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Conducted by  
James Gardiner

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(It is remarkable that the query dealt with below is on exactly the same subject as dealt with in our editorial this month. It might be asked why the two articles have been published together. This is pure coincidence: There has been no consultation of any kind between Bro. Gardiner and myself. My editorial was sent for publication several days before I saw Bro. G's contribution, due to my being absent from home when his article was delivered at my address. At first I thought of holding over one article or the other. But the title of our editorial had already been announced in the "S.S.", so that I thought it wisest to publish it. On the other hand I did not wish to give any impression of selecting one rather than the other for publication this month. And no doubt the brother making the queries was looking for a quick answer. Hence I decided to publish together. One thing we are thankful for:— that the two articles agree so closely with each other. It would have been disastrous if any contradictions, or even differences, had been apparent in the expositions! Editor)

**COULD** you give some explanation of Romans chapter 13, verses 1-2? Does this mean "subject to higher spiritual powers," (*i.e.* church government), or does it

mean "subject to *state governments*"? Verse 2 states that we must not resist powers ordained of God. Does this mean that we would have to submit to a communist power in this country, if such came about before the Lord's return?

The verses, referred to, read, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation."

To get the full import of Paul's instruction we should read on to verse 7 at least. I shall refer later to these verses.

#### Our Duty To Government

Generally speaking we enjoy, in Britain, a well ordered society, and church members rarely come into open conflict with "the powers that be"—the administering authorities. Certainly there are signs that revolutionary elements are at work, in trying to destroy law and order; but so far we can say that, by and large, we live in great freedom and enjoy the common law freedoms of speech, action and worship. Thus these verses in Romans 13 do not carry the significance they might otherwise have if we lived in some other countries in the world *e.g.* in communistic or Roman Catholic dominated ones. This is because Rom. 13:1-2 refers to *citizenship*, and Paul is saying to church members that they must *be good citizens*. This, to my mind sums up the two verses. Disciples of Christ must *be good citizens* of whatever land or city they inhabit. In Britain it is relatively easy to be a follower of Christ and also a "law-abiding" citizen. In some countries it may not be so easy. Thus we tend to overlook the implications of Rom. 13 until circumstances arise which send us scurrying to the N.T. to ascertain our precise obligations. I am sure this happens during war, when the question of bearing arms in battle had to be decided in the conscience of each individual concerned. History shows that the problem has beset every generation, and in the past Christians have either granted the ruler too much latitude or refused to concede him what he was fully entitled to claim. Sometimes we too allow no satisfactory place in our thought for the function of the state. There has always been a strain on our thinking, which needs little provocation, to repudiate temporal rulers and claim that we owe sole allegiance to King Jesus. Indeed there is one worldwide religious sect which does not allow its members to "salute the flag", stand up for the national anthem, or recognise "earthly" government in any way. Some of the early Christians may have had doubts as to their exact responsibilities to the Roman authorities, or even as to whether they had any responsibilities at all to civil governments, and so prompted this teaching on the subject from the apostle Paul. He left them in no two minds on the matter. They were in the church but they were also in the world. They had a responsibility to Christ, but they also had one to their fellow men. They had joined the brotherhood of Christ, but had not ceased to be part of the brotherhood of men.

In verse 1 Paul says, "Let every soul be obedient unto the higher powers ruling authorities". There were to be no exceptions; every individual disciple of Christ was to obey the rightfully constituted government of the land. Not the church government, but the *civil authorities*. The following verses emphasise this fact, when Paul talks about paying taxes and so on. Paul does not specify *the form* or *character* of the ruling authority, whether it be *monarchic* (rule by a king); *oligarchal* (rule by a few); *republican* (rule by elected representatives); *democratic* (rule by the people); *communistic* (workers' dictatorship) or even a dictatorship itself. The type of government is not important and this perhaps answers that part of the question which asks if we, as followers of Christ, would have to submit to a communist power if it ever existed in this country. The answer is, "Yes", we ought to be good citizens in any country under any type of government.

### Reasons For Submission

Paul goes on in verses 1 and 2 to explain *why* we ought so to submit ourselves to earthly rulers. Because *God* wants it so. Human governments have God's authority and His complete sanction for their existence. Indeed they are ministers (or servants) of God (v. 4). God approves of law and order and the administering of justice in the world at large, and we must co-operate with the lawfully installed officers of government. Generally speaking and all things being equal, civil governments endeavour to protect their subjects and grant them the natural rights of the person, property and liberty. Good governments also seek to preserve freedom of worship for all the people. This is the kind of good civil government that Paul certainly had in mind, for he envisages one which would promote good and come down heavily on evil. He says if Christians are well behaved then they need not fear the civil authorities, indeed they would be commended by these civil authorities (v.3) for being good citizens. It is only if one does that which is evil that one need fear the civil authorities and then one must take what one gets from the full rigour of the law. Paul would have little sympathy for any such, it seems.

Therefore, says Paul, we must be obedient citizens *on two counts* (v.5)

(1) to avoid the wrath of the legal officer (for the judge bears not the sword in vain, v.4);

(2) for conscience' sake towards God, for God will also require it of us if we disregard the civil powers decreed by Himself.

Indeed Paul goes a little farther in verses 6 and 7, instructing that we not only *obey* but we must also *pay*. Obey the powers that be and also pay for their support and upkeep. We must pay our taxes and all dues and tributes. We must honour those to whom honour is due, and fear those to whom fear is due.

We may have misgivings about how some of our taxation is being used (perhaps to further a war) but our responsibility is to pay our taxes when called upon.

### Good and Evil Government

The early Christians perhaps wondered about their responsibilities to the Roman authorities. Roman law and order was admirable and even today our legal system is partly based upon that of the Roman Empire. But later in history the Christians suffered much persecution at Roman hands (they were burned alive and thrown to the lions). Paul however, spells out the responsibility of *all Christians in all ages to all governments*.

It should be noted that while God approves of civil order and government, and indeed gives it His authority, He only does so while it remains *good* government. We don't believe for a moment, for instance, that God approves of all kings, queens, dictators, presidents etc. Some have been despots, tyrants, and have brought much suffering, misery and death (Adolf Hitler is one example). God approves of civil order and justice and goodness, but He no more appoints governments to do evil, or sanctions wrong in them, than He sanctions sin in men. God tolerates many rulers, but does not necessarily approve of them. The best form of government for Israel was a theocracy: but the Israelites, to be like the nations around them, cried out for a king and God gave them a king. God did not, however, approve of their having a king. Our duty to evil rulers and governments diminishes in proportion to their evil intentions. We must still obey all *lawful* instructions, but we must refuse to comply with anything not in keeping with God's word. This must, in fact, be our attitude to any government, good or bad – that we humbly obey all lawful rules and instructions but refuse compliance with all instructions which conflict with the scriptures. The difficulty, of course, sometimes is deciding exactly when an instruction is violating God's word. Thus if we are punished (by the law) for breaking a good law we *suffer as an evildoer*, but if we are punished for non-compliance with an evil instruction we *suffer as a Christian* (1 Peter 4:15-16). Daniel disobeyed the ruling monarch of his

day when the instruction he received was incompatible with his responsibility to God. The civil authorities commanded Peter and John to stop preaching about Jesus but their answer was "whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye". They were prepared to hearken unto men, but *more* prepared to hear God. Thus our strict obedience to invested authority is qualified always by our doing only that which God approves.

Much more can be said on the matter but our space has virtually gone. We notice, for instance that Paul says *obey* the ruling authorities. Is it also a duty to *assist* the ruling authorities, by voting, jury service, prevention of crime, etc.? If civil government is God's appointment ought not Christians to *participate* with the ruling authorities *e.g.* as a police officer, judge, town councillor, member of parliament, etc.? One would imagine perhaps that followers of Christ would be great assets in public life. Many remain aloof from such activity because of political corruption and party strife; while some have entered the "corridors of power" to the detriment of their faith.

### Summing Up

Could I sum up then the verses referred to by our brother? All civil governments derive their origin and authority from God, and while doing right and good, have His sanction and approval. Therefore God requires us to obey them, and when we refuse or fail we resist not only the government but God Himself. Civil and law officers are ultimately for our good and we need not fear them, nor should we resist them. Consequently there are two reasons for obeying the properly constituted government, firstly that we may avoid being punished, and secondly that we might please God. Moreover for these same reasons we must pay our dues, taxes and customs. We must also respect and even honour those in authority. By this means says Paul, we shall be well pleasing to God and shall promote the earthly happiness of all.