

13:1–7 SUBMISSION TO AUTHORITIES

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. 5Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

OVERVIEW: Paul exhorts the Romans to obey the divinely appointed secular authorities; to oppose secular authority is to oppose God's order. The magisterial reformers, who often worked closely with civil authorities to enact their reforming efforts, likewise argue that civil rulers are ordained by God and do not need the church—whose role is to proclaim the gospel—to legitimize them. In their eyes, to serve public office is a good Christian vocation ordained by God for the common good, and public officials should serve not out of self-interest but for the welfare of others. Only when the governing authorities contradict the commands of God or become tyrannical may Christians resist for “we must obey God rather than human beings” ([Acts 5:29](#)).

Philip D. W. Krey et al., eds., *Romans 9–16: New Testament*, vol. VIII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

While acknowledging the original context of Paul's audience the magisterial reformers nevertheless assume that the magistrates are Christian. They respect the wisdom of Cicero and other Romans about governance but share with [Augustine](#) a profound ambiguity about whether justice can be attained by governance apart from Christ. [Augustine](#) had argued that as excellent as the Roman Republic was it never attained justice because only Christ brings true justice.¹ The magisterial reformers also remind their readers that only those in certain offices, like pastors, should criticize officials; this was not the role of the private citizen. Good order and the maintenance of peace, which are the responsibility of civil authorities, are necessary for worship and the proclamation of the gospel.

The Anabaptist reformers, on the other hand, encouraged at least two attitudes toward government: either to withdraw altogether from the world and form a true Christian community according to biblical models, like the Hutterites, or, like Thomas Müntzer, to build the kingdom of God on earth and if necessary revolt against "ungodly" rulers who resisted them. The magisterial reformers feared that both approaches could lead to disorder, which is partly why they so often persecuted the radicals. With the exception of those who encouraged withdrawal from the world like some [Anabaptists](#), all the reformers agreed that the governing authorities are divinely ordained to protect the people and serve the common good and therefore do not bear the sword in vain. And so the reformers agree with Paul: Christians must pay all such authorities their due—taxes, revenue, respect and honor.

¹For example, see [Augustine, *City of God* 19.21 \(NPNF 2:415–16\)](#).

ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT. TILEMANN HESSHUS: The doctrine of civil government is a necessary one in the church. For when the church is gathered among people in this life and needs food, drink, hospitality, protection, laws, judges and contracts, one must know from whom authority derives; who established it, preserves it and directs it; what sort of obedience is owed to a magistrate; whether a Christian may discharge civil duties; whether contracts may be drawn up with a good conscience; whether one may summon another to court; and whether civil matters hinder faith and the righteousness of the Spirit. It is necessary to educate consciences about these great matters, especially because many fanatical minds have foully polluted this estate—people like Marcion, Manes, Tatian, Montanus, the Anabaptists, Thomas Müntzer, Heinrich Pfeiffer and even the Roman Antichrist. For they taught that civil rulers in this type of life would be able to obtain salvation only with difficulty. And they have further contended that every civil office ought to be abolished. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13: EXCURSUS ON MAGISTRATES.²

GOD'S WORD ON CIVIL MATTERS. PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: Life in the state ... does not belong to the gospel, but to the judgment of reason and the counsel of the magistracy. Passing laws about contracts, successions, court actions, pun-

² Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 388r-v. Marcion (c. 85–c. 165) denied the canonicity of the Old Testament as well as much of the New. Manes (fl. third century AD) was the father of the Manichaean religion, which taught that matter was inherently evil. Montanus (fl. second century AD) started an extreme ascetic movement. Thomas Müntzer (d. 1525) embraced a strong apocalypticism that led ultimately to his death; he was aided by Heinrich Pfeiffer (d. 1525).

ishments, war and similar civil or forensic things belongs to reason, like matters of architecture or the art of physicians. Nevertheless it is necessary that there be a word of God about the use of these arts for two reasons: that the works of God may be acknowledged and that we may know their use is permitted to the godly, because our works need to have a testimony from the Word of God.

Let readers here note first to what extent the gospel speaks about political matters in general. They should remember that the gospel does not set up any kind of worldly government, but approves the forms of government of all peoples and the laws about civil matters that are in agreement with reason. Thus it approves of medicine and the art of building. At the same time the gospel teaches the godly properly about spiritual and eternal life in order that eternal life may be begun in their hearts. In public it wants our bodies to be engaged in this civil society and to make sure of the common bonds of this society with decisions about properties, contracts, laws judgments, magistrates and other things. These external matters do not hinder the knowledge of God from being present in hearts or fear, faith, calling on God and other virtues. In fact God put forth these external matters as opportunities in which faith, calling on God, fear of God, patience and love might be exercised.

There is a certain wisdom worthy for a Christian to know. God cast the church into the midst of these occupations because God wants to become known among people in a common society. He wanted all offices of society to be exercises in confession, and at the same time exercises of faith and love.

Minds must become accustomed to think reverently

about all the areas of civil society because minds are greatly hurt by fanatical opinions, that governments, laws, courts and contracts are things thought out by human ingenuity and are only instruments of human greed; that governments are instruments for exercising unjust power against those who are weaker; and that courts serve the desire for revenge or avarice.... On the contrary we should think honorably of them. They are gifts and ordinances of God, handed down for this purpose first, that this society may be preserved for the purpose of teaching. Second, that these offices of society themselves may be exercises of confession. Third, that in these works we may exercise fear of God, faith, prayer, love, etc. Therefore let us realize that it is wicked to despise or harm these divine things. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS (1540).³

COMMON CONFUSION CONCERNING CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

WOLFGANG MUSCULUS: The apostle spends almost the entire chapter teaching the obedience owed to magistrates. So diligently and with such focus he taught this because it is likely that certain erring spirits secretly alienated the profession of the Christian name among sedition and conspiracy. Even at that time erring spirits behaved as if it were disgraceful and unlawful for Christians to obey magistrates, so that it was necessary for the apostle to handle this position with such diligence. This plague tempted Jews too, before Christians, concerning which see Josephus. And this tempts many Christians in our own time. However, as it has always been suppressed, so also in our time it has not been able to prevail, because concerning this matter the Lord declares that those who oppose magistrates oppose the

³ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 216–17* (MO 15:709–10).

power of God. And not only will the efforts of seditious people accomplish nothing against God's ordered rule, but also they bring judgment on themselves. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13.⁴

NO EARTHLY KINGDOM. JOHN CALVIN: Because he so carefully handles this subject regarding the formation of Christian life, it seems that he was compelled to do so by some great necessity, which—though the preaching of the gospel always requires this—needed to be addressed especially in that age. There are always tumultuous spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ cannot be exalted sufficiently, unless all earthly powers are abolished; nor can they enjoy the liberty given through Christ, unless they cast off every human yoke of subjection. Nevertheless this error, before all others, arrested the Jews. It seemed disgraceful to them that the offspring of Abraham—whose kingdom had flourished greatly before the advent of the Redeemer—should now remain in subjection after he appeared. There was something else that alienated the Jews no less than the Gentiles from their rulers: not only that they all abhorred piety but that they also persecuted religion with a most hostile spirit. And so it seemed absurd to acknowledge them as legitimate lords and rulers who strove to snatch the kingdom away from Christ, the only Lord of heaven and earth. For these reasons it is likely that Paul was led to confirm the power of the magistrates with greater care. And first he lays down a general precept by which he summarizes what he is about to say. Then he adds an explanation and proof of his precept. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:1.⁵

⁴ Musculus, *In epistolam Apostoli Pauli ad Romanos commentarii*, 223.

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13:1–2 All Authority Is from God

INSTRUCTION CONCERNING RULERS. CARDINAL CAJETAN: After Paul has instructed the Romans concerning the use of the body, the matters and gifts of God, he continues with instruction concerning the use of liberty with respect to rulers. Accordingly he warns that if the Romans suppose that they are exempt from the jurisdiction of secular rulers, it does not follow on account of their liberty in Christ. For this reason he instructs them to submit to secular rulers. And while he should have said “every human being,” he quite meaningfully says “every soul,” so that we would understand that not only our material, not only our body, but also our soul should be subject to secular rulers in those matters that they can lawfully rule. And by saying “all,” he excludes no one. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:1.⁶

PAUL RESPONDED TO CHRISTIAN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE. DESIDERIUS ERASMUS: Paul was aware that some Christians, under the pretext of religion, were refusing the orders of their rulers, and that as a result the established order would be upset and all things thrown into disarray. Therefore he taught that they should obey anyone at all entrusted with public authority, making exception for the interests of faith and piety. True, these very rulers are pagan and evil; but order is still good, and for the sake of this the godly must sometimes bear even bad rulers. ANNOTATIONS ON ROMANS

⁵ CTS 38:477–78* (CO 49:248–49). See further Calvin’s comment on Acts 1:6, RCS NT 6:8. Luther agrees that Christians must not confuse Christ’s kingdom with temporal power and worldly peace, even if it’s tempting (see *Sermons on Matthew* 24 [1539]; LW 68:271–72*; WA 47:561).

⁶ Cajetan, *In Sacrae Scripturae Expositionem*, 5:72.

13:1.⁷

OUR SOULS OBEY GOD. MARTIN LUTHER: Is there some mysterious reason why he does not say “every person” but rather “every soul”? Perhaps it is because it must be a sincere submission and from the heart. Second, because the soul is the medium between the body and the spirit, so that he thus may show that the believer is exalted once and for all above all things and yet at the same time is subject to them, and thus, being twin born, one has two forms within oneself, just as Christ does. According to the Spirit, he is above all things, and because through faith the believer has subjected all these things to himself in the sense that he is not affected by them nor trusts in them, he compels them to serve him to his glory and salvation. This is to serve God and so to rule and establish the spiritual realm.

The world is conquered and subjected in no better way than through contempt. But this spiritual rule is now so little known that almost everyone with one accord says that the temporal gifts which have been given to the church are spiritual gifts. And now, they regard only these as spiritual and rule by means of them, except that they still carry on their juridical actions, the lightning bolts of their decrees, and their power of the keys, but with much less concern and zeal than they use on their “spiritual,” that is, their temporal duties.

Thus the spirit of believers cannot be or become subject to anyone but is exalted with Christ in God, holding all things under its foot, like the woman depicted with the moon under her feet, symbolizing all temporal powers. The “soul,” which is the same as the spirit of a human being,

⁷ CWE 56:347.

insofar as it lives and works and is occupied with temporal matters, ought to be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution. By this submission it is obedient to God and wills the same thing that he wills, and thus through this subjection it is victorious over all these things.

Let me digress a little.⁸ A person has to be amazed at the impenetrable darkness of our time. Today nothing hurts more, those voracious spendthrifts of our temporal gifts, than when the liberties, laws, edicts or benefices of the church are violated. Then they immediately let fly the lightning bolts of excommunication and with wondrous audacity declare people heretics, enemies of God and of his church and of the apostles Peter and Paul. In the meantime they are utterly unconcerned as to whether they themselves are friends of God or perhaps even greater enemies than those they condemn. To such an extent have they established an obedience and faith under the custody, enlargement and defense of temporal things. You may be guilty of pride, wantonness, avarice, contentions and wrath, and you may possess the whole catalog of vices mentioned by Paul, and even though you may possess them till they cry to heaven, you are a most pious Christian if only you uphold the laws and liberties of the church. But if you neglect them,

⁸ Luther here criticizes the state of the medieval ecclesial court system. This court operated under spiritual law, that is, canon law. Parishioners who did not pay their tithe were summoned to court to settle the matter. If they did not appear in court, they were excommunicated until they came to court and paid their fines and tithe. These court cases had more to do with the church's power and wealth than the spiritual state of believers. Luther is highlighting this incongruity, saying the church should be concerned with the care of souls rather than its bank accounts.

you are not a faithful son of the church, nor her friend.

Moreover, the secular princes have given great riches to the church and have endowed her leaders with many benefits. But look at this marvel. In the time of the apostles, when priests were eminently worthy of the favor of all people, they still paid taxes and were subject to the governing authorities. But now, when the life they lead resembles nothing so little as the life of priests, they enjoy the rights of special exemptions. Do the successors possess what the predecessors should have had? And the life that the present generation ought to live, did the former generation already demonstrate it sufficiently? By some marvelous exchange the earlier age labored and merited but received no fruit, while the later age enjoys the fruit without working for it or deserving it. I do not say that these privileges are evil, but that in our day they are being given to evil and undeserving men, when once they were bestowed only on those who were good. SCHOLIA ON ROMANS 13:1.⁹

WHAT IS A MAGISTRATE? PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI: A magistrate is a person chosen by God to uphold law and peace, to restrain crime and evil with punishments and the sword, and to promote every kind of virtue. The efficient cause is God. The final cause is the preservation of the law and peace, the defeat of crimes and troubles, and the increase of virtue. The formal cause is the order that divine Providence has appointed in human affairs. The material cause is the human being or person, for whoever is appointed to the magistracy is chosen from among human beings. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13.¹⁰

⁹ LW 25:468–69* (WA 56:476–77); citing Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 3:22; Rev 5:10; 12:1; 1 Pet 2:13; 2 Tim 3:2.

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GOVERN ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD, NOT HUMAN REASON.

JOHANNES BRENZ: Every Christian government should promote and protect the Word of God and devote all its power to it. For since the power of government comes solely from God, as Christ says in [John 19](#) and Paul in [Romans 13](#), so it is always proper, indeed necessary, that one conduct oneself according to the will of him who created the office of government and to rule according to the Word that creates, maintains and rules all creatures. For the reason that the secular sword has been established is to keep its subjects in peace. But how can temporal, secular peace be better maintained than through the word of peace, which pacifies the sinner, the great enemy of God, the highest good? And how can external peace be maintained if one does not have peace of mind and heart toward God, which only happens through the Word of God, which incorporates us into one Christ by the one [Holy Spirit](#)? For this reason the [Holy Spirit](#) has bestowed on government the majestic title of “gods.” ... This title gives sufficient indication of what the Lord demands of government, namely, that it should rule according to the Word of God, not according to its own reason or

¹⁰ Vermigli, *In Epistolam ad Romanos*, 603 (*A Commentarie upon the Epistle to the Romanes*, 426v–427r). To answer the question “Why?,” Aristotle distinguishes four causes through which the nature of things can be understood: the material cause—the material of which a thing consists; the formal cause—the form of the thing, encompassing its basic attributes; the efficient cause—the thing that brings about motion or change; and the final cause—the reason for which a thing is done. For a statue, the material cause is the stone from which it is made; the formal cause is the shape that it takes once it has been crafted; the efficient cause is the sculptor carving it; and the final cause may be to preserve a memory, to make money or to represent beauty.

opinion. INSTRUCTION CONCERNING THE DISPUTED ARTICLES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.¹¹

WHETHER TYRANT OR SAINT, OBEY THE MAGISTRATES. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Political offices are not condemned because of tyrants and their crimes. And do not let people seek pretexts for their own haughtiness, as if all may deny obedience because tyrants hold office, but let us know that we must obey because of God's command both kings and their agents, whenever they command those things which do not conflict with God's Word or with the law of nature. Polycarp did not refuse to render obedience to the emperor, but said, "We Christians have been instructed to show to the powers ordained by God the honor that befits them," but when he was ordered by the governor to sacrifice to idols, he refused because he was forbidden to do so by divine law. COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 13](#): EXCURSUS ON MAGISTRATES.¹²

ONLY LAWFUL RULERS. CARDINAL CAJETAN: He does not say "to powers" but "to excellent powers" to distinguish from tyrannical powers—that is, the power of those who are not rightly lords, but tyrants. Accordingly their powers are powers, but they are not "excellent powers," rather they are hostile powers, mercenary powers. According to this distinction of hostile powers, he says "excellent powers," so that they would understand ... that every soul is not subjected to tyrannical powers but to excellent powers, and as it is said by this one word "to legitimate powers." COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 13:1](#).¹³

¹¹ Brenz, *Godly Magistrates and Church Order*, 45*; citing [Jn 19:11](#); [Rom 13:1](#); [Ex 22:28](#).

¹² Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 392r-v.

¹³ Cajetan, *In Sacrae Scripturae Expositionem*, 5:72. Most of the

OUR GOD IS A GOD OF ORDER. DAVID PAREUS: Therefore in general we are taught that God is the author and lover of good order and the enemy of *ataxia* [“disorder”] and confusion. Consequently, let us love and pursue order as a most beautiful thing in all things, for the things that exist and come into being by order are beautiful and lasting. But let us recognize that every confusion, whether in the powers that be and empires or in other matters, is the work of the devil and is opposed to God and harmful to human affairs.

COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:1.¹⁴

TWO REMINDERS. THEODORE BEZA: However, these two are connected, that is, the office of magistrate and the appointment to that office, so that the apostle rightly calls both ... the ordinance of God in the next verse. But one ought to remember here two things: namely, that this saying of Paul must be understood to apply to legitimate powers by which the human race is ruled where God the Creator advises this

reformers render *exousiai hyperechousai* more literally as “higher powers.” Contemporary biblical scholars give a more idiomatic translation, “governing authorities.” Some have posited a double referent to the human magistrates and the angelic beings over them, but this hypothesis has generally been rejected (see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament 38 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 796 n. 22). See further C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1985), 2:656–60; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 666; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 795–96. Luther offers a sort of compromise, “Let everyone be subject to the magistrates who have power over you” (WADB 7:69).

¹⁴ Pareus, *In Epistolam ad Romanos*, 1296.

arrangement and not to those that are established by tyranny or even by impiety, and that this saying applies to the laws themselves, not to any and all persons who enjoy this power. To be sure, evil magistrates also do not give orders apart from the judgment and ordinance of God, but this has no bearing on Paul's aim here. ANNOTATIONS ON ROMANS 13:1.¹⁵

GOVERNMENT IS GOD'S GOOD WORK. PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: This proposition of Paul is first that government, that is, the order of rules or the form of the state, is a good thing, which God by his own work both instituted and preserves. Also the order of the movements of the heavenly bodies has both been instituted by God and is preserved by him. When Paul says that governments are from God, we should understand that they are not only permitted by God, as sins are said to be permitted, but that they are rather works of God, instituted and preserved by him, and confirmed through his Word. Paul clearly calls government an ordinance of God, that is, a thing that is instituted by the counsel of God that it may be in harmony with his will, or that it may be approved by him. Sins are not ordained by God; rather they are the violation of his ordinance.

These things are said briefly by Paul, but they are very important. First, it is necessary that this teaching be found in the church, lest a work of God be ascribed to the devil, and so that the works of God and the works of the devil may be distinguished from each other. Second, we know that these offices have been set before us to be exercises of confession, calling on God and other virtues, to become acts of

¹⁵ Beza, *Annotationes majores*, 2:136; citing Gal 3:27; Judg 6:34; Col 3:10–17.

true worship of God. Third, obedience may be strengthened, lest we violate a divine ordinance, and may remember that God is the protector and preserver of his ordinance. Fourth, the government and all of us in civil life may have the comfort that God governs these dangers of civil life, and preserves kingdoms, civil righteousness, and peace in the world, and punishes tyrannies and robberies.

This is a very great comfort to all godly persons in light of the great dangers to governments. The godly should consider the magnitude of these things, namely, that states are overthrown not only by human audacity but much more by the fury of the devil, who is the enemy of discipline and of things honorable. Therefore Christ calls him a murderer. And in Daniel it is written that a good angel defended the Persian kingdom against an evil angel. The devil incites his members to destroy public harmony. Neither should only the authors of danger be considered. Remembering this comfort of the Scripture—that God wants to preserve governments—we should add prayer, as the Scripture teaches in many places. **COMMENTARY ON ROMANS (1540).**¹⁶

TWO TYPES OF LAWS. **JOHN HOOPER:** The laws of magistrates are of two types and sorts: either they concern God or human beings. If they concern or appertain to God, they are either in accordance with the Word of God or contrary to the Word of God. If they are in accordance with the Word of God, it is necessary and requisite, even on pain of damnation, that they must be obeyed. If they are repugnant to the Word of God, they should not be obeyed. Yet human beings should suffer death rather than defend themselves by force

¹⁶ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 217–18* (MO 15:711–12); citing [Jn 8:44](#); [Dan 10:13, 20–21](#).

and the violent resistance of superior powers, as Christ, his apostles and the prophets did. If the laws concern and pertain to human beings and civil things, they must simply, without exception, be obeyed, except where they are repugnant and contrary to the law of nature, as Pharaoh's laws and commandments were to the midwives, that they should have killed all the male children that the Israelite women brought forth. Because Saint Paul commanded us to give obedience to the higher powers, how worthy of hellfire are those who resist them with hand, heart and tongue.

ANNOTATIONS ON [ROMANS 13:1](#).¹⁷

PERSECUTIONS MUST BE ENDURED. DESIDERIUS ERASMUS: But if persecution by rulers or magistrates should break out against you because of your profession of Christianity, it must be endured even though it did not arise from any fault of yours. But persecutions must not be provoked or invited by refusing to do what these leaders in their own right demand and what can be done without offense to God. The state stands firm through order; it ought not to be disturbed under the pretext of religion. PARAPHRASE ON [ROMANS 13:1](#).¹⁸

A PRAYER FOR GOD-GIVEN AUTHORITIES. HANS SCHLAFFER AND LEONHARD FRICK: Once more, O most gracious Father, we pray for all governments and rulers of this world to whom you have given and lent authority from above. Grant them, dear Lord, that they may use their power according to your will, not theirs, to protect and care for the poor, the pious and the righteous, to punish evil and evildoers, that they may not wash their hands in the blood of the faithful and

¹⁷ Hooper, *Annotations on Romans 13*, B1r-v*; citing Ex 1.

¹⁸ CWE 42:73.

innocent, that an orderly and quiet life may exist among us in all blessedness and integrity. KUNSTBUCH: A SIMPLE PRAYER.¹⁹

13:3–5 If You Do Good, What Worry Do You Have?

ORDER IS GOOD. DESIDERIUS ERASMUS: For just as God wished that there should be order among the members of the body, ... so in the whole commonwealth in which there are both good and evil, God wished that there be a certain order. And order in itself is good in itself, even if someone abuses a magistracy. Consequently, those who disturb this order fight against God, its author. And those who fight against God will justly pay the penalty. But if you do not wish to be subject to laws or to magistrates, you should not think that you can achieve this by defiance, but rather by innocence. For magistrates have no power by law except over those who commit an act that is not permitted. Live rightly and the law does not concern you; there is nothing that you should fear from the magistrates. PARAPHRASE ON ROMANS 13:2–3.²⁰

A RULER'S DUTIES. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Paul learnedly summarizes the duties of a ruler when he says that a ruler is an adornment for good works, but a terror for evil works. The prophets call this task “doing judgment” and “doing justice.” He even calls a ruler the servant and avenger of God for wrath and states that he does not bear the sword in vain. By this noteworthy praise he not only excellently adorns but also teaches him what his task is. They ought to be a reward for good works as ministers of God. That is to

¹⁹ CRR 12:275.

²⁰ CWE 42:74.

say, they ought to defend orphans and widows, deliver the oppressed, maintain the peace, administer justice and defend integrity. And they should be guardians not only of the second table but also of the first table. For that reason he calls them “servants of God.” Let a ruler know that it pertains to his office to see to it that the people are taught rightly about God, schools are built, religion is defended, true worship of God is offered, the sacraments are properly administered and the churches are supported. [Psalm 24](#) says, “Lift up your heads, o gates, and the king of glory will come in.” Also: “And kings will be your foster fathers and queens your nurses.” Inept and obtuse are those who remove the ruler from any care for the church and religion and want him to be occupied with only earthly goods such as herding. To the contrary, the Scripture says, “And now, kings, understand. Learn, you who judge the earth. Serve the Lord with fear.” In their power itself and their royal duties the [Holy Spirit](#) wants them to serve Christ. Therefore, by all means the care of religion pertains to them. David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah all behaved in this pious way, because they founded the church, promoted the worship of God, supported armies of teachers and students, protected prophets, repaired the temple, and stirred up the people to the love of true religion. [Constantine the Great](#), the Theodosiuses and Charles the Great behaved piously, because they undertook the care of the church, called synods to decide controversies, established pay for ministers of the Word, supported scholars and defended godly gatherings with arms. COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 13](#): EXCURSUS ON MAGISTRATES.²¹

²¹ Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 392v–393r; citing [Ps 24:9](#); [Is 49:23](#); [Ps 2:10–11a](#). Constantine the Great (272–337)

WHAT IS GOVERNMENT? PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: Up to this point Paul has taught two rules, that authorities or government are good things and approved by God, and also that it must be obeyed, where he includes the teaching about punishment, which he repeats later. Meanwhile he inserts a description of the government—what it is—in this way: The government is a minister of God to us for the good, a protector for defending right actions and for punishing transgressions with the sword, that is, with corporal punishments.

This definition is complete and better than the Aristotelian definition,²² which is as follows: The government is the guardian of the laws. For Paul adds the efficient cause, that it has been instituted by God. And with respect to the ultimate cause he adds the clear words: “To you for good,” where he distinguishes the tyrant from the true ruler. For a magistrate should think that he had been divinely placed in this office so that he should plan what is useful for others, as Aristotle reminds Alexander that he should think that the kingdom had come to him that he might do good to the entire human race, not that he might be unscrupulous and scornful toward others. Daniel also says to the king: “Free yourself from sin though justice and do good to the poor.” Also the saying of Xenophon is praised, “A good ruler is not different from a good father.” Thus a magistrate should

legalized Christianity as well as provided for its support; he also called the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325 AD. Theodosius I (347–395) made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Theodosius II (401–450) opposed Nestorianism and Eutychianism. Charlemagne (d. 814) established the Holy Roman Empire and supported a renewal of liturgical and theological studies sometimes called the Carolingian Renaissance.

²² See above, p. 154n10.

think that authority and wealth have come to him not so that he can misuse them to fulfill his desires, but so that he may be able to counsel for the common good, and that right actions may be protected, such as the true worship of God, discipline, the courts and peace.

But in connection with this definition people ask how we know what are right actions. I answer: Paul here avoids a longer discussion and speaks generally in order to approve the laws of all peoples about civil matters, if only they are in agreement with the law of nature. For from it he wants right actions in civil matters to be judged. Therefore he is here teaching the third rule: A Christian is not bound to the Mosaic form of government, but is permitted to use the laws of all nations that are in harmony with reason. A Christian owes obedience to his present government.... He owes obedience to the present laws that are in agreement with reason. Therefore it is permissible to hang thieves; it is permissible to divide inheritances according to our laws, because the gospel does not establish a new, worldly form of government but preaches about eternal and spiritual life. Meanwhile it permits us to use various forms of governments, even at various times of days. Because obedience toward present laws is taught, it is taught also that we may make use of present laws. In [Luke 3](#) service in the Roman army is approved. And in [Acts 15](#) the apostles forbid that the Gentiles should be burdened with the Mosaic form of government. Paul also says: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek." [COMMENTARY ON ROMANS \(1540\)](#).²³

THIS APPLIES TO SUBJECTS AND LORDS. PHILIPP

²³ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 219–20* (MO 15:713–14); citing [Dan 4:7](#); [Lk 3:14](#); [Acts 15:19–21](#); [Gal 3:28](#).

MELANCHTHON: These things do not pertain only to subjects but also to magistrates. When they become tyrants, they destroy the ordinance of God no less than seditious people do. Their consciences become guilty because they do not obey the ordinance of God, that is, the laws they ought to obey. The threats set down here pertain also to them. As Scripture says elsewhere: “You are not exercising human judgment but the Lord’s. Whatever you judge shall overwhelm you.” For this statement must always be kept in mind—that government is an ordinance of God. Therefore whoever violates it sins, whether he be a subject or a superior, and God will impose punishments, for instance, if in church he despises the sacraments.

The severity of this commandment should agitate everyone lest they think that violation of the political estate is a small matter. On the contrary, let us learn that in those who believe in Christ, the works of political and economical life are good works and acts of worship of God, not merely secular works, because society must be preserved in order that God may become known in it. This purpose is not a worldly matter, since all activities of the political life are aimed at this purpose: God wanted them to be exercises of confession and on account of this purpose he imposed them on us. Therefore the prophets demand these works, and even more so than ceremonies. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS (1540).²⁴

MAGISTRATES ARE SERVANTS TO ALL. JOHN CALVIN: From this magistrates may learn the nature of their vocation. They are not to rule for their own interest, but for the public

²⁴ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 221* (MO 15:715–16); citing 1 Pet 2:13–17; Is 1:17.

good, nor are they granted unbridled power, but it is restricted to the well-being of their subjects. In short, they are responsible to God and to human beings in the exercise of their power. They are entrusted by God as his envoys and do his business, and they must give an account to him. The ministry, then, that God has committed to them also concerns their subjects, and so magistrates are debtors to them as well. And private citizens are reminded that it is through divine goodness that they are defended by the sword of princes against the wrongs of the wicked. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:4.²⁵

UNJUST MERCY IS MURDER. BALTHASAR HUBMAIER: The judges, governments and executors of justice are called servants of God in Scripture and are not murderers. God judges, sentences and kills through them, and not they themselves. From this it follows that those who do not want to kill the evildoer but let them live are acting and sinning against the commandment: “You should not kill.” For whoever does not protect the righteous kills him and is guilty of his death as much as the one who does not feed the hungry. **ON THE SWORD.**²⁶

GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROTECT THE PIOUS AND PUNISH THE WICKED. DIRK PHILIPS: No congregation of the Lord may have domination over the consciences of people with an external sword, nor compel the unbeliever to faith with violence, nor kill the false prophets with sword and fire. But they must judge and exclude with the Lord’s Word all who are within the congregation and found to be evil. Anything more than this that happens is neither Christian, evangeli-

²⁵ CTS 38:481* (CO 49:251).

²⁶ CRR 5:515–16.

cal nor apostolic. And if someone wants to say that the authorities have not received the sword in vain, and that God through Moses has commanded to kill the false prophets, to that I answer briefly: the magistrates have not received the sword from God to judge over spiritual matters—for these must be judged by the spiritual only spiritually—but to keep their subjects in good order and to keep peace, protect the pious and punish the wicked. THE ENCHIRIDION: THE CONGREGATION OF GOD.²⁷

CHRISTIANS ARE ONLY CITIZENS OF HEAVEN. THE SCHLEITHEIM ARTICLES: We have been united as follows concerning the sword. The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death, and the secular rulers are established to wield the same.

But within the perfection of Christ only the ban²⁸ is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.

Not many who do not understand Christ's will for us will ask whether a Christian may or should use the sword against the wicked for the protection and defense of the good or for the sake of love. The answer is unanimously revealed: Christ teaches and commands us to learn from him, for he is meek and lowly of heart and thus we shall find rest for our souls (Mt 11:29). Now Christ says to the woman who was taken in adultery, not that she should be stoned according to the law of his Father (and yet he says,

²⁷ CRR 6:375*; citing Rom 13:1–7; Deut 15:1–23; 1 Cor 2:13.

²⁸ That is, excommunication.

“What the Father commanded me, that I do” [Jn 8:22]) but with mercy and forgiveness and the warning to sin no more, says: “Go, sin no more.” We too should proceed in this same way, according to the rule of the ban.

Second, it is asked concerning the sword whether a Christian shall pass sentence in disputes and strife about worldly matters, such as the unbelievers have with one another. The answer: Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother concerning inheritance, but refused to do so (Lk 12:13). So should we refuse too.

Third, it is asked concerning the sword whether the Christian should be a magistrate if he is chosen for it. This is answered thus: Christ was to be made king, but he fled and did not discern the ordinance of his Father. Thus we should also do as he did and follow after him, and we shall not walk in darkness. For he himself says: “Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). He himself further forbids the violence of the sword when he says: “The princes of this world lord it over them, etc., but among you it shall not be so” (Mt 20:25). Further Paul says, “Whom God has foreknown, the same he has also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,” etc. (Rom 8:30). Peter also says: “Christ has suffered (not ruled) and has left us an example, that you should follow after in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21).

Lastly, one can see in the following points that it does not befit a Christian to be a magistrate: the rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the Spirit. Their houses and dwellings remain in this world; that of the Christians is in heaven. Their citizenship is in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven

(Phil 3:20). The weapons of their battle and warfare are carnal and only against the flesh, but the weapons of Christians are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldly are armed with steel and iron, but Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and with the Word of God. In sum: as Christ our Head is minded, so also must be minded the members of the body of Christ through him, so that there be no division in the body, through which it would be destroyed. As it is written of Christ, so must his members be, so that his body may remain whole and unified for its own advancement and building up. For any kingdom which is divided within itself will be destroyed (Mt 12:25). ARTICLE 6: ON THE SWORD.²⁹

WRATH ONLY APPROPRIATE FOR MAGISTRATES. PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: The rebaptizers' fundamental opinion is this: that orderly punishment in government is pure sin and tyranny, for wrath is forbidden to the Christian as it stands written in Romans 12.... This is the rebaptizers' reason. And such misunderstanding gives them cause to boast their endurance [against governing authority] as great holiness and in addition to condemn all governing authority, for they imagine that the works of all Christians must absolutely be the same. That's pure blindness! It results from incorrect interpretation of Scripture and from their misunderstanding that they don't know how to distinguish between the spiritual reality in the heart and the external estates, which should and must have dissimilar works—as husband and wife, father and child have dissimilar external works—and should nevertheless have God's fear and faith

²⁹ CRR 1:39–41*.

in Christ in the heart.

Thus, since the rebaptizers grasp this saying in which wrath is forbidden, we should know how to respond to this. Namely, all wrath outside this office is forbidden, but wrath in this office is God's command and a holy and good work. Holy Scripture itself teaches us this distinction; it is not fabricated by human beings.

For Paul says about this office which bears the sword: it is God's work and order, and the governing authority is God's servant to punish the wick and protect the pious. From this saying it's clear that such wrath in this office is not sin, but God's command and order and a true, holy service to God. And because this office is not sin, but a good work ordered by God, therefore Christians may hold and wield such an office, as God's other gifts like food and drink, etc. Yes, they must maintain and not destroy this office, for the law must remain in the world to punish the wicked, as Paul says: "The law is laid down for the sake of the unrighteous." Now the office which bears the sword is a part of the law....

From all this it is clear that the saying that forbids wrath means those works outside of this office; the other saying which praises and commands wrath means those works in this office. And it's easy to understand why the works in this office and those outside of this office must be dissimilar, for this distinction is necessary for the maintenance of peace and discipline. What disorder and turmoil would follow if each and every person wanted to be judge and executioner himself! Thus, God has finely and usefully ordered government. **THE REFUTATION OF SEVERAL UNCHRISTIAN ARTICLES.³⁰**

³⁰ Melanchthon, *Verlegung etlicher unchristlicher Artikel*, B4r-C1r; citing [Rom 12:19; 1 Tim 1:9](#). Here Melanchthon refutes that "Chris-

THE WORLD'S WRATH INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE CHURCH'S LOVE. PETER WALPOT: This power [of the keys] Christ gave to his apostles and his congregation, but the power of the sword he never commended to any apostle or disciple or anyone in his congregation. You will search yourself to death if you think you can find it in his covenant! Now, the ban, as used in the church of Christ, and the sword, as used in the world, are so completely different as evening and morning, they are such incompatible things as death and life. For that reason they may not be mixed together.

The power of the keys, the ban of Christians, through separation purges from the congregation what is evil. The sword of the world purges from the very face of the earth. The Christians' punishment is loving, yes, a brotherly punishment; the sword's punishment is merciless and filled with wrath. After the Christians' ban we can seek and perform repentance again; after the sword or worldly judgment repentance and reformation are eternally abbreviated. The ministers of the keys are vessels of lovingkindness; the ministers of the worldly sword are vessels of wrath. The power of the keys is wielded and held for the benefit of the Christian community, banning greed and personal property. The power of the sword is held for the benefit of greed and personal property, making individual property and individual people. Thus, the power of the sword in past ages under many different names is called "the worldly authority." That is the reason why this office cannot be joined with the unblemished church. For both follow different paths that go opposite ways and never meet. **THE GREAT ARTICLE BOOK: ON THE SWORD.**³¹

tians should not and cannot be part of a governing authority and office which bears the sword" (B3v).

Philip D. W. Krey et al., eds., *Romans 9–16: New Testament*, vol. VIII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SECULAR AND ECCLESIAL RULE. TILE-MANN HESSHUS: Indeed, there are many differences between the civil order and the ministry of the gospel, which others have rather fully explained. In this passage let this one thing be noted, namely, that the Holy Spirit by his own testimony arms the ruler here with the sword and physical force against all arrogant people and gives him the power of life and death. Paul says, “He does not bear the sword in vain, but is a servant of God, an avenger of wrath against him who practices evil.”

Therefore God himself girded the ruler with the sword and gave him the power to kill the guilty. Thus God told Noah in [Genesis 9](#), “Whoever sheds blood, his blood will be shed by man.” God armed King Jehu with a sword and ordered him to wipe out the entire family of Ahab. And David sang, “Blessed be God who teaches my hands for battle and my fingers for war.” Again, [Psalm 18](#): “God girded me with strength for war.” Again, “You gave me the shield of your salvation.”

But the ministers of the gospel by no means are armed with a sword or physical force, but they are only heralds of the word. They ought to reproach sins with the law and comfort terrified minds with the gospel. Christ says, “The kings of the nations exercise dominion, but it shall not be so with you.” And Christ says to Peter, “Whoever takes the sword will perish by the sword. **COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13: EXCURSUS ON MAGISTRATES.**³¹

GOD ORDAINS BOTH SECULAR AND ECCLESIAL OFFICES. PHILIPP

³¹ [QGT 12:253](#).

³² Heshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 396v; citing [Gen 9:6](#); [2 Kings 9:5–9](#); [Ps 144:1](#); [18:39, 35](#); [Lk 22:25–26](#); [Mt 26:52](#).

MELANCHTHON: It's clear that God has ordered these two offices differently—the preaching office and worldly governing authority. And he has commanded that Christians must be under both offices. Thus, it's a horrid error to mix these offices into one another or to remove and withdraw the one; for they are both God's order and command. For absolutely no person has the power to overturn God's order.

THE REFUTATION OF SEVERAL UNCHRISTIAN ARTICLES.³³

GOD'S COMMAND: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MURDERER AND A MAGISTRATE. MARTIN LUTHER: This and other errors all spring from this: that we view the estates externally without God's word and according to their works and send God's word packing. Now if a murderer hacks someone's head off, he does not act rightly in this, for he has no command—that is, no word of God—for it. Indeed he acts against God's word and command, which forbids killing. And so it is murder, pure hell, darkness and death. However, if a prince or judge kills someone, that's by our Lord God's word and command. You yourself do not bear the sword, but God ... as if it were in God's hand, as if an angel and not a human bore it, because God's word clings to it, which commands to punish the wicked and to protect and defend the pious. A WEDDING SERMON (JANUARY 8, 1531).³⁴

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINT. JOHN CALVIN: What Paul first commanded concerning the rendering of obedience to magistrates he now repeats by way of summary but with an addition: they should be obeyed not only for the sake of

³³ Melanchthon, *Verlegung etlicher unchristlicher Artikel*, C1v. Here Melanchthon refutes that “Christians should have no other governing authority than the servants of the gospel alone” (C1r).

³⁴ WA 34,1:54.38–40, 56.1–9.

human obligation but because we should obey God too. He uses “wrath” for the retribution that magistrates can require for contempt of their dignity. It is as if he had said, “And so they must not be obeyed because it is not lawful to oppose the powerful and mighty without punishment, for they are used to enduring injustices that cannot be repelled, but they should be obeyed willingly, because the conscience is obligated by the Word of God to this submission.” Therefore even if the magistrate were disarmed, so that it would be possible to assail and condemn him without punishment, it should be attempted no more than if we were to be threatened with punishment immediately. For a private citizen does not have the right to strip authority from the one whom the Lord has placed in power over us. Moreover, this whole discussion concerns civil offices. And so those who exercise dominion over consciences try in vain to establish their sacrilegious tyranny from this passage. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13:5.³⁵

13:6–7 Pay What You Owe

DO NOT BE WEARIED BY TAXES! MARTIN LUTHER: See how good it is to pay taxes and to obey! By this you help to protect the pious and to punish the wicked. And so don’t let it irritate you. MARGINAL GLOSS ON ROMANS 13:6 (1546).³⁶

GOD DEMANDS THAT THE GOVERNMENT BE DILIGENT. PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: Here is also an important word about the diligence that is required of magistrates. For Paul says, “They attend diligently to this,” that is, to the service of God, that is, to the propagation of true worship and to the

³⁵ CTS 38:483* (CO 49:251–52).

³⁶ WADB 4:69.

defense of discipline and peace, which are divine benefits. And diligent attendance is a great effort of the mind, which does not relax its care, vigilance and labor, even as it is most true that government is a burden to which no human wisdom can be equal. Nevertheless diligence, which he here calls care, is required of magistrates, which God helping is successful. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS (1540).³⁷

SECOND TABLE OF THE LAW. PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: In this saying he embraces all duties that are necessary in society. He commands that we pay the money we owe to anyone in contracts. He commands that we render the duties we owe to the family, citizens, parents, spouse, children and servants. The Decalogue shows what the duties are that are owed to each individual, which he repeats here in order that we may have a sure teaching about which works are necessary. For it is necessary that the conscience have a sure word also about works, according to which they are regulated, lest acts of worship be imagined without a word of God. About such works Christ says: “In vain they worship me with human commandments.” COMMENTARY ON ROMANS (1540).³⁸

SHOW RESPECT! JUAN DE VALDÉS: So servants should honor their masters with exterior and interior respect, as I earlier said with regard to children, and this is what St. Peter means. It is also important to counsel masters not to be tyrannical with their servants, but for them to remember that both of them have the same heavenly Father and Lord. They should, therefore, treat them not as slaves but as brothers. Dealing with this commandment, you should also

³⁷ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 223 (MO 15:717).

³⁸ Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 223* (MO 15:717–18).

say that everyone is obliged to obey, respect and honor prelates, priests, princes—those persons who administer justice—since they are established by God. Finally, you should say that children and adults should respect and honor their teachers and elders both in age and in dignity, since even nature teaches us this when we naturally call an old man “father” or “uncle” and an old woman “mother” or “aunt.” DIALOGUE ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.³⁹

THREE ACTS OF HONOR. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Honor is reverence and piety joined with true faith, by which we not only declare our subjection by some kind of external gesture, but rather acknowledge with true affection of the heart that the civil ruler is the ordinance of God and that he was appointed for our good. By our honor we also love and fear him as we would a parent and as one who acts in the place of God on earth; we pray to God for our ruler and for the preservation of the civil order; and we even forgive and cover over their weaknesses and errors. Therefore honor contains three noteworthy actions.

The first is recognizing the wisdom and kindness of God in establishing civil order and to love the ruler as a servant of God and a guardian of your life and property. Joseph not only revered the Egyptian king with an external gesture, but he also loved him with true affection of heart, as a servant of God. Thus Daniel said to the Babylonian king, “O king, live forever.”

The second action is to pray daily for the ruler, as God prompts one by his own Spirit, to give thanks that God has given godly and wholesome princes and that he does not permit tyrants to destroy everything as their desires dictate.

³⁹ Valdés' *Two Catechisms*, 85; citing 1 Pet 2:18–21.

Thus Jeremiah orders the Jews to pray for the Babylonian king, and Paul says in [1 Timothy 2](#), “I urge that above all prayers and intercessions be made for all people and for kings.”

The third action that pertains to the honor owed to rulers is respect and reverence, so that we do not misinterpret the dubious deeds of a ruler but rather put a good construction on them. Let us even pardon some errors and lapses and ascribe them to the massive burden of the affairs of state and the weakness of human nature. For as Solomon says, “There is no one on earth who does not sin even when doing some act of kindness.” [COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 13: EXCURSUS ON MAGISTRATES.](#) ⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 394v–395r; citing [Dan 3:9; 5:10; Bar 1:11](#) (cf. [Jer 29:7](#)); [1 Tim 2:1–2](#); [Eccl 7:20](#).