

# New Testament Theology of the State

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Israel cries to me, “My God,  
we—Israel—know you!” Israel has  
spurned the good; the enemy shall  
pursue him. They made kings, but  
not through me; they set up princes,  
but without my knowledge. With  
their silver and gold they made  
idols for their own destruction.

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Hosea 8:2–4

## Introduction

Church and state issues continue to be the source of many conflicts among Christians today, resulting in a massive confusion in what exactly a Biblical theology of the state and public policy entails. The confusion often prompts awkward answers to important questions regarding the relationship of Christians to government, such as “What kind of government should a Christian support?,” “What public policy should be obeyed?,” or “What does submission to government mean?” Most Christians attempt to justify their political philosophy Biblically with Romans 13 in some way, if they attempt at all. At first glance, this appears to be an acceptable solution – Paul seems to call for submission to government. But how do we reconcile this passage with the undeniable fact that individuals acting within the coercive machinations of states have been the greatest culprits of criminal action and violence in the history of mankind? In Germany during the 1930s and 40s, for instance, theologians used Romans 13 to encourage submission to the Nazi regime, especially since it was democratically elected. More recently, a member of the Zimbabwean parliament [declared](#) that the corrupt dictator-president Robert Mugabe was sent from God and “should not be challenged in next year’s watershed polls.” Obviously, these are inappropriate ways for Scripture to be used, but how much different are we who live in the United States, a nation that often claims to be Christian? Are we simply to comply with the government because the Bible says so, or is more at stake?

Clearly the church has a need for a better framework for evaluating the nature of the state and the consequences of public policy. I propose to begin this process with an analysis of some New Testament passages that seem to address the relationship of Christians to civil government, specifically what we find in the gospels and in Romans 13.

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\*This paper was originally published on [LewRockwell.com](http://LewRockwell.com) in September 2007. In April 2008, it won the Best New Paper Award at the Christian Scholars Forum at the University of Texas at Austin. In [part 1](#), I examine the nature of the State in the Gospels, focusing on the Temptations of Christ and the famous “Render to Caesar” passage. In [part 2](#), the focus shifts to Romans 13 and to application.

# 1 The Gospels and the State

The initial step toward developing a Biblical theology of government must be to examine the teachings of Jesus. What did Jesus say and do that helps us to understand what our reactions to government must be? Often those who want to derive Biblical principles about government from the gospels turn to the famous “Render to Caesar” passages, an event recorded in each of the synoptic gospels ([Matt. 22:15–22](#), [Mark 12:13–17](#), [Luke 20:20–26](#)). But is this the only gospel text worth discussing regarding civil government? In my opinion, it is not. One can also obtain some important information about the nature of the state through the temptations of Jesus and a brief comparison of the kingdom of man to the Kingdom of God.

We begin with an analysis of the “Render to Caesar” passages, first examining the text of Matthew 22:

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup> They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15–22, NRSV)

In Matthew, the Pharisees send some of their disciples along with Herodians to Jesus in order to “trap him in his words” at the temple. The Gospel of Mark says that “*they* sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Jesus,” *they* likely being the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders mentioned in [Mark 11:27](#). Strangely, Luke identifies the questioners as “spies” from the priests, teachers, and elders. The identity of these interrogators is not trivial. Indeed, the Pharisees and Herodians had stark differences in philosophy. Herodians were pro-Roman rule, and they used the Romans’ power to obtain certain benefits. The Pharisees, in contrast, were more ambivalent towards the Romans; Pharisees would generally tolerate them as long as Jewish religious practices were left alone. However, the Pharisees and Herodians are brought together because of their shared opposition to Jesus.

In each gospel, the question is prefaced differently, but the phrasing of the question itself is always the same: “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” The question is very clever. The Herodians would be *for* paying the tax, and if Jesus answers in the negative they have grounds to arrest him for rebelling against Caesar. On the other hand, the Pharisees would generally *not* like the tax (although they are forced to pay it), and an answer in the affirmative would likely result in a loss of popular support of Jesus. Furthermore, there is a subtle legal phrasing in the question by asking “is it lawful,” or in some translations “is it permitted.” In other words, the Pharisees are asking, “Is it *consistent with Torah* (Jewish Law) to pay the tax to Caesar or not?” All those present were aware of the law and of the words of Leviticus 25:23, “The land [of Israel] shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine.” The question is now more complicated because Torah may be at stake. Since Caesar is trying to take the land from God, is it not disobedience to pay the tax?

Jesus saw through the trickery, of course, and responds with a clever gambit of his own. When he asks the Pharisees to produce a coin, they unwittingly bring forth the very evidence

that exposes their hypocrisy. Jesus asks them whose image and inscription is on the coin. They answer, probably reluctantly, “Caesar’s.” But they, and the surrounding people, realize their error, for the *inscriptions* on these coins would always read, “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the deified Augustus, chief priest.” The *Pharisees*, those leaders expected to uphold the law of God, have brought into the *temple* an item that effectively breaks the second commandment, to have no graven images, showing that in their hearts they break the first commandment as well. They, not Jesus, are the hypocrites. They are the ones who bought into the Roman’s pagan system. In commentator Thomas Long’s estimation, Jesus’ response means, “Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No man can serve two masters ([Matt. 6:24](#)). You seem to have made your decision, forged your convenient compromise. But what about your obligation to God? Render to God what belongs to God. Choose this day whom you will serve” (251).

If this interpretation is correct, then there is effectively no guideline set forth here for resolving church and state issues. State practices are not legitimized here by any means. Rather, Jesus says that any neat schemes of division in life that we create must come down, and discourages nationalism or jingoism as a legitimate church practice. We may live under a state, but we belong wholly to the God who is above all states. We are always to render to God what is God’s.

An interesting clue to the nature of the state emerges in the temptations of Jesus ([Matt. 4:1–11](#), [Luke 4:1–13](#)), which few commentators develop. In Matthew, the third temptation of Christ is “the kingdoms of the world and their splendor,” which Satan can give Jesus if he pays obeisance to Satan. Strangely, even though Satan is considered “the Prince [ruler] of this world” ([John 12:31](#), [14:30](#), [16:11](#)), we do not often seriously consider what Satan’s offer means. I think that Satan was quite sincere in his offer; Jesus did not brush it off as impossible. Jesus seems to understand that the kingdoms of this world *do* belong to Satan, and we should not think otherwise. Logically, this means that the kingdoms of the world are at enmity with God. In fact, Scripture witnesses to this directly and indirectly in multiple places. The Old Testament strongly indicates that the pagan religions, often encouraged by Satan through their sorcery and witchcraft, were intimately tied to a nation’s political leadership. G. K. Chesterton agrees with this assessment and gives evidences from history in his book [The Everlasting Man](#). Herod clearly perceives that the baby Christ-child is a threat to his power, and hence orders the killing of hundreds, if not thousands of infants in an attempt to stop this incursion ([Matt. 2](#)). Furthermore, the theme of Babylon as an evil state under the influence of Satan permeates the book of Revelation. In [Revelation 18:4](#), for instance, God exhorts His church to “come out of her [Babylon], my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.”

Briefly discussing the differences between the kingdom of man and the Kingdom of God is illustrative in this discussion. One of the recurring themes in the gospels, especially Matthew, is that Jesus is a *king* bringing forth the Kingdom of God. But Jesus explicitly says that, “My kingdom is not from this world... my kingdom is not from here” ([John 18:36](#)). The “rules of the kingdom” as explained in the Sermon on the Mount are unlike any sort of state laws that have ever existed. Furthermore, it is not the job of the Christian to use *physical force* to bring about his kingdom, but rather to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” ([Matt. 6:33](#)). The kingdoms of man are founded upon power and violence, but the Kingdom of God is founded upon humility ([Matt. 18:4](#)), service ([Matt. 20:26](#)), and love ([John 13:35](#)). While we cannot help being tied to states in this world, we are reminded once again that “our citizenship is in heaven” ([Philippians 3:20](#)).

In summary, Jesus’ direct teachings about civil government are virtually non-existent, but the gospels make some strong implications about the nature of the state that might surprise us.

The state appears to have a strong connection to Satan and his kingdom, and is antithetical to the Kingdom of God, which shuns the use of power for personal gain.

## 2 Paul's Teachings on the State

While one is hard-pressed in the gospels to develop a thorough theology for how Christians should interact with the state, the epistles of Paul and Peter address these issues much further. Romans 13:1–7 is the clearest exposition regarding civil government,<sup>1</sup> but other significant Scriptures include [Titus 3:1–3](#), [1 Timothy 2:1–3](#), and [1 Peter 2:11–17](#). However, for brevity's sake only Romans 13 will be examined in detail. The following analysis has benefitted greatly from the works of Dr. John Cobin, specifically his books *Bible and Government* and *Christian Theology of Public Policy*, which in this author's opinion provide the best and most thorough attempt to integrate this passage into a consistent understanding of public policy theology.

Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, and even used his citizenship to his advantage on one occasion in [Acts 22](#) and [23](#). Yet, he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” and a Pharisee in regard to the law of God ([Phil. 3:5](#)). Hence, one would expect for him, like the Pharisees in the gospels, to be somewhat resentful towards the Romans because of their rule over the land of Israel. Yet in Romans 13, Paul seems to be quite positive towards Roman rule. A “face value” reading of the text might lead one to believe that the state is a very positive force in society and perhaps even a divinely ordained institution in the same way that the family and the church are divinely ordained.

However, I do not think this sort of interpretation is warranted. Apostolic admonitions regarding civil government cannot easily be reconciled with a casual, plain reading of the New Testament texts. Otherwise, you would conclude that the apostles were either wrong, speaking within an irrelevant cultural context, or just out of their minds. When one considers the actual historical context of Romans 13, rather than lifting it out of Scripture as merely abstract ideas, a surprising reading emerges. To illustrate this, how would the interpretation change if one replaced the words “governing authorities,” “rulers,” and the personal pronouns with the names of the emperor and kings of that time, namely Nero, Herod, or Agrippa? The text would read as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to **Nero and Herod**; for there is no authority except from God, and **Nero and Herod** have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists **Nero and Herod** resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For **Nero and Herod** are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of **Nero and Herod**? Then do what is good, and you will receive **Nero and Herod's** approval; <sup>4</sup> for **Nero and Herod** are God's servants for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the **Nero and Herod** do not bear the sword in vain! **Nero and Herod** are the servants of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be subject to **Nero and Herod**, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For the same reason you also pay taxes, for **Nero and Herod** are God's servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to **Nero and Herod** what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. ([Romans 13:1–7](#), NRSV)

How should Christians today interpret this knowing that Nero was in power at the time of Paul's writing? How can we resolve the problem of knowing that Nero killed good people,

namely Christians, when the passage clearly says that civil government *rewards and commends* those who do good? Clearly, the interpretation problem is not resolved with an immutable maxim as simple as “do what the government says.” Both the Old and New Testaments manifest that this is not right or true on multiple occasions. Some examples include:

- Hebrews defying Pharaoh’s decrees to murder their infants ([Exodus 1](#))
- Rahab lying to the King of Jericho about the Hebrew spies ([Joshua 2](#))
- Ehud deceiving the king’s ministers and assassinating the king ([Judges 3](#))
- Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to comply with the king’s decrees, and were miraculously saved twice ([Daniel 3](#) and [6](#))
- The Magi from the East disobeying Herod’s direct orders ([Matthew 2](#))
- Peter and John choosing to obey God rather than men ([Acts 5](#))

The text of Romans 13 can be better understood with an appreciation for the historical context and evident reason through Scripture and experience, rather than taking a “face value” interpretation as so many Christians often do.

<sup>1</sup> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

Verse 1 says that state authorities are instituted by God. Paul’s primary message for Christians, however, is not that states are specially instituted in the same way as the family and church, but rather that the state is not operating outside of the plans of God. In this sense, the state is divinely instituted in the same way that Satan is divinely instituted. God is not surprised when states act the way they do. As noted specifically in the Gospels, the state is understood throughout Scripture as being intimately tied to Satan and his kingdom, and patently opposed to the Kingdom of God. The state’s status within God’s ultimate plan does not legitimize the evil the state commits.

Submission to civil government, then, is always qualified. The command is to obey in general, but sometimes we will disobey public policy because of personal and Scriptural conviction. Christians are to obey most policy whenever *directly* requested to do so, but ensuring *active* compliance with every public policy is unnecessary. All submission is directed at being expedient and practical toward men and glorifying toward God. Cobin explains that, “Any sin problem for disobedience arises only when one’s action is unwise, involves poor stewardship, requires neglecting one’s family duties, or detracts from the believer’s principal purpose in life” ([Christian Theology and Public Policy](#), 120).

<sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; <sup>4</sup> for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.



Verses 2–4 indicate that if you irritate the state then you will face wrath, but if you behave in the way the state wants then they will be pleased. At many points, what the state defines as good and evil may be very much opposed to what God defines as good and evil. But what Paul is telling the believers in Rome is that if they do something that the Roman government defines as evil then they will likely be punished for it. We cannot abstract this verse from its cultural context and make it an absolute requirement on all cultures at all times. To do so would be to put Christians under a great bondage to bad public policy. There is no compelling reason to think that Paul was deliberately writing about any particular rulers other than those in the first century Roman Empire.

Paul knew full well the power of Nero and the potential harm he could cause to Christians in Rome—he calls it “the sword”—and he does not want believers to be persecuted for anything other than the name of Christ and what he stands for. Paul reminds the Roman Christians, though, that even the dreadful power of the state is not outside the power of God. His message to them is the same as [Romans 8:28](#), that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” The state can indeed be a means of sanctification for the Lord’s church.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Verses 5–7 expand upon the reasons for submitting and include practical ways the Roman Christians were to respond to Paul’s message. Cobin says, “The reason we *must* submit to government is to avoid wrath or worrying about being harmed by the state authority. God does not want us to be entangled with the affairs of this world to the point where such involvement detracts from our primary mission” (*Christian Theology of Public Policy*, 125). The word “conscience” in verse 5 should be interpreted in a similar manner as [1 Corinthians 10](#) (regarding food sacrificed to idols). The believers were concerned that the Roman state would find a *legal* reason to persecute them. One cannot use this verse in an absolutist sense to say that Christians can never participate in removing any authority, such as in the American Revolution. Paul also encourages Christians to “overcome evil with good” as understood in [Romans 12:21](#) (this includes evil authority), and to work to be free if at all possible ([1 Corinthians 7:20–23](#)).

Paul also says to submit to paying taxes for the same reason: avoiding state wrath in order to live for God. One despises paying taxes, but in order to abate the state’s wrath one pays them. Likewise, “pay to all what is due them” is commanded for the same purpose, especially considering the political tumult of the time. But does this mean that a man sins if he makes a mistake on his Federal tax return? Paul would very likely answer *no*. Modern taxes are very different from Roman taxes. In fact, the Greek word for “taxes” in verse 7 is more accurately rendered “tribute,” which is specifically the capitation tax (or “head tax”) in a Roman township census. The Romans would send soldiers from house to house, count the residents there, calculate the tax, and then demand full payment immediately. If a Christian did not comply at once, then he, his family, and possibly even his fellow believers could be in imminent, serious trouble. Paul says to not resist these men when they do this, just pay the tax. Refusal to pay would identify them as part of the tax rebels and political rogues of the day, and would give the Romans a reason to persecute Christians in Rome and perhaps throughout the empire. Paul wanted the Roman Christians to avoid becoming public spectacles and government targets.

As a general principle, modern Christians should do the same when immediate threat of state force is upon them, taxes or otherwise. However, modern taxes are not often like this; tributes and tariffs are not culturally transcendent forms of payments to states. Hence, one is most certainly not sinning if a mistake is made on a tax return. Cobin would even go so far to say that some taxes can be completely avoided without guilt (*Christian Theology of Public Policy*, 129).

Romans 13 is not an abstract, blanket statement that requires submission to all state laws, in all places, for all circumstances, at all times. Nor is it a prescription for what particular form of government is sanctioned by God or for how states should act. The historical context and wording requires us to be careful when making pronouncements about what a Christian's submission to the state looks like.

Christian obedience to government is for the purpose of expedient peaceful living and bringing no dishonor to the name of Christ. We are not obligated to follow every jot of public policy. Moreover, we are not supposed to follow *any* law that goes against the law of God. If we are to be persecuted, it should be for the name of Christ and *what he stands for*, not for refusing to follow some random law when *directly* threatened by state action.

In conclusion, developing a theology of the state from the New Testament is understandably difficult. Examining the gospels, one finds that the state is not related to the Kingdom of God in any way, and in fact the state stands with Satan in direct opposition to God. The "Render to Caesar" encounter with Jesus does not legitimize the state and does not form the basis of a Christian's interaction with government. Finally, a full understanding of Romans 13, taking into account its proper context, helps us to make better decisions within whatever state authority we find ourselves under.

## Endnote

Some scholars are not convinced that Romans 13 is actually referring to *civil* government. Mark Nanos argues that what Paul is talking about here is the obligation of Christians, particularly Christian *gentiles* who associated with the Jewish synagogues of Rome, to "subordinate themselves to the leaders of the synagogues and to the customary "rules of behavior" that had been developed in Diaspora synagogues for defining the appropriate behavior of "righteous gentiles" seeking association with Jews and their God." (Nanos 291)

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