

The following discourse is written by Pastor Matthew Trehella and is found as an appendix in a book he authored entitled *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates: A Proper Resistance to Tyranny and A Repudiation of Unlimited Obedience to Civil Government*. The book is available through Amazon.com or at LesserMagistrate.com. This concise exegesis is a response to those who say that Romans 13 teaches unlimited obedience to civil government. You can also listen to An Examination of Romans 13 here: <http://reconstructionistradio.com/project/an-examination-of-romans-13/>

An Examination of Romans 13

Three Convincing Proofs that Romans 13 Does *Not* Teach Unlimited Obedience to the Civil Government



This short article is written to give three convincing proofs that Romans 13 does *not* teach that we are to give unlimited obedience to the State as some Christian men teach. The three convincing proofs are:

1. Nowhere does Romans 13 state that we are to give unlimited obedience to the civil government, rather men impose such thoughts upon the text.
2. Proper hermeneutics forbids such a conclusion – that we are to have unlimited obedience to the civil government – because there are many passages of Scripture where the people of God *disobey* the State, and are commended by God for doing it.
3. Romans 13 contains limitation clauses that make it clear the civil government's authority is not unlimited, nor therefore, is our obedience to the civil government to be unlimited.

The First Convincing Proof

First, nowhere does the Bible say that we are to have unlimited obedience to the civil government – *nowhere*. Yet, this *divine right of kings* – that whatever those in civil authority decree is to be obeyed - has been what various Christian men have asserted over the centuries. They base this idea on Romans 13:1-5. But where does Romans 13 teach unlimited obedience to the State? They *impose* that idea upon the text. The text itself reads:

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

Yes, the text does say we are to be subject to the governing authorities, and that governments are established by God, but where does it say we are therefore to have unlimited obedience to the government? It does not. Again, they impose that upon the text.

In fact, there is *not one* scripture anywhere in all the Bible that demands or instructs unlimited obedience to the civil government. That fact, in and of itself, should suffice to convince that we are not to give unlimited obedience to the State, but we will continue to the second convincing proof.

The Second Convincing Proof

The second convincing proof is that proper hermeneutics forbids such a conclusion – that we are to have unlimited obedience to the civil government – because there are many passages of Scripture where the people of God *disobey* the civil government, and are commended by God for doing it.

Good hermeneutics demands that we not read a verse or passage in a vacuum. The hallmark of good hermeneutics is “Scripture interprets scripture.” In other words, every individual scripture (scripture with a small s) must be interpreted in light of the whole of God’s Word (Scripture with a big S). “Scripture interprets scripture.” We are to examine a particular verse in light of the whole of God’s Word.

When we look at the whole of God’s Word, we see that there are many passages which contradict the assertion that “we are to always obey the government.” For example, Exodus 1:15-21 records the story of the Hebrew mid-wives who were commanded by the king to kill the male Hebrew babies. The Scripture says they “*feared God,*”¹ and therefore refused to kill the male babies. God commended them for their actions,

¹ Exodus 1:21

as the Scripture states, “*Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty.*”²

The point is, if the assertion is true that God’s people are *always* to obey the laws and orders of the State, this passage stands in complete contradiction to it.

In Daniel chapter six, we read that the king declared that no one could pray to any deity, but only to him.³ Notice that this law was made in clear contradiction to the law of God. The men who conspired to make this law understood that the only charge they could raise against Daniel was one concerning “the law of his God.”⁴ Therefore they made a law according to man – “the law of the Medes and Persians.”⁵ This was a classic showdown where the law of man contravened – violated, opposed, and contradicted - the law and Word of God.

How should the people of God respond? Did Daniel obey this law? Did he say, “Oh, that is a bad law, but we must always obey the State?” No, Daniel took a brave and open stand in defiance of this unjust law. The Scripture says that “*when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open towards Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God.*”⁶

Notice he “knew” of the unjust law; notice his windows were “open” so all could see his non-compliance with the law; notice he “knelt down on his knees” so no one could mistake his defiance of the law; and, notice he did it “three times” in one day.

² Exodus 1:20

³ Daniel 6:7-9

⁴ Daniel 6:5

⁵ Daniel 6:8

⁶ Daniel 6:10

Again, if the assertion is true that God's people are always to obey the laws and orders of the State, this passage stands in complete contradiction to it.

The midwives were told *to do* something bad – kill the male babies – and they refused. Daniel was told *not* to do something good – pray to the Lord – and he refused. These two passages about the midwives and Daniel illustrate the standard the Church has followed historically, namely, when the State commands that which God forbids or forbids that which God commands, we have a duty to obey God rather than man.

The standard is that if a law enacted by the civil government contravenes the law or Word of God, we are to obey God, not the State.

Other passages also contradict the assertion that we are to always obey the State. For example, Hebrews 11:23 records how Moses' parents disobeyed the king. The Scripture reads, "By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; *and they were not afraid of the king's command.*"⁷ This is recorded in what Christians call the "Hall of Fame of Faith." Their actions are commended by the Word of God.

In Second Corinthians 11:32-33, Paul talks about how he avoided the government officials who were attempting to arrest him, by escaping down the side of the city wall. The Scripture reads, "In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of Damascus with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; *but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.*"⁸ Paul knew the government officials were trying to arrest him, but rather than submit, he craftily fled.

⁷ Hebrews 11:23

⁸ 2 Corinthians 11:32-33

In the fifth chapter of Acts, the apostles were told by the authorities not to preach about Jesus. They refused to obey them and responded by saying, “*We ought rather to obey God than men.*”⁹ When human authority contravenes the law or Word of God, we have a duty to obey God rather than man.

All these passages (and others) stand in complete contradiction to the idea that we are to *always* obey the government. If Romans 13 teaches that we are to have unlimited obedience to the State, these passage stand in contradiction to such an assertion.

So, nowhere in Romans 13 does it state that Christians are to have unlimited obedience to the civil government, and the hallmark rule of proper hermeneutics, “Scripture interprets scripture,” repudiates such an assertion.

The Third Convincing Proof

The third convincing proof that Romans 13 does not teach unlimited obedience to the civil government is that Romans 13 itself contains limitation clauses which limit the authority and function of the civil government, and therefore make clear that our obedience to the State is not to be unlimited.

The advocates of unlimited obedience to the State point to verse one which says, “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,” and then impose upon the text that we are *always* to obey in *everything*, something which the text does not say.

The truth is, the passage *does* talk about obeying the authorities, *but* there are conditions stated which limit the ruler’s authority. There are limitation clauses attached to what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 13.

⁹ Acts 5:29

Verses three and four clearly limit the ruler's authority. The Scripture says:

“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. 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.”

These are limitation clauses. The Scriptures are plain – the ruler's authority is not unlimited. He is to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil. *But what if he begins to punish those who do good, and reward those who do evil?* What if he makes law, policies, or court rulings that reward those who do evil and law, policies, or court rulings that punish those who do good? Should he still be obeyed? As we saw previously, the Scriptures are clear – he should not be obeyed.

When the State commands that which God forbids or forbids that which God commands, we are to obey God rather than man. We are *not* to join the ruler in his rebellion against God. When he rules justly, we are not to resist him (v.2). But if he rules unjustly, then we are to resist him. In such instances, we are to obey God, rather than man.

God has established four governments in the earth, namely, self-government, family government, church government, and civil government. Each has its own function and jurisdiction in the lives of men. Family, church, and civil government assist in producing self-government in the individual.

Each of these governments has positions of authority. For instance, in family government, the man is the head; the wife is his helper in the governance of the home. In church government, positions include elders, pastors, and deacons. In civil government, positions range from the

President to the policeman. The authority that each possesses is *delegated* authority – authority given to them of God.

The first verse of Romans 13 declares, “*For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.*” Hence, the authority that the State possesses is delegated from God. The governing authority is, as verse 4 states, “*God’s minister.*” They are to therefore govern according to God’s rule.

Most all would agree that when a father makes unjust or immoral laws or decrees in the home, that those under his jurisdiction are *not* bound to obey. Similarly, when a church officer governs unjustly within the church, neither should he be obeyed. But for some reason, when it comes to the civil government, men tend to think that the State can do most *anything* and they should always be obeyed.

Let us examine each of these three governments from Scripture.

Concerning family government, Colossians 3:20 states, “Children, *obey your parents in all things*, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.”

Notice this verse of Scripture says children are to obey *in all things*. There are *no* limitation clauses that limit the parent’s authority, nor the extent of the child’s obedience. Yet no one takes the parents authority as being limitless, nor the children needing to grant unlimited obedience.

All are agreed a father should not tell his child to go rob the corner gas station because if caught the child will face less severe punishment than he. Rather, the father has a duty before God to instruct the child in honesty and hard work, and to abhor theft. Hence, the father does not rule autonomously. He does not get to contravene the law of God just because he has a position of authority. The authority he has is *delegated* to him from God, and he has a duty therefore to govern his home in accordance with God’s rule. So a child who is told by his father to go rob the corner gas station would be right *not* to obey his father.

Also, regarding church government, Hebrews 13:17 states, “*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*”

Again, this verse also places *no* limitation clause or clauses that limit the church officer’s authority, nor the extent of a congregant’s obedience. Yet no one takes their authority as being limitless, nor that those under them must give unlimited obedience.

Suppose a pastor was skimming out of the offering plate for his own personal gain and a congregant learned of it, but the pastor told him to not tell anyone so he could continue to steal. No one would think the congregant wrong for telling the elders anyway.

Yet, when it comes to civil government, some Christian leaders tell their people that they should *always* obey, even though there *are* limitation clauses when it comes to obedience to civil authorities. God’s intent for rulers is that they be a terror not to good works, but to evil (v.3). They are to praise or reward those who do good (v.3). He is to be an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil (v.4). These are limitation clauses. This is God’s definition of good government.

These limitation clauses clearly show the God-given role of the ruler or magistrate. When the civil authority governs according to God’s intended function for his office, we are to “therefore,” as the very next verse says, “be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake” (v.5). When they do opposite of what their delegated authority requires of them, however, we are *not* to obey them. We may have to actively resist them.

The pastors of Magdeburg, Germany, in their Confession which formalized the doctrine of the lesser magistrates, made an analogy

between family government and civil government to make this very point:

Let us take an example concerning a father of a family. If he should come to his wife or grown daughters in his house with some scoundrels in an obvious attempt to prostitute them, then they, his wife and daughters, not only would not render their husband and father the obedience which they otherwise owe him, but when they are not able to preserve their chastity in any other way, they would drive him off with stones.

By the same argument, when the admission of Caesar into a magistrate's city brings with it a sure abolition of the true religion, the slaughter and exile of pious men -- in this case, the defense of religion, of one's own life and the lives of other innocent persons (which defense the magistrate of that city owes to God and to the citizens by the commandment of God) removes another part of the obedience owed to Caesar, that he should not offer obedience by admitting Caesar into the city, according to the rule of Christ, because the duties owed, when they come with injury to God and others, and joined with sin, ought not to be paid to anyone, not even to a father or a magistrate.¹⁰

Romans 13 is clear that the civil magistrate is to mirror the justice and law of God in the earth. They are to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil. They are to execute wrath on those who practice evil. Therefore, when the magistrate makes or advocates law which contravenes the law of God, the Christian has the duty to resist and oppose such law, and obey God rather than man.

Verse four makes clear that the authority the civil magistrate possesses is delegated authority. "For he is *God's minister* to you for good. But if

¹⁰ Matthew Colvin, trans., *The Magdeburg Confession (1550)* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Publishing, 2012) 64.

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." This concurs with verse one which makes clear the authority given to the ruler is given to him of God. Therefore he is to govern in accordance with God's rule.

God's law and Word is the standard for knowing what is good and what is evil. As the passage continues, verse nine of Romans 13 references the law of God. Why? Because it is the standard for knowing what is good and what is evil. It is the standard for both the public, as well as the personal lives of men. Paul is at that point in the passage moving from the public (the role of the magistrate) to the private. Both are in view. In other words, all men and all governments of men are accountable to the law and Word of God.

It stands to reason, if we are to *always* obey the State, regardless of what laws or orders the State makes or gives, then we, in effect, make the State *God*. The pastors of Magdeburg addressed this point in their Confession. They wrote:

If God wanted superior magistrates who have become tyrants to be inviolable because of his ordinance and commandment, how many impious and absurd things would follow from this? Chiefly it would follow that God, by his own ordinance and command, is strengthening, nay, honoring and abetting evil works, and is hindering, nay, destroying good works; that there are contraries in the nature of God Himself, and in this ordinance by which He has instituted the magistrate; that God is no less against his own ordinance than he is for the human race.¹¹

The idea that we are to always obey the State because it is appointed by God is absurd. The subjection they are due is not without limits. When they pervert their God-given role and function and begin to reward those

¹¹ Colvin, *Magdeburg Confession*, 67.

who do evil and punish those who do good, rather than reward those who do good and punish those who do evil, *we have no duty to obey them*, rather, we have a duty to obey God. We must not join in the magistrate's rebellion against God, rather we must be true to the Lord. The Scriptures are clear on this.¹²

Christians are the best of citizens. We subject ourselves to the governing authorities and obey them in all points of civil law *except* in those points where they clearly contravene the law and Word of God. The pastors of Magdeburg declared this to Charles V in their Confession. The pastors wrote:

As for other matters relating to your rule, we will gladly render obedience -- as much as we are able and we owe you. The profession of our religion has diminished nothing from it; so that much true dignity and encouragement for the obedience owed rather flows from it for you. For we teach with the apostle Paul that you are the vicarious minister of God for promoting good works, and that obedience is owed to you in this role, just as to God, not only because of wrath or fear of your sword, but also because of conscience, that is, fear of the wrath and judgment of God.

Although we cannot consider that all men equally comply with this doctrine, nor can we bring that about ourselves, nonetheless we can promise you this with the strength of a promise which is said about our ministry ("my word will not return to me void, Is. 55. Likewise, "Your labor will not be in vain in the Lord") that we will give from our Churches the greatest possible number of

¹² Some mistakenly try to use First Peter 2:13-14 to try and further their teaching of unlimited obedience to the State. But the word translated "ordinance" in some translations is an old English word referring to every "realm" or "institution" of human authority, not to every statute or law of man. As the verse goes on to say "whether to the king as supreme, 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." Hence, Peter is saying the same as Paul, and is not teaching unlimited obedience to the State.

men who, if they be able to enjoy their own religion through you, will declare their obedience toward you in all owed and upright duties, and loyalty without hypocrisy, out of true love, not so much love of receiving fruit from you, as love of you yourself, perhaps more than all those whom you say are obedient to you, so that you mistakenly mark us for the crime of contumacy and rebellion.

Although we are not able to look into the hearts of individuals, still, let us plainly affirm this about the city's general attitude and will: that except for the preservation of our religion, nothing else is sought; that when this is gained, our Senate and citizens will be most obedient in all their proper duties according to your Majesty's laws.¹³

In this example, the pastors are making clear to Charles that they are his best citizens; that they obey in all areas, *except* where the law or Word of God is contravened.

Even when we disobey an unjust or immoral law, we benefit the ruler and the people of the nation as a whole. We benefit those in authority because, due to our disobedience, they are confronted with the reality of their rebellion against God. Our Christ-obeying disobedience gives them opportunity to recover themselves, and turn from their unjust and/or immoral deeds.

We benefit the people of the nation as a whole because we act as a check against tyranny. Our fealty is to Christ first, not to man, therefore when the State makes law which commands that which God forbids or forbids that which God commands, we obey God rather than man. This benefits the entire nation. The tyrant government is not allowed to continue

¹³ Colvin, *Magdeburg Confession*, 52.

unchecked in its tyranny. This is one way in which Christianity preserves liberty for a nation.

As Christians, we suffer at the hands of the State due to our disobedience of their unjust or immoral laws or decrees. The rest of the nation benefits from our suffering because we help rein in tyrannical governments. This has been the history of the Church. But the ungodly don't see it. They prefer select parts of history where Christian men affirmed the pagan doctrine of the divine right of kings by positing an unbiblical interpretation of Romans 13 and teaching unlimited obedience to the State.

Like Daniel said to Darius in Daniel 6:22 *“O king, I have committed no crime against you.”* In other words, an unjust or immoral law is no law at all.

As Christian men and women, may we stand true to Christ, and to the law and Word of God.¹⁴

This concise exegesis is found as an appendix in the book entitled *The Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates: A Proper Resistance to Tyranny and A Repudiation of Unlimited Obedience to Civil Government*. The book is available through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or at LesserMagistrate.com.

¹⁴ For a list of common arguments against the lesser magistrate doctrine, including the Romans 13 assertion, and a response to each of them, read Christopher Goodman's *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed by Their Subjects and Wherein They May Lawfully by God's Word be Disobeyed and Resisted* written in 1558. It is available at Kessinger Publishing, Kessinger.net.