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Presenting *every man* perfect in Christ Jesus. Colossians 1:28

Volume XVI
Issue 376

Authority, Submission and Obedience

by – Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

THE MEANING OF AUTHORITY

Noah Webster defines authority as “power, or right to command or act.” It should be evident to the believer that it is God Himself Who is *the* Authority of the universe. In fact, it is His authority that is the only *natural* and *absolute* authority. All other authority in the universe is *delegated* and *derived* from Him.

When God delegates authority it is a very serious matter for the ones with whom it is vested, and to the ones in submission towards it. All who have delegated authority from God are servants of God, whether that authority is in the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:3; Colossians 3:18-22), government (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; I Peter 2:13-14), or employment (Ephesians 6:5-7; I Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9-10). Those with delegated authority from God are accountable to Him for that authority.

THE PROPER RESPONSE TO AUTHORITY

The primary response toward authority is submission. It is authority's counterpart. Improper attitudes toward authority are an affront to the source of all authority – God Himself.

Submission has become a repulsive term in our day. In the minds of many it often has the connotation of inferiority. However, submission primarily describes the way a relationship is ordered, structured and conducted. Submission does not mean that one is less important or inferior. It is very important that we have a clear understanding that submission is not an issue of “superiority,” but simply one of “function.”



WHAT SUBMISSION IS

The Greek word for submit is *hupotasso* (hupo = under; and tasso = set in order). Submission is the act of yielding to the authority of another. It is the opposite of resistance. As in the case of the traffic sign, yielding is the act of “giving way,” or “allowing another the right-of-way.”

TRUE SUBMISSION AS MANIFESTED IN CHRIST

[Jesus Christ] *went down with them* [Joseph and Mary], *and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them* (Luke 2:51).

The nature of submission can be seen clearly here in this verse. Christ Himself was under submission. Does this mean that He was inferior to Joseph and Mary? No! Were they better than He? Absolutely not! Let us state it once more: *delegated authority, and submission to it, have nothing to do with inferiority and superiority, but function!*

Submission is the God-ordained way whereby individuals may relate to each other and properly channel, in an orderly fashion, all of their actions, abilities, ideas, wisdom, talents, education, etc.

More than anything else, submission is an attitude of the heart towards authority. As we have seen from the last passage, even Christ, while on earth, submitted to divinely appointed authority.

(see *AUTHORITY*, page 3371) ↗

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- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7);
- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25);
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the church, the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Romans 11:13);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear (Mark 7:7, 13);
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:
 - total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
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AUTHORITY (continued from front page)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABSOLUTE SUBMISSION AND RELATIVE OBEDIENCE

Submission and obedience must not be confused.¹ Submission primarily has to do with attitude. Obedience, on the other hand, has to do chiefly with compliance to authority (*i.e.*, actions).

As Watchman Nee points out,

When delegated authority (men who represent God's authority) and direct authority (God Himself) are in conflict, one can render submission but not obedience to the delegated authority.²

CONFLICTING AUTHORITY

If someone advocates absolute obedience to all human authorities, when such authorities are in conflict with divine authority, can there be clearly shown from the pages of Scripture a principle to resolve such a conflict?

Those who are acquainted with the Scriptures know that the word "god"³ is a broad-based word – it is the title of a magistrate. When we use it with an upper case "G" we refer to the Supreme Magistrate – "God." When it is used with a lower case "g" it is a reference to an inferior magistrate – one beneath "God." For this reason, God gave the commandment to Israel,

You shall have no other gods before Me (Exodus 20:3).

The issue is not that Israel couldn't have any other "gods" they honored, revered or obeyed. The issue was that there could be none *before* Him. We see this stressed in the *Concordant Literal Old Testament* as,

1. "Submission ... should not be confused with obedience." Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Volume 3, p. 424
2. Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Authority*, p. 107.
3. **Hebrew:** 'ēlôhîym (Stong's #430 – gods in the ordinary sense; but specifically used of the supreme God; occasionally applied by way of deference to magistrates; and sometimes as a superlative).
Greek: theos (Strong's #2316 – a deity, especially [but not exclusively] the supreme Divinity; figuratively, a magistrate).

There shall not come to be other elohim for you in preference to Me.

He and He alone was to be Israel's "God" with a capital "G."

He of course delegated authority among those who would have the assignment of being lower magistrates:

You are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High (Psalm 82:6).

THE DIVINE CHAIN-OF-COMMAND

We learn a simple principle in all of this. Though there are other magistrates (those exercising authority, *i.e.*, "gods") on the earth, none of them are to occupy a place before Him, the Supreme Magistrate – "God." Therefore, when there is a direct conflict (ordained by God, of course!) between a lower magistrate and the Highest Magistrate, we will defer to the Highest and obey Him, even if it means disobeying the lower one. They may be a "god," but they are not *the* "God." God alone is to occupy our highest allegiance, worship and obedience. All other "gods" are subordinate to Him. Therefore, if God's revealed will for the believer runs contrary to the will of earthly authorities, it is because Father desires a testimony of faith to be given by His chosen ones, and a demonstration of man's folly to be made in contrast with His wisdom and supremacy.

SUBMISSION IS ABSOLUTE, OBEDIENCE IS RELATIVE

Though submission to earthly authorities is clearly taught in Scriptures, some advocate that they also demand absolute obedience as well. Such is not the case. The main passages usually used to defend such a position are Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; and I Peter 2:13-14. In all three passages the issue is "submission," not "obedience."

Let every soul be subject (Romans 13:1).
Be subject (Romans 13:5).
Be subject (Titus 3:1).
Be subject (I Peter 2:13).



In each case above, the word “subject” is the Greek word *hupotasso*. As noted earlier, it is a compound word: *hupo*, meaning “under;” and *tasso*, meaning “set in order” – thus, “to set in order under.”

Here are a few resources regarding *hupotasso*:

Under-set (*Concordant Keyword Concordance*).

To subordinate (James Strong #5293).

To arrange under (Joseph Thayer).

Primarily a military term, to rank under (W.E. Vine).

To set in array under (Robert Young).

To place in order, to place under in orderly fashion (Spiros Zodhiates).

Hupotasso denotes order and structure. As one lexicon states,

It means first of all accepting the exact place God has assigned, keeping one’s rank in this or that society.⁴

Therefore, the usage of *hupotasso* in the Greek Scrip-

tures correctly relates to submission, not to obedience. Let’s consider some of the other relationships that *hupotasso* describes. In Romans 13 *hupotasso* is in the middle voice,⁵ just as it is in all of these following passages:

Believers’ submission to each other (Ephesians 5:21).

Wives’ submission to husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; I Peter 3:1, 5).

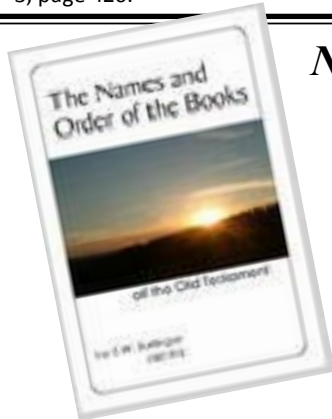
Servants’ submission to masters (Titus 2:9; I Peter 2:18).

In each of these cases above, *hupotasso* is describing the way a certain relationship is ordered, or structured. There is to be a submissive spirit of honor, respect and reverence; but, would one seriously suggest that any of these others should include absolute obedience?

While believers should submit to each other – wives to husbands, servants to masters – does this somehow mean that believers should *absolutely* obey each other, that wives should *absolutely* obey their husbands, and that servants should *absolutely* obey their masters – each without *any* exceptions? *Certainly not!*

4. Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Volume 3, page 426.

5. “In the middle voice the subject is affected, more or less, by the action” (*Concordant Keyword Concordance*); meaning, in the case of *hupotasso*, to “place oneself in submission.” – Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary: New Testament*).



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✍ If a husband asks his wife to kill their children, should she obey?

Someone may object that this is just a hypothetical question, but it is not. There are evil men, waxing worse and worse (II Timothy 3:13), who hold authority at all of the levels of submission (*hupotasso*): there are evil magistrates, evil husbands and evil masters.

Contrary to what many believe and teach, there is no such thing as *absolute* obedience when it comes to human authority. Such obedience *always* has its limitations. There are no other “gods” before God.

We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

We are to honor and respect those in authority, as they are “God’s ministers.” We should be subject to them. However, while a heart attitude of submission to human authority is absolute, obedience is not.

When the dictates of delegated authority conflict with the clear teachings of Scripture, another biblical principle takes precedence.

COMMENTS BY OTHERS ON THE NATURE OF ROMANS 13 AS RELATED TO ABSOLUTE OBEDIENCE

“*Let every soul be subject*” has been misunderstood by many, for it is not said, “*Let every soul be obedient,*” and there is a difference.⁶

Paul does not deal here with the problem of what the Christian must do when the state authorities command him to preform acts which are in contradiction to his loyalty to Jesus Christ.⁷

There surely is a point beyond which we must render no obedience, either to rulers or anyone else, except to God. If they were to demand of us what is due only to God – worship, for instance, as in the case of Daniel or his three friends – we must firmly refuse.⁸

When the dictates of the state conflict with the clear teachings of Scripture, another biblical principle took precedence: “*We ought to obey God rather than man*” (Acts 5:29). For this very reason Christians throughout history have fled homelands and have even forfeited their lives.⁹

While the believer may not agree with the government philosophy or politics of his nation, he is to be a good citizen of it. So long as a law does not violate his conscience before God, the Christian should obey it. Even if he defies such a law, he should be prepared and willing to endure the consequences of his allegiance to God.¹⁰

Jesus set a precedent in this matter, for although His words, “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (Mark 12:17), were spoken with reference to the payment of tribute, they express a principle of more general application. ... When Caesar claims divine honors, the Christians’ answer must be “No.” ... Christians will voice their “No” to Caesar’s unauthorized demands ... more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say “Yes” to all of his authorized demands.¹¹

One must not disobey conscience in submitting to civil government. Without being a rebel he can refuse to do what he regards as wrong, but he must patiently endure the penalty.¹²

The rights of conscience are sacred and may never be infringed by the civil magistrate. God alone is Lord of conscience. ... That this is the true doctrine of Scripture is evident from the example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego, and of the Apostles themselves, who openly proclaimed, “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29).¹³

The obedience which the Scriptures command us to render to our rulers is not unlimited; there are cases in which disobedience is a duty.¹⁴ ►

6. R.E. Rhoades, *The Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, p. 286.
7. James D. Smart, *Doorway to a New Age: A Study of Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, p. 161.
8. L.M. Grant, *Comments on the Book of Romans*, p. 134.

9. Thoralf Gilbrant, *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, volume 16, page 391.
10. Hershel H. Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study*, p. 153.
11. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 233, 234.
12. Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 152.
13. William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 589.
14. Charles Hodge, cited by William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans*, page 589.

SCRIPTURAL EXAMPLES OF THE DISOBEDIENCE OF FAITH

We are familiar with the scriptural phrase “*obedience of faith*,” but there are many honorable examples in Scripture of the *disobedience* of faith.

It is quite possible to submit oneself to authority, and at the same time be disobedient to some specific command. There is widespread Scripture testimony for believers’ disobedience to earthly authorities as an extreme expression of their faith. We will note a few.

The Hebrew Midwives (Exodus 1:15-22)

The King of Egypt required the midwives to kill the male children born under their care. Shiprah and Puah refused and,

Did not as the King of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive. ... Therefore God dealt well with the midwives (17, 20).

Rahab (Joshua 2)

The King of Jericho directed Rahab to deliver the spies of Israel to him. She directly disobeyed the command, hiding them and helping them to escape. For the act of faith’s disobedience, she is honored in Hebrews’ “Hall of Faith.”

By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them who believed not, when she had received the spies with peace (Hebrews 11:31) and sent them out another way (James 2:25).

The Soldiers of Israel (I Samuel 14:24-30; 43-45)

The soldiers of Israel disobeyed the King, refusing to kill innocent Jonathan.

Obadiah (I Kings 18:4, 13-15)

When Queen Jezebel was killing God’s prophets, Obadiah hid and protected a hundred of them.

The “Three Hebrew Children” (Daniel 3:1-7; 12-18)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to com-

ply with King Nebuchadnezzar’s command to worship the golden image that he had erected.

Daniel (6:6-11, 16-28)

Daniel disobeyed King Nebuchadnezzar’s thirty-day ban on prayer to God.

The Wise Men (Matthew 2:8, 12)

The Magi disobeyed the command of King Herod. Interestingly, it was God Himself Who instructed them to disobey. Herod told them to do one thing, God told them to do another. The wise men disobeyed Herod and obeyed God.

When those in human authority issue decrees contrary to those of God, it is clearly God, rather than man, Who should be obeyed.

Peter and John (Acts 4:1-21; Acts 5:17-18; 26-29)

When the rulers of Israel (4:5, 8) decreed that Peter and John cease their teaching (4:18), they responded,

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you decide. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

Some assert that the Apostles were only disobeying religious mandates, not governmental ones. Those attempting to make such a distinction do not understand the nature of Israel, nor her status under the jurisdiction of Rome. Israel was functioning as a religious-political entity, under the authority of the Roman Empire. These rulers of Israel before whom Peter and John were summoned were operating under Roman authority. This is why, when their decrees were violated, they had the authority to arrest the Apostles and place them in prison (5:18).

This is the same type of religious-political union that believers faced throughout the Dark Ages.

When Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms, he faced the civil-ecclesiastical authority. When he refused to recant, he defied the law. When asked by the Inquisitor,

Doest thou admit that these books are written by thee? Wilt thou retract these books and their contents, or doest thou persist in the things thou hast advanced?

Martin Luther responded,

Unless I can be convicted of error by the Holy Scripture, I neither can nor dare retract anything, for my conscience is held captive by God's Word. Here I stand, I can do not otherwise; so God help me. Amen.

PAUL OUR APOSTLE

For some, there seems to be quite a disconnect between what they suggest is Paul's teaching of absolute obedience and his straightforward life of civil disobedience. Surely, if anyone knew the meaning of Romans 13:1-7 and Titus 3:1, it would have been their author, Paul. He obviously did not believe that they sanctioned some supposed absolute obedience to earthly magistrates. Paul's was a long story of run-ins with the law. He was repeatedly imprisoned and eventually executed by civil authorities.

PAUL THE CRIMINAL

Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even to bonds (II Timothy 2:8-9).

Early in Paul's ministry he was assailed by trumped-up charges; but over time, as the attitude of the government toward him and his message grew intolerant, his ministry was made illegal and he was imprisoned as an "evil doer."

This phrase "evil doer" is a translation of the Greek word *kakourgos*, which James Strong (#2557) defines as "a criminal." Both Weymouth and Moffatt render it "criminal" in their translations. At last, Paul suffered evil, "as a criminal."

It was Paul's distinct "my gospel" that had steered him into his troubles with authorities. Note that it was, "my gospel: wherein I suffer trouble."

At the time of his writing of II Timothy, Paul was imprisoned under the great persecution of Nero.

Only state-approved religions were accepted and allowed to practice legally under Roman authority. At first, Paul's ministry was allowed under the assumed auspices of Judaism, but as His revelations from God continued to show that they were distinct and separate, his message and ministry became illegal.

So, it was the very message of Paul that caused his troubles. Now Paul, even with his privileged Roman citizenship, was imprisoned and suffered execution "as a criminal." Yet, while disobedient, he always exuded a spirit of submission with respect, honor and non-resistance. His was a godly attitude of subjection, while giving a testimony of the disobedience of faith.

RELIGIO ILLICITA

Christianity was publicly declared to be illegal by Rome. The more that Paul preached the distinction of his gospel, the more he distanced himself from Judaism and the more he lost his "legal" umbrella of "religious freedom." Every time Paul taught his mystery gospel, he assured another nail for his coffin. Paul's gospel was illegal!

Merrill C. Tenney (1904-1985) describes for us the situation in which Paul found himself:

[Cornelius] Tacitus [56-117], writing of the times of Nero, calls Christians "enemies of the human race" (Annals xv. 44).

Judaism was a *religio licita* [legal religion], and the Christians, as a sect of Judaism, enjoyed the privilege of protection ... [But when] they were openly separated from Judaism [by the distinct ministry of Paul] they became a *religio illicita* [illegal religion], with no official standing, nor even the right to exist ... They were liable to prosecution if the magistrates found a plausible excuse for harassing them, and they could claim no immunity or redress.¹⁵

Robert H. Gundry also writes,

The Roman government still regarded Christianity as a branch of Judaism and therefore a *religio licita* (legal religion). The Roman policy was to grant freedom to all existing religions in the ►

15. Merrill C. Tenney, *Exploring New Testament Culture: A Handbook of New Testament Times*, pp. 125, 303.



empire, but to ban new religions for fear of the social turmoil caused by their invasion. Only at a later date, when the Romans realized that Christianity was distinct from Judaism, did they ban Christianity as a *religio illicita* (illegal religion).¹⁶

There are rare occasions when some believers, in some societies, in some generations, are required by their own conscience to disobey earthly magistrates. This action should never be taken lightly – it is a serious matter for which the believer’s faith could be severely tested by those who *bear not the sword in vain* (Romans 13:4).

There are, however, worse things than disobedience to man. Though believers in such situations should always do everything within their power to be peaceful, kind, gentle and cooperative – showing all due honor and respect to the magistrates – the ultimate Magistrate is God, to Whom is due absolute obedience.

A.E. Knoch writes,

We are called to the ministry of conciliation and must not oppose those whom God has been pleased to put over us in any matter which does not violate our conscience.¹⁷

As with the many examples given earlier, where believers have faced the authorities for their terrestrial disobedience, there can be an opportunity for an unparalleled testimony for God. There is something extremely powerful about the humble, non-resistant presence of faith that, in clear conscience before God, can look a magistrate directly, unashamedly in the eyes and with boldness declare such words as these:

Our God Whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace ... But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods (Daniel 3:17-18).

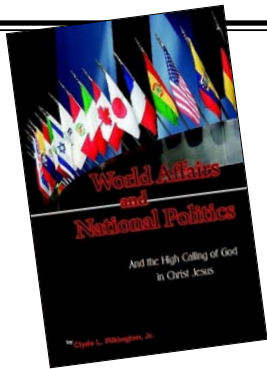
Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge; for we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

[Excerpted from chapter 15 of the author’s book, *World Affairs and National Politics*.]

16. Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (1978), p. 236.

17. A.E. Knoch, *Unsearchable Riches Magazine*, Volume 10, 1918.



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