

PAUL'S TEACHING ON CIVIL LIBERTIES IN ROMANS 13:1-7 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Romans 13:1-7 is a foundational biblical passage in which the Apostle Paul instructs Christians to submit to governing authorities, asserting that all authority is established by God. The study relies on the Aristotelian natural or divine theory of the state to analyse civil liberties. It views religion as a concept coined by man to explain man's relationship with the object of worship, as well as a strong belief that man has in a sacred entity. Paul emphasizes that rulers are God's servants for the good of society and that resistance to authority is equivalent to resisting God's ordinance. This passage has profound theological, ethical, and socio-political implications, especially in contexts where governance is marred by corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. In the Nigerian context, where political instability, systemic corruption, and human rights violations are prevalent, Paul's teaching presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the church. On one hand, it calls for a posture of respect, civic responsibility, and prayer for those in power. On the other hand, it raises critical questions about the limits of obedience in the face of unjust governance. The church in Nigeria is therefore tasked with discerning how to uphold biblical submission to authority while also fulfilling its prophetic role of speaking truth to power, advocating for justice, and promoting godly leadership. This study explores the balance between submission and resistance, analysing Paul's intent within his historical context and extrapolating its relevance to modern-day Nigeria. It concludes that the church must engage in constructive civic participation, ethical advocacy, and spiritual accountability, encouraging believers to be both law-abiding citizens and courageous voices for righteousness in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS: Religious Foundation, Civil Liberties, and Contemporary Church.

INTRODUCTION

Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most theologically significant and practically challenging passages in the Pauline epistles regarding the Christian's relationship to political authority. In this text, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to "be subject to the

governing authorities," declaring that "there is no authority except from God" and that "those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1, ESV). This passage has been the subject of extensive theological debate, especially concerning its application in contexts of political oppression, tyranny, or systemic injustice.

Paul's primary concern in this passage is order within the Christian community and society at large. By urging submission to civil authorities, Paul affirms a theological principle: that governance is part of God's providential structure for maintaining justice and peace in human society (Wright, 2002). However, Paul's teaching must be understood within the broader biblical witness, which includes prophetic resistance to unjust rulers (e.g., Daniel, Elijah) and the lordship of Christ above all earthly powers (Acts 5:29; Revelation 13).

In Nigeria, this message takes on urgency. The country's democratic framework is regularly challenged by corruption, authoritarian governance, suppression of dissent, and the misuse of power. Violations of civil liberties—such as restrictions on peaceful protests, press freedom, and religious expression—frequently threaten both individual dignity and national stability. In such an environment, the Church is uniquely positioned to interpret Paul's teachings in a way that affirms both respect for legitimate authority and defence of God-given human freedoms.

Paul's instruction does not support blind obedience or silence in the face of oppression. Rather, it calls the Church to uphold lawful authority when it acts justly, and to serve as a prophetic voice when the state deviates from its divine mandate (Wright, 2002). Thus, the passage offers the Nigerian Church a biblical framework for civic responsibility, enabling it to advocate for justice, protect civil liberties, and model faithful citizenship in a pluralistic and often unstable political climate. For the Church in Nigeria, the interpretation and application of Romans 13:1-7 carry significant weight. Nigeria's political landscape is characterized by corruption, abuse of power, electoral malpractice, insecurity, and often a weak rule of law. In such a context, the question arises: How should Christians relate to a government that may fail in its divine responsibility to promote justice and the common good?

While Paul's call to submission underscores the importance of respect for authority and civic responsibility, it does not endorse blind obedience to unjust governance. Instead, it invites the Church to engage critically and faithfully—to submit where possible, resist where necessary, and always uphold a godly conscience (Stott, 2001). This study explores Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1-7 in light of its original context and its practical implications for the Nigerian Church, particularly regarding political engagement, social justice, civil obedience, and the Church's prophetic witness.

HISTORICAL GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 13:1-7

Joseph (1993:25) posits that according to mythology, Rome was founded by descendants of Aeneas, Romulus and Remus (ca. 753 BCE). In the time of 60 BCE Rome was governed by the triumphant generals, Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar. In 27 BCE, Octavian (the title *Augustus*) became the emperor or dictator of the Roman world. He was succeeded by the emperors of the Julio Claudian line: Tiberius Caesar (14-37 CE), Gaius Caligula (37-41), Claudius (41-54), and Nero (54-68). All scholars unanimously agree that the time of Nero was the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul was condemning the disobedience to authority. Why did Paul instruct us to be submissive to the government? Mott (1992) sees that the ethical teaching of Paul in Romans 12-15 is an expression of his mature reflections upon problems encountered in his earlier missionary work, as in 2 Corinthians. The statement concerning taxation is not aimed at the specific situation of Rome, but it deals with a general problem of Christians in the Roman Empire and, by implication, the contemporary church in Nigeria. As it were in Rome, some religious adherents in Nigeria do not perform their civil obligation, like payment of taxes and involvement in elections. Ebenezer (2022) wrote that 30 – 40 percent of Christians in the rural part of Cross River State do not participate in the election, calling it satanic and wordily.

Romans 13:1-7 is part of Paul's letter to the Romans, written around AD 57-58. The letter is a theological treatise that explores the relationship between Jews and the Gentiles in the early Christian church. Romans 13:1-7 is situated in the later part of the letter where Paul discusses the Christians relationship to the state.

Structure of the Pericope (text)

- I. Submission to authorities (13:1-3)
- II. The Role of Government (13:4)

THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO THE STATE (13:5-7) EXEGESIS

Text

Romans 13:5-7, ESV: "Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For this is why you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay 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, honour to whom honour is owed."

Verse 5 – Subjection for Conscience' Sake

Greek Text: διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν.

ἀνάγκη (anankē) – "necessity" or moral obligation; highlights the weight of this duty.

ὑποτάσσεσθαι (hypotássesthai) – "to be subject, to submit"; a military term implying ordered subordination.

συνείδησις (syneidēsis) – "conscience"; denotes a God-given internal guide that informs moral duty.

Paul stresses that obedience to civil authorities is not merely pragmatic (to avoid wrath or punishment) but theological and moral. Christians obey out of conscience—a recognition of divine order and responsibility before God. This links submission to a higher ethical standard, not blind allegiance.

Verse 6 – Paying Taxes and Recognizing Authority

Greek Text: διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε· λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσὶν εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες.

φόρους (phorous) – "taxes" or direct tribute; a civic duty to support governance.

τελεῖτε (teleíte) – "you pay" or "fulfill"; carries the sense of completing an obligation.

λειτουργοὶ (leitourgoi) – "ministers" or "public servants"; in secular Greek and the Septuagint, it often refers to religious service, suggesting civil authorities serve a sacred function.

προσκαρτεροῦντες (proskarterountes) – "persisting, attending diligently"; implies continuous public service.

Paul calls the authorities *leitourgoi theou* (ministers of God), elevating their function to a divinely sanctioned vocation. Paying taxes, then, is more than a civic duty—it is a recognition of God's providence through civil structures. Christians acknowledge God's sovereignty even through flawed human systems.

Verse 7 – Fulfilling Obligations

Greek Text: ἀπόδοτε πᾶσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς· τῷ τὸν φόρον, τὸν φόρον· τῷ τὸ τέλος, τὸ τέλος· τῷ τὸν φόβον, τὸν φόβον· τῷ τὴν τιμὴν, τὴν τιμὴν.

ἀπόδοτε (apodote) – "render, give back"; implies a debt or obligation.

ὀφειλάς (opheilás) – "debts, dues"; used elsewhere in the NT to denote moral or financial obligations.

φόρος / τέλος (phoros / telos) – different types of taxes; *phoros* typically refers to direct taxation, *telos* to customs or tolls.

φόβος (phobos) – "fear" or reverent respect toward authority.

τιμὴ (timē) – "honor" or esteem; a recognition of the office's dignity.

Paul advocates for comprehensive responsibility: material (taxes), emotional (respect), and moral (honour). Christian submission involves not just action but attitude, displaying reverence for God's established order. This does not preclude prophetic critique but insists on honouring the role even if critiquing the individual.

Paul's teaching in Romans 13:5-7 integrates submission, conscience, and honour into a cohesive Christian ethic toward government. Key themes include submission as a spiritual obligation guided by conscience, recognition of civil authority as divinely instituted, though not immune to critique, and financial support (taxes) and moral respect (honour, fear) as expressions of obedience and reverence.

RELIGIOUS FOUNDATION OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

Religion is a concept coined by men to explain man's relationship with the object of worship. It is a strong belief that man has in a sacred entity. Religion, like many other concepts, has no consensus or universally acceptable definition. In other words, scholars have failed to agree on a definition of religion. Emile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which is to say things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them. This means that religion is an amalgamated system of beliefs and activities that are related to a sanctified personality. This also portrays the sociological view of religion. Max Lynn Stackhouse defined religion as "a comprehensive worldview or 'metaphysical moral vision' that is accepted as binding because it is held to be in itself basically true and just, even if all dimensions of it cannot be either fully confirmed or refuted. Religion describes human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of special reverence. It is also commonly regarded as consisting of the way people deal with ultimate concerns about their lives and their fate after death (Adam, 2024) Religion is a range of social-cultural systems, including designated behaviours and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organisations, that generally relate humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements—although there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion (Morreall & Sonn, 2013).

According to Salgado (2014), religion refers to a series of practices and rules according to people's beliefs, but the substrate to them is spirituality, understanding it as that which precisely nurtures religion and gives it sense, that is, faith in God. Levin, as cited in Pérez, Sandino & Gómez and cited by Salgado (2014), found that religion, particularly church attendance, provides feelings of positive self-esteem and control as a result of public and private devotion activities, such as religious rites, prayer, and meditation upon establishing and keeping a personal relationship with a divine being. It is found that there are protective factors that allow for to relief and mitigation of suffering, overcoming adversity, reaching a greater wellbeing, quality of life, more transcendence capacity, and a sense of plenitude and self-actualization (Salgado, 2014).

A religious foundation can refer to the basis of a religion, the donation of assets to a religious institution, or the idea that humans are both transactional and transcendent beings. For example, the foundation of a Christian religion can be the person and work of Jesus or the Bible. The Bible uses the idea of a foundation to symbolize strength, stability, and support for spiritual truths. Therefore, the religious foundation may be referred to as the basic or the cornerstone that was laid on which all the adherents are expected to build. Religious practices may include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration (of deities or saints), sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trances, initiations, matrimonial and funerary services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, or public service.

Four religions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism - account for over 77% of the world's population, and 92% of the world follows. This portends that every religion has followers who are equally citizens of the state. Though Jesus Christ did not give His immediate followers any religion, men decided to make order by giving a name to the followers, which later metamorphous into Christianity, which arguably has the largest followers on the planet. Paul's teaching encourages believers to be steadfast and obey the state, emphasizing that the state can only terrorize the evildoers.

Civil liberties simply refer to citizens' rights and freedom in a particular country, which protect the people from the tyranny of the rulers. This also expresses the degree of freedom that people have while interacting with the State. In other words, civil liberties describe the rights, how, and perhaps why things or actions should be taken. Civil liberties cannot be toyed with since every citizen enjoys compulsory membership. For instance, individuals have no choice but to become automatic members of the State once they are born within its territorial limits. The State, on the other hand, gives orders most time through the constitution mandating its citizens to perform their obligations to the State. Eminue (2005) postulates that some citizens are known to disobey state laws on conscientious grounds. Liberty of conscience is the right to hold and profess what principles or opinions we choose and to live in accordance with them, provided they are not seditious. Some religious sects deny the legitimacy of any kind of man over man; they say only spiritual authority has dominion over them. Some, like Martin Luther, prescribe resistance to established authority that issues commands contrary to God's word. The Christian could disobey when obedience involves sin, which means that the ruler has issued an unjust command. However, Paul's teaching encouraged those who take after Christ to submit to the State by ways of paying their taxes, passports as well, and respect to constituted authorities.

Civil liberties are natural rights inherent to every citizen that protect them from tyranny by the state. The degree to which these liberties are enjoyed by people is an important indicator of the quality of a given country's democracy (Nulman, 2022). It is the state of being subject only to laws established for the good of the community,

especially about freedom of action and speech, or a person's rights to be subject only to laws established for the good of the community. In other words, it protects citizens to be free from state tyranny by guaranteeing specific rights. Nulman reiterates that modern societies are dependent on civil liberties to balance the restrictions that a state can place on its citizens. Personal liberties are necessary for freedom to exist within the confines of a world that is ruled by governments. Without civil liberties, democracy cannot exist to support equality and individual flourishing. They allow us to express controversial ideas safely, lead private lives, and make other important decisions for ourselves while living under state rule.

Therefore, Civil liberties are guarantees and freedoms that governments commit not to abridge, either by constitution, legislation, or judicial interpretation, without due process. Though the scope of the term differs between countries, civil liberties often include the freedom, of conscience, freedom of press, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to security and liberty, freedom of speech, the right to equal treatment under law and due process, the right to a fair trial, and the right to life. Other civil liberties include the right to own property, the right to defend oneself, and the right to bodily integrity. Amaowoh and Emmanuel (2018:185) asserted that the lack of love among Nigerians for the country is also evident in the non-payment of taxes and even disrespect for the National flag and National Anthem

Theoretically, the divine theory of the origin of the State gives a framework to this analysis. The theory was propounded by Aristotle (Ahmad, 1937). The theory states that the state is divinely arranged. The theory explains how the state came into being. The supporters of this theory believed that *the* state doesn't come into being by the people, but it is the handiwork of God on the earth. The state was created by God, and the King was the representative or agent of God on the earth. That is, the state is a product or the pronouncement of the supernatural being. The theory states that the ruler received power from God and ruled by the grace of God and was accountable to Him alone (John, 2009). Talking from the Aristotelian divine theory of the State, that the state is the handiwork of God, and the rulers ruled by the grace of God and were accountable to Him alone. It is possible to believe that God cannot bring up bad leaders, and if some leaders go contrary to God's intention, they would receive recompense rewards in due season. The Christian, on the other should be subject to the state and at the same time endeavour to participate in the decision-making to guide against unjust decisions. Again, the theory is appropriate in this analysis, since it portrays that God created the State as well as gave the leaders the opportunity to lead. Hence, based on this theory, Christians should believe that the religious foundation of civil liberties protects them from the tyranny of the rulers and they should be firm in defending it.

**CONTEXTUAL SURVEY: A RECONSIDERATION OF PAUL'S TEACHING
IN ROMANS 13:1-7**

13.1 πάσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω. οὐ γάρ ἐστιν Ἐξουσία εἰμὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ, αἱ δέουσαι ὑπὸ θεοῦ τεταγμέναι εἰσιν	¹ 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.
13:2 ὥστε ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ τῆ τοῦ θεοῦ διαταγῇ ἀνθέστηκεν, οἰδεῖ ἀνθστηκότες ἑαυτοῖς κριμα λήμψονται.	² Therefore, he who resists the authorities' resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.
13:3 οἱ γὰρ ἄρχοντες οὐκ εἰσιν φόβος τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἐργῷ ἀλλὰ τῷ κακῷ. Θέλεις δὲ μὴ φοβέσθαι τὴν ἐξουσίαν; τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποιεῖ, καὶ εἰς ἐπαινον ἐξ αὐτῆς	³ For rulers are not terrors to good conduct, but to bad conduct. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,
13:4. θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν. ἐάν δέ τίς κακὸν ποιῇς, φοβοῦ. Οὐ γὰρ εἰκὴ τὴν μάχαιραν φορεῖ. Θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν, ἐκδικοῦς εἰς ὀργὴν τὸ κακὸν πράσσοντι	⁴ For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.
13:5. διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτασσέσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν.	⁵ Therefore, one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.
13:6. διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ φόρους τελεῖτε, λειτουργοὶ γὰρ θεοῦ εἰσιν οἱ αὐτοῦ τοῦτο προσκαρτεροῦντες.	⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.
13:7 ἀπόδοτε πάσιν τὰς ὀφειλάς, τῷ τὸν φόρον τὸν φόβον, τῷ τὸ τέλος, τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον, τῷ τὴν τιμὴν τὴν τιμὴν.	⁷ Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Paul the Apostle is one of the most influential Apostles of Jesus Christ, though his apostleship did not come as a result of meeting Christ personally, but by revelation. Apostle Paul has made a significant contribution in promoting Christ's teaching with some remarkable insight and deeper revelation. In the book of Romans, chapter 13, verse 1-7, the most influential New Testament writer wrote thus:"

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained by God. (2) Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinances of God and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. (3) For the rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise of the same. (4) For he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (5) Wherefore, ye must need be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake. (6) For this cause, pay ye your tribute also, for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. (7) Render, therefore, to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Paul was addressing believers in the early church. In the address, Paul encouraged Christians to obey every political authority because the authority was set up by God. He urged them not to resist the power that was ordained by God because doing so is tantamount to resisting God, and those who resist God would receive punishment. Obviously, Paul made the position known, because the individual who worships God also takes part in other institutions, that is, *Homo religiosus*, also buys or sells in the market (*Homo economicus*), takes part in politics, at least exercising franchise (*Homo politicus*), and *homo social*. This implies that believers do not interact with God alone or in spiritual exercise only, but in other activities that involve humans. Paul unambiguously explained that the Government is not against righteous people, but rather, against the evildoers. Paul then charged Christians to do well, since damnation is basically for those who engage in civil disobedience. Paul called those who exercised or discharged government functions ministers of God, and advised people, believers alike, to pay their dues without compulsion and not to avoid the government's wrath but to display God's integrity, which is the conscience.

IMPLICATIONS TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a state that has many religious groups; these religious groups have been given the legal framework to operate. According to the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is enshrined in section 38 (Umoh, 2008). This implies that the law of the land has provided a constitutional framework for religious activities in Nigeria. Though there are persecutions in some parts of the country as a result of religious intolerance. However, Christians should be steadfast in the face of difficulties and at the same time perform all civic responsibilities, since it is apparent that government was instituted by God. There are enormous implications of this to the contemporary church in Nigeria:

1. Christians should see civil obedience as an act of worship rendered to God, not to men who are representatives, because they would account before their creator. Though some political theorists held that there is no morality in politics, Ezeife in Eminue cited by Ekott and Jimmy (2024), avers that the ignorant say, there is no morality in politics, that politics is the zone of the filthy, where anything goes, the abode of demons! This just cannot be true. Politics is God's vineyard because it deals with the affairs of men, the highest of God's creation. None can escape the judgment of God on things done in politics. Since political actors would not escape God's judgment, Christians should not resist the government's good intentions.
2. Another implication is that Paul's teaching encourages Christians to contribute towards the development of the state by paying their taxes, respecting constituted authorities, and giving honour to the kings. This is so because it is only in the state that Christians would achieve their objectives for God and humanity. Aristotle in Eminue, cited by Ekott and Jimmy (2024), asserts that man can only realize his full potential by living in the parts which was well-organized, stable, self-sufficient community or the most perfect state of human organization and an ethical institution that was indispensable for the full moral and all-round development of man. This means that, for sustainable development to benefit the church in contemporary Nigeria, the church must operate in a well-organized state. To actualize this, Christian's contributions cannot be overemphasized.
3. It also implies that Christians would live in their respective environments without being afraid, since they have fulfilled their side of the social contract through payment of taxes, corporate social responsibility, and respect for fundamental human rights, even amid difficulties, God would see them through.
4. Most importantly, it implies that Christians would promote God's ideal and character among the people, and they would be blessed on earth as well as the everlasting life.
5. Again, it also implies that Christians could participate in politics not just as voters but as officeholders, and this would allow them to influence decisions at least gradually, which might protect civil liberties.
6. Christians' involvement in politics can influence decision-making, thereby helping to regulate policies that affect the citizenry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Civic education should be encouraged in schools, as such should be included in the school curriculum (Religious education).

2. Religious organizations like CAN and OPN should encourage members, churches to teach their adherents about civil liberties, and should make it one of the church's Doctrines.
3. The government should run an inclusive government where the church gets involved in the formulation of policies.
4. Christians should perform their civic responsibilities as service to God.
5. Adequate education on civil liberties should be promoted among Christian churches and other religions that believe in the Supreme God.

CONCLUSION

Religion is a special institution that has assisted man in diverse ways, including regulating man's relationship with God in the case of Christianity, as well as setting and correcting the societal moral tone. Paul has a massive influence on Christianity, apart from being one of the most influential writers in the New Testament, his insightful, knowledgeable, and outstanding revelations have given the church the needed fundamental in Christian living in the contemporary era.

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