

“Subject to Magistrates, and Princes, and Powers, but within the Limits of Discipline”: Romans 13:1–7 before the Edict of Constantine the Great (c. 167–250 CE)

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ABSTRACT: Romans 13:1–7 is among the best-known passages in the New Testament that addresses the submission of early Christians to the ruling powers of the day. Christians are to submit to the governing authorities, for they are ordained by God. Likewise, rebellion against the governing authorities means rebellion against God (Rom. 13:1–2). Yet Paul has in view only the ideal iteration of governance, in which rulers are “servants of God” (Rom. 13:4,6) and they reward the good and punish the evil. In times of tyranny and persecution, however, later ecclesiastics had to look back at Romans 13:1–7 from a different perspective: should Christians submit to unjust and despotic rulers? The answer that takes shape during the first two centuries of the Christian era (c. 167–250 CE) is a conditioned “Yes”. The approach of these writers is mainly positive and constructive. Christians are to respect tyrannical rulers at all time, even when they must be resisted. Christians are to obey tyrannical rulers whenever they act justly and in everything that is not contrary to their faith. Christians are to pray for tyrannical rulers sincerely and without ceasing. There are, however, limits to Christians’ submission to governing authorities. They are to resist any demand that goes against “the rules of Christian life”: a ruler that claims the honor that belongs only to God, acts against the will and word of God, or acts under the influence of the devil, is to be resisted. Yet there are also limitations placed on their resistance, as there are limitations placed on their obedience. Christians are to resist tyrannical rulers in a manner that is brave, yet respectful, righteous, and peaceful.

KEYWORDS: Romans 13:1–7, governing authorities, tyranny, persecution, submission, resistance, limits

Introduction

Romans 13:1–7 is among the best-known passages in the New Testament to address the relationship between church and state, particularly the submission of early Christians to the ruling powers of the day: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted” (Rom. 13:1–2). If the relationship between early Christians and the Roman Empire is in view, then undoubtedly the pivotal landmark of the first centuries of the common era is the edict of Mediolanum (Milan), issued by Constantine the Great, by which Christians were granted freedom of religion (313 CE). Before the time of Constantine, Christianity was viewed largely as a *superstitio* (Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44; Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 10.96; cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 16) and was treated by local magistrates as a *religio illicita* (cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 21.1; Esler 1996, 211). During this time, Christians faced social discrimination, religious opposition, and even several waves of political persecution – mainly local, approved or tolerated by provincial rulers, but also centralized, ordered by a few emperors.

Given the hostile environment in which early Christianity took shape, the issue of Christians’ submission to the governing authorities could not be avoided. Moreover, Romans 13:1–7 could not be avoided. How radical is the exhortation of the apostle Paul? Are there limits or exceptions to the submission required in Romans 13? If rulers are appointed by God, how should Christians react when rulers turn against God? If rulers are instituted to reward

the good and punish the evil, what is to be done in the case of reversal – the good is being punished and the evil rewarded? Questions like these seem to appear repeatedly in early Christianity, setting the background for the perspectives offered by various ecclesiastics, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and others.

When compared with the numerous references to Romans 13:1–7 after the edict of 313 CE, those during the first two centuries of Christianity are scarce, yet they provide an important window into the struggles and dilemmas of the early Christians, as they attempt to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). In this study, only the *most significant readings* of Romans 13:1–7 will be analysed, from *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 167 CE) to Origen’s *Contra Celsum* (c. 250 CE). A few readings during this period are either not considered or merely mentioned, for they apply Romans 13 to contexts other than Christians’ submission to authorities or do not offer sufficient data for a proper analysis: e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 4.36.6; Tertullian, *De anima* 33.6; Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum*, 3.5. Before the reception of Romans 13:1–7 in the selected writings is examined, however, a brief analysis of the text itself is requisite.

Some notes on Romans 13:1–7

In his letter to the Christians of Rome, the apostle Paul addresses the topic of submission of citizens to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1–7). All humans (lit. “every soul”), but Christians primarily, should be subjected to both central and local rulers, for “the authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1). Douglas J. Moo (1996, 791) sets this section in the context of “Paul’s teaching about the transitory nature of this world” (cf. Rom. 13:11–14): “His purpose may be to stifle the kind of extremism that would pervert his emphasis on the coming of a new era and on the ‘new creation’ into a rejection of every human and societal convention — including the government.” Although Christians have become “citizens of heaven” (cf. Phil. 3:20) and are placed under the absolute authority of King Jesus (McKnight & Modica 2013), they are still citizens of the nations of this world. Moreover, the established human institutions, including political and administrative structures, are a manifestation of God’s ongoing care for the world (Moo 1996, 791). Thus, to respect the political authorities means, for Paul, to submit to the ordering that God has instituted on earth (Rom. 13:1–2).

Aside from the literary context above, there could be also a historical context behind Romans 13:1–7. As Gordon D. Fee (Fee & Stuart 1993, 52–53) remarks, Paul’s letters are occasional, part of a dialogue out of which the modern readers only hear the answers, while the questions remain silent:

Most of our problems in interpreting the Epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were, or even if there was a problem. It is much like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying. Yet in many cases it is especially important for us to try to hear “the other end” so that we know what our passage is an answer to.

For certain scholars (e.g., Dunn 1988, 766), the background of Romans 13:1–7 is the rebellious attitude of those Christians in Rome who “had been infected by their fellow citizens with a resistance to paying taxes to an increasingly rapacious Roman government”. Indeed, the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annales* 13.50–51) refers to the people’s refusal to pay “indirect” taxes to Emperor Nero during the 50s CE, a refusal that escalated into a revolt against taxation in 58 CE (cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 6.10.1). That this is the actual historical background of Romans 13 is uncertain, as there is only a secondary emphasis on taxation (Rom. 13:6–7) (see Moo 1996, 793).

It is noteworthy that Paul writes Romans 13 under the rule of Nero (r. 54–68 CE). Yet the years 56–57 CE, the date of the composition of Romans that is agreed upon by the bulk of scholars (e.g., Jewett 2006, 21), were the early years of Nero’s reign. As Ben Witherington III

(2004, 305) notes, “Until 59, there was relative peace and calm, especially in Rome, and there was much hope that the emperor would continue along the positive track he was following. He had, after all, promised such at his accession” (cf. Seneca, *De Clementia* 1.2–4). Soon afterwards, Nero’s rule changes drastically and he becomes the infamous tyrant that is remembered today (e.g., Griffin 2013). Would Paul have written a similar exhortation as in Romans 13:1–7, if he would have written it sometime later, during the final years of Nero’s reign? The answer is both “Yes” and “No”.

By the time he writes Romans, Paul has lived as a Christian under three Caesars: Tiberius (r. 14–37 CE), Caligula (r. 37–41 CE) and Claudius (r. 41–54 CE). All three emperors were known for their tyrannical abuses and immoral excesses. Moreover, Paul himself suffered injustice from various rulers and administrators of the Roman provinces (e.g., Acts 16:16–40; 18:12–15; 2 Cor. 11:32–33). By now, he has seen enough instances of unjust and tyrannic rule. How are Christians to submit to such rulers and to their oppressive regimes? On the one hand, Paul’s language in Romans 13:1–7 is universal: “*all souls... the authorities that exist have been established by God*” (Rom. 13:1). Also, in the larger context of the letter, such submission to earthly rulers is an attestation to the transforming power the Gospel (Moo 1996, 744). Thus, this exhortation goes beyond the occasional character of the letter (cf. Jewett 2006, 786–787). On the other hand, scholars have noted that Paul has in view only positive aspects with regard to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:3–6): “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right... the one in authority is *God’s servant* for your good... They are *God’s servants*, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer... the authorities are *God’s servants*, who give their full time to governing.” There are no indications that Paul has also in view instances of tyranny, abuse or injustice. Rulers, therefore, are to be obeyed as long as they fulfil their rightful duties and remain “*God’s servants*”. When they become *God’s adversaries*, Christian resistance is a must. As Thomas R. Schreiner (1998, 687–88) concludes,

This text is misunderstood if it is taken out of context and used as an absolute word so that Christians uncritically comply with the state no matter what is being demanded. 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 as 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. Indeed, Paul envisions a situation in which the governing authority carries out its task by punishing evildoers and rewarding those who do what is good. I am not persuaded that one can account for this passage by appealing to Paul’s good relationship with civil authorities or the more genial part of Nero’s reign. Paul was keenly aware that the ruling authorities had put Jesus to death, and as a student of the OT and Jewish tradition he was well schooled in the evil that governments had inflicted on the people of God. It was simply not his intention to detail here the full relationship of believers to the government. Stein (1989, 334) says rightly, “Governments, even oppressive governments, by their very nature seek to prevent the evils of indiscriminate murder, riot, thievery, as well as general instability and chaos, and good acts do at times meet with its approval and praise.” Paul would not disagree with the call to obey God rather than rulers when they attempted to squelch the preaching of the gospel (Acts 5:29; cf. Mart. Pol. 10.1–2, where rulers are respected but Polycarp will not render worship to the genius of Caesar). Nor would he dispute the claim that the state can function as an evil beast (Rev. 13), since John’s teaching stems from Dan. 7, and Paul himself expects an evil ruler to arise (2 Thess. 2:1–12). The intention in Romans is to sketch in the normal and usual relationship between believers and ruling power (cf. Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–17). Christians should submit to such authority and carry out its statutes, unless the state commands believers to do that which is contrary to the will of God.

For Schreiner, the emphasis seems to be on the active and positive: governing authorities, even those abusive and unjust, are to be obeyed in all they are doing right and whenever it is possible. During the first centuries of the Christian era, however, this proved to be a challenging matter, with various nuances and novel contexts. In the following sections, therefore, the most significant instances of the reception of Romans 13:1–7 will be traced throughout early Christian history, namely the period before the edict of 313 CE, by which all

Christians throughout the Roman Empire were granted freedom of religion and political protection.

Martyrdom of Polycarp (c. 167 CE)

Given the complicated relationship between Christians and the governing authorities of the Roman regions prior to the edict of Constantin the Great (313 CE), including the local and systematic waves of persecution, it is of little surprise that references to Romans 13:1–7 are scarce in the first two centuries. It is also of little surprise that (perhaps) the earliest direct reference to Paul’s exhortation still extant comes from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3–10.2 (Holmes 2007, 301–302), which is a textual pattern of the Christian resistance to Caesar’s cult:

9:3 But when the magistrate persisted and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ”, Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” 10:1 But as [the magistrate] continued to insist, saying: “Swear by the genius of Caesar”, [Polycarp] answered: “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now, if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing.” 2 The proconsul said: “Persuade the people.” But Polycarp said: “You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God [Rom. 13:1–7], as long as it does us no harm; but as for these, I do not think they are worthy that I should have to defend myself before them”.

Eusebius of Caesarea (*Historia ecclesiastica* 4.14.10–4.15.1) erroneously places Polycarp’s martyrdom in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180), while modern scholars (e.g., Barnes 1969, 131; Parvis 2007, 127–132) prefer an earlier date, during the reign of Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161). A more precise framing is unnecessary for the purpose of this study, as Christians were persecuted *for being Christians* during both reigns – yet not by the emperors themselves (Keresztes 1968; 1971). The persecutions were local, rather than central.

Under the threat of death penalty, Polycarp, then Bishop of Smyrna, is asked by the local magistrate to “swear by the genius [or the fortune] of Caesar”, which is a form of declaring the deity of the emperor. In the words of Origen (*Contra Celsum* 8.65), “We will never swear by ‘the fortune of the king’, nor by ought else that is considered equivalent to God.... If, on the other hand (as is thought by others, who say that to swear by the fortune of the king of the Romans is to swear by his demon), what is called the fortune of the king is in the power of demons, then in that case we must die sooner than swear by [it].” Indeed, Polycarp prefers to be martyred rather than blaspheme Jesus and proclaim Caesar as Lord. It is in this context that he cites broadly Romans 13:1–2. For the sake of brevity, a single aspect shall be emphasised at this point. Polycarp’s citation is followed by a conditional phrase: “as long as...”. The partial submission to Caesar and local magistrates is conditioned by the absolute submission to God and to “King” Jesus. When the two are in conflict, “I am a Christian” means to choose the latter, regardless of the consequences.

Irenaeus of Lugdunum (c. 175–180 CE)

Interestingly, the devil almost disappears as a subject of interest for post-apostolic Christian authors (c. 90–170 CE). For several decades, references to the devil have been absent, secondary or implicit (Burke 2016; cf. Farrar 2018). In *Adversus haereses* (c. 175–180 CE), Irenaeus shows a renewed interest for the topic, addressing the influence of Satan over the powers and governments of the world (5.24.1–2):

¹As therefore the devil lied at the beginning, so did he also in the end, when he said, “All these are delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will I give them” [Matthew 4:9]. For it is not he who has appointed the kingdoms of this world, but God; for “the heart of the king is in the hand of God” [Proverbs 21:1]. And the Word also says by Solomon, “By me kings do reign, and princes administer justice. By me chiefs are raised up, and by me kings rule the earth” [Proverbs 8:15]. Paul the apostle also says upon this same subject: “Be ye subject to all the higher powers; for there is no power but of God:

now those which are have been ordained of God” [Romans 13:1]. And again, in reference to them he says, “For he bears not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath to him who does evil” [Romans 13:4]. Now, that he spoke these words, not in regard to angelical powers, nor of invisible rulers — as some venture to expound the passage — but of those of actual human authorities, [he shows when] he says, “For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, doing service for this very thing” [Romans 13:6]. This also the Lord confirmed, when He did not do what He was tempted to by the devil; but He gave directions that tribute should be paid to the tax-gatherers for Himself and Peter [Matthew 17:27]; because “they are the ministers of God, serving for this very thing” [Romans 13:6].²For since man, by departing from God, reached such a pitch of fury as even to look upon his brother as his enemy, and engaged without fear in every kind of restless conduct, and murder, and avarice; God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, as they did not acknowledge the fear of God, in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their laws, they might attain to some degree of justice, and exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword suspended full in their view, as the apostle says: “For he bears not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath upon him who does evil” [Romans 13:4]. And for this reason too, *magistrates themselves, having laws as a clothing of righteousness whenever they act in a just and legitimate manner, shall not be called in question for their conduct, nor be liable to punishment. But whatsoever they do to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and illegally, and tyrannically, in these things shall they also perish; for the just judgment of God comes equally upon all, and in no case is defective. Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations, and not by the devil, who is never at rest at all, nay, who does not love to see even nations conducting themselves after a quiet manner*, so that under the fear of human rule, men may not eat each other up like fishes; but that, by means of the establishment of laws, they may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations. And considered from this point of view, those who exact tribute from us are “God’s ministers, serving for this very purpose” [Romans 13:6].

In 177 CE, Christians in Roman Gaul faced a severe persecution (e.g., Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.1.1–63). Irenaeus himself escaped it, as he was in Rome at the time, carrying a letter to Bishop Eleutherus, on behalf of the suffering brethren. Returning to Lugdunum after the persecution relented, he takes up the place of the local bishop, who had been among those martyred. Could this tragic event set the background for *Adversus haereses* 5.24? Unfortunately, there is no certain answer. Nevertheless, there is certainty that, for Irenaeus, the authorities who persecuted Christians in Gaul were doing the work of the devil.

It is God who ordains governing authorities, yet it is the devil who perverts their act of governance. On the one hand, God has given rulers “for the correction and the benefit of their subjects, and for the preservation of justice; others, for the purposes of fear and punishment and rebuke; others, as [the subjects] deserve it, are for deception, disgrace, and pride” (*Adversus haereses* 5.24.3). Irenaeus expresses here an idea similar to Joseph de Maistre (1811): “Toute nation a le gouvernement qu’elle mérite.” Maistre, however, has democracy in view, while for Irenaeus it is God who appoints all rulers.

On the other hand, in the case of tyrants and persecutors, it is the devil who “deceives and leads astray the mind”, in order to make them usurp the status, authority, and adoration that rightfully belongs to God (*Adversus haereses* 5.24.3c–4):

³The devil, however, as he is the apostate angel, can only go to this length, as he did at the beginning, [namely] to deceive and lead astray the mind of man into disobeying the commandments of God, and gradually to darken the hearts of those who would endeavour to serve him, to the forgetting of the true God, but to the adoration of himself as God. ⁴Just as if any one, being an apostate, and seizing in a hostile manner another man’s territory, should harass the inhabitants of it, in order that he might claim for himself the glory of a king among those ignorant of his apostasy and robbery [...] And as his apostasy was exposed by man, and man became the [means of] searching out his thoughts, he has set himself to this with greater and greater determination, in opposition to man, envying his life, and wishing to involve him in his own apostate power.

Therefore, Christians should be subjected to the governing authorities only as long as the authorities themselves are subjected to God and “act in a just and legitimate manner”, “for the benefit of nations”. However, whenever the rulers of the world assume the “apostate power” of the devil and act “to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and

illegally, and tyrannically”, Christians are to resist their demands – but peacefully and sacrificially, awaiting “for the just judgment of God” (cf. Romans 13:1–7 in *Adversus haereses* 4.36.6). For, in resisting these tyrannic rulers, they are actually resisting the devil.

Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180–185 CE)

Sometime between 180 and 185 CE, Theophilus of Alexandria wrote a series of tractates to his “very good friend Autolyucus”. The tractates discuss the Christian “religion” of Theophilus and aim “to make the truth plain” to his partner in dialogue (*Ad Autolyicum* 2.1). In spite of their previous conversations, Autolyucus continued to hold the “opinion that the word of truth is an idle tale”, hence the need for the third tractate (*Ad Autolyicum* 3.1). In this tractate, Theophilus briefly mentions the topic of submission to governing authorities (3.14):

And that we should be kindly disposed, not only towards those of our own stock, as some suppose, Isaiah the prophet said: “Say to those that hate you, and that cast you out, you are our brethren, that the name of the Lord may be glorified, and be apparent in their joy” [Isaiah 66:5]. And the Gospel says: “Love your enemies, and pray for them that despitefully use you. For if you love them who love you, what reward will you have? This do also the robbers and the publicans” [Matthew 5:44, 46]. And those that do good it teaches not to boast, lest they become men-pleasers. For it says: “Let not your left hand know what your right hand does” [Matthew 6:3]. Moreover, concerning subjection to authorities and powers, and prayer for them, the divine word gives us instructions, in order that “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life” [1 Timothy 2:2]. And it teaches us to render all things to all: “honour to whom honour, fear to whom fear, tribute to whom tribute; to owe no man anything, but to love all” [Romans 13:7–8].

It is noteworthy that the topic of submission belongs to a section called “On Loving Our Enemies”. By quoting Matthew 5:44, 46, Theophilus implies that the enemies are to be loved and prayed for. Similarly, in the following paragraph, Christians are to be subject to “authorities and powers”, but also are to “[pray] for them”. It could therefore be inferred that, for Theophilus, the governing authorities are among the enemies. After all, the three tractates are to be dated around the end of Marcus Aurelius’ reign, when local persecutions against Christians seem to have increased. Also, it is not incidental that in the immediately following lines (*Ad Autolyicum* 3.15), he defends Christians against public charges of atheism, cannibalism, incest, and civic noncompliance:

But far be it from Christians to conceive any such deeds [cannibalism, incest, etc.]; for with them temperance dwells, self-restraint is practiced, monogamy is observed, chastity is guarded, iniquity exterminated, sin extirpated, righteousness exercised, law administered, worship performed, God acknowledged: truth governs, grace guards, peace screens them; the holy word guides, wisdom teaches, life directs, God reigns.

Thus, even when the rulers are the enemy, they are to be obeyed (“subjection to authorities and powers”). That is submission in public. But they are also to be prayed for (“prayer for them”). That is submission in private. Apostle Paul makes a similar point in Romans 13:5 (“Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment [public] but also as a matter of conscience [private]”).

It is difficult to ascertain how radical or temperate is Theophilus in his reading of Romans 13:7–8. Several clues argue for the latter. As in Paul, there is only a positive context to this citation: “a quiet and peaceable life”. What about those cases of persecution and martyrdom? Theophilus follows in the line of Paul and keeps silent about the negative. Even if the rules are the enemy, there is still common ground to be searched for, with the hope of living a peaceful life. Secondly, the submission to the authorities is seen as obedience to the “instruction” of the “divine word”. In fact, there are no fewer than five explicit biblical quotations in *Ad Autolyicum* 3.14, comprising 65% of all the words of the section. It is not submission for the sake of the rulers, but for the sake of the “divine word”. In this case, the “divine word” is the higher authority. Thirdly, to love the enemy does not mean to “become men-pleasers”: “And those that do good it teaches not to boast, lest they become men-

pleasers”. To obey is one thing; to please is another. It is precisely this warning against “men-pleasers” that introduces the paragraph “concerning subjection to authorities and powers”. Finally, in his defence of the innocence of Christians (*Ad Autolyicum* 3.15), Theophilus states clearly that it is God who is to be acknowledged, for it is God who reigns.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 CE)

Paedagogus (c. 200 CE) is the second writing of Clement’s major trilogy, dealing mainly with various aspects of the Christian way of life: eating, drinking, sleeping, material possessions, life together, vocabulary, etc. In *Paedagogus* 1.9, Clement discusses God’s discipline and its beneficial effects: “the system He pursues to inspire fear is the source of salvation”. It is in this context that he makes the following comparison:

For if rulers are not a terror to a good work, how shall God, who is by nature good, be a terror to him who sins not? “If you do evil, be afraid,” says the apostle [Rom. 13:3–4]. Wherefore the apostle himself also in every case uses stringent language to the churches, after the Lord’s example...

Clement has witnessed the outbreak of persecution against the Christians of Alexandria during the reign of Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 CE), he himself fleeing from Alexandria in 202 CE (Osborn 2005; Ashwin-Siejkowski 2008). Even so, he states, “rulers are not a terror to a good work”. Why is this? Clement repeatedly refers to “persecution for righteousness’ sake”, as a way of “perfection”, which is a key theme in his writings (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2008):

“Blessed are they”, says He [Jesus Christ], “who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for they shall be called the sons of God”; or, as some of those who transpose the Gospels say, “Blessed are they who are persecuted by righteousness, *for they shall be perfect*”. And, “Blessed are they who are persecuted for my sake; for they shall have a place where they shall not be persecuted”. And, “Blessed are ye when men shall hate you, when they shall separate you, when they shall cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake”; if we do not detest our persecutors, and undergo punishments at their hands, not hating them under the idea that we have been put to trial more tardily than we looked for; but knowing this also, that every instance of trial is an occasion for testifying. (*Stromata* 4.6)

In this larger context of Christian “perfection”, the governing authorities are God’s instruments to either punish or to perfect. In the case of good works, even the unjust persecution of Christians becomes a mean of perfection. While in the case of evil works, the punishment of both God and earthly rulers is deserved. Seen in this context, Romans 13:3–4 seems to be used by Clement to warn fellow Christians in a manner similar to 1 Peter 4:12–16:

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

For Clement, persecutions against Christians are to be expected from the governing authorities of the Roman provinces (e.g., *Stromata* 4.6). However, these rulers should not be given reasons to act justly. If the works of Christians are good and God is feared at all times, earthly rulers are not to be feared, even in times of persecution.

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 203–206 CE)

Among the most cited sayings of Tertullian of Carthage is the one regarding Christian persecution, written at the end of his *Apologeticum* (50.13): “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*” (cf. 21.25: “Nero’s cruel sword sowed the seed of Christian blood at Rome”). In modern times, however, the quotation is usually rendered as “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”, under the influence of a

long tradition of evolved citations (see Dodgson 1842, 105). Indeed, several treatises authored by Tertullian were written during persecution, such as *Scorpiace* (c. 203–204 CE; so Barnes 1969, 131): “This among Christians is a [season of] persecution” (1.5). Given this dominant theme, addressing the topic of Christians’ submission to persecuting authorities is to be expected. Indeed, in *Scorpiace* 14.1–3, Tertullian reads Romans 13 as follows:

1No doubt the apostle admonishes the Romans to be subject to all power, because there is no power but of God, and because [the ruler] does not carry the sword without reason, and is the servant of God, may also, says he, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil [Romans 13:1, 4]. For he had also previously spoken thus: “For rulers are not a terror to a good work, but to an evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and you shall have praise of it. Therefore, he is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid” [Romans 13:3–4]. 2Thus, he bids you be subject to the powers, not on an opportunity occurring for his avoiding martyrdom, but when he is making an appeal in behalf of a good life, under the view also of their being as it were assistants bestowed upon righteousness, as it were handmaids of the divine court of justice, which even here pronounces sentence beforehand upon the guilty. Then he goes on also to show how he wishes you to be subject to the powers, bidding you pay tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom [Romans 13:6], that is, the things which are Caesar’s to Caesar, and the things which are God’s to God [Matthew 22:21]; but man is the property of God alone. 3Peter, no doubt, had likewise said that the king indeed must be honoured [1 Peter 2:13], yet so that the king be honoured only when he keeps to his own sphere, when he is far from assuming divine honours; because both father and mother will be loved along with God, not put on an equality with Him. Besides, one will not be permitted to love even life more than God.

Explicitly, Tertullian both affirms and limits the power of the governing authorities. On the one hand, God is the ultimate repository of all authority (“power”), and it is He who bestows it to *all* earthly rulers (14.1). On the other hand, “man is the property of God alone” (14.2), so the rulers must “keep to [their] own sphere” (14.3). God must be placed above all humans and must be loved even more than life (14.3). For Tertullian, this means to obey God rather than the rulers, even when this decision leads to martyrdom: “be subject to the powers, not on an opportunity occurring for his avoiding martyrdom” (14.2). Rulers are to be obeyed only when they comply to the will of God and lead accordingly, as His servants: “but when [ruler] is making an appeal in behalf of a good life, under the view also of their being as it were assistants bestowed upon righteousness, as it were handmaids of the divine court of justice...”

When rulers, on the contrary, demand what is God’s alone, Paul’s “admonishment” to the Romans no longer applies to their situation: “[the apostle] bids you be subject to the powers... but...; he wishes you to be subject to the powers... but...” A similar point is made in *De Idololatria* 15 (c. 203–206 CE; so Waszink & van Winden 1987, 13), yet with an important emphasis on the negative, i.e., any obedience to the ruler who transgresses “the limits” and claims divine honors for himself is idolatry (15.3, 8b–9):

³“Render to Caesar what are Caesar’s, and what are God’s to God” [Matthew 22:21], that is, the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is on man, to God; so as to render to Caesar indeed money, to God yourself. Otherwise, what will be God’s, if all things are Caesar’s? [...] ^{8b}Therefore, as to what relates to the honours due to kings or emperors, we have a prescript sufficient, that it behoves us to be in all obedience, according to the apostle’s precept, “subject to magistrates, and princes, and powers” [Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1], *but within the limits of discipline*, so long as we keep ourselves separate from idolatry. ⁹For it is for this reason, too, that that example of the three brethren has forerun us, who, in other respects obedient toward king Nebuchodonosor rejected with all constancy the honour to his image [Daniel 3:1–30], proving that whatever is extolled beyond the measure of human honour, unto the resemblance of divine sublimity, is idolatry.

The same literary pattern is used here, as in *Scorpiace*: “be in all obedience... subject to magistrates, and princes, and powers, *but* within the limits of discipline (*intra limites disciplinae*)”. When the limits of discipline or “the rules of Christian life” (Waszink & van Winden 1987, 245) are disregarded by the rulers, Christians’ full resistance is imperative, following the example of Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Tertullian is the first author to use the word “limits” when he applies the “precepts” of Romans 13:1–7 to his time. There are limits to what earthly rules could have or demand. There are limits even to what Caesar could have or demand. For no one can have what only God has, no one can demand what only God demands: “what will be God’s, if all things are Caesar’s” (*De Idololatria* 15.3).

Origen of Alexandria (c. 250 CE)

While in Irenaeus’ *Adversus haereses* 5.24 the *passive* resistance of Christians against the demonic tyrants is implicit, for Origen this becomes an important point. In *Contra Celsum* (c. 250 CE), probably written while he resided in Caesarea, he states (8.65):

Moreover, we are to despise ingratiating ourselves with kings or any other men, not only if their favour is to be won by murders, licentiousness, or deeds of cruelty, but even if it involves impiety towards God, or any servile expressions of flattery and obsequiousness, which things are unworthy of brave and high-principled men, who aim at joining with their other virtues that highest of virtues, patience and fortitude. But while we do nothing which is contrary to the law and word of God, we are not so mad as to stir up against us the wrath of kings and princes, which will bring upon us sufferings and tortures, or even death. For we read: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God” [Romans 13:1–2] These words we have in our exposition of the Epistle to the Romans, to the best of our ability, explained at length, and with various applications; but for the present we have taken them in their more obvious and generally received acceptance, to meet the saying of Celsus, that “it is not without the power of demons that kings have been raised to their regal dignity”. Here much might be said on the constitution of kings and rulers, for the subject is a wide one, embracing such rulers as reign cruelly and tyrannically, and such as make the kingly office the means of indulging in luxury and sinful pleasures. We shall therefore, for the present, pass over the full consideration of this subject. We will, however, never swear by “the fortune of the king”, nor by all else that is considered equivalent to God...

For Celsus, a Greek philosopher of the second century CE and a major opponent of the Christian religion, the demons are at the origin of a tyrant’s raise to power: “it is not without the power of demons that kings have been raised to their regal dignity”. This explains satisfactorily the deviant and abusive behavior of certain rulers. For Irenaeus and Origen, however, following apostle Paul, “there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1–2). In other words, even the tyrants and persecutors of Christians are appointed by God. While Irenaeus explains this paradox by arguing for the ruler’s subsequent deception of the devil, Origen leaves Celsus’ point mainly unanswered. He simply sets his quotation against Romans 13:1–2.

Origen focuses on explaining the apparently contradictory response that Christians should give: a tyrant should be obeyed, since he is ordained by God; at the same time, a tyrant should be resisted, since he “[reigns] cruelly and tyrannically”. But where is the line? Origen suggests two practical responses. First, Christians should honor God by *resisting the rulers* who act as if they were gods or demand honor “equivalent to God, as in the case of swearing by “the fortune of the king” (cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3–10.2). Second, Christians should honor earthly rulers by *resisting them passively and peacefully*. This is an act of obedience to God’s command in Romans 13:1–7, but also a sign of practical wisdom. Rebellions against rulers usually produce chaos, suffering, and death: “But while we do nothing which is contrary to the law and word of God, we are not so mad as to stir up against us the wrath of kings and princes, which will bring upon us sufferings and tortures, or even death.” As mentioned above, *Contra Celsum* was probably written while Origen resided in Caesarea. Could it be that the tragic memories of the Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire (66–73, 132–136 CE) were still vivid in his area?

Synthesis

Those who are subject to the governing authorities are subject to God. Those who rebel against the governing authorities, rebel against God (Rom. 13:1–2). These two precepts are fundamental

to Paul's argument in Romans 13:1–7. Yet Paul, as shown above, has in view only the positive side of governance, in which rulers are "servants of God" (Rom. 13:4, 6), who reward the good and punish the evil. The apostle seems to envisage here the ideal ruler. As for the opposite situation, much closer to the political realities of the day, in which rulers claim the honour due to a god, disregard good and commit evil themselves, Paul leaves the issue unaddressed. It falls to the post-apostolic ecclesiastics to offer answers to and guidelines for their fellow Christians who face such a harsh political reality, while enduring tyranny and persecution.

Limits to the submission

It is noteworthy that all the major interpretations of Romans 13:1–7, before the edict of 313 CE, are composed in the context of opposition and, especially, persecution against Christians. In times like these, questions regarding the limits of submission to unjust authorities are urgent. None of the ecclesiastics above note explicitly that Paul's exhortation to submit to the authorities has limits, for the apostle only addresses an ideal case. Nevertheless, they all read Romans 13:1–7 with this mindset. An approach closer to Paul's is that of Theophilus of Antioch. Like Paul, Theophilus does not set clear limits between submission and resistance to the rulers, yet he circumscribes the obedience within the positive framework of "a quiet and peaceable life". Even when the rulers represent the enemy, Christians should seek to live as law-abiding citizens, yet all the while giving final authority to the rule of God.

More clearly defined lines are drawn by Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. (1) For Polycarp, "paying proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God" is conditioned: "as long as it does us no harm". By "harm", he means primarily harm to the integrity of the Christian faith, as he was ordered to "revile Christ" and to "blaspheme [his] King". Thus, for the bishop of Smyrna, Romans 13:1–7 must be followed by the conditional "as long as". Freedom of conscience and religion are among the limits defining submission to rulers. (2) When interpreting Romans 13:4, Irenaeus clearly defines the line between submission and resistance with the use of the adversative "but". Christians are to resist any ruler that acts not as "God's servant" and "for the benefit of nations", *but* acts in the service of the devil. (3) Tertullian is the first author to use the word "limits" when applying Romans 13:1–7: "subject to magistrates, and princes, and powers, *but within the limits* of discipline". By "discipline" he means "the rules of Christian life".

Limits to the limits

At the same time, there are limits to the limits of submission to the rulers. (1) Polycarp answers respectfully to the request of his executioner: "You [i.e., the proconsul] I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God". If the requests of a ruler, be it tyrant and persecutor, are not harmful to the faith or conscience of Christians, he is to be obeyed. (2) For Clement, persecution is a path to "perfection". Thus, even when persecuted, Christians are to behave in a manner worthy of the perfection they are called to seek: and "every instance of trial is an occasion for testifying". Christians who suffer because of evil doings are not persecuted; they are punished. Persecution is only "for the righteousness' sake". In sum, the cause of persecution should be righteousness; the result of persecution should be perfection. (3) Origen argues for the need of a *peaceful resistance*. On the one hand, Christians may not submit to a ruler, if this is "contrary to the law and word of God". On the other hand, any resistance that is not peaceful and respectful to the ruler, is an act of madness, not faithfulness: "we are not so mad as to stir up against us the wrath of kings and princes, which will bring upon us sufferings and tortures, or even death".

Conclusions

Romans 13:1–7 is among the best-known passages in the New Testament that addresses the submission of early Christians to the ruling powers of the day. Christians are to submit to the governing authorities, for they are ordained by God. Likewise, rebellion against the governing authorities means rebellion against God (Rom. 13:1–2). Yet Paul has in view only the ideal iteration of governance, in which rulers are “servants of God” (Rom. 13:4, 6) and they reward the good and punish the evil. In times of tyranny and persecution, however, later ecclesiastics had to look back at Romans 13:1–7 from a different perspective: should Christians submit to unjust and despotic rulers? The answer that takes shape during the first two centuries of the Christian era (c. 167–250 CE) is a conditioned “Yes”. The approach of these writers is mainly positive and constructive. Christians are to respect tyrannical rulers at all time, even when they must be resisted. Christians are to obey tyrannical rulers whenever they act justly and in everything that is not contrary to their faith. Christians are to pray for tyrannical rulers sincerely and without ceasing.

There are, however, limits to Christians’ submission to governing authorities. They are to resist any demand that goes against “the rules of Christian life”: a ruler that claims the honor that belongs only to God, acts against the will and word of God, or acts under the influence of the devil, is to be resisted. Yet there are also limitations placed on their resistance, as there are limitations placed on their obedience. Christians are to resist tyrannical rulers in a manner that is brave, yet respectful, righteous, and peaceful.

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