

## Commentary by Dr. Cobin on the key passages concerning the believer's response to public policy

### Expedient commands in Romans 12–14 and 1 Peter 2

The following commentary is designed to accompany *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* as an application of its interpretive model. It is not an exhaustive treatise on all points that may be gleaned from Romans 12–14 or 1 Peter 2. The focus of the exercise is to bring to the forefront certain elements that are necessary for good interpretation but that are not necessarily apparent: (1) the historical and cultural context in which the apostles wrote and (2) a setting forth of the paradigms that may be used to interpret texts that deal with a Christian's response to public policy. The (arguably) superior hermeneutic set forth in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* is then applied, and Romans 12–14 and 1 Peter 2 are exegeted, to produce what could be termed an expedient or *Liberty of Conscience* perspective. Note that the first *Merriam-Webster* definition of *expedient* is being "suitable for achieving a particular end in a given circumstance." In this commentary, the word expedient is used in the sense of what is practical, prudent, or advantageous for a believer living in his culture.

#### *The Historical and Cultural Context when Romans 12-14 and 1 Peter 2 Were Written*

On the one hand, one must be cautious about employing history and culture in his biblical exegesis. God's word is valid for all peoples of all times, and it is errant to arbitrarily ignore or modify portions of His word based on one's understanding of history and culture. On the other hand, it is impossible to fully understand or appreciate the Scriptures apart from the historical and cultural context in which they were written. Indeed, a lack of cultural and historical understanding can lead to crass or mistaken interpretation.

One need only consider the following motifs and passages from the Bible to see the importance of understanding context: the mandate to give holy kisses (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 1 Peter 5:14); mandatory greetings (Philippians 4:21, Titus 3:15, Hebrews 13:24); Old Testament practices brought into the New Testament (Acts 15:28-29, Romans 14:5, Colossians 2:16); indebtedness (Romans 13:8); self-defense (Romans 12:19, cf. Luke 22:36); requirement to eat meat (1 Corinthians 10:25); practices of women in church (1 Corinthians 14:34, cf. 1 Timothy 2:11) and with their hair and head coverings (1 Corinthians 11:5-6, cf. 1 Timothy 2:9); mandates regarding prophecy and tongues-speaking (1 Corinthians 14:39, 1 Thessalonians 4:20-21); principles of order in worship (1 Corinthians 14:40); mandates about when to bring offerings (1 Corinthians 16:2); requirements of temporal contentment (1 Timothy 6:8); Paul's personal commands to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:9, 13, 21a); mandates to entertain strangers or angels (Hebrews 13:2); obligations to pray for prisoners (Hebrews 13:3); admonitions to the wealthy class (James 5:1); admonitions to confess our sins to other believers (James 5:16); prohibitions about letting heretics into one's home (2 John 10-11); requirements to give away one's clothing (Matthew 5:40) or to acquire tools and provisions (Luke 22:36); mandates to not attempt to change one's social class or status (1 Corinthians 7:24); and mandates to let no one despise leaders (Titus 2:15b, 1 Timothy 4:12). Then there are also those curious mandates to be ignorant (1 Corinthians 14:38), unjust, unholy, filthy, righteous, and holy (Revelation 22:11), as well as the exhortation to figure out what the 666 means (Revelation 13:18). Surely, culture and history have some bearing on the interpretation of these texts. Accordingly, I present the quotations below as a means of setting forth the context in which the Apostles wrote to the Roman Christians about their response to public policy under Nero.

"Now as to the many things in which Nero acted like a madman, out of the extravagant degree of the felicity and riches which he enjoyed, and by that means used his good fortune to the injury of others; and after what manner he slew his brother, and wife, and mother, from whom his barbarity spread itself to others that were most nearly related to him; and how, at last, he was so distracted that he became an actor in the scenes, and upon the theater, —I omit to say any more about them, because there are writers enough

upon those subjects every where.”—Flavius Josephus (1999), *The Wars of the Jews*, William Whiston, trans., book II, 13:1, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Publications.

“I have revered the gods so far,’ said he; ‘but at this moment I think that not they are over the world, but one mad, malicious monster named Nero.’ ‘Aulus,’ said Pomponia. ‘Nero is only a handful of rotten dust before God.’” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter IV, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“Meanwhile Pomponia, when she had conducted Lygia to the cubiculum, began to comfort, console, and encourage her, uttering words meanwhile which sounded strangely in that house, where near them in an adjoining chamber the lararium remained yet, and where the hearth was on which Aulus Plautius, faithful to ancient usage, made offerings to the household divinities. Now the hour of trial had come. On a time Virginius had pierced the bosom of his own daughter to save her from the hands of Appius; still earlier Lucretia had redeemed her shame with her life. The house of Caesar is a den of infamy, of evil, of crime. But we, Lygia, know why we have not the right to raise hands on ourselves! Yes! The law under which we both live is another, a greater, a holier, but it gives permission to defend oneself from evil and shame even should it happen to pay for that defence with life and torment. Whoso goes forth pure from the dwelling of corruption has the greater merit thereby. The earth is that dwelling; but fortunately life is one twinkle of the eye, and resurrection is only from the grave; beyond that not Nero, but Mercy bears rule, and there instead of pain is delight, there instead of tears is rejoicing.” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter IV, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“He was a patrician, a military tribune, a powerful man; but above every power of that world to which he belonged was a madman whose will and malignity it was impossible to foresee. Only such people as the Christians might cease to reckon with Nero or fear him, —people for whom this whole world, with its separations and sufferings, was as nothing; people for whom death itself was as nothing. All others had to tremble before him. The terrors of the time in which they lived showed themselves to Vinicius in all their monstrous extent. He could not return Lygia to Aulus and Pomponia, then, through fear that the monster would remember her, and turn on her his anger; for the very same reason, if he should take her as wife, he might expose her, himself, and Aulus. A moment of ill-humor was enough to ruin all. Vinicius felt, for the first time in life, that either the world must change and be transformed, or life would become impossible altogether. He understood also this, which a moment before had been dark to him, that in such times only Christians could be happy.” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter XXVI, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“How could the earth find place at once for the Apostle Peter, Paul of Tarsus, and Caesar? Tell me this. I ask because I passed the evening after Paul’s teaching with Nero, and dost thou know what I heard there? Well, to begin with, he read his poem on the destruction of Troy, and complained that never had he seen a burning city. He envied Priam, and called him happy just for this, that he saw the conflagration and ruin of his birthplace. Whereupon Tigellinus said, ‘Speak a word, O divinity, I will take a torch, and before the night passes thou shalt see blazing Antium.’ But Caesar called him a fool. ‘Where,’ asked he, ‘should I go to breathe the sea air, and preserve the voice with which the gods have gifted me, and which men say I should preserve for the benefit of mankind? Is it not Rome that injures me; is it not the exhalations of the Subura and the Esquiline which add to my hoarseness? Would not the palaces of Rome present a spectacle a hundredfold more tragic and magnificent than Antium?’ Here all began to talk, and to say what an unheard tragedy the picture of a city like that would be, a city which had conquered the world turned now into a heap of gray ashes. Caesar declared that then his poem would surpass the songs of Homer, and he began to describe how he would rebuild the city, and how coming ages would admire his achievements, in presence of which all other human works would be petty. ‘Do that! do that!’ exclaimed the drunken company. ‘I must have more faithful and more devoted friends,’ answered he.” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter XXXVIII, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“The throng assumed in places a threatening aspect. Vinicius heard voices accusing Nero of burning the city. He and Poppaea were threatened with death. Shouts of ‘Sanio,’ ‘Histrio’ (buffoon, actor), ‘Matricide!’ were heard round about. Some shouted to drag him to the Tiber; others that Rome had shown patience enough. It was clear that were a leader found, these threats could be changed into open rebellion which might break out any moment. Meanwhile the rage and despair of the crowd turned against the praetorians, who for another reason could not make their way out of the crowd: the road was blocked by piles of goods, borne from the fire previously, boxes, barrels of provisions, furniture the most costly, vessels, infants’ cradles, beds, carts, hand-packs. Here and there they fought band to hand; but the praetorians conquered the weaponless multitude easily.” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter XLIII, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“This, lord, that synagogues exist openly in the Trans-Tiber; but that Christians, in their wish to avoid persecution, are forced to pray in secret and assemble in ruined sheds outside the city or in sand-pits. Those who dwell in the Trans-Tiber have chosen just that place which was excavated for the building of the Circus and various houses along the Tiber. Now, when the city is perishing, the adherents of Christ are praying. Beyond doubt we shall find a countless number of them in the excavation; so my advice is to go in there along the road.” —Henryk Sienkiewicz (2002), *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, Jeremiah Curtin trans., chapter XLV, McClean, VA: Indypublish.com.

“Therefore, to put an end to the rumor [that Nero was responsible for the burning of three-fourths of Rome] Nero created a diversion and subjected to the most extra-ordinary tortures those hated for their abominations by the common people called Christians. The originator of this name (was) Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontinus Pilate. Repressed for the time being, the deadly superstition broke out again not only in Judea, the original source of the evil, but also in the city (Rome), where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become popular. So an arrest was made of all who confessed; then on the basis of their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race...Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open the gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being punished.” —Cornelius Historiae Tacitus (2003), *The Annals and the History*, 15.44.2-8, Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb trans., New York: Modern Library Press.

“Nero is wholly composed of crime. But he will pay the price for his crimes, as is fair, and as will happen soon.” —Matthew Gwinn (1997) [1603], *Nero*, Act V, Scene 4 [Act II, Scene 1], Volusius Proculus, Epicharis, Dana F. Sutton, trans.

The notorious emperor Nero was reigning in Rome from AD54 to AD68. The Apostles wrote to the Roman believers during that period. Nero was an insane, pompous criminal, who instigated chaos in society. Rioting and other grievous social upheavals were commonplace in Rome under Nero. Such were the circumstances in Rome when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians. Both Paul and Peter were likely martyred in Rome in AD63 or, most likely, AD64 (although some think that Paul was martyred in AD66). In that same year, Nero made his famous appearance in a public stage performance, and allegedly fiddled while he burned at least two-thirds of Rome. Nero falsely blamed the Christians for the conflagration, and Peter thus alludes to the “fiery trial” (I Peter 4:12) that would come upon believers on account of the ensuing persecutions. As Tacitus relates: “Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed.” Peter’s epistle is addressed to Christians who were banished by Nero, dispersed from Rome (or elsewhere) on account of their faith. Nero committed suicide, after the Roman Senate declared him a public enemy (AD68). Recall this text from pp. 127-128 of *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*:

Paul wrote Romans early in AD57, a year in which “Rome experienced famine and riots”. This fact seems very significant, especially since Paul directs the Christians at Rome to not to participate in the “envying”, “rioting”, and “strife” around them (Rom. 13:13). Consequently, the Roman Christians were in need of the pragmatic counsel that this passage provides. There is apparently little dispute about the AD57 date among scholars, being settled from both internal and external evidence. The date of Peter’s writing of I Peter is “uncertain” although it seems to have been later in his life, perhaps AD63 (although it might have been earlier). Paul’s pragmatic remark in Titus 3:1, which seems to parallel Peter’s, was made at about the same time, perhaps in the autumn of AD60 or AD64.

Many of the early churches were afflicted by particular problems, usually mimicking the culture that surrounded them. Corinth was a resort town renown for lasciviousness and lewdness, and it is such behavior that infiltrated the Corinthian church: sexual immorality, marital issues, lawsuits among believers, abuses of the Lord’s supper, dissention and contentions, and dealing with weaker brothers. Churches in Galatia and Palestine were combating legalisms introduced by Jewish premises. James rebukes wealthy believers who are not acting appropriately, and Christ specifically rebuked the Smyrnan church for the same thing. Jude warned against the intrusion of heretics into the ranks of the faithful, as Christ points out to the churches at Pergamos and Thyatira. John corrected churches that had been permeated by Gnosticism. Christ rebukes the churches in Sardis and Ephesus for their formalism and deadness. Rome was the seat of government power and a huge center of trade, and it is no wonder that the Roman church was influenced by the activities of the culture surrounding it, and Paul and Peter counsel the Roman believers in this regard.

Interestingly, Paul had written I Corinthians and II Corinthians around the same time (AD55 to AD57) as the epistle to the Romans, but the Apostle gives no practical treatise on Christians and government in those epistles. However, he does address both churches about the issue of the weaker brother and eating meat sacrificed to idols. The Corinthians had a litany of sinful problems, but evidently reminding them to be submissive to their local rulers was not a pressing issue for the Apostle. Paul does mention obedience to authorities to Titus, who was left in Crete for a while, but does not mention it to Timothy who was left in Ephesus (on the western coast of modern Turkey); both epistles were written about the same time. While Crete was not of great economic importance in the Roman world, its south central city of Gortys (about 30 miles from modern Rethymno) did serve as capital for the province of Crete and Cyrenaica (the coast of modern Libya), which was formed in 74BC. Given Gortys' political importance, its proximity to Roman trade routes, and the Cretan's famous propensity to indulge in revelry as: "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12), Paul exhorted Titus to tell Cretan believers to be careful to "be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work" (Titus 3:1). Paul wanted to shut down any possible excuse for the Roman state to persecute believers. If there was to be persecution, it must come as a result of hatred for Jesus Christ and His church (Revelation 12:17), and not because of the sinful behavior of Christians. When social instability and lack of food produced rogues and riots, Christians were to have no part of it.

### *The biblical principle of submission to civil government*

In *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*, Christian submission to the state and public policies is set forth as *pragmatic* or *expedient* from the point of view of the policy (legislation, ruling, executive order) itself. That is, Christians obey in order to avoid incurring the state's wrath. They do not want to incite a break out of Leviathan against them on account of their public disobedience to most policies. Thus, Christians do not sin by violating these rules *per se*. However, the Apostles do give a command to submit to the state and even if it has to be applied differently depending on the historical and cultural context, that principle still stands for all believers at all times. Disobeying apostolic teaching does indeed have moral implications: it involves sinning. However, the Apostles are not telling Christians that they sin when they do not follow the "letter of the law" of the state's policies. On the contrary, there are clear cases when Christians *must* violate public policy: prohibitions of Gospel preaching, mandates to kill children, and so forth. Submission to the state is not an absolute command. Furthermore, one cannot say that he has sinned *necessarily* because he has violated some policy: like not coming to a complete stop behind the limit line at a stop sign or hiring an illegal alien. What makes the action sinful is (a) the public and flagrant nature of the sin and (b) the cavalier disregard for Apostolic concerns that (c) do not bring glory to God in the world.

The Apostles were concerned that disobedient believers would sin by: (1) dishonoring God in the sight of others; (2) harming the testimony of Jesus Christ in society; (3) bringing wrath unnecessarily upon believers and their families; (4) acting foolishly—or least without the appropriate amount of wisdom and prudence; (5) being poor stewards of God's provisions; (6) giving the state an excuse or reason to single out Christians for persecution; (7) worrying about what the state might do to them and thus violating the teaching of Christ in Matthew 6:25; and (8) beginning to engage in ostensibly benign activities that (a) might eventually lead to temptation to do sinful things or (b) might at least have the appearance of evil deeds to onlookers. Alternatively, the revitalized (or restyled) Divine Right school—and the theonomic school if an ideal government were in place—would say that sin occurs because the civil government is a special authority sphere in life, and the believer must submit to what it decrees as if God Himself were speaking. They would not hold the state's word to be God's word, but they would hold public policy to be directed by Providence and a manifestation of His will for believers affected by it. Thus, violating the policy is said to be sinful *in and of itself*.

Nevertheless, as noted in the commentary below, and as pointed out in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*, the state is not a special sphere of authority to promote or enhance the kingdom of God. It is an agent of the kingdom of Satan that God ordains and uses primarily as His servant to bring terrestrial judgment on sinners. Accordingly, disobedience to the evil state is *never* sin in cases when public policy would compel us to violate a clear commandment of God or to disregard or abrogate a conviction we hold with a strong basis in Scripture. In all other cases, disobedience to the state might be sinful—but not because of disregard of a public policy *per se*. Civil disobedience would be sinful if it were public and flagrant—especially during dire times such as Christians faced under Nero—and if it involved careless or cavalier disregard for God’s glory and the apostolic concerns noted above. Otherwise, violating biblically innocuous public policy would not be sinful if done discreetly, privately, clandestinely, wisely, prudently, and carefully (or if done through ignorance of the policy). Whether or not a Christian’s disobedience to the state or public policy is sinful will depend in large part on the cultural context in which he lives. Disobeying curfew rules while living under Nero or Stalin is one thing, but running a stop sign at 2AM in rural North Dakota is another. Trying to pull off a revolution under a powerful Caesar or Czar might be suicide, and thus not glorify God, while revolting against King George actually brought American Christians greater freedom and has given more glory to God in the long run. American Christianity has been a tremendous boon to worldwide missionary endeavors, the printing of Christian books, and the promotion of theological study. In brief, the choice to revolt, or even to what extent a Christian may prudently disobey, depends on the political, technological, and economic context in which he finds himself. However, a Christian who unintentionally or inadvertently offends men—government officials in particular—or gives occasion for reproach of Christ on account of his disobedience to such policies (even if the policy is considered asinine, like prohibiting spitting on the sidewalk or requiring using a seatbelt before driving down the block at midnight), must be willing to apologize quickly and humbly make amends when confronted.

*Summary of the four major Evangelical paradigms regarding civil government*

Table 1: Evangelical public policy paradigms (historical categories and their main branches)

<i>Category by Disposition / Action</i>	<i>Integrated Authority</i>	<i>Competing Kingdom</i>
<i>Transformational / Involved</i>	Theonomy	Liberty of Conscience
<i>Non-Confrontational / Passive</i>	Divine Right	Anabaptist

Table 2: Views of the Evangelical public policy paradigms

<i>Historical line of thought:</i> <b>Paradigm / Perspective</b>	<i>Integrated Authority</i>		<i>Competing Kingdom</i>	
	<b>Theonomy</b>	<b>Divine Right</b>	<b>Anabaptist</b>	<b>Liberty of Conscience</b>
<b>1. Views the state as a special sphere of authority like the family and the church?</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>2. Views the state as a transformable institution under the dominion mandate (Gen. 1:26-28)?</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>3. Views the source or foundation of the state’s rules as:</b>	God’s law when the state is a covenant-keeper; men or Satan otherwise	Providence: state speaks God’s will to the church / its subjects as God’s servant (or oracle)	God, who is doing His will in the competing realm; a few would say Satan	Satan (Rev. 13:2b, 4a; cf. 12:9a), or at least the state’s own cultural or moral standard

<b>4. Views the nature of the state as:</b>	Evil if a covenant-breaker, good if dominated by covenant-keepers	Benign: Good when good men run it and bad when bad men run it	A realm that competes with God's Kingdom (some regard as evil)	Evil: the greatest source of oppression and affliction besides false religion in history
<b>5. Views military service and the draft as:</b>	Morally permissible under some circumstances	Morally permissible under Providence	Pacifist (making the draft a bad thing too)	Often morally permissible, esp. for just war (the draft is bad when it is proactive policy)
<b>6. Views the primary role of the state as bringing terrestrial judgment upon sinners or harassing the church under God's permissive decree</b>	No	No	Yes, but also sees a role for the state in punishing criminals, etc.	Yes
<b>7. Views the primary role of the state as promoting or upholding the kingdom of God in the world</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>8. Views the state as "ordained" by God just as:</b>	Family and church (cf. the Westminster Larger Catechism)	Family and church	Any other thing God ordains outside of His Kingdom	Satan, the "god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4a)
<b>9. Views the church's role in political life as:</b>	The church preaches to the state and the state enforces God's Law; transforming the state (dominion mandate)	Supportive and active, endeavoring to promote "better" legislation with more God-honoring rules	The church should have nothing to do with the state or politics; Christians sin by participating in it	The church should not provoke the state, and must not hope that the state will help it achieve its godly ends; individual Christian involvement is left as a matter of conscience
<b>10. Views open rebellion or revolution as:</b>	Laudable and right when against a covenant-breaking state and led by a lower magistrate	Generally sinful	Unavoidable when the state intrudes into the life of the believer	Morally permissible so long as no other sin is committed by doing so; can be led by anyone
<b>11. The godly goal of revolution would be:</b>	Bring down a covenant-breaking king	Unlikely (if ever) to be ascertained	Unattainable since not permissible for believers	Permissible when it can be done wisely, God is glorified, and the church is benefited
<b>12. Views resistance as:</b>	Morally right when resisting a covenant breaking state, otherwise wrong	Generally sinful, except for a few items like prohibiting preaching the gospel and forced abortion	Unavoidable but not to be sought after	Morally right whenever it can be done without bringing public shame on Christ or wrath on the church, and when no other sin is being committed by doing so
<b>13. Views lying to the state (e.g., hiding Jews from Hitler, not reporting all income on a tax return, etc.) as:</b>	Morally right when resisting a covenant breaking state	Generally sinful	Unclear, but likely right / OK when promotes God's glory; tendency to shun taxes for warfare	Morally right when it can truly be used to promote life, stewardship, and God's glory

<b>14. Would use public policy to promote righteous living</b>	Yes	Yes	No, other than crime control	No
<b>15. Would consider reporting “tax protesters” or other rule breakers to the state</b>	No, unless a covenant-keeping state were in power	Yes	No	No

*Exegesis of Romans 12—14*

**12:9** Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

Given the context at Rome, Paul is saying that social mischief and roguery are evil and Christians must abstain from them. As an aside, is government “evil”? Yes! Then are we to abhor it too? Yes, but we must still submit to it in most policies in order that we not be distracted from our main mission in life. There are many policies that must be submitted to in order to avoid being harassed or fined by the state. Some policies must not be submitted to since they would violate a clear command of God or a conviction that we hold from the Scriptures. But there are many other policies that we need not obey since they are not enforced or are archaic (even though not repealed).

**12:14** Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

At that time (AD57), Rome was full of unrest and rioting. Paul did not want the Roman believers to partake in the mischief and chaos, as would have been so easy for them to do. Paul was applying the general teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount to the specific circumstances in Rome at the time. Of course, as a general principle it is valuable as well, just as Christ’s teaching is of general value even though directed specifically at the Jewish culture.

**12:16b** Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. **17** Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. **18** If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. **19** Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. **20** Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’

Christians might have been opportunists like their neighbors and take advantage of the social upheaval, or they could have been tempted to resist with force those who were caught up in the insurrection that wanted to molest them. But Paul wanted the believers to behave differently in order to glorify God and have a good testimony. He also wanted to make sure that they did not lose their lives and damage their families in the face of Nero’s wrath—that is a pragmatic or expedient approach. Paul did not want believers to be a focal point in the eyes of the civil government, especially since Nero was already prone to blame Christians.

**12:21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Good works and not acting in the same manner as the rogues brings glory to God, and does not provoke the authority to pour out his wrath on believers. The word here is πονερός, wickedness, referring to the wicked deeds of the rioters. Paul switches words in chapter 13:2-5 to κακόν, misdeeds, when talking about the state’s punishing of evildoers. Paul might also be giving a general principle that whenever we can subdue evil in the world and replace it with what is good we should do so, but only if we do not sin in the process.

13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Paul is essentially saying: “Do not mess with the civil government like others are doing. Realize that God has ordained it and all authority for a purpose: judgment of sinners in particular. Stay out of the way of God’s minister of wrath on the rebels.” As noted in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*, submission to the state is always qualified. We must obey in general, but many times we must disobey policies on account of personal conviction, its obsolescence, or its non-enforcement. All Christians agree that submission is qualified; differences arise over the “what” and the “when.” What policies can be disobeyed and when should a believer employ *passive* or *active* resistance to a policy? The theologians might allow rebellion to any policy that does not comply with God’s law set forth in the Old Testament. The Anabaptist might passively resist any decree of the state, if it is considered contrary to the purposes of the kingdom of God. The revitalized Divine Righter would permit rebellion only when a policy runs contrary to a “clear” teaching of Scripture, such as, prohibitions of Gospel preaching (Acts 4:19), eating forbidden foods (Daniel 1:8), bowing to false gods (Daniel 3:12), prohibitions of prayers to God (Daniel 6:7-10), selling one’s possession when it is a special heritage from God (1 Kings 21:3), and committing murder (Exodus 1:17). Other permissible rebellions may be added to the list as well, including prescribing violations of any of the Ten Commandments, mandating oath taking, or directing child rearing and educational practices, depending on the Divine Righter one asks. (The final list may vary widely between them.) Submission to the state always has the objective of being pragmatic toward men and glorifying toward God. There is never a moral problem for disobeying a policy or revolting *per se*. Any sin problem for disobedience arises only when one’s action is unwise, involves poor stewardship, requires neglecting one’s family duties, or detracts from the believer’s principal purpose in life (as noted under the Romans 12:9 comment earlier).

All four views would permit *passive* resistance to any morally repugnant policy, including fleeing on account of policies designed to persecute believers (Matthew 2:13, 10:23, 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:21; John 10:5)—although the Divine Righters would probably allow less passive resistance than the others. Surely, it is unimaginable that Roman believers would have obeyed policies requiring them to turn in their brethren to the authorities. The Roman Christians obviously disobeyed a policy designed to persecute them by not surrendering to authorities, preferring to flee to the Catacombs. The main disagreements in practical theology arise over when active resistance can be employed. At any rate, all four views of the believer’s response to public policy do *not* take Paul’s teaching (or Peter’s) to be *absolute*. However, the *Liberty of Conscience* perspective developed in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* squares best with Paul’s teaching in Romans 13:1-7 since it does not abide with inconsistencies like the other views. The theologians have to relegate the teaching to a golden age or an idealistic view of what government “should be” (even though they know that it only very rarely has been). Most of the time, they will be able to justify revolt, making Paul’s submission requirement rather lame or impotent. The Anabaptist view, although similar to the Liberty of Conscience view in some respects, does not seem to give much weight to Paul’s mandate in practice, since almost any policy can be found wanting (and thus become non-binding) in terms of their overarching desire for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

The Divine Righters are left with the uneasy position of demanding absolute disobedience to a few policies and absolute obedience to everything else. The problem for them arises in that there is no universally or even widely accepted list of policies that can be disobeyed (beyond a handful of “clear” ones). One will say that hiring a Christian who has entered the country illegally is sin while another will not. The same is true about policies for the military draft, giving preferential treatment for hiring homosexuals, prohibiting sexual practices in marriage, prohibiting working or shopping on Sunday, and many other policies. If put in a ring for 16 rounds of hard policy questions, they would end up accusing each other of sin at many points. (Some will come down to the rather crass position that almost anything *illegal* is sin.) Furthermore, Divine Righters end up throwing Christians into bondage. For them, it is a *sin* to revolt or disobey *any* public policy that is not



specifically on their “OK to disobey” list. It makes no difference that a believer is ignorant of the legislation and policies where he is. He sins whether he disobeys intentionally or not. In some places he will sin if he spits on the street (as in Dunn, North Carolina), if he wears his grandfather’s postal worker uniform to a costume party (USA), if he wears a military ribbon that he is not authorized to wear (USA), if he fails to wear his seatbelt for any reason in most states, if he throws a rock at a bird in Dublin, Georgia, or if he is under age 18 and plays pinball in South Carolina or Nashville, Tennessee. There are a countless number of federal and state “laws” that he is obliged to obey. He must not have a cavalier attitude toward sin (cf. Romans 6:1) and thus must take seriously his obligation to be apprised of the local public policies wherever he goes. If he is tempted to sin and break a “law,” God will provide a “way of escape” for him (1 Corinthians 10:13), and he must strive to find it. Hence, if the Divine Right doctrine is taken seriously, the bondage is severe.

The theonomists have an advantage of having a more or less exact list of good and bad policies from the Old Testament. They do not think that it is sin to disobey a policy unless it is on the Bible’s law code. Some of them might say that, under a covenantal view of society, a government that violates God’s covenant forfeits its right to obedience. Nevertheless, while there may be some bondage in the theonomic system, it is nothing like the bondage found under a Divine Right one. The Liberty of Conscience view also has the advantage of freeing the believer from bondage to men’s rules. Any policy may be resisted if the need (or moral obligation from conviction) arises, if there is no clear pragmatic or expedient reason to obey it (unlike there was in Rome), and the believer does not commit any ancillary sin by disobeying. Thus, it is not very difficult to reconcile Paul’s rather absolute-sounding mandate with a Liberty of Conscience view. He told the Roman Christians under Nero to be particularly careful to obey every policy they could, in order to minimize personal suffering and persecution. Some were banished by Nero, and perhaps many others fled the city, following the teaching of Christ (Matthew 10:23). Yet the fact remains that the coddled absolutist interpretation of the Divine Righters does not hold up well when one considers the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Even Divine Righters admit that there are times when rebellion against the state is required. Paul’s tough language reflects the context in which the believers were living. Such a strong directive is not universal for all times and places. The principle stands of course, but its specific application will depend on the repugnancy of the policy in question, the strength of the state that enforces the policy, and the ability of the believer to wisely resist the policy (either actively or passively) within his cultural context. The Liberty of Conscience view also permits the greatest personal choice and responsibility in deciding which policies to resist.

*13:2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.*

Here Paul is saying: “Do not cross them and you will not have to face their wrath that is going to come down on the rioters. Instead, behave as they want you to and they will be pleased with you.” The state has its own definition of what is good and evil, and Paul is pointing out to the believers at Rome that if they do something that the annoyed government of that time thinks is evil then they will suffer wrath for it. Those who wish to divorce this teaching from its historical context, making Paul’s teaching an absolute requirement in all cultures and eras, are greatly mistaken. They end up placing Christians under an inordinate bondage to public policy, just as do many adherents of the revitalized Divine Right of Kings doctrine.

*13:4 For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*

Paul states the facts of life: “If you taunt the state it will bite you—hard.” Paul knew how powerful Nero was and the damage he could inflict on the growing church at Rome. Nevertheless, Paul reminds the believers that the unrest around them, and the state’s wrathful activities, would in the end produce more general

sanctification in the sense of Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

*13:5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.*

The reason we submit to government is to avoid wrath or worrying about being harmed by the authority. The word “conscience” is used to denote one’s worry about doing something wrong. But in this case, as it was in Corinth where some brethren weakly worried about eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 10:23-31), the believers were worried about whether doing something that the Roman government considered to be wrong. In terms of God’s way, our conscience bothers us when we sin and remind of us the Day of Judgment. In terms of the state, it bothers us when we are not in compliance with the policy and we worry that we might incur the wrath of the state. Remember, the government’s definition of evil and God’s definition of evil are often diametrically opposed.

While submission is generally required, it is not absolute; it was at that time for the Roman believers especially important to submit and show themselves to be different than their neighbors who did not stand a chance against the civil authority. Might there be other times when believers might be able to participate in gaining the upper hand over an evil authority, such as the American Revolution? The Liberty of Conscience view suggests that Scripture leaves room for such a possibility. The peculiar submission to Rome at that time had special significance to the believers of that day, and as a principle to future situations, but not necessarily all situations. What a grief it is to modern believer when their leaders bring them into bondage of having to apprise themselves of, and obey, every bit of legislation and executive or judicial decree that presents itself in their lives! What a grief it is to believers who are chided by some (based on an absolutist interpretation of this passage) for revolting against an evil state when they have a legitimate opportunity to overcome it! Rather than such absolutism, one might argue that Paul generally permits Christians to “overcome” evil (authority) and be “free” from it. “Overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21) and “Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it...You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Corinthians 7:20-23). Thus, the primary reason God tells us to obey is to avoid facing overwhelming wrath and worry, but when Christians have the ability to resist an evil state and overcome it, as the Americans did in 1776, then they may by all means do so. Therefore, Paul is not teaching that all resistance must be immoral. He is not saying that violating public policy is sin, with a few exceptions (e.g., prohibitions of Gospel preaching and demands to commit murder). He is teaching that since any resistance by the Romans believers would be crushed by overwhelming power, and would give an excuse to begin a general persecution of Christians, they had to be careful to go above and beyond the call and submit to all policies that do not cause them to sin. As Peter would say to them later: “submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” (1 Peter 2:13).

*13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.*

It is as if Paul were saying: “Consider submitting to the present policies in the same manner as you submit when paying taxes. You hate to pay taxes but you do so because you do not want the state’s wrath or worry. Behave accordingly, especially now given all the tumult (or perhaps the martial law) that was emerging.” Note that Paul teaches that suffering is part of the Christian life (Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12; cf. Luke 6:22, John 16:33). But he does not teach that Christians should *seek* persecution. On the contrary, Christ taught us to flee persecution when possible (Matthew 10:23, 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:21), and in Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 the Apostles admonish believers to comply with policy in order to minimize persecution and suffering. Paul demonstrated this objective when he utilized his rights as a Roman citizen to mitigate the persecution and suffering that he might face (Acts 25:11, 22:25-29, 23:27, 28:19).

Were the Christians who participated in the Boston Tea Party and other tax rebellions against England in violation of this mandate to pay taxes to an evil state? Nero's rule was plainly evil too, but believers had not chance of achieving his overthrow. Were Isaac Backus (1724-1806)—a noted preacher, historian, and defender of liberty—and the other early American Baptists in violation for their active resistance to certain religious taxation? They were not, because the force of the teaching of Paul is neither absolute nor neatly transcendent across cultural contexts. And the Americans had a viable chance at achieving liberty.

**13:7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.**

The word 'taxes' here is *tribute*, or a capitation tax charged in a township census. The government agents went house to house and counted the residents (or the residents registered at a local office, cf. Luke 2:1), and demanded immediate payment of the tribute. "Do not resist them," says Paul, "just pay it." "The same thing holds with any sort of indirect tax they charge you when you bring your goods to market to trade and they require a tariff at the gate of the city. Walk humbly past those state agents with power to harm you, and be outwardly fearful so as not to provoke them. Give honor to the authorities outwardly so as not to peeve them and give them cause to assault you. Give them whatever money or respect they require of you during this tumultuous time." And, as a general principle at other times in the future, modern Christians should do the same. However, it is not clear that Paul has in mind any sort of tax that would be levied but rather those levied visibly near their homes or in the marketplace. Nonpayment in public would classify them with the rebels and rogues of the day. Paul wanted them to avoid such public controversy so that they would not become objects of governmental wrath or detract from the glory of God. How does this apostolic teaching about taxes relate to our modern era when taxation is not always public as it was in Rome? Would Paul require that American Christians be scrupulous in reporting every dime for income and sales tax purposes (e.g., that they gain through private bartering or cash sales)? If the main principles in the passage that Paul teaches are (1) to avoid the state's wrath, (2) to be free from worry that the state will harass you, (3) to not make a public spectacle of resistance to public policy and thus give the state an excuse to persecute the church, and (4) above all, to glorify God by keeping His commandments, then it seems that many modern taxes may be avoided or even evaded without sinning or violating apostolic teaching. Tribute and tariffs are not representative of all kinds of taxes in all cultural contexts for all times. They were the public taxes of the Roman civilization.

This counsel from the Apostle Paul is very practical, pragmatic, expedient, and advisable. As I noted in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective*, pages 123-126, Paul is not out of line with the similarly expedient directives regarding civil government elsewhere in the Scriptures.

#### *The Apostles' pragmatic doctrine*

The tone of Paul's plea in Titus 3:1-2 is even more pragmatic than in Romans 13:1-7. Paul wanted believers to be free of the earthly turmoil that comes from being embroiled with the civil government. He would prefer that a Christian live a 'quiet and peaceable life' (I Ti. 2:2), being noticed only on account of his good works, love and faith. Insulting speech was to be replaced with 'humility' (Tit. 3:1) and gentleness so that the fruit of the Spirit would be manifested to others. In another practical passage, Paul tells the saints in Thessalonica to live in such a way that attention is not drawn to themselves as meddlers, but rather on account of their love. '[A]spire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you' (I Thes. 4:11).

Note that there are other instances of pragmatic advice regarding civil government and political authorities in the Bible. Consider a few examples.

- *Proverbs 23:1-3* 'When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider carefully that which is set before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food'.

- *Ecclesiastes 5:8* ‘If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them’.
- *Ecclesiastes 8:2-5* ‘I counsel you, keep the king’s commandment for the sake of your oath to God. Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not make a stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him. Where the word of a king is there is power; and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’ He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; and a wise man’s heart discerns both time and judgment’.
- *Matthew 17:27* ‘Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you’.

Hence, it is not odd to find practical instruction about civil government in the Bible. On the contrary, it is surely appropriate to expect to find more such pragmatic advice in places like the second half of Romans—especially given the dire circumstances of that period of the Roman Empire.

Accordingly, the command to ‘honor’ all people and the king in I Peter 2:17 does *not* have to be tantamount to the ‘honor’ of parents required by the Fifth Commandment (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Eph. 6:1-3) but solely has pragmatic significance. That is, in order to avoid being needlessly harassed by the civil government (which could be suicidal), a Christian should conduct himself wisely, showing at least superficial respect to government leaders.

Thus, the Christian’s attitude should be as meek as Daniel’s. He appeared in the king’s court and took his gifts (without wanting them). He never cursed the king or mocked the people who could have harmed him (cf. Eccl. 10:20). Even when a Christian chooses to not respect the policies and ideas of a government leader, he can still manifest outward respect for him, while inwardly giving him no higher place or greater respect than other workers of iniquity.

Paul gives a similar pragmatic teaching in Romans 13:1-2,5 where Christians, in the face of threats from civil government, are told to ‘be subject’ as a matter of practical wisdom, realizing that ‘the government authorities’ are ‘from God’ and are in His control. Rebellion would cause needless terrestrial ‘judgment’, or at least anxiety of ‘conscience’ (cf. Mt. 6:27-34), complicating and debilitating the more important elements of Christian practice.

Paul was *not* requiring unqualified submission to the state. No act of submission is ever without some qualification—even in marriage. The Christians at Rome who entered the catacombs certainly did not think submission was without qualification. They preferred to submit to God rather than to Rome’s proactive public policies and therefore suffered the consequences of their rebellion. Those Christians understood that Paul wrote as one who was cognizant of the dire circumstances they faced under their civil government (just as Peter would write to them later). They comprehended the practical nature of the instruction.

Paul and Peter knew that the Roman government upheld few—if any—bits of biblical law. Rather, it sets standards of good and evil, right and wrong, according to pagan religious, cultural, or political principles. Surely, it is a relatively rare artifact of history to find a government that has helped to secure and uphold biblical principles and ethical standards of conduct. Without doubt, both Paul and Peter were well acquainted with this fact.

**13:8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.**

This not only applies to tribute and tariffs that would be demanded, but also to any other person in Rome at that unstable and difficult time. Paul is basically saying, “Do not give anyone around you, whether bureaucrat or rioter, a reason to assail you.” This text does not mean that under more tranquil times believers were forbidden to borrow money. The best choice at that time in Rome was to bless others with things that they had, government agents and rioters included, and to thus demonstrate the love of Christ. As a principle, we might do the same as the Roman believers were instructed (at least in some cases).

**13:9 For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.**

The law of Christ sums up in one phrase the entire second table of the law: about how we ought to treat our neighbors. Paul says: “Apply that law of Christ now with regard to your Roman neighbors caught up in the frenzy.”

*13:12* The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. *13* Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

Paul admonishes them: “Do not sin like most everyone else around you. Behave differently, as Christ would have you behave. Do not mimic their drunken parties, fighting, lusts, revelries, and riots, but instead act as a Christian should act and use the opportunity to show that you are different than the rabble of society.”

*13:14* But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

Paul effectively says: “Rather than take advantage of the situation for earthly gain, utilize the circumstances to glorify God, advance the cause of the Gospel, and promote your own sanctification.”

*14:1* Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. *2* For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. *3* Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

Continuing his expedient teaching into chapter 14, Paul says: “With all of the turmoil going on around you, do not devour one another over minor issues.”

*14:4* Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Here Paul sums it up: “Respect Christian liberty on issues that are not absolutely clear in the Scriptures. God will be his Judge, but God has also promised to preserve him as one of His elect.”

*14:8* For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.

The Christian’s life is in God’s hands, who will make him persevere so that he will never be out of His favor.

*14:12* So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. *13* Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way.

Paul admonishes the believers to be careful how they live and not to use their liberties in such a way that it causes a brother to have a conscience problem—even if the conscience violation he feels has no merit in reality—but is only on account of his weak understanding.

*14:14* I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. *15* Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. *16* Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; *17* for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. *18* For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Paul is saying here: “Especially during unrest, your brethren are the most important supports in your lives. Do not nitpick and wrangle with them in a sort of spiritual revelry that rivals the vile and reprehensible revelry around you. Instead, show extra love and patience and do not grieve your brother.”

*19* Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

The bottom line is: behave in a godly and peaceable manner in order to glorify God in this unstable world around us, and let us behave in a charitable and encouraging manner to the brethren.

### *Exegesis of 1 Peter 2*

*2:1* Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, *2* as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, *3* if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

Like Paul in Romans 13:12, Peter gives a similar list of follies and behaviors to shun. Instead of living for the flesh, Peter admonishes the Roman believers to use instability as an opportunity to improve Christian character.

*2:7* Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, ‘The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone,’ *8* and ‘A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense.’ They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. *9* But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; *10* who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

The reprobates around the believers act out their part to defy God and reject Christ. Apparently, the Roman government’s wrath was going to come upon them as a terrestrial judgment as well. By their bad behavior, they were asking for stripes. On the other hand, the elect in Rome were to realize who they were and act accordingly, ensuring that the glory of God remained their chief end.

*2:11* Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, *12* having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Like Paul in Romans 13:1-7, Peter does not want the Roman believers to participate in the riotous living of those around them. Instead, he wanted the believers to be seen by the civil government as compliant and not troublesome, to the end that the Gospel might be promoted even more.

*2:13* Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, *14* or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.

Peter’s teaching is similar to Paul’s in Romans 13:1-7: “Do what the Roman government demands.” Christians needed to realize that the rogues of Rome were in jeopardy of being judged by the powerful state, which disliked their misdeeds. Governments have seldom in history, and certainly not under Nero’s Rome (AD57 to AD63), punished people who broke God’s law or harmed His ways, or who rewarded believers or those who promoted the kingdom of God. The meaning here, as in Romans 13:1-7, is that the state punishes evil as it defines evil and rewards or praises good as it defines good. The message to believers is stay out of Leviathan’s way so as not to get terrestrial wrath poured on them.

*2:15* For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—

Peter has in mind the same goal that Paul did. Behave differently in your culture during the uprisings and you with glorify God more and advance the Gospel by your good deeds.

**2:16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.**

Peter alludes to his conversation with Christ about the temple tax in Matthew 17:24-27. “Free,” ελευθερος, is used in a similar way in both 1 Peter 2:16 and Matthew 17:26. Compare the passage in Matthew:

*Matthew 17:24* When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, ‘Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?’ 25 He said, ‘Yes.’ And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?’ 26 Peter said to Him, ‘From strangers.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the sons are free. 27 Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you.’

Christians are “free” from having to obey legalisms or any authority but God in an absolute sense. Nevertheless, for both expedience reasons and for reasons of advancing the kingdom of God, Christians should also obey civil authority. Christians should not disobey most policies “lest we offend” rulers (Matthew 17:27). That only brings wrath, worries, and wastes our time and resources. It throws our priorities in life out of whack. The same may be said for joining rogues in their roguery. It is not fitting for saints who are in reality a royal priesthood (as Peter just described) who should be dedicated to glorifying God in everything.

**2:17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.**

Similar to Paul’s teaching in Romans 13:7-8, believers should go out of their way to love their brethren, especially during difficult times. And Peter calls on believers to show at least superficial honor to rulers or to their neighbors (even in the midst of debauched revelries and rogueries). The Apostle Paul was careful to maintain this outward respect toward the high priest (Acts 23:5). However, we see that this command is not absolute under any circumstance by looking at the lives of Christ, John the Baptist, and the Apostles. Jesus disparagingly referred to Herod as a “fox” (Luke 13:32), publicly dishonored the ruling scribes and Pharisees by calling them a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 23:33) and “sons of hell” (Matthew 23:15), and reproached the high priest (John 18:19-23). Unlike Paul, Jesus did not make a conciliatory gesture when He was accused of reproaching the high priest and was struck on the cheek—partly because being struck on the face was a fulfillment of Isaiah 50:6. (We also see that the command to turn the other cheek in Matthew 5:39 is not an absolute requirement since Christ did not do so, nor did Paul when he was similarly struck in Acts 23:2.) John the Baptist likewise called the ruling scribes and Pharisees a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7), and was not afraid to rebuke and dishonor Herod publicly by saying that his brother Phillip was in sin for having Herodias (Matthew 14:4). His actions were congruent with the doctrine of the Apostle Paul: “Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear” (1 Timothy 5:20), and John the Baptist was not out of line with many of the other Old Testament prophets who harshly confronted civil leaders. Peter and John publicly derided the demands of the Jewish rulers, elders, scribes, and the high priest when they were asked to stop speaking about Jesus (Acts 4:18-19).

**2:18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. 19 For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.**

More practical exhortation: “Believing slaves must not take advantage of the current unstable circumstances to procure benefits for the flesh.” It makes no difference if one’s master is a believer, benign, or cruel. The believers were to use the instability as an opportunity for testifying to others about God’s grace, rather than to create a bad testimony by taking advantage of the situation. They should stay faithful and reverent; just

like Paul and Silas who chose to not escape from the Philippian prison (Acts 16:25-34). Like them, if the Lord wills, they would have an opportunity to gain both their freedom and the souls of their masters.

2:20 For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. 21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 'Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth'; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

In sum, Christians are to expect, and rejoice in, suffering for Christ (Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 3:12; Luke 6:22; John 16:33). By imitating Him we glorify Him and advance His kingdom.

It is fitting to close by quoting a famous English Baptist preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, who notes that Baptists have suffered at the hands of the state, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. But Baptists have never made any alliance with the state. I believe that the Liberty of Conscience view of civil government and public policy presented in *Bible and Government: Public Policy from a Christian Perspective* is the proper heritage of Baptist believers. That is not to say that it is incompatible with other denominations. It is. But Baptists have had the great misfortune of aligning themselves with incompatible doctrines about public policy from other groups that has led to the acceptance of errors like the revitalized Divine Right of Kings doctrine.

“We believe that the Baptists are the original Christians. We did not commence our existence at the reformation, we were reformers before Luther or Calvin were born; we never come from the Church of Rome, for we were never in it, but we have an unbroken line up to the apostles themselves. We have always existed from the very days of Christ, and our principles, sometimes veiled and forgotten, like a river which may travel underground for a little season, have always had honest and holy adherents. Persecuted alike by Romanists and Protestants of almost every sect, yet there has never existed a Government holding Baptist principles which persecuted others; nor, I believe, any body of Baptists ever held it to be right to put the consciences of others under the control of man. We have ever been ready to suffer, as our martyrologies will prove, but we are not ready to accept any help from the State, to prostitute the purity of the Bride of Christ to any alliance with Government, and we will never make the Church, although the Queen, the despot over the consciences of men.” (*The New Park Street Pulpit*, volume VII, page 225).



## Appendix: Interesting Quotations Relevant to this Issue

### *Regarding Baptists and their thinking*

From the website: *Who Are Baptists?* <http://www.fbcwarmsprings.org/baptists.htm>

“Early Baptists were persecuted in England and America because they were not the established (or state sanctioned) denomination. Thomas Helwys was eventually executed because of his refusal to give the King control over his spiritual life. In America, Baptists were arrested and persecuted in the colonies because they were not the official religion. Baptist pastors were placed in jail for preaching and holding Bible studies not sanctioned by the state church (in most colonies Anglican or Episcopal churches were the official churches). They were in violation of the law for following God’s leadership. In American history, two distinct streams of thought converged. The rationalists wanted the government free of church interference and control. Radicals like Baptists wanted the church free of government interference and control. The result was the first amendment to the United States Constitution (article one of the Bill of Rights). Virginian John Leland, a prominent colonial Baptist agreed to support James Madison to be a delegate to the Constitutional Congress if he would support an amendment separating church and state. Madison was elected and was instrumental in the writing of the Bill of Rights. A free church in a free state is the distinctively Baptist contribution to American democracy. Early Baptists wanted religious liberty. Toleration is a concession from a superior to an inferior. Liberty is a matter of principle and an inalienable right. Baptists were so confident in the power of the Gospel that freedom for every religion to exist was not intimidating. Balthasar Hubmaier, an early Anabaptist, said “Faith is not the product of the heretic’s tower.” If a person is free to believe, they must be free not to believe. Historically, this belief has caused Baptists to oppose government aid to parochial or church schools, any form of state sponsored, written or controlled prayer or religious exercise. While often misunderstood it is the historic Baptist position. As you might expect there is difference of opinion about the expressions of these freedoms among Baptists. But that is the result of freedom; each Baptist and Baptist church following God leadership. For Christians who grew up in a different tradition this may sound confusing. Freedom can be that way. Absolute freedom is an invitation to anarchy and confusion. The one common thread that holds us together is Jesus Christ. A common commitment to knowing and doing the will of God provides a consensus in the church body. Because of human limitations, we may not all come to the same conclusion about God’s will for the church. Yet, God is able to lead the church to a consensus decision. A one hundred percent agreement, on any decision while desirable, is rarely possible in a Baptist church. Humility and mutual respect keep the church united. Humility reminds us that no one can claim to have the monopoly on understanding God’s will or have the infallible interpretation of a Biblical text. Mutual respect reminds us that the other person could be right even if they are in the minority.”

From the paper on this website: *This Sacred Land by Anthony Stanonis*  
<http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1993-4/Stanonis.html>

Overall, the Baptists trusted in Calvinism’s strict discipline and independence. <3> Ministers such as Isaac Backus also believed that God had “appointed two kinds of government in the world which are distinct in their nature and ought never to be confounded together, one of which is called civil the other ecclesiastical government.” <4> Besides supporting the separation of church and state, Baptists attempted to be as decentralized as possible. <5> After the establishment of the first Baptist church by Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639, however, the concept of possessing some sort of unity among the colonies’ churches grew as the number of places of worship increased. <6> Thus, the idea of forming associations, a denominational program that focused on the formal participation of several churches came into existence. The first, the Philadelphia Baptist Association, was created in Pennsylvania in 1707. Associations soon represented a common part of the organizational structure of Baptist churches. In 1751, the Charleston Association of South Carolina, the South’s first Baptist organization, was established, followed in 1758 by the Sandy Creek Association of North Carolina. <7> The Philadelphia Association, however, retained a certain leadership among the Baptist congregations despite the distrust that individual churches had for granting any central authority to such an organization. <8>

From the paper on this website: Chapter V *The Baptist Story*  
[http://www.freechurchheritage.com/wb/wb\\_ch5.htm](http://www.freechurchheritage.com/wb/wb_ch5.htm)

Nowhere is this more evident, he states, than in the articles on the authority of the state in religious affairs. Article 39 of *A True Confession* reflects the Calvinism of its authors who were the Separatists (called Brownists) of the “Ancient Church” of Francis Johnson. Johnson was in prison in London at the time (1596) and the major part of the membership was already in Amsterdam led by Henry Ainsworth, who was probably the principle author of the confession. Six passages from the New Testament and at least twenty-five from the Old Testament were cited as Scriptural support for its contents. This confession is obviously not a Baptist statement of faith. These Separatists, even though the object of persecution in England did not believe in religious liberty. Instead they believed that the state should support their form of Christianity and suppress other religious expressions. Article 39 reads:

That it is the Office and duty of Princes and Magestrates, who by the ordinance of God are supreme Governours under him over all persons and causes within their Realmes and Dominions, to suppress and root out by their authoritie all false ministries, voluntarie Religions and Counterfeyt worship of God, to abolish and destroy the Idoll Temples, Images, Altares, Vestments, and all other monuments of Idolatrie and superstition and to take and convert to their own civile uses not only the benefit of all such idolitrous buyldings & monuments, but also the Revenues, Demeanses, Lordships, Possessions, Gleabes and maintenane of anie false ministeries and unlwafull Ecclesiasticall functions whatsoever within their Dominions. And on the other hand to establish & mayntein by their lawes every part of Gods word his pure Relligion and true ministerie to cherish and protect all such as are carefull to worship God according to his word,...

*The First London Confession*, published by seven Particular Baptist churches in London, sets forth a radically different perspective regarding the role of the state in matters of religion. In contrast to *A True Confession*, of the twenty-eight passages of Scripture cited in support of the articles on religious freedom and the limitations of the state, only three were from the Old Testament. The Baptists, also, chose to state their position on religious freedom in five brief articles rather than the long and involved articles found in the Separatist confession on the subject. Articles XLIX and LI given below contain the heart of the Baptist position.

The supreme Magistracie of this Kingdome we beleve to be the King and Parliament freely chosen by the Kingdome, and that in all those civill Lawes which have been acted by them, or for the present is or shall be ordained, we are bound to yeeld subjection and obedience unto in the Lord, as conceiving our selves bound to defend both the persons of those thus chosen, and all civill lawes made by them with our persons, liberties, and estates, with all that is called ours, although we should suffer never so much from them in not actively submitting to some Ecclesiasticall Lawes, which might be conceived by them to be their duties to establish which we for the present could not see, nor our consciences could submit unto; yet are we bound to yeeld our persons to their pleasures.

But if God with-hold the Magistrates allowance and furtherance herein; yet we must notwithstanding proceed together in Christian communion, not daring to give place to suspend our practice, but to walk in obedience to Christ in the profession and holding forth this faith before mentioned, even in the midst of all trialls and afflictions, not accounting our goods, lands, wives, children, fathers, mothers, brethren, sisters, yea our own lives dear unto us so we may finish our course with joy; remembering alwayes we ought to obey God rather then men, and grounding upon the commandement, commission and promise of our Lord and master Jesus Christ, who as he hath all power in heaven and earth, so also hath promised, if we heed to his commandments which he hath given us, to be with us to the end of the world; and when we have finished our course, and kept the faith, to give us the crowne of righteousness, which is laid up for all that love his appearing and to whom we must give an account of all our actions, no man being able to discharge us of the same.

In the 1646 edition of the *First London Confession*, the Baptists added to article XLVIII an extensive “Note” that strengthened the position of the Particular Baptists on religious freedom in unequivocal terms: “*And concerning the worship of God; there is but one law-giver, which is able to save and destroy, James 4:12; which is Jesus Christ, who hath given laws and rules sufficient in His word for His worship;...*”<sup>30</sup> For those who argue that Baptists only took the position on church and state found in these articles because they were a persecuted minority, need look no further than *A True Confession* of the Separatists. They, too, were a persecuted minority living in exile in Holland, but still they championed the concept of a state-church, which would tolerate no “heretical” religious opinions. Clearly, the Particular Baptists broke with their Calvinistic heritage not only in rejecting the state-church concept of the Separatists, but also in basing their arguments for religious freedom upon convictions derived from the New Testament and not the Old.<sup>31</sup>

### *Luther’s nexus with the impetus of both theonomy and the Divine Right of Kings idea*

“Luther’s courageous act at Worms has rightly been regarded as an important step in the history of the development of religious liberty. He steadfastly maintained that the authorities of both the church and the Empire were bound to convince him, an individual, of his errors before condemning him. On the other hand, this was still a far step from complete religious individualism and the denial of authority. This position, supported by the subsequent history of the reformer, shows that he firmly believed that by his personal religious experience and study he had arrived at the absolute religious truth, which did not permit any individual interpretation. It was his duty to show the authorities this truth, and it was their obligation to defend it. If the papacy would not do so, he would turn to the government. If the emperor refused to do so, he would turn to the territorial lords.” Harold J. Grimm (1954), *The Reformation Era: 1500-1650*, New York: The Macmillan Company, page 139.

“The Protestant Mind is the precursor of the nationalistic mind and is to a large degree the creator of the dominant thought-pattern of the era that follows, namely, the divine right of Kings. Luther gave to the secular power an authority and dignity almost, if not completely, divine: ‘The hand that wields the sword is not a human hand but the hand of God. It is God, not man, who hangs and

breaks upon the wheel. It is God who wages war.' It is not too much to say that, powerful as the influence of Luther was in the realm of religion, his doctrine of the State was mightier in Protestant lands than his doctrines of grace, and created a new phase of the age-long problem of the relation of organized government to organized religion." Rufus W. Weaver, *The Revolt Against God*, page 155.

"As a Christian, man has to suffer everything and not resist anybody. As a member of the State, the same man has to rob, murder, and fight with joy, as long as he lives....A prince may indeed be a Christian, but he must not rule as a Christian....No one must think that the world is governed without blood. The worldly sword must be red and blood-rusty....Wherever the princes take their power from, it does not regard us. It is the will of God, irrespective whether they have stolen their power or assumed it by robbery. ...If anybody has the might, he obtained it from God. Therefore he also has the right....Even if the authorities act unjustly, God wills that they should be obeyed without deceit....for to suffer unjustly harms no man's soul; indeed it is profitable to it. . . . Even if the authorities are wicked and unjust, nobody is entitled to oppose them, or to riot against them." *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (1909), Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, trans. by James Kellerman., vol. 30, page 1, passim.

### *Presbyterians and the American Revolution*

Presbyterians were not the only Christians who supported the War [of American Independence] (Baptists, Congregationalists, and some few others did as well) but they were the largest single group and the most widely dispersed throughout the colonies. Because of the nearly unanimous support of the Presbyterians and the "high profile" opposition to Britain on the part of the pastors, Presbyterians were blamed for the entire incident. One common designation of the War in Britain was "the Presbyterian Rebellion." An ardent supporter of the king in this country, wrote to his friends in England, "I fix all the blame for these extraordinary proceedings upon the Presbyterians. They have been the chief and principle instruments in all these flaming measures. They always do and ever will act against government from that restless and turbulent anti-monarchical spirit which has always distinguished them everywhere." (quoted in Lorraine Boettner (1992), *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, page 383) See [http://www.gbt.org/wilkins/presbyterians\\_and\\_the\\_war\\_of\\_ind.htm](http://www.gbt.org/wilkins/presbyterians_and_the_war_of_ind.htm) also see <http://www.aplacefortruth.org/studies/history19.htm>

Rev. August 13, 2003