

Romans 13 and *unlimited* submission to government

Exegesis and Application
By: Dan Fisher

“No government is to be submitted to, at the expense of that which is the sole end of all government – the common good and safety of society.”

Pastor Jonathan Mayhew, 1749

“A slavish submission to tyranny is a proof of a very sordid and base mind.” Pastor Samuel West, May 29, 1776

“Is there no case in which a people may resist government? Yes, there is one such case; and that is, when rulers usurp a power oppressive to the people, ...” Pastor Joseph Lathrop, Dec 14, 1787

“You are a Christian and it is your duty under God to submit to government; no matter what – and you are sinning if you don’t!” How often have you heard someone, especially in the church, make that declaration? Are they right? I do not believe so.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: submission to authority is unquestionably a central tenet of Christianity and is clearly taught in Scripture. A couple of passages that teach this immediately come to mind:

“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men, ²for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. ³For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,” (1 Tim. 2:2-3, NKJV)

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, ²to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men.”
(Titus 3:1-2, NKJV)

According to Scripture, *all* authority ultimately finds its source in God and in submitting to God, Christians must be known for their respect for and submission to *proper* authority. But, must Christians submit to every dictate of authority – especially that of their state/national government?

Like you, I suspect, I have grappled with this question for most of my life. I have found that balancing my responsibility to submit to governmental authority while

equally balancing my responsibility to defend the truth and the innocent who are often abused by those who wield power with no apparent concern for life and/or personal rights is no easy task. Because I am a Christian, must I submit to governmental authority when it mandates evils such as human slavery or the murder of the unborn by means of abortion? Would it be a sin to stand against such evils? Many in the church believe so and use the Bible (mainly Romans 13) to bolster their position.

Sadly, the majority of preachers/pastors and politicians have been ignorantly or intentionally shackling the people for years with what I believe to be a flawed interpretation of Rom 13 – especially as it applies to the form of government we have in these United States. Consequently, people have generally come to believe that they would be sinning if they ever defied the government, no matter how evil it may have become. They mistakenly believe that they, especially if they are Christians, owe *slavish, unlimited* submission to all authorities. Is this actually what Paul was teaching in Rom 13?

Oddly enough, the Bible actually provides numerous examples of committed believers not only defying governmental authority but also receiving the approval of God in the process. Consider these examples:

- The Hebrew midwives defying the command of Pharaoh by saving the Jewish baby boys – including Moses's parents saving him (Ex 1:15-21, 2:1-10)
- Moses refusing Pharaoh and siding with the Jews (Heb 11:27)
- Queen Esther approaching the king uninvited in order to save the Jewish people from annihilation (Est 4:10-16)
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refusing to bow to the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:1-23)
- Daniel defying the king by refusing to stop praying to the God of Israel (Daniel 6:1-13)
- Jesus refusing to abide by the Jewish Sabbath laws (Matt 12:1-14, Jn 18:31)
- The apostles and early Christians refusing to stop preaching the Gospel (Acts 5:27-29, 12:1-4, 16:19-24)
- Believers throughout the ages defying ungodly authorities (Heb 11:35-38)

Even more perplexing, I have heard many of the same preachers and politicians who believe that Rom 13 requires *unlimited* submission, applaud the above-mentioned biblical heroes for their courage to defy the evil authorities of their day. But how do they justify this apparent contradiction in their thinking? Obviously, they cannot have it both ways – either the Bible requires *unlimited* submission to governmental authority, thus making the likes of Daniel and the apostles sinful rebels, or there must be something wrong with the generally accepted *unlimited submission* understanding of passages like Rom 13.

So, were men like Daniel sinning when they defied the evil authorities of their day? Certainly the Bible does not condemn them. Was Jesus sinning when He defied Jewish laws, laws that were just as authoritative as those of the Romans?

Of course not – at least not if He was the *sinless* Son of God. To even suggest that Jesus sinned is itself heresy. (Passages such as 2 Cor 5:21, Heb 4:15, 9:14, and 1 Pet 1:19, among others, clearly teach that Jesus was sinless.) There must be some reasonable way to make sense out of what *appears to be* a glaring contradiction in God’s Word.

The solution must begin with our admission that the ways of God are beyond our limited ability to completely understand. The book of Isaiah actually says this:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is 55:8-9, NKJV)

God sometimes works in ways that baffle the wisest among us. Although He never contradicts Himself or acts against His own holy nature, He does, at times, use evil men and disasters to further His eternal plan – though He may not have elevated those men to their lofty positions or have caused those disasters to occur. The honest fact is God sometimes allows evil men and governments to rule and good people to sometimes suffer in the process. In the midst of this, God promises to care for those who love and serve Him – regardless of whether we understand it. The ways of God are often mystical to us at best.

A simple exegesis of Romans 13:1-5 and how it applies to those living in a representative republic

Since Rom 13:1-5 seems to be the *passage of choice* for those who teach *unlimited* submission to government and thus, creates the greatest amount of consternation and confusion for Christians, it is helpful to take a closer look at these verses and see how those living in a representative republic like ours should understand them. When we do this, everything begins to make sense.

Thankfully, there is a systematic way to understand God’s often “mysterious ways and words.” By carefully following the science of biblical interpretation known as Hermeneutics we can solve dilemmas we often encounter in Scripture. In addition to observing things like textual/historical context and grammatical constructs, one of the critical rules of Hermeneutics that helps us immensely is the “Analogy of Faith” principle. Simply stated, this principle declares that since all Scriptures are harmoniously united with no essential contradictions, every interpretation of a passage must be compatible with what the other passages in the Bible teach. If our interpretation does not harmonize with the totality of Scripture, we have gotten something wrong. So, when attempting to properly understand what Rom 13 is teaching about submission to government, we must consider other passages that deal with that subject as well.

Honestly, this is the area of greatest concerns for Christians in Oklahoma, and everywhere else for that matter. Since most have had little training in the “art” of proper Bible study, they find themselves resorting to taking a passage of Scripture and arbitrarily deciding what it says – often taking it out of context and reading into it an incorrect meaning. Unfortunately, Romans 13 is a classic example. Since we do not want to make this mistake, we must adhere to the rules of hermeneutics if we are to properly understand Rom 13.

The best way to begin our examination of Rom 13 is by carefully considering the context of the entire book. Only by understanding the reason Paul wrote Romans and by recognizing to whom he was specifically addressing it, can we hope to develop a correct interpretation of the whole book and chapter thirteen specifically. When we follow this process, we discover that Rom 13 unequivocally does not teach that Christians owe *slavish, unlimited* submission to government.

In considering the context of Romans, we will examine three components: time and place or authorship, the reason for its writing, and its theological implications.

- **Time and Place:** Paul writes the letter to the Church in Rome in 56-57 A.D. while he is in Corinth during his third missionary journey. At this time, Paul had not yet visited Rome and would not until he delivered the love offering he had collected to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Assuming the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occurred in 33 A.D., then the church in Rome, if it had been started shortly thereafter, would have been only some 23 years old when Paul wrote them the letter we know today as the book of Romans. We know that the Roman church dates back at least to 49 A.D. because the Roman historian Suetonius wrote that same year, “As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Christ, he expelled them from Rome.” Paul’s letter would have been a wealth of new knowledge to the Roman believers since at this time the books that make up the New Testament were just beginning to be written. Up until this time, the fledgling church in Rome had been completely dependent on the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment of the Old Testament, information from travelers from Jerusalem, and those with particularly unique spiritual wisdom like the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla. So Romans was truly a breath of fresh air to these early Christians.
- **Reason for writing:** In Rom 1:11,15, Paul says that his reason for writing the letter was threefold: to encourage the Roman believers, establish their faith, and to impart to them some spiritual gift. As he wrote the thirteenth chapter, Paul must have been aware of some developing problem within the small church in Rome (chapters 12-15). It is plausible that Priscilla and Aquila, who had been deported from Italy by Emperor Claudius sometime between 49 and 52 A.D., may have informed Paul of the

troubles in the church once they met up with him in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3). Having learned of the “troublesome” Jews in Rome who were the cause of the Claudius’s mass deportation of Christians and Jews, it is reasonable to conclude that Paul felt compelled to instruct the believers in Rome as to how they should co-exist with Roman rule.

In 54 A.D., Nero had ascended to power after Claudius had experienced an untimely death from eating poisonous mushrooms and Paul would have most likely been aware of this development. It is helpful to note that at the time Paul wrote Romans in 56 A.D., Nero’s close adviser Seneca was still alive and had not retired, so Nero had not yet turned into the tyrant he would eventually become around 64 A.D. when Rome was decimated by a fire that he blamed on the Christians. Even so, it was under Nero’s totalitarian reign that Paul instructed the Roman believers to submit for “conscience’s sake.” Rome, and the Christians living there, obviously held a very special place in Paul’s heart and mind.

- **Theological Implications:** Romans, as a whole, is a letter of instruction on doctrine and is central to the Christian faith. In chapter 13:1-5, Paul tells the young Christians, who may have been closely tied to the Jewish community in Rome, to submit to the Emperor’s rule. Remember, things were not too difficult for the Christians during the early years of Nero’s rule, so we have to wonder what these believers were doing that necessitated Paul’s admonition to submit to their earthly rulers. Interestingly, although there are numerous unproven theories, the Scriptures are silent about the controversy. But one thing is certain – Paul believed Christians should be known for their *general* respect for authority.

So, with this analysis as a backdrop, the church in Rome is instructed by Paul to obey their Roman governmental authorities.

Romans 13:1-2

In verses 1-2, Paul begins by saying:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” (Rom 13:1-2, NKJV)

Carrying this 1st century admonition to the 21st century, there is no getting around it – if Paul wrote this passage by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then Rom 13:1-5 clearly teach that God is sovereign over governments and that Christians must submit to their governmental authorities. Frankly, Paul is not the only apostle

who makes this argument; the Apostle Peter took the same position when he wrote:

“Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men –” (1 Pet 2:13-15, NKJV)

The unavoidable question is how do we reconcile what Paul and Peter teach with the examples we have already seen where believers “righteously” defied governmental authority? Ironically, by refusing to remain silent about their own faith, even Paul and Peter were themselves often at odds with the authorities of their day. In fact, their defiance was so strident; it eventually led to the martyrdom of both. Therefore, it would seem extremely hypocritical for these two apostles to demand *unlimited* submission to government when they, themselves, lived and ministered a good deal of the time in open defiance of it. And since we know that Paul and Peter were no hypocrites, how do we solve this dilemma?

The answer is actually simpler than it may seem. If we compare passages like Rom 13:1 and 1 Pet 2:13-15 to other passages where believers honored God by defying authority, it becomes clear that, while the Bible teaches a principle of *general* submission to all in positions of authority, it also teaches that when those authorities violate God’s higher laws, believers have no choice but to resist. This, I believe, is what happened in the cases of the Hebrew midwives, Esther, Daniel, etc. If these believers had submitted to the authorities of their day, they would have been disobeying God’s higher laws such as protecting innocent human life, not worshipping false gods, and being faithful to preach the Gospel. And this is the critical point to understand – there is a higher law to which believers must submit than earthly authority. This is the key to properly understanding Rom 13:1-2.

When we then consider how Rom 13:1-2 apply to those of us living in a representative republic, there are a number of things we must understand. First, we must remember that in 1776-1783, God, in His sovereign providence, allowed a representative republic to be formed in the American colonies. According to the *Declaration of Independence*, our foundational document, government derives its just powers from the “consent of the governed.” Therefore, in our representative form of government, the PEOPLE are the governing authorities and it is to the “consent of the governed” that Christians must submit – not to the governing bodies per se, unless those bodies are acting in accordance with God’s principles and are executing the will of the people.

In these United States, we, therefore, have the luxury of insisting that God’s higher law be determinative for the Christian. Thus, in our constitutional republic, when a branch of the federal government, such as the U.S. Supreme Court, issues an unconstitutional ruling that makes the murder of the unborn “legal,” the

Christian is duty bound to defy that ruling – mainly because God’s higher law commands, “Thou shall not murder.”

Of course, the question naturally arises, “How do we have the authority, and the responsibility, to defy the Supreme Court and other laws that are not consistent with God’s higher law and our founding principles?” The answer is found in a deeper understanding of our unique system of government here in the states.

Our system of government is based on an organizing principle known as *federalism*. James Madison, known as the “chief architect of the Constitution,” writing in *Federalist #45*, provides us a succinct and salient definition of federalism, as the Framers understood it in 1776-1788:

“The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected. The powers reserved to the several States will extend to all the objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people, and the internal order, improvement, and prosperity of the state.”

Generally, the states intended for the new federal government they were creating to have very limited powers – called the “enumerated powers,” found in Sec. I, Art. 8 of the U.S. Constitution. The Framers believed that the government closest to the people should be the strongest. Therefore, the states, where the people actually live, work, raise families, etc., retained the greatest amount of power and delegated (not surrendered) to the federal government “few and defined” powers. This would ensure that if the federal government ever abused its power by overreaching and became tyrannical or totalitarian, the people in the states would be able to interpose and stop it. Although this may be a revolutionary thought in the 21st century, it is completely consistent with the principles of our founding. James Madison actually wrote this in the *Virginia Resolution* in 1798:

“... in case of a deliberate, palpable, and dangerous exercise of other powers, not granted by the said compact, the states who are parties thereto, have the right, and are in duty bound, to interpose for arresting the progress of the evil,
...”

In *Federalist Paper #33*, Framer Alexander Hamilton added:

“If the federal government should overpass the just bounds of its authority and make a tyrannical use of its powers, the people, whose creature it is, must appeal to the standard they have formed, and take such measures to redress the injury done to the Constitution as the exigency may suggest and prudence justify.”

We must recognize that America was not a “monolithic nation” at its founding – it was thirteen distinct and sovereign colonies uniting together to resist an overreaching central government in England. The critical thing to understand is that in doing so, the colonies had no intention of surrendering the entirety of their sovereignty to the alliance – and the same goes for the states when they formed the Union and the federal government later after the War of Independence was won. (See *Federalist Papers 33 & 45*, the *Virginia Resolution* & the *Kentucky Resolution*)

When the *Declaration of Independence* was written and signed by the 2nd Continental Congress, these thirteen colonies became thirteen separate and sovereign states with these words:

“That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved;”

Nothing has changed since those words were penned. The “Free and Independent States” have never surrendered their original sovereignty to the federal government in Washington D.C. It naturally follows then, that since the states *delegated* the federal government’s powers to it, they could, in cases of serious federal abuse of power, take those delegated powers away.

Consequently, Oklahoma (and every other state for that matter) is not subservient to Washington D.C. If Washington oversteps its enumerated powers, “the free and independent” people of Oklahoma have no obligation to obey. This *revolutionary* thought was actually articulated by Thomas Jefferson:

“... that whensoever the general government assumes undelegated powers, its acts are unauthoritative, void, and of no force ...”¹

Sadly, we have allowed the federal government to “assume” so many “undelegated powers,” specifically through the federal courts, that we must honestly ask, “How could anyone say today that Washington D.C.’s powers are “few and defined” as Madison and the other Framers intended?” I believe our federal government has so utterly violated the *Madisonian* definition of federalism that it has truly lost its legitimacy to govern. Only by restoring a proper and dignified relationship between the state and federal governments can we step away from the *tyranny of the courts* and actually honor the original intent of our founding principles and the blood shed in securing our independence and freedom.

So, when Rom 13:2 warns that resisting governmental authority is tantamount to resisting God and that those who do so will be judged, then when government

¹ Jefferson, Thomas, *Kentucky Resolution*, 1798.

acts within its proper, godly role, and the people refuse to submit, they *are truly* sinning and *will* face the appropriate judgment from the government and God. But, in a representative republic where the people, under God, are the ultimate “authority,” when their state/federal government or the U.S. Supreme Court issue unrighteous, unreasonable laws/decrees that resist the authority of the People and violate the righteous principles of God, then it is the government that is “resisting the ordinance of God” – not the people. In this instance, the governmental authorities are the ones “bringing judgment/condemnation upon themselves.”

Applying Rom 13:1-2 is only possible, of course, in a *moral* and *religious* culture – an immoral and irreligious culture naturally has no regard for God’s principles. Our Framers, believing that only a moral and religious (the Framers would have been referring primarily to Christianity) people is capable of self-governance, openly articulated this principle. For example, Pres. George Washington wrote in his 1796 farewell address:

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. ... where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the Oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. ... reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”²

Pres. John Adams agreed by writing in Oct. 11, 1798:

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. ... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”³

But someone may ask, “What happens when the people are *immoral* and *irreligious*? Framers Benjamin Franklin answered that question in 1787:

“Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.”⁴

² Washington, George, “Farwell Address, Sept. 19, 1796,” University of Virginia, The Washington Papers, http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents_gw/farewell/transcript.html

³ John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, by his Grandson Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856), Vol. 9. Chapter: To the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts.

⁴ Franklin, Benjamin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 9, (Macmillan, 1906), p. 569, Letter: To Messrs. The Abbes Chalut and Arnaud, Philadelphia, April 1787

According to Franklin then, those societies that abandon morality taught by religion will, generally, lose their freedom and be ruled by ever-increasingly powerful government.

Essentially, I believe it is really no more complicated than that. In our representative republic, if the People of some states understand abortion to be wrong, they have the authority to stop it; and the state government, federal government, or the U.S. Supreme Court does not have the authority to force the evil upon them. If the government will not cooperate, then according to the *Declaration*, the People have the authority to “alter” their government to reflect their will. This is not sinful disobedience to Scripture, rebellion, or anarchy – it is living in accordance with our founding documents and our finest American traditions.

Romans 13:3-5

Additionally, it is important to realize that Rom 13:3-4 makes a clear distinction between *godly* and an *ungodly/tyrannical* government:

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.” (Rom 13:3-5, NKJV)

Clearly, Paul believed *proper* government, one worthy of a Christian’s submission, is the kind of government that *rewards* the doers of good and *punishes* the doers of evil. Only this kind of government could legitimately be called “God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” Who would be so ridiculous as to claim that a government that punishes the *doers of good* and rewards the *doers of evil* is a minister of God? This, indeed, would stretch credulity beyond the breaking point.

It is also helpful to note that Paul teaches the principle of submission in passages other than Rom 13. For example, in Eph 5:22 Paul teaches that wives are to submit to the authority of their husbands, in Eph 6:1 Paul teaches that children should submit to the authority of their parents, and in 1 Tim 3:5, 5:17 Paul teaches that the congregation must submit to its pastor(s). But, I know of very few who believe this means that wives, children, and church congregations must submit *without limits* – no matter what is required of them. Therefore, I believe, to be consistent, we must interpret Paul’s use of submission in Rom 13 to be *limited* rather than unlimited in nature.

Additionally, Paul realized that cooperation is not always an option. In Rom 12:18 he writes, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” The “if it is possible” phrase clearly implies that *unlimited* cooperation or submission is not always the proper response – especially in the case of ungodly authority that is committing unconscionable acts of evil such as Pharaoh’s order to murder all the Jewish baby boys or the Nazis’ slaughter of the Jews in 1930s-40s Germany.

So in summation, a balanced, reasonable interpretation of Rom 13 teaches that citizens, especially Christians, should submit to their government. But when doing so brings them into conflict with God’s higher laws, believers not only have the *right*, they have the *responsibility* to defy that authority and attempt to stop the evil – especially if they live in a *representative republic* like ours where all political power ultimately rests in “the people.” Of course, when they do so, they must anticipate the possible negative consequences that may come because there is an inherent risk involved when the people of God resist ungodly and evil totalitarian governments – like the Roman government under Nero. With all of the biblical heroes listed earlier, each was subject to the consequences of their overt or clandestine acts of defiance. Thus, each Christian, when choosing to defy a totalitarian regime must be willing to accept the consequences. Thankfully, by the grace of God, we who live in these United States do not live under a totalitarian regime – at least not yet.

Other heroes who defied their government

Interestingly, history outside of the Bible also provides numerous examples of good people, whose courage we celebrate today, who refused to submit to evil laws and boldly disobeyed them – fully prepared for whatever consequences came. Our Framers clearly fall into this category. Abolitionists living in 19th century America, who saw slavery as unconscionable and defied the law by using options like the Underground Railroad to assist runaway slaves, are such heroes. The citizens of Wisconsin are heralded by many for their refusal to submit to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and for offering sanctuary to any runaway slave who could make it to their state. We rightly honor people like Corrie Ten Boom and her family, Oskar Shindler, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer for defying the law to save Jews and other political dissidents from the evil clutches of the Nazis. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers are considered heroes for defying the Jim Crow laws to establish justice for all people. Are we now prepared to declare these (and many others who acted accordingly throughout history) sinners, rebels, and anarchists for their defiance to evil decrees?

Are those who claim that we must obey government (specifically the U.S. Supreme Court) in all instances, prepared to say that believers should have obeyed *Dred Scott v. Sanford* where the Supreme Court said that Black people were property instead of people and could be owned and sold like chattel? Do

they believe that Christians must obey *Buck v. Bell* where the Supreme Court said that it is constitutional to force sterilization on American citizens? Would they insist that Christians support *Korematsu v. U.S.* where the Supreme Court said that it was constitutional for the government to round up citizens of Japanese descent and force them into interment camps, causing many to lose homes, businesses, and sometimes families – even though they had done nothing wrong?

Must those who believe the Bible is God's Word bow in *unlimited* submission to court rulings like those while offering zero assistance to the oppressed? Is there no recourse for the people when their government becomes evil? Is waiting *patiently and prayerfully* until a wayward government sees the error of its ways the only biblical option? These are critical questions and the way we answer them will have far reaching ramifications on how we will live in Oklahoma and whether or not we will remain a free people. (**Remember:** in a representative republic like ours, the people, not the government, hold all of the political power.)

What our Framers actually believed

Thankfully, the Framers of our republic understood that the people, not government, are the *sovereigns*. They believed that people, not governments, are “endowed by their Creator” with unalienable rights – including the right to create and correct their own governments. They did not view defiance to tyrannical government as sinful rebellion. In fact, the *Declaration of Independence*, our national birth certificate, opens with a statement of respectful defiance:

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them,”

Obviously, the Framers did not believe in *unlimited* submission to the English Crown. Indeed, they had attempted to work out their differences with the King and Parliament, but once the British proved unwilling, the Framers boldly declared their independence. Were they wrong to do so? We should be thankful they did not believe they were.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in the *Declaration*, “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” thus clarifying that the seat of governmental authority is “the people.” Therefore, proper government answers to the people – not the other way around. Jefferson then went on to list the options available to the people if their government ever ceases to fulfill its proper role:

“That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

According to our Framers, if a government ever becomes *improper*, it is the “right” and “duty” (stated later in the Declaration) of the people to “alter,” “abolish,” or “throw it off” (stated later). So much for unlimited submission. In 1928, Alice Baldwin, PhD. and Duke University historian, explained the prevailing philosophy of government in America’s founding era:

“Probably the most fundamental principle of the American constitutional system is the principle that no one is bound to obey an unconstitutional act. ... No single idea was more fully stressed, no principle more often repeated, through the first sixty years of the eighteenth century, than that governments must obey law and that he who resisted one in authority who was violating that law was not himself a rebel but a protector of law.”⁵

She is absolutely correct and many examples could be provided to prove it. For example, after the Colonies declared their independence, the task of designing a seal for the new government was assigned to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. They presented their proposed design to the Continental Congress on August 20, 1776. Although not adopted, the design depicted a circle with a drawing of the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea with Moses and the Israelites looking on in its center and the phrase “Rebellion To Tyrants Is Obedience To God” around the circle’s perimeter. Clearly, those three Framers did not believe in *unlimited* submission.

Resistance to tyranny has always been in the finest traditions of our culture. Ironically, it was not until preachers and politicians started preaching their *unlimited submission to government* message that Americans embraced a slavish posture toward their government. I am convinced that our Framers would be rolling over in their graves if they could see us now!

Critical to our understanding of why our ancestors saw things they way they did is the considerable influence of the preachers of their day. That’s right – there was a time in America when preachers/pastors did not preach *slavish, unlimited* submission to government. Instead, they stood in their pulpits railing against British tyranny and urging their congregations to stand for liberty, freedom, and independence. Consequently, the British hated them, calling them the “Black Robed Regiment,” and treated them as dangerous enemies to the Empire.

These “patriot preachers” were confident that if the British government was intent on trampling the God-given, unalienable rights of the people, it had forfeited its

⁵ Baldwin, Alice M. *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*. (New York: F. Ungar Pub., 1958, chapter 12, p. 169.

legitimate claim as a “punisher of evil,” and had, itself, *become* that evil. Convinced that the illegitimate actions of the King and Parliament were forcing them into conflict, they believed that the Church had a responsibility to do something about it. And since God had not forbidden the Colonists from defending themselves, numerous pastors and spiritual leaders of high moral character/reputation encouraged a stand. It seemed abundantly clear to them that standing *for* what is right sometimes requires standing *against* what is wrong. Their conclusion: if the sword could be justly used to punish an evil individual, it could also be justly used to punish an evil ruler/government as well – be he king or Parliament.

The following sermon excerpts from leading American preachers of the 18th century illustrate how a good number of the preachers understood the subject of submission to governmental authority in their day:

Joseph Lathrop’s sermon, “A Sermon On A Day Appointed For Publick Thanksgiving,” preached in Springfield, Massachusetts, Dec 14, 1787:

“Perhaps it will be asked, ‘Is there no case in which a people may resist government?’ Yes, there is one such case; and that is, when rulers usurp a power oppressive to the people, and continue to support it by military force in contempt of every respectful remonstrance. In this case the body of the people have a natural right to unite their strength for the restoration of their own constitutional government.”⁶

Elizur Goodrich’s sermon, “The Principles of Civil Union and Happiness Considered and Recommended,” preached in Hartford, Connecticut in 1787:

“When a constitutional government is converted into tyranny, and the laws, rights and properties of a free people are openly invaded, there ought not to be the least doubt but that a remedy is provided in the laws of God and reason, for their preservation; nor ought resistance in such case to be called rebellion.”⁷

Jonathan Mayhew’s 1749-50 multi-discourse sermon, “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission And Non-Resistance To The Higher Powers”:

“No government is to be submitted to, at the expense of that which is the sole end of all government – the common good and safety of society. ... The only reason of the institution of civil government and the only rational ground of submission to it is the common safety and utility. If therefore, in any case, the

⁶ Lathrop, Joseph, “A Sermon On A Day Appointed For Publick Thanksgiving,” Sandoz, Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805, 2 vols, Foreword by Ellis Sandoz (2nd ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998). Vol. 1. Chapter: 29.

⁷ Goodrich, Elizur, “The Principles of Civil Union and Happiness Considered and Recommended,” preached in Hartford, CN, 1787, Sandoz, Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805, 2 vols, Foreword by Ellis Sandoz (2nd ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998). Vol. 1. Chapter: 31.

common safety and utility would not be promoted by submission to government, but the contrary, there is no ground or motive for obedience and submission, but for the contrary. ... [But] the duty of unlimited obedience, whether active or passive, can be argued neither from the manner of expression here used, nor from the general scope and design of the passage [Romans 13:1-7].

If rulers are a terror to good works, and not to the evil; if they are not ministers for good to society, but for evil and distress, by violence and oppression; if they execute wrath upon sober, peaceable persons, who do their duty as members of society; ... it is plain that the apostle's argument for submission does not reach them; they are not the same, but different persons from those whom he characterizes; and who must be obeyed according to his reasoning. ...

Rulers have no authority from god to do mischief. If those who bear the title of civil rulers, do not perform the duty of civil rulers, but act directly counter to the sole end and design of their office; if they injure and oppress their subjects instead of defending their rights and doing them good; they have not the least pretense to be honored, obeyed and rewarded, according to the apostle's argument. ... It is blasphemy to call tyrants and oppressors, God's ministers. They are more properly the messengers of Satan to buffet us. ... The argument here used [Rom 13] no more proves it to be a sin to resist such rulers, than it does, to resist the devil, that he may flee from us. ... No rulers are properly God's ministers, but such as are just, ruling in the fear of God. ... [N]o civil rulers are to be obeyed when they enjoin things that are inconsistent with the commands of God: All such disobedience is lawful and glorious; ... All commands running counter to the declared will of the supreme legislator of heaven and earth, are null and void: And therefore disobedience to them is a duty, not a crime. ...

The king is as much bound by his oath, not to infringe the legal rights of the people, as the people are bound to yield subjection to him. From whence it follows, that as soon as the prince sets himself up above law, he loses the king in the tyrant: he does to all intents and purposes, unking himself, by acting out of, and beyond, that sphere which the constitution allows him to move in. And in such cases, he has no more right to be obeyed, than any inferior officer who acts beyond his commission. The subject's obligation to allegiance then ceases of course: and to resist him, is no more rebellion, than to resist any foreign invader. ...

When once magistrates act contrary to their office, and the end of their institution; when they rob and ruin the public, instead of being guardians of its peace and welfare; they immediately cease to be the ordinance and ministers of God; and no more deserve that glorious character than common pirates and highwaymen.

Not to discontinue our allegiance, in this case, would be to join with the sovereign in promoting the slavery and misery of that society, the welfare of which, we ourselves, as well as our sovereign, are indispensably obliged to secure and promote, as far as in us lies."⁸

⁸ Mayhew, Jonathan, 1749-50 multi-discourse sermon, "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission And Non-Resistance To The Higher Powers", Thornton, John Wingate (1860). *The pulpit of the American revolution: Or, The political sermons of the period of 1776 With a historical introduction, notes, and illustrations* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln), pp. 39-104.

Samuel West's election sermon, "Discourse VI," preached to the Massachusetts Legislature in Boston, MA, May 29, 1776:

"A slavish submission to tyranny is a proof of a very sordid and base mind. ... all good magistrates, while they faithfully discharge the trust reposed in them, ought to be religiously and conscientiously obeyed. ... The reason why the magistrate is called the minister of God is because he is to protect, encourage, and honor them that do well, and to punish them that do evil; therefore it is our duty to submit to them, not merely for fear of being punished by them, but out of regard to the divine authority, under which they are deputed to execute judgment and to do justice. ... if magistrates have no authority but what they derive from the people; ... if the whole end and design of their institution is to promote the general good, and to secure to men their just rights, it will follow, that when they act contrary to the end and design of their creation they cease being magistrates, and the people which gave them their authority have the right to take it from them again. ... when a people find themselves cruelly oppressed by the parent state, they have an undoubted right to throw off the yoke, and to assert their liberty, ... for, in this case, by the law of self-preservation, which is the first law of nature, they have not only an undoubted right, but it is their indispensable duty, if they cannot be redressed any other way, to renounce all submission to the government that has oppressed them, and set up an independent state of their own, ... No man, therefore, can be a good member of the community that is not as zealous to oppose tyranny as he is ready to obey magistracy. ...

Further: if magistrates are no farther ministers of God than they promote the good of the community, then obedience to them neither is nor can be unlimited; for it would imply a gross absurdity to assert that, when magistrates are ordained by the people solely for the purpose of being beneficial to the state, they must be obeyed when they are seeking to ruin and destroy it. This would imply that men were bound to act against the great law of self-preservation, and to contribute their assistance to their own ruin and destruction, in order that they may please and gratify the greatest monsters in nature, who are violating the laws of God and destroying the rights of mankind. Unlimited submission and obedience is due to none but God alone. ... Whenever, then, the ruler encourages them that do evil, and is a terror to those that do well, i.e., as soon as he becomes a tyrant, he forfeits his authority to govern, and becomes the minister of Satan, and, as such, ought to be opposed. ... Reason and revelation, we see, do both teach us that our obedience to rulers is not unlimited, but that resistance is not only allowable, but an indispensable duty in the case of intolerable tyranny and oppression."⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, both a proper exegesis of Scripture and a careful study of history show that *unlimited* submission to government is completely unreasonable and is

⁹ West, Samuel, election sermon, "Discourse VI," preached to the Massachusetts Legislature in Boston, MA, on May 29, 1776, Thornton, John Wingate (1860). *The pulpit of the American revolution: Or, The political sermons of the period of 1776 With a historical introduction, notes, and illustrations* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln), pp 259-322.

not required of Christians – or any one else for that matter. To argue otherwise, as I mentioned earlier, stretches the bounds of credulity.

Consider: had we been alive in the 19th century, would we have done nothing while our neighbors were trapped in slavery? Had we been living in Germany in the 1930s-40s, would we have submitted to the Nazis and allowed millions of our neighbors to be wrongfully imprisoned and slaughtered without lifting a finger in defiance?

If the answers to those and similar questions is a resounding “No,” then how can we argue today that we must submit to ungodly, unjust laws and decisions of the Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court? Are we required by Scripture to submit to *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision that has allowed millions of innocent unborn babies to be murdered? How can anyone argue that we should submit or “bide our time” until that *magical justice* is appointed to the Court who will reverse the killing – all while millions continue to be murdered in the meantime? Given the evil of this single Court decision, how can anyone argue that it would be *sinful, illegal or anarchistic* to defy it? I am convinced it would be the highest act of wickedness not to do so!

To borrow a few words from the Christian patriot, Patrick Henry, “I know not what course others may take, but as for me,” I refuse to bow in blind servitude to the state or federal government. I believe it is time for Christians in America (where governmental authority resides with *the people*) to decide if we will be governed by the “consent of the governed” or the “consent of the courts.”