

## A TEXT OF TYRANTS:

# *Fresh Thinking on Romans 13:1-7*

BY WILLIAM G. JOHNSON

Funny, isn't it, how you can read a passage of the Bible many times and figure that you've got it down pat until one day, *Bam!* Something explodes your ideas.

That happened to me recently. I was writing a book on Paul's letter to the Romans—not a verse-by-verse commentary, but a work that attempts to trace Paul's developing line of argument and explain how it applies to Christian living today. I worked my way forward, struggling a bit on tough areas of chapters 9–11, but eventually became satisfied with progress. Then I hit 13:1–7 and it was *Bam!* Try as I might, I couldn't see how the passage fit with what preceded and what followed.

After several weeks I still cannot. In the logical flow of the letter, Romans 13:1–7 is an interloper.

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Focused study led me to take a hard look at the content of the passage. It's one familiar to Seventh-day Adventists—we build on it our understanding of the Christian's relationship to civil authorities.

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Christian's relationship to civil authorities. For many years I had accepted the well-worn understanding—that it teaches that the authorities are put there by God and that we should submit to them. Now, however, as I indulged in a little “out of the box” thinking and read up on the passage, my views underwent a transfiguration.

In this paper I shall point out my new understanding and the evidence that led me there. The conclusions at which I arrived surprised me; to a degree they were unwelcome. I present them here, not as established beyond

all challenge, but to arouse curiosity and inspire others to research the matter more deeply.

Here in America, only a couple of years ago, Romans 13:1–7 came to the fore, when an uproar arose over the government policy of separating children—some only infants—from their parents at the border with Mexico.



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McAllen, Texas, USA - September 21, 2016: A group of Central Americans walks down a road prior to being picked up by the Border Patrol for illegally crossing the Rio Grande River into the US in deep-south Texas. There has been a flood of mothers with children and unaccompanied minors from Central America, fleeing gang violence, crossing illegally over the past several months.

The passage, it turns out, has been a conundrum of scholars for many centuries. By its teaching, all authority comes from God, so that to disobey incurs not just punishment from the state, but divine displeasure; it has long been a favorite of tyrants.

### The Passage

Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. For the authorities do not

strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you.

They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.

Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority (Rom. 13:1–7).

The words come without qualification: *all* authority. Not a matter of good government or bad government—we must submit to *all* civil authorities.

Monarchs have loved this passage. King James of the renowned King James Version liked to quote it. Tyrants of various stripes have used it to support unjust laws.

Followers of Christ in Hitler's Germany bowed to the evil Third Reich because of this passage. German Adventists went along. Only a small number of Christians, notably Dietrich Bonhoeffer and those with him, refused to permit the state to usurp the authority that belongs to Christ alone.

And here in America, only a couple of years ago, Romans 13:1–7 came to the fore, when an uproar arose over the government policy of separating children—some only infants—from their parents at the border with Mexico. Then-Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, rolled out these words in an attempt to justify the harsh actions.

Ellen White likewise predicted that this passage would be used in conjunction with persecution. “And there will be some who will even urge such a course [persecution] from the Scripture: ‘Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. . . . The powers that be are ordained by God’” (*Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 5, 712).

Ron Cassidy, in a 2010 article in *Expository Times*, noted: “These words have caused more unhappiness and misery in the Christian East and West than any other seven verses of the New Testament by the license they have given to tyrants” (quoted by Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Letter to the Romans*, 309).

The passage has had a huge influence on the thought and practice of Seventh-day Adventists. With very few exceptions, we have kept clear of involvement in issues of social justice. When other people felt conscience-bound to protest publicly, Adventists remained silent. The state was there by divine authority; it wasn't our place to question it. To challenge its laws would be, in fact, fighting against God.

This quiescent approach, so well established and taken for granted for many years, runs contrary to that of the pioneers of our movement. They were abolitionists; they saw slavery as evil, a blot on America that should be expunged by whatever means. The Fugitive Slave Act (1820) stipulated that runaway slaves were to be apprehended and returned to their masters. The early Adventists called for believers to defy this unjust law, even though such activity could result in fines or imprisonment. The church paper, the *Review and Herald*, boldly called for civil disobedience.

We have come a long way from our roots. Motivated by Romans 13:1–7, Seventh-day Adventists have often

become comfortably compliant with unjust rulers with whom we became acquainted through our institutions. Of course, when the tide turned and despots were overthrown, Adventists suddenly were out of favor also.

Recent events in the United States demand that we take a hard look at our understanding of Romans 13:1–7 and our relation to the state. The passage is startlingly relevant to what is happening on the streets of this nation.

### Key Issues

Three issues underlie this study:

1. How did the original recipients of Paul's letter understand these words? Did they accept them without question, or did they reply: “Paul, you've got to be kidding!”?
2. Can this passage bear the weight that Seventh-day Adventist interpreters have given to it?
3. Does Romans 13:1–7 force upon us cognitive dissonance (when a long-held conviction confronts overwhelming reality)?

Without doing violence to the original Greek, we can change the translation of one word—from “authorities” to “police”—and at once the words leap off the page with startling contemporary meaning.

Everyone must submit to *the police*. For *police* authority comes from God, and *the police* have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against *the police* is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. For the *police* do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the *police*? Do what is right, and they will honor you.

The *police* are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. The *police* are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.

Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For

government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to the *police*.

Try to put yourself in the shoes of a Black person, especially a Black man.

The police placed there by God?

Police authority comes from God?

Do what is right, and you have nothing to fear?

*George Floyd!*

Police are God's servants, for your good?

*Really? Black Lives Matter!*

The pattern is achingly familiar:

Unarmed Black man leaves home.

Unarmed Black man encounters police.

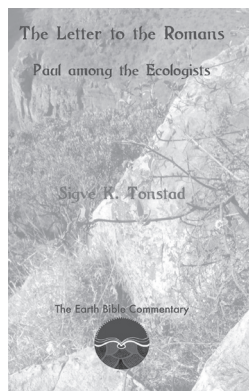
Unarmed Black man never comes home. He's dead.

The evidence stacks up. Reality shatters our well-rehearsed conclusions. *Cognitive dissonance!*

### The Christians in Rome

The oldest and most widely accepted understanding of Romans 13:1–7 is that Paul meant just what he said:

The authorities are placed there for our good by God. Sigve Tonstad comes down on this position in his recent commentary, *The Letter to the Romans: Paul Among the Ecologists* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016). He argues that bad government is better than no government, which means chaos.



I think Tonstad's commentary is excellent, but part company with him on Romans 13:1–7. I find it too big a stretch to accept that Christians living in Rome of all places could accept the passage.

The Roman Emperors of Paul's day were a vile line of despots. Murder, rape, incest, dissipation, cruelty, sadism, extravagance, gambling, perversion—you name it, they did it.

Caligula (37–41) was a half-crazy monster who murdered on a whim. He delighted to watch executions; if the number of prisoners was low, he would simply add victims from among the onlookers. Disgusted by his despicable conduct, the Praetorium Guard assassinated him and installed his uncle, Claudius.

Claudius (41–54) was a cruel despot, immoral and blood-thirsty, who loved to gamble.

Nero (54–68) murdered his mother, his wife, his brother, and countless others. He castrated a young slave and married him. When rumors implicated him in the Great Fire that destroyed one-third of Rome, Nero found a scapegoat in the Christians. They were crucified, covered in oil, and set ablaze to make light for the emperor's garden, and thrown to wild animals. So great was the terror inspired by this monster, after he died by suicide rumors persisted for years that he had come back to life.

Romans 13:1–7, addressed to followers of Jesus in Rome, asserts that all authority comes from God and should be obeyed; that the rulers are agents of the divine who will punish the law-breaker and protect those who do well.

Caligula? Claudius? Nero? I find it impossible to accept that these words were meant to be read literally.

### Code Language

An alternative explanation is that the words were code

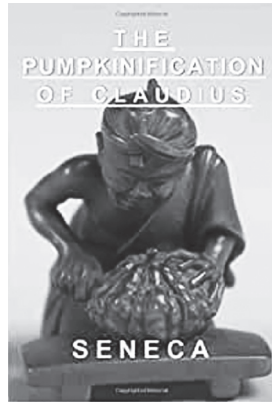
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The Fugitive Slave Act (1820) stipulated that runaway slaves were to be apprehended and returned to their masters. The early Adventists called for believers to defy this unjust law, even though such activity could result in fines or imprisonment. The church paper, the *Review and Herald*, boldly called for civil disobedience.

language; the passage was a parody which the Christians who read it quickly recognized.

At first reading the idea appeals, but supporting evidence is lacking. The passage provides no hint that it is a parody. Even more telling is its subject matter—relation to civil authorities—in a letter focused on the Good News. And if it were a parody, what would be its point?

To suggest that Paul wrote in code out of fear of reprisal is falsified by an actual parody written around the time of the letter. By this time in the Empire, the practice had arisen that, after the emperor died, the Senate declared that he had been deified. Following the death of Claudius, Seneca, a philosopher and senator, wrote a scathing parody that in large part has survived to our times. Titled *The Pumpkinification of the Deified Claudius*, it plays on the word apotheosis (deification) to lampoon the departed despot. It portrays Claudius at the moment of death: old, infirm, unable to control his bowels. He dies and departs to gain a place among the gods, but they are none too pleased to accept him into their number. He is shunted from god to god until he finishes up in Hades. There he is sentenced to gamble by playing dice with a cup that has no bottom. Claudius endlessly throws dice which endlessly fall to the ground.



Seneca's parody of Claudius is a relentless, merciless lampoon. It goes way beyond any "roast" of the president of the United States.

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen and proud of it. On occasion, he didn't hesitate to let authorities know this, reminding them of the privileges it entailed. Alongside Seneca's mocking *Pumpkinification*, Romans 13:1–7 is weak gruel indeed!

So, if we can't accept the passage in literal terms and it isn't parody, *what is it?* Let me share the evidence that leads me to a surprising conclusion.

### The Evidence

The evidence is two-fold: the logical train of thought in chapters 12–13, and the content of the passage itself.

Paul's wonderful letter develops masterfully in three stages:

Chapters 1–8: Exposition of the Good News;

Chapters 9–11: Israel's failure to accept Christ;

Chapters 12–16: Life in the new community of Christ's followers.

Chapter 12, which begins to elaborate the "so what" of the Good News, begins with a call for Christians to consider themselves "living sacrifices" to God and warns them not to think that they are better than they really are. Then, beginning with verse 9, Paul launches into a long description of how genuine love, *agape*' manifests itself. The passage is powerful and compelling, although not as well known as the famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13.

In words reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, Paul counsels a course of treating enemies well. The passage reaches a climax with the words: "Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good."

Suddenly, as we move into the next chapter, tone and subject change abruptly: "Everyone must submit to governing authorities . . ." Gone is discussion of *agape*' in action; the mood switches to "must" and threat of punishment. The change comes without transition; it is startling. The calm waters of the lake are suddenly roiled by a windstorm.

Then, just as abruptly, the storm is past and the discussion resumes—on what theme? *Agape*! "Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another" (verse 8). Then the argument proceeds to a breath-taking conclusion that wraps up Paul's long discussion of law, grace, and freedom in chapters 1–8. "If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. . . . These and all such commandments [adultery, murder, stealing]—are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself. . . . love fulfills the requirements of God's law."

Judaism emphasized the 613 commandments found in the Torah.

Sinai emphasized the Ten Commandments.

Jesus emphasized the Two Great Commandments—love to God and love to neighbor.

Paul emphasizes only one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

**Bold! Breathtaking!**

# There is at least one ancient tradition that calls into question the authenticity of Romans 13:1–7.

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But here's the point: if we begin at 12:9 and read to 13:10, the train of thought flows without interruption—if we omit 13:1–7.

What is going on? 13:1–7 seems to be an interloper. Could it be an interpolation?

## Not Like Paul

These suspicions are taken further when we take a close look at the content of 13:1–7. Its ideas are unlike those we find elsewhere in this letter or elsewhere in Paul's writing. And not just unlike Paul—contrary to Paul!

Here is a startling fact: the passage isn't specifically Christian. It could have been written by a pagan philosopher. It sounds obsequious, politically correct, boot licking.

How different from what Paul wrote at the outset of the letter: “Paul, a *doulos* (slave) of Christ Jesus. . . . May God our Father and the Lord (*Kyrios*) Jesus Christ give you grace and peace” (Rom. 1:1–7).

So common are these words to us that we fail to grasp their heavy weight in Paul's time. Then, Caesar wasn't just the head of state, he was *Kyrios*—Lord. And terms like “Good News,” “peace,” and “power” already were current as part of the imperial cult. (Recognition of this dynamic has gained acceptance in recent years by expositors like N. T. Wright.)

Paul was fearless, not mealy-mouthed. Political correctness was utterly foreign to his thinking. This is the man who proclaimed unabashedly: “There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. But for us,

There is one God, the Father,  
by whom all things were created,  
and for whom we live.  
And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
through whom all things were created,  
and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:5–6).

The ideas of Romans 13:1–7 run counter to those of Jesus. In the judgment hall, Jesus confronted Pilate with the sharp divide between the kingdoms of this world and his kingdom: “My kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. . . . My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). He drew the same distinction in his reply to the Pharisees who endeavored to ensnare him over the issues of paying taxes to Caesar. “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God” (Luke 20:25). By this answer Jesus refuted any idea that civil authorities stand in a God-ordained role alongside His Kingdom.

Even more damning is the manner in which John the Revelator portrays the Roman Empire and other earthly powers: marauding, rapacious, Satan-inspired beasts that persecute the people of God—not beneficent authorities appointed by God for the good of those who do well (Revelation 12–13, 17).

## An Unsettling Conclusion

My reflection on Romans 13:1–7, based wholly on the internal logic of the letter and the content of the passage, pointed in a direction that in many ways was unpalatable to me: the passage is not from Paul; it is an interpolation. Holding a high view of Scripture, I found this conclusion troubling.

My field of studies is New Testament exegesis and theology; apart from New Testament Greek, I am not versed in the ancient languages of the period of Paul's writings. I turned to a friend and scholar who has made a lifetime study of the ancient manuscripts—Dr. Abraham Terian. Terian, recognized as a foremost scholar of ancient Armenian, has taught at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago. He is completing a forty-year, definitive work on the writings of Philo Judaeus, a Jewish contemporary of Paul.

Dr. Terian compared Romans 12–13 in Greek, Syriac, and Armenian. In each case he was impressed by the change in mood from chapter 12 to chapter 13. He

also noted subtle differences in word-use and style as the text moves from chapter 12 to chapter 13. On the basis of his investigation, Dr. Terian became convinced that Romans 13:1–7 is an interpolation.

Could it be that so many centuries of study and scholarship has failed to recognize what was becoming more apparent?

The theory had a big weakness—it totally lacked support in manuscript evidence. When I was invited to make a Zoom presentation of my ideas, I frankly acknowledged this major problem with the interpretation.

My presentation brought a couple of unexpected responses from the wonderful world of the Internet. Two listeners became curious and came up with the same result; there is at least one ancient tradition that calls into question the authenticity of Romans 13:1–7. The Sahidic (Southern) Coptic version of the Bible omits Romans 13:1–6 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920; Coptic text with English translation by G. W. Horner).

### What About Ellen White?

I was curious to find what Ellen White had written on Romans 13:1–7 and turned to Dr. Ron Graybill, scholar of Ellen White history and writings, formerly associate director of the Ellen White Estate. He reported the results of his research:

The Ellen G. White Estate, in the process of putting all of Ellen White’s writings online, went through and inserted the scriptural references for all of the places where she quotes scripture. This enables us to search for references to Romans 13. If we limit our search to her “Lifetime Words,” that is, all the books, articles, and pamphlets she published during her lifetime, plus all the letters, diaries, and manuscripts she produced prior to her death in 1915, we find a total of 47 quotations from Romans 13. By limiting our search to “Lifetime Words,” we avoid all the duplicate instances that may have appeared in various compilations created after her death. . . .

So there you have it: two references to the first seven verses of Romans 13, one a partial

quote of a single verse, the other an ambiguous reference. Now there are probably other quotes from the Bible that Ellen White used to urge good citizenship and obeying the law of the land, but obviously she didn’t rely on Romans 13 much to make that point.

### A Possibility and an Invitation

Could it be possible that Romans 13:1–7 is an interpolation? Yes. This would not be the only interpolation in the New Testament. The ending of the Gospel of Mark, 16:9–20, is not found in the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel. It likewise has content of a dubious character—it mentions taking up snakes, which is the basis for the practices of the snake-handling cult of east Tennessee.

While I would not go so far as to suggest that Paul could not have written Romans 13:1–7, I think it highly unlikely that he did so. The passage was possibly a detached writing on a small piece of papyrus that early on became inserted among the other papyrus sheets of the letter. Interestingly, Dr. Terian observed similarities between the passage and philosophical writings from the time of Philo.

Regardless of one’s conclusion as to the authenticity of Romans 13:1–7, the passage needs to be considered in light of Jesus’ teachings and the portrayal of the state by John the Revelator.

And the invitation: I find these conclusions intriguing, but I share them in tentative fashion. I hope this paper will encourage someone, somewhere—someone who is conversant with the history of the Coptic and who can work in its languages—to take the exploration further.



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