several occasions Orville spoke of his service in those dark days in La Belle Province, and his mother-in-law, who was a member of my congregation in New Westminster, related how Orville was arrested and jailed because he preached the Word of God, the Gospel of Peace.

Likewise, Bev Ward, who served as the pastor of the First Baptist Church of North Vancouver during the 1980s when I knew him, bore the distinction of having been jailed for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bev and I were prayer partners for several years, during which time I came to admire his brave stand against government oppression of religious liberty during those difficult years.

There is an old saying among foreign missionaries that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Certainly, that saying applies in the lives of those fearless saints who brought the faith to North America and then spread it across the continent.

Throughout the Word of God are found examples of civil disobedience. Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the new-born boys, they refused to obey. "The midwives fear God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded" [EXODUS 1:17]. Nebuchadnezzar issued an edict that all his subjects must fall down and worship his golden image; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey [DANIEL 3:8-30]. When Darius, king of the Medo-Persian Empire, decreed that nobody could petition any god or man save himself for a period of thirty days, Daniel refused to obey [DANIEL 6:1-28]. When the Sanhedrin banned all preaching in the Name of Jesus [ACTS 4:18], the Apostles disobeyed. Haled before that august body, Peter boldly asserted on behalf of all the Apostles, "We must obey God rather than men" [ACTS 5:29]. In each instance, civil disobedience involved great personal risk, including possible loss of life. In each instance, the purpose of the refusal to obey the laws of the state was "to demonstrate their submissiveness to God, not their defiance of government."¹³

¹³ Charles W. Colson, **Kingdoms in Conflict, An Insider's Challenging View of Politics, Power and the Pulpit** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1987) 251

A great Princeton scholar and Presbyterian divine provides an excellent summation of this verse. He writes, “the Gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy. It teaches rulers that they are ministers of God for the public good; and it teaches subjects to be obedient to magistrates, not only for fear, but also for conscience sake.”¹⁴

Christians are not called to be pliant, lying down in the face of evil and doing nothing to oppose it. Jesus, standing before Pilate provides a powerful example. He was not disrespectful to the representative of Rome; He did not rage or threaten. Our Lord knew what the governor would do, and He accepted the official action as from God. However, Jesus was not silent. He spoke the truth, as He always had done. When He had reminded Pilate that the only authority he possessed was that which had been divinely granted, the Master warned the governor against continued sinning. “He who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin” [JOHN 19:11b].

This is the role of a Christian today. We hear a great deal of the separation of church and state, an idea which has been utterly perverted in this day to mean separation of God from state. We would not wish to see a union of church and state, but what we witness today is a relegating of righteousness, godliness, Christian faith, to a sort of civic ghetto. Though Christians do not rule the state—nor should we—it is nevertheless our duty as followers of the Son of God to speak out against all wickedness. We are conscience bound to remonstrate against government leaders who seek to commend evil, even as they condemn the good. Civic leaders need to have their sin exposed. Governing authorities must be reminded that they are ultimately accountable to God from whom their authority derives.

Therefore, we are accountable. We are accountable to speak out. We do not have the power of the sword; that is reserved for civil authorities, as the Apostle will demonstrate in a few verses. The weapon we are called to bear is truth, and truth is stronger than the sword. But woe to us if we do not wield the sword of truth powerfully.

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, **Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1886) 415