

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT SUPPOSED TO DO? AN EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 13:1-4

Tito de S. Lyro

One of the many questions that has come to the forefront of people's minds after the September 11th attacks concerns the role of government in society. What is the government supposed to do? This question was vividly present in the apostle Paul's mind as he writes to the church in Rome. Of course, Paul addresses this issue in other places. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 he says, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence."¹ In Titus 3:1 he says, "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work." However, no passage is more thorough in declaring the role of government under the New Covenant than Romans 13:1-7. Due to the allotted space for this article, it will concentrate on verses 1-4.

The first question that arises from this passage is the identity of the authorities in verse 1. Are they earthly or heavenly authorities? Some say that these are angelic authorities because of Paul's use of the word ἐξουσίαις (authorities) in different places

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1. ἐξουσίαις referring to good angelic beings

Ephesians 3:10 – to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*,

2. ἐξουσίαις referring to fallen angelic beings

Ephesians 6:12 – For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

Colossians 2:15 – Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

3. ἐξουσίαις referring to both good and fallen angelic beings

Colossians 1:16 – For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

The context surrounding verse 1 immediately discards the possibility of these authorities being demonic angels because it calls them “God’s minister unto good.”³ Regarding the authorities being good angelic beings, nowhere in the Bible we find that humans are to be in subjection to angels. As a matter of fact, good angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation.”⁴ In addition, the word ὑπερχούσαις, translated “governing” in the New King James Version (NKJV), is often used in secular literature as a reference to the civil magistrate.⁵ Thus, Paul did direct the passage in consideration to the earthly (civil) authorities, rather than to angelic beings.

Paul outlines six basic duties of the civil magistrate. The first one is that he is to govern. ὑπερχούσαις is translated as *governing* in the NKJV and mean “to have power over, be in authority over, be highly placed.”⁶ Thus, the first duty of the civil magistrate is to exercise this power that God has given him,⁷ which is accomplished by governing⁸ the people. The second duty is actually the practical outworking of the first. The civil magistrate is not to be a terror to good works.⁹ This is a difficult statement to understand. Paul is not writing about what the civil magistrate must do. Rather, he is writing about what the civil magistrate indeed does as evidenced by the use of the indicative mood. Common experience dictates that not all governments approve works that are biblically good. Of all the different views in the literature available to the writer of this article, the one summarized by the following quotation makes the most sense.

“Paul means that consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, in one way or another, the power will praise the good work and punish the evil... It may indeed intend to punish him, but its intended punishment will then turn out to be praise. It may take his life, but in so doing it will but confer a crown of glory.”¹⁰

Therefore, no matter what the intent of the civil magistrate is, his actions will ultimately reward good works.

Conversely, the civil magistrate is to be a terror to evil works.¹¹ Again, this statement goes against personal experience. From an earthly perspective, the civil government seems to reward evil. However, in the heavenly scheme of things the civil government will ultimately be a terror to evil works.¹² In a related thought, Paul says that the magistrate is to praise those that are practicing good works. The idea here is not that the government is bound to reward good works, but to approve them. In other words the government is to recognize these good works and to publicize that recognition.

Paul also states that the civil magistrate is God’s minister. The word translated “minister” in verse 4 is also translated “servant” or “deacon” in other places. The civil magistrate is not supposed to be self-serving. Instead, he must be selfless much like Christ’s selfless government over His Church. Finally, the civil magistrate is to be the executor of God’s judgment and wrath. The popular understanding of this verse is that Paul is sanctioning the government’s exercising of capital punishment. While this understanding is true, there is more to the government’s execution of God’s wrath and judgment. The word φορέῖ, usually translated “bear” or “wield,” means “to wear.” The civil magistrate wears the sword as a symbol of the

authority given to him by God to administer ALL forms of punishment, including capital punishment.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

² Karl Barth and Oscar Cullman among others.

³ Verse 4.

⁴ Hebrews 1:14

⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), pp.659-660.

⁶ Walter Bauer, F.W. Gingrich, and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

⁷ “For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” (Rom. 13:1b).

⁸ Govern: “to make and administer public policy and affairs” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*).

⁹ Rom. 13:3-4a.

¹⁰ Cranfield, p. 665.

¹¹ Rom. 13:3, 4b.

¹² “If he does evil, it must needs punish him – though it may be by shameful honours or false security” (Cranfield, p. 665).