

I. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

CHRISTIAN SUBMITTING TO ROMAN AUTHORITY ACCORDING TO ROMANS 13:1-7

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ABSTRACT. This study analyzes a text from Romans 13:1-7 where the Apostle Paul presents six reasons for the Christian submission and obedience to the civil Roman authority at that time. Taking into account that the Roman Persecutions against to Christians have already made a lot of victims among them, Paul's exhortations to Roman Christians urging them to be obedient to secular authority, seemed to be extremely courageous. Paul argues his advices by affirming that governing authority that exists, is established by God and it is, therefore, his "ministry" in the world rewarding the good deeds and punishing the wrong ones. According to this perspective the Christians motive for submission to the civil authority is not "the fear", but rather "the conscience" and "the love". Rom 13:1-7 constitutes, therefore, the key text of the entire New Testament on the subject of Christian's obedience and submission towards the State's civil authority.

Keywords: Roman authority, conscience, fear, submission, obedience, secular power, Pauline

1. Preliminaries

The pericope Rom 13:1-7 was and continues to be one of the biblical subjects that have provoked a lot of divergent disputes between biblical scholars reaching many contradictory results on the topic of its authenticity, respectively,

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of its pauline authorship¹. Indeed, one reading it quickly concludes an apparent discontinuity, not having any connection with the preceding or with the succeeding context. Moreover, it interrupts even the linear flow of the argumentation.²

Researcher Otto Michel³, for example, says that Rom 13:1-7 is an independent text, which St. Paul, himself, inserted later, in his Epistle. Others are of the same opinion, but they say Ap. Paul inserts here “an already developed Christian tradition”.⁴ For other biblical scholars, Rom 13:1-7 appeared as an “alien body” within 12:1-13:14⁵. Indeed, the pericope appears not only interrupting “Paul’s elaboration of the nature and centrality of love, but it seems to give unqualified endorsement to an institution that belongs to an age that is ‘passing away’ (13:11-14) and to which we are not to be conformed (12:2)”.⁶

But the aim of this study is not to argue the Pauline or Not-Pauline authenticity of this text. Therefore, we only state that the objections which are brought against the Pauline authenticity of the text are not convincing.

For instance, the linguistic arguments presented by the researcher W. Walker⁷ as well as those considered to be foreign⁸ to Paul’s thought are

¹ For all the history of the topic, see: James Kallas, “Romans XIII, 1-7: An Interpolation”, *New Testament Studies*, 11 (1964/1965): 365-374; Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem*, (Gerd Mohn: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), 191-197; Ernst Barnikol, “Römer 13. Der nichtpaulinische Ursprung der absoluten Obrigkeitsbejahung in Rom 13,1-7”, in *Studien zum NT und zur Patristik* (FS E. Klostermann), (TU 77), (Berlin: Akademie, 1961), 65-133; M. Borg, “A New Context for Romans XIII”, *New Testament Studies*, 19, (1973): 205-218; P. Stuhlmacher, “Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1-7”, *ZThK* 73, (1976): 131-166; K.H. Schelkle, “Staat und Kirche in der patristischen Auslegung von Röm 13,1-7”, *ZNW* 44 (1952/53): 223-236; V. Zsifkovits, *Der Staatsgedanke nach Paulus in Röm 13,1-7. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Umwelt und der patristischen Auslegung*, (WBTh 8) (Vienna: Herder, 1964); Ulrich Wilkens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, coll. “Evangelisch Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament”, band VI/3, (Herausgegeben von Hans-Josef Klauck, Ulrich Luz, Thomas Söding und Samuel Vollenweider), (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 43-66.

² See details, in this respect, William Hendriksen, *Romans* (NTC), (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 429; William O. Walker Jr., *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, coll. “Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series”, vol. 213, (Stanley E. Porter ed.), (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 222-223.

³ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer übersetzt und erklärt*, coll. “Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament”, (Herausgegeben von Heinrich A.W. Meyer und Ferdinand Hahn), (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 312.

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (NIC), (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 791.

⁵ Cf. Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) (= *An die Römer*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), 352.

⁶ Cf. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 791.

⁷ See William O. Walker Jr., *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*, 222-223.

⁸ See Ernst Barnikol, “Römer 13. Der nichtpaulinische Ursprung der absoluten Obrigkeitsbejahung in Rom 13,1-7”, 65-133.

also not of the most solid, Pauline Epistles showing, in general, a number of important *hapax* words which denotes the originality of pauline style.⁹ On the other hand, Paul's teaching also has a number of striking similarities to 1 Pet 2:13 - 17.¹⁰ "This suggests - thinks D. Moo - that Jesus' teaching about the relationship of the disciples to the state was the basis for a widespread early Christian tradition, which Paul here takes up and adapts".¹¹

This is the reason why we will start in our research from the hypothesis that this pericope is the creation of Saint Paul, and that this text shows us, in the most genuine way, one of the characteristics of the early Church in matters of obedience and submission to the civil government.

2. Six "Imperative-Reasons" for Christian Obeying and Submitting to Roman Authority (13:1-5)

a. *The authority is established by God (13:1)*

The way how the Apostle begins his exhortation is extremely provocative: "Let every person (Πᾶσα ψυχή - soul - KJV) be in subjection (ὑποτασσέσθω) to the governing authorities (ἐξουσίας ὑπερεχούσας). For there is no authority (ἐξουσία) except from God, and those which exist are established (τεταγμένα) by God" (Rom 13:1).

Literally Paul says, "Let every *soul* be in subjection". But the word "soul", as here used, means person, human being and not a part of human being (soul in distinction from body or spirit). Therefore, the translation "every person" (NASB) or "everyone" (NIV) is completely justified.

⁹ Other epistles, unanimously recognized as pauline contain in a limited space, unusually many foreign words (See 1 Cor 1:26-31; 2 Cor 11:21-29). However, nobody doubts of their pauline authorship. See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005), 500. Stanley E. Porter, D. A. Carson, *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics. Open Questions in Current Research*, coll. "Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series", vol. 80, (Stanley E. Porter ed.), (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 114; Cătălin Varga, "The Pauline Background of the Christological Hymn in the Epistle to Philippians 2:6-11. An Interrogation of the paternity and possible solutions", *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa*, LX (2015), 1, 73.

¹⁰ If we are to analyze the text of the Epistle 1 Peter we will reach the conclusion that a significant number of key words and concepts are common with Rom 13:1-7: ὑποτάσσω (order under, submit), as well as the basic imperative ὑπερέχω (have power over, be in authority (over), be highly placed of authorities in the state) term used to describe the power of a state; the purpose of government as being ἐκδίκησιν κακοποιῶν (taking vengeance on evildoers), the exhortation to give hate "honor" (τιμάω) and "fear" (φοβέομαι) etc. (See details, D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 793).

¹¹ D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 793.

It is interesting the vision of St. John Chrysostom, who, by the expression “Let every soul be in subjection (ὑποτάσσεσθω)”¹² understands all Christians regardless of function or social condition. He states: “All souls may obey to the governing authorities, even if it would be an apostle, or evangelist or prophet, or regardless any other because such obedience not offend at all Eusevia”.¹³ Therefore, the argument St. Paul brings to arguing the unconditional obedience to authority is a *theological* one: “...For there is no authority (ἐξουσία) except from God and those which exist, are established (τεταγμένα) by God” (13:1).

The noun ἐξουσία, presented in the text, is used generally to describe the dignity of Christian ministers (clergy) however. It may also have a general sense, namely that of authority or absolute power.¹⁴ In this sense, it may include both the Roman State, as supreme authority, as well as local authorities with special reference to the judicial office. This is the sense used by Paul in the text of Rom 13:1.¹⁵

¹² The verb ὑποτάσσω, which has a unique meaning in Rom 13:1, i.e. “submission” and “strict obedience” to the Roman Empire, is used in a few other places in the New Testament (1 Cor 15:28; Jam 4:7; Heb 12:9) where bears a different significance, namely, “allegiance to God’s will”. Originally the verb ὑποτάσσω was used most often in the field of royal administration and politics, assuming unconditional obedience. Meantime the subordination/submission becoming in the early Church a fundamental feature of the behaviour of each Christian, the verb ὑποτάσσω has defined this special Christian attitude towards the civil authority (Eph 5:21; 1 Pet 2:13). See R. Bergmeier, “ὑποτάσσω, hypotassō, subject, subordinate”, in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, (Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider eds.), (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 408.

¹³ Cf. Ioan Chrysostom, *In Epistolam ad Romanos homilliae 23* (PG 60.616), în *Comentariile sau Explicarea Epistolei către Romani*, trad. Arhim Theodosie Athanasiu, (București, 1906), 383.

¹⁴ See details, Werner Foerster, “ἐξέστιν, ἐξουσία”, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Band II, (Herausgegeben von Gerhard Kittel und Gerhard Friedrich), Kohlhammer Verlag, (Stuttgart-Köln: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1990), 565.

¹⁵ Some researchers, however, have come to the conclusion that St. Paul uses here the term ἐξουσία for the same purpose for which it is also used in other contexts, referring to angels (Eph 1:21; 6:12). Therefore, it follows that even in Rom 13:1 Apostle Paul would exhort the Christians to submit to the angels (Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time. The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, (London: SCM Press, 1962), 192: “You must say, with regard to these powers, that in the concept of early Christianity, they do not relate to the earthly authorities close to the daily life, conditioned by the current situation, but unseen beings, which are not always some mediators, but rather some executive instruments through which Christ will show His glory”. See also C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical 1947-52 on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, (London: T&T Clark International, 1979), 656-657. The first one who, apparently, proposed this identification was Martin Dibelius in his work: *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909). Later he has retracted his opinion (See M. Dibelius, “Rom und die Christen im ersten Jahrhundert”, in *Botschaft und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze II*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), 177-228).).

As for Paul's exhortation (Rom 13:1) the researcher Ben Witherington¹⁶ is of the opinion that it must be taken into account the *historical-political context* of the middle of the first century, so that we can better understand why Apostle Paul wrote these exhortations in favour of Roman authorities. So, he thinks that the Apostle, when he emphasizes the above imperative, he had in his mind the positive experience of "Pax Romana" by which he was helped to fulfil his first Christian mission. In this way, the goal of St. Paul, by his advice, was not to disturb that Roman peace, offered by the great empire, because the Apostle knew that it is only under conditions of peace the Gospel will be spread to all nations.¹⁷ Would have intended the Apostle, by giving this command, to try to avoid any possible Christians protest against the Roman authority, which could endanger civil order imposed? Possible!

But according to other researchers, the understanding of Paul's urge, given to Roman Christians, to submit to "high authorities" (13:1), would also have been facilitated from another aspect, namely, that of the historical-social context, specific for the middle of the first century, when taxes and duties, increased by Nero, have generated a multitude of protests among Roman citizens.¹⁸ Paul surely didn't want his Christians among protesters, having regard to the cruelty punishments of Roman government in which, beginning from the brutal public spectacles and up to the public crucifixion at sight of everybody, the sentenced Christians experienced the worst moments of their lives.¹⁹ So, it's possible that Apostle Paul would also have had in view this social aspect when he addressed such exhortations to Roman Christians.

¹⁶ Ben Witherington, *Paul's letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 307.

¹⁷ Pierre Grelot, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Romains: Une lecture pour aujourd'hui*, (Versailles: Editeur Saint-Paul, 2001), 168-171. Some researchers are of the opinion that by the favourable attitude of the Apostle toward Roman authority he also wanted to build a good image which should allow him a further assistance from the State, in terms of both human resources and monetary, which would have permitted him to achieve his great mission of Spain Evangelisation (See David W. Pao, "The Ethical relevance of New Testament Commentaries: On the Reading of Romans 13:1-7", vol. *On the writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, (Stanley E. Porter, Eckhard J. Schnabel eds.), (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 199-200). It is high unlikely such an objective of Paul! However, the pauline imperative is not free from stupefaction in a climate in which the Roman Empire he extended its borders throughout the whole Mediterranean basin, having also developed its idolatrous cult. Moreover, under the influence of the Greek Philosophy, the Emperor has claimed even the title of "Dominus Deus" (See, Sung U. Lim, "A double-voiced reading of Romans 13:1-7 in light of the Imperial cult", *HTS Theologies Studies*, LXXI, 1, (2015): 3).

¹⁸ See J. Friedrich, W. Pohlmann, P. Stuhlmacher, „Zur historischen Situation und intention von Rom 13.1-7“, *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche* 73, 2 (1986): 138-139.

¹⁹ See more details, Shelly Matthews, E. Leigh Gibson, *Violence in the New Testament*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 13.

But beyond any presupposition, the first reason for which the Christians are morally indebted to obey and to be subjected to Roman authority is the fact that “it is established (τεταγμένα) by God”.

Therefore, those who are against civil authorities are opposing to God Himself. The immediate consequence of such behaviour is the attracting of God’s anger upon them, punishing them either here, on the earth,²⁰ or in the eschatological future: “*Therefore he who resists (ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος) authority (τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ) has opposed the ordinance of God (θεοῦ διαταγῆ); and they who have opposed will receive condemnation (κρίμα λήψονται) upon themselves*” (Rom. 13:2).

Interpreting these words, St. John Chrysostom states: “This goes to show that Christ introduced his laws not with the purpose to overthrow the common order of the state, but rather with the purpose of a better straightening, and also to teach us not to thrust ourselves into foolish and mindless fights. The intrigues and emulations caused us for truth and justice, are enough. And therefore, we should not inflict troubles and temptations upon ourselves.”²¹

b. The rulers are not a cause of fear (13:3)

When the expression: “will receive condemnation upon themselves” (13:2b) refers to a historical judgment that is mediated by the secular civil authority, than the following verses 13,3-4 could further explain this situation. But if the judgment mentioned in 13:2b might be referred to God’s final judgment, then we must view in Rom 13:3-4 as a second reason why Christians are to submit to governing authorities. Not only has God appointed them (13:1b), but he has also entrusted to them an important role in maintain order in the society. By punishing those who do wrong and rewarding those who do good, secular authority are carrying out God’s purposes in the world. Ap. Paul explains this by affirming: “*For rulers are not a cause of fear (φόβος) for good behaviour (τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἔργῳ), but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same*” (Rom 13:3).

²⁰ It is not excluded that Apostle Paul through the expression οἱ δὲ ἀνθεστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κρίμα λήψονται (“and those who oppose it will attract damnation” - 13:2 b), would probably have had in view the expulsion of Jews in the period of Tiberius, or that of Claudius, or Caligula’s trying to unholy the Temple in Jerusalem, or decisions concerning imperial crisis between Greeks and Jews of Alexandria (See, James R. HARRISON, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities tab at Thessalonica and Roma. A Study in the conflict of ideological friends*, coll. “Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament”, vol. 273, (Herausgeber von Mr Jörg PIRRUNG Frey), (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 272).

²¹ John Chrysostom, In Epistulam ad Romanos homilliae 23 (PG 60.616), in *Commentaries or the Explanatoin of the Epistle to the Romans*, 382.

Ambrosiaster referring to these words asserts: “Rulers are here kings who are created in order to correct behaviour and prevent bad things from happening. They have the image of God, because everyone else is under one head”.²² Therefore, Christians are to submit to the civil authority.

Referring to Paul’s words (13:3), Augustine has an interesting commentary on them: “This can upset some people, when they think that Christians have often suffered persecution by these authorities. They say: “Were these Christians not doing well, since not only did the authorities not praise them, they punished and killed them!” The apostle’s words must be carefully considered. He does not say: “Do what is good and the authorities will praise you,” but: “Do what is good and you will have praise from him.” Whether someone in authority approves what you do or persecutes you, “you will have praise from him,” either when you win it by your obedience to God or when you earn your crown by persecution.”²³

St John Chrysostom sees the verse 13:3 as an attempting of Paul to comfort Christians after the previous command “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities” (Rom 13:1). He affirms: “Therefore, through his previous words, he hurt them deeply and frightened them, then again he raises, and like a wise doctor applies pleasant doctors, and comforts them by saying: «Why are you frightened? Why are you trembling? Lest the governor is frightening those who are occupied with good deeds?» Therefore, also adds: Will you not be afraid of authority? Do good and you will be praised”. Did you see how he befriended them with the master, whom the Apostle shows to be their praiser? Did you see how the Apostle drove their fear and mistrust in the authority?²⁴

c. Authority (ἐξουσία) - a minister of God (13:4)

The verse 4 is framed by two assertions in which Paul characterizes the ruler as a “servant to God”. The first elaborates the *positive function* of the ruler – *praising those who do good* – (13:3b). The second explains the *negative function* of the ruler – *punishing the wrong deeds* – which Apostle Paul touched on verse 13:3. In 13:4 he explains it in more details: “For it is a minister of God (θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν) to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword (μάχαιρα) for nothing...”

²² Ambrosiaster, *Commentarius in XII Epistulas Paulinas A* 8.1.9, in “Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 81.1”, (Vienna: Tempsky, 1866), 419.

²³ Augustine, *Romans 73*, in: P. F. LANDS (ed.), in *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans; Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982), 41.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, In *Epistolam ad Romanos homilliae 23* (PG 60.616), in *Commentaries or the Explanation of the Epistle to the Romans*, 382.

Therefore, the complementary functions of the state and of his accredited representatives are the promoting and rewarding of good and the limitations and punishment of evil:

- He is God's servant for your own good (13:4a)
- He is in the Lord's ministry...to punish the one who does evil (13:4b)

The same dual role is mentioned by Apostle Peter, in his first Epistle, where he states: "... *governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right*" (1Pet 2:14).

As for the kind of penalties and sanctions the Apostle does not pronounce anything, but the expression "*for it does not bear the sword (μάχαιρα) for nothing*" (13:4c) is left to understand, believes John Stott, using "a necessary minimum force" to punish and remove evil.²⁵ But the mention of the "sword" (μάχαιρα), which previously appears in the Epistle, in the context of one's supreme sacrifice for Christ (8:35-36), and which was used for executions (cf. Lk 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27, Hebr 11:34; Rev 13:10), shows clearly that Paul uses this word, in the text, as a symbol for *capital punishment*. The bearing of the sword by the representatives of Roman power, clearly expresses the symbol of the power of life and death which these men possessed. It is very interesting that, in both these functions – positive and negative –, the secular ruler is performing God's purposes, as his διάκονος.

The word διάκονός is a generic term covering a wide variety of works.²⁶ In light of this evidence, the question is, if the term διάκονός has here, in the text, a purely secular meaning or a quasi-religious one? The word διάκονός means "servant", "minister" and no more. It is the qualifying genitive θεοῦ (of God) that indicates the ultimately "religious" significance of their service: "*For it is a minister of God to you for good*" (13:4a).²⁷

Referring to the meaning of the term διάκονός, here in the text, Origenes asks: "In what sense is a judge in this world the *servant of God*? ... It seems to me that this question is answered by that passage in the Acts of the Apostles where the decision was taken to impose only certain ritual obligations on Gentile believers (Acts 15:23–29). They were told to abstain from eating what had been sacrificed to idols, from blood and from fornication, but nothing was said about murder, adultery, theft, homosexuality or other crimes which are punished by both divine and human laws. Now if what was explicitly forbidden to the Gentiles was all they had to do, then it would seem as if these other things were all right. But look at how the Holy Spirit has organized everything.

²⁵ Cf. John Stott, *Romani* (Comentarii minime expositive), (Ed. "Logos": Cluj-Napoca, 2000), 386.

²⁶ See more details with referring to the meaning of the word διάκονός, art. Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "διακονέω, διακονία, διάκονος", in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testaments* (G. Kittel) (ThWNT), Band II, (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1990), 81-93.

²⁷ See D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 801.

Because these other crimes are already punished by secular laws, it seemed superfluous to add a divine prohibition as well. All that he decreed concerned matters which seemed right from the divine point of view but which were not covered by human laws. It is in this way that a human judge acts as a servant of God. For God wants these crimes to be punished by human judges and not by representatives of the church".²⁸

For John Chrysostom, the reason why Paul the Apostle names secular rulers "God's servants" is that they are the representatives of God's will in rewarding good deeds and the punishment of evil ones. Here is what he says, "The civil power makes virtue easier for the Christian by chastising the wicked, by benefiting and honouring the good and by working together with the will of God. For this reason he is even given the name of "God's servant." ... Even when he administers punishment, it is God's will that he is carrying out".²⁹

So, on the positive side, by bestowing praise (13:3b) and encouraging Christians to do what is good, the civil ruler may be called διάκονός.

d. Authority - an avenger who brings wrath (13:4d)

The last part of verse 4 presents the civil authority again, as "*minister of God*". Repeating the word διάκονός in characterizing the role that she has in relation to Christians, shows the importance which the Apostle Paul gives for her reason of being. In addition, the Apostle also defines the civil authority as being the instrument through which flows "wrath" upon the wrongdoers: "... *for it is a minister of God* (θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν), *an avenger* (ἔκδικος) *who brings wrath* (ὀργήν) *upon the one who practices evil*" (13:4d).

The question is: What kind of anger does the Apostle speak about? Is it about that of God or of the civil authority? A lot of scholars are of the opinion that in this text the Apostle has in view the wrath of the civil authority.³⁰

But, the fact that the state power is characterized by a double affirmation, in the same verse 4, as being "minister of God" (διάκονός) leads to a different interpretation: the noun ὀργήν (13:4) is used by Paul with direct reference to God's wrath, because rebellion against the State, which is the temporary servant of God, is the ultimate form of rebellion against God.³¹ D. Moo is interpreting

²⁸ Origen, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos* 13,3 (PG 14.1227), (T. Heither ed.), vol. 5, (New York: Herder, 1995), 94-96.

²⁹ J. Chrysostom, *In Epistulam ad Romanos homilliae* 23 (PG 60.616), in P. Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and PostNicene Fathers of the Christian Church* 1,11, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 512.

³⁰ See D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 802, n. 57.

³¹ Paul D. Feinberg, "The Christian and Civil Authorities", *The Master's Seminary Journal*, X, 1 (1999): 93.

verse 4 in the same sense: “When the civil authority punishes wrongdoers, the authority, acting as God’s servant, is “an instrument of vengeance” through whom God is executing *his wrath* on human sin. The „vengeance” that is prohibited to individual Christians (cf. Rom 12:19) is executed by God’s chosen servants, the secular authorities”.³²

Ambrosiaster sees even in the worldly power, to punish evil committed, here on earth, an action by which God seeks to limit the eternal punishment of those who commit sin. Here is what he says: “Since God has ordained that there will be a future judgment and he does not want anyone to perish, he has ordained rulers in this world who, by causing people to be afraid of them, act as tutors to mankind, teaching them what is to do in order to avoid future punishment”.³³

Therefore, the spiritual message of Paul is here, in the text, obvious. In this respect, W. Hendriksen states: “In his infinite kindness, God, through Paul, caused this message to be delivered to the Roman church, in order that its members – and further all, throughout the ages, who could read this letter- might be kept from practicing evil, and might, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, turn to God for pardon and for strength to live orderly and sanctified lives”.³⁴ This is the fourth reason for which Christians must submit to the world’s leaders, being named by specialists, a **practical reason**.³⁵

e. Submission - for conscience' sake (13:5-6)

The interpretative key of this *crux interpretum* (Rom 13:1-7) seems to be verse 13:5 and the meaning of the word *συνείδησις*, which ensures the proper understanding of the Pauline imperative and the Apostle’s conception towards any dominion, but predominantly Roman. And this fear, however, should not be the ultimate motive in the problem of Christians’ unconditional submission, but their conscience of redeemed creatures through the death and resurrection of Christ, which no longer allows, under his sacrificial love, to further up rise against anyone.

³² D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 802. A similar interpretation, see W. HENDRIKSEN, *Romans*, 436.

³³ Ambrosiaster, *Commentarius in XII Epistulas Paulinas A* 8,1,9, in “Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum” 81.1, 421.

³⁴ W. Hendriksen, *Romans*, 436.

³⁵ Robert H. Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1-7”, *Novum Testamentum*, XXXI, 4 (1989): 325-326. But, the intention of Saint Paul also has to be seen from an another angle: The epistle to Romans has many purposes comparable with others Epistle. For example, the two passages (1:8-16a and 15:14-33), which both describe Paul’s intention to visit the communities in Rome, on his missionary journey to Spain, are encrypted with Paul’s intention to fulfill his mission among the gentiles. In this unit, three major themes meet: missionary, apologetic and pastoral, which all complete one another. That’s why their inter-relations can establish even the mission parameters necessary for understanding the text Rom 13:1-7, but also the intention that stood behind all of these Pauline imperatives.

Thus, summing up all the arguments in verses 13:1-4 for Christians submitting to the authority of the state, Apostle Paul says: “*Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection* (διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι), *not only because of wrath* (ὀργήν), *but also for conscience' sake* (συνείδησιν)” (Rom 13:5).

Avoiding punishment, or “the reason for fear”, in early Christian circles, were not the main reasons for determining submission and obedience of the Church towards the State. The real motive in this respect was based on the conscience (ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν – 13:5). Rom 13:5 is the only place in which the Apostle Paul uses this term - συνείδησιν, but it is integrated in the broader context of the Christian attitude, who renewed his mind just for the reason not being conformed with such a corrupt world (Rom 12:1-2).

This kind of submission is a completely part of the new moral pattern of the advanced spiritual Christian, who understands, according to the context of the world which he lives in, that is neither unsuitable nor wise to rebel against a lawful authority accepted by God.

From this Pauline argument follows two logical conclusions which mark each individual Christian's conscience: on the one hand, the Christian must submit in order to avoid the wrath of God, the One who appointed the civil authorities and, on the other hand, not to burden his conscience, as son of God, with any disobedience or rebellion against what God established. This second vision is, actually, the final argument in solving this problem referring to the unconditional submission of Roman Christians to the worldly authorities and which submission involves the conscience.³⁶

In fact, Paul the Apostle does not introduce here a new argument since he does not develop it, but he summarizes in a chiasmic structured form all he previously has mentioned. In essence, it is about the following conclusion: the State will punish those who do evil and will bring the wrath of God upon them.³⁷ More than this, if the pagans submit to the state and pay their taxes (φόρους), either because of the fear of eventual punishment or because of their reasoning that the State provides protection and welfare, the more Christians are indebted to fulfil their duties because of their union with God, who allowed the existence of the state.³⁸

The attitude coming from conscience is, in fact, the Apostle's argument in favour of paying taxes due to the civil authority. He is clear in this regard: “*For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God* (λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν), *devoting themselves to this very thing*” (Rom 13:6).

³⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 436.

³⁷ Robert H. Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1-7...”, 339-340.

³⁸ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans...*, 667.

We can observe that here for calling secular rulers Paul no longer uses the word “ministers” but a different word namely, λειτουργοὶ (pl. of λειτουργός) which generally has religious implications. This word was used frequently in the LXX to refer to people who served in the Temple (cf. Num 4:37; 41:1; 1Sam 2:11; Ezra 7:24; Isa 61:6). In the New Testament it always refers to those who are ministering for the sake of the Lord (cf. Heb 8:2; 10:11; Rom 15:16). In any case, as in the case of διάκονός in 13:4, the addition “of God” makes clear the ultimately sacred nature of the “secular ruler’s service”. Therefore the payment of taxes becomes a responsibility that the Christian owe to God himself. This is emphasized in Paul’s additional description of the rulers as those who “devote themselves to this very thing”. Paul may think of the “thing” to which the rulers devote themselves as their promoting of good and restraining of evil (13:3-4), their collecting of taxes (13:6), or, perhaps most likely, their service itself as “servants of God”.³⁹

Of course, in this context, an open question remains: if some actions of the State will be considered as violations of Christian faith, to what extent may the obedience and submission which the Apostle Paul discusses in the text about, cohabitate in this scenario? May the Christians refuse to obey on the basis of the conscience, just as the Apostles did (cf. Acts 5:29)?⁴⁰ It is really an open question, which the text does not deal with. However, in this case, the only answer that can be given is the following one: obligations towards God prevail any other obligations towards people. The text from Acts 5:29, also known as “Clausula Petri”, is decisive in this respect: *“We must obey God rather than men!”*

However, the Apostle is not preoccupied in this text to approach this kind of Christian attitude in relation with the civil authority. But, in the case of a possible such a kind of challenge the answer wouldn’t be other than the only one enunciated above.

f. Submission of Love (13:7-8)

The verse 13:7 has no explicit link to the context, but it seems to be a practical conclusion to all exhortations of the Apostle presented up to here: *“Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour”* (13:7).

Therefore, for Paul the regular payment of taxes is the clearest proof of the Christians’ respect due to the authority of the State. So he put in parallel

³⁹ See more details in this respect, D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 805.

⁴⁰ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, coll. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, (D.A. Carson ed.), (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 464. See also, Mircea BASARAB, *Biserica în dialog. Studii biblice*, (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2009), 93.

the simple exercise of tax payment and the submission to civil authority for conscience's sake.

However, Saint Paul doesn't stop here but rather on the background of conscience brings to discussion the most convincing argument for submission: obedience from love (ἀγαπή) towards God and towards rulers: "Owe (ὀφείλετε) nothing to anyone except to love one another (τὸ ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν); for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8).

It is widely recognised that the pronoun ἀλλήλους does not only refer to the Christian community, but to all with whom they come in contact, including the representatives of the State powers. This follows from the broader context of the pericope (Rom 12:17-13:7) where the relationships with the whole community are viewed from a perspective of a whole.⁴¹

Commenting on this text, Augustine said that if we oppose to the authorities, this means that we do not love the image of God reflected in them and in this way we cannot love the person whom Christ identifies himself with.⁴² The only debt that remains is the love because it can never be paid. Saint Paul appeals to love precisely because it addresses Christians whose behaviour has to reflect the characteristics of the new creation restored in Christ.

The expression ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς ("give to them all that is due") from Rom 13:6 is interpreted here in Romans 13:8 according to the following model: the only duty and debt that Christians have, is to mutually love one another. The exhortations from Rom 12:17.20-21; 13:3-4 bring into discussion the theme of not paying evil for evil and this cannot be fulfilled except by loving the neighbour (ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον).⁴³ Therefore, the State through the authority that it possesses, watching over the good and the public order, promoting the common good, must be regarded as a servant of people and of God. Submission must be, consequently, an act of conscience and of love toward your protector, the only guarantor that represents the interests of society.

3. Conclusions

1. From a contextual, linguistic and theological point of view, Rom 13:1-7 is written by the Apostle Paul with the purpose of persuading the Christians in Rome that the Roman authority is allowed by God in order to facilitate their salvation.

⁴¹ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 776.

⁴² Augustine, *De Trinitate* 11.23, in col. "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers", vol. 3, (Philip Schaff ed.), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), 124.

⁴³ John E. Toews, *Romans*, (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2004), 318.

2. The text from Romans 13:1-7 does not include a “teaching about the State” nor can it be taken as an expression of a doctrine about the absolute respect towards the State, but rather a teaching about the motivation of obedience to civil authority on the basis of wisdom, conscience and practical reasons. The State rules and laws must be respected, while those of God must be fulfilled. Man has an eternal destiny which transcends earthly and temporary realities.
3. What Saint Paul transmits to the Church in Rome is the following thing: submission must also include the motive of the conscience, but if something, insignificant, would be proven to be a coercive instrument against it, then the unconditional submission will be dissolved, according to “Clausula Petri” which states: *“We must obey God rather than men”* (Act 5:29).
4. According to Paul’s perspective the Christians motive for submission to the civil authority is not “the fear”, but rather “the conscience” and “the love”.
5. The text Rom 13:1-7 constitutes the key text of the entire New Testament on the subject of Christian’s obedience and submission towards the State’s civil authority, both with regard to its length and also to the specific details as such.

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