

The Powers that Be

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(1901-1992)

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers ..." ~ Romans 13:1

This is Paul's positive declaration recorded in Romans 13:1, and there is no verse in Scripture that has been misapplied more than this one. In all church theology "*the higher powers*" are made to be the civil authorities, whoever they may be in any country and at any time. [I]t needs to be said that of all the absurd interpretations ever made by theologians, this one takes first prize. It is unworkable and unbelievable, and it cannot be followed out through the additional statements that follow this declaration.

The initial declaration of Paul seems to present no great difficulty, since most law-abiding men are quite willing to be subject to those who rule over them, so far as the submission required does not conflict with duties toward God. However, the next statement, which is actually a part of the sentence, creates impossible difficulties. If "*the higher powers*" means the civil authorities, I cannot believe this statement; and I doubt if any of my readers can believe it unless they are given to simple-minded credulity.

Paul enforces his first statement by declaring that "*there is no power (authority) but of God.*" If this is applied to civil authorities, then we must believe that their authority comes from God; but the idea that those who govern derive their just powers from the consent of those governed, as our *Declaration of Independence* so majestically declares, must be rejected. That their authority comes from God, I do not believe and this I reject.

It would be interesting to know who first applied these words to civil authorities. One is suspicious that this happened in the days when men believed in the divine right of kings, when the civil powers and organized religion worked hand-in-glove to maintain absolute domination of the lives and thoughts of the people.

Whoever it was began a chain of errors that have been millstones upon the necks of many whose sole desire is to believe and practice whatever is written in the Word of God. This passage they cannot believe unless they close their eyes to the most obvious facts and divorce it from all that follows. The assiduous Bible student knows that Paul did not intend to convey any such ideas since he had already told the Corinthians to ignore the civil authorities when one believer had a matter against another (I Corinthians 6:1-3).

After his initial declaration in Romans 13:1, Paul goes on to say that *“the powers that be are ordained of God.”* The phrase *“the powers that be”* has become by popular usage a familiar synonym for the civil authorities, but this cannot be what Paul meant when he first wrote these words. If this is what it means, then we must believe that all civil authorities are God ordained men, that anyone who resists them is resisting the ordinance of God, and that all who do resist shall receive to themselves condemnation. This I do not believe, and this I cannot believe.

If I believed this, I would have to believe in the divine right of all who govern; and if these words speak of civil authorities, then we must admit that some of the heroes of the faith, whom we now honor, are honored because they did the very thing condemned here. History is filled with the deeds of faithful and heroic men who defied the civil powers in order to worship and serve God according to the light they had received. With them it was even as Peter said to those who ruled in Jerusalem, *“Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4: 19-20).

It would seem that the first two verses of Romans 13 present enough problems for those who insist that this passage sets forth the Christian’s duty toward civil authorities, but every declaration that follows creates another major problem. *“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil,”* Paul continues. These words, if applied to civil authorities, are in direct contradiction to those spoken by Christ when He warned the apostles to,

“Beware of men: for they shall deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for My sake” (Matthew 10:17-18).

These words applied to civil authorities would make perfect saints out of all who govern, but we know from experience that this is not the case. Too numerous to mention are the rulers who have persecuted those who have done good and have favored those who have done evil. God’s Word does not teach ridiculous things; therefore, it cannot be that the *“higher powers”* or *“the powers that be”* in Romans 13 has any reference to civil authorities.

This becomes still more evident when the balance of Paul’s words are considered.

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same ... For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing” (Romans 13:3, 6).

After reading these words, the reader should ask himself if he believes that tax collectors are God’s servants who are doing His work in imposing and collecting the taxes laid upon us.

Through the years I have consulted many commentaries on this passage, commentaries from my own library, in other libraries, and from the shelves of bookstores. All of these have agreed that Paul speaks here of civil authorities, but all problems are ignored and all difficulties are

glossed over. One expositor sums up his comments by saying: “Since there are no spiritual authorities among men today to whom these words refer, then, in spite of the great difficulties created, we must apply them to civil authorities.”

This commentator stumbled upon the solution when he said, “no spiritual authorities today.” This is the key to the whole matter; but what about the day when these words were written, the time period to which they should be applied? Will anyone dare to say that there were no such authorities in the thirty-three years of which the book of Acts is the history? There were men of God on earth then of whom every word spoken here was true, and to whom every statement could be applied without modification or alteration. These words belong to that New Testament time period, “The Acts Period.”

The chief characteristic of this time was the presence upon earth of God-commissioned, God-empowered, and God-authorized men called Apostles. We first read of this great authority in Matthew 10:1 where we are told that Jesus Christ gave them power (*exousia-authority*) over unclean spirits and over all manner of sickness and disease. This authority was in no way based upon their faith, devotion, or holiness. It was given even to Judas Iscariot (Matthew 10:4). This authority was renewed and extended in Matthew 16:19; John 20:22-23; and Luke 24:49. These words made these men the “*higher powers*” (Gk., superior authorities) of the Acts period.

We see this authority exercised in Acts 3:6 when Peter used it to bring complete healing to a man over forty years of age who had never walked. We see it from another standpoint in Acts 5 when he pronounced a sentence of death upon Ananias and Sapphira. He spoke and their death followed. He did not wear the sword as an empty symbol. We see it in the life of Paul in Acts 13 when he spoke the words that brought total blindness on Elymas the sorcerer. We see it again in Acts 14 when Paul commanded the impotent cripple to “*Stand upright on thy feet.*”

The superior authority that was given to men in the Acts period was not limited to the twelve apostles. In Romans 12:8 Paul exhorts those who rule to do it with diligence. He instructed the Thessalonians to recognize those who “*are over you in the Lord*” (I Thessalonians 5:12). There were gifts of government (I Corinthians 12:28), and some were set among the out-called ones for this specific purpose. All who possessed this gift qualified as “*higher powers,*” or superior authorities to whom all believers were to be subject.

When we read Romans 13:1-7 in the light of these positive truths, all questions are answered and all difficulties disappear. The apostles and other divinely appointed rulers of the Acts period were the “*higher powers*” to whom every soul was to be subject. They had their authority from God and they were ordained of God. If anyone resisted their authority, he resisted God’s arrangement; and such actions were sure to result in divine punishment. These authorities were never a terror to good works, only to the evil.

If any complained of the power of these men (the words of Romans 13:3 would indicate that some did), they were told to do good and they would have no cause for fear, and would be sure to receive praise; but if they did evil, they would have every cause to fear; for these men

did not bear in vain the power to exact the most severe penalties. They were God's servants, His avengers to execute wrath upon those who did evil.

Thus, we find in Romans 13:1-7 a most powerful argument for rightly dividing the Word of Truth (II Timothy 2:15), and the necessity for recognizing to the fullest extent the unique position of some men in the Acts period and the unique character of God's dealings with men at that time.

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