

Gordan Runyan, *Resistance to Tyrants: Romans 13 and the Christian Duty to Oppose Wicked Rulers* (2012)

This little book is written in a breezy style and breaks up the matter into small units, apparently so that the content can be readily taken in by the below average reader. Some important points are postponed from the main presentation to a “Part Two: Addressing Objections” section. This means that the book is not as systematic as one would like in order to do an analysis, but this likely fits it better for its purpose. The book is directed against the two main theories of Christian submission to authorities, but as a result of this organization of the contents, one of them, and probably the main one being taught by the more intellectual Evangelicals at least, is only considered under the objections.

There is no attempt to present a political philosophy beyond what is the inevitable implication of taking a stand on the issue of Christian resistance. Those who advocate a more abject theory of submission to tyrannical authority general express or insinuate some particular view of how God’s authority is transmitted to those tyrants, but any listing of dissection of those theories is beyond the scope of the book, although this review will go into them a bit.

The book is chiefly an explanation of what Paul says in Romans 13: 1-7. This text is the main authority used to teach Christians what their attitude toward government should be. Runyan’s point is this:

It is, in fact, true that Romans 13:1-7 teaches the people of God to offer unqualified obedience to tyrants, then that is what we must do. If the Word tells us to submit to evil, we’ll be found rebels for opposing it.

However, the reverse holds as well. If Romans 13 actually teaches, contrary to most of our modern pulpits, that Jefferson got it right when he said “Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God,” well, then, *submitting to* and *servng* these same tyrants would be an act of treason against the King of kings. (p. 5)

He cites *The Establishment and Limits of Civil Government* by James M. Willson as his major source.

The first step is to consider the context Romans 13 in the flow of Paul’s general argument up to that point and in view of his purpose. “Romans is the New Testament’s great explanation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” (p. 8) Paul is explaining in broad terms what the Gospel is and what is the difference that the Gospel makes in the lives of the followers of Jesus. This is the task of the first eight chapters of Romans. In three of them, chapters 6-8, he explains freedom from the law under the Gospel. Then chapters 9-11 explain what this means for the Jews. Chapter 12 begins the applications of this change in the life of Christians. “Chapter 13, and our verses in question, come along right here, in this train of thought. How should the liberated believer live, specifically in relation to human governments?” (p. 9)

This view of Romans is the mainstream, received view. It is said, for example, that Paul had never been to Rome at the time that he wrote it. Therefore, unlike in the other epistles, he could not assume that background knowledge that he normally taught in his evangelistic tours, and had to cover this general instruction in the opening chapters of this epistle. The view has been challenged recently by revisionist ideas. A Presbyterian (PCA) pastor, who was an avid disciple of N. T. Wright, told me that everyone thinks that the book of Romans is a great systematic exposition of

theology, but it was actually a compendium of practical pastoral advice. Where Runyan says, that Paul in these chapters “takes pains to prove that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from works.” the new reading says that Paul was just admonishing the Jews that their national distinctives of dress and diet no longer marked them as the people of God. Given the popularity of this new perspective, there is now a substantial group that would question Runyan’s view of the context. Not that he is wrong, but it is a situation that has to be taken into account in using the contextual argument.

As Paul is explaining the implications of the change of status from being under the Law to being free from it. It is important to be clear about what that status was. Runyan says: “Throughout Israel’s history, the Law of God was the government, for all intents and purposes. Sure, they had their kings, and judges, and ruling elders, but even all of those folks were under the authority of the Law. They were only subordinate rulers in Israel.” (p. 9) As the Law was the authority in civil government, freedom from the Law had direct implications for civil government under the Gospel. Was there a replacement for the Law, as far as civil government was concerned? Therefore it makes sense that this is the question that Paul answers in Romans 13. But what was their status before? Was the law their ruler, or were the kings the rulers, who were *supposed* to follow the law, but were still rulers if they did not?

In I Samuel 8 the people come to Samuel and ask for a king. “Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” God’s response to Samuel about this was “Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me.” But he was told to warn the people about what this meant, “This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you:” and then describe the taxation and tyrannical actions that will ensue. “And you will cry out in that day because your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the Lord will not hear you on that day.” This certainly looks like a change of status from what existed under the judges. Under Solomon the tyranny was in evidence in the forced labor he required for his building programs, so that when Rehoboam succeeded him, the people asked for relief (and didn’t get it). The situation had even changed from one where God would raise up judges to rescue the people from foreign oppression to one where God would raise up foreign oppressors to punish the people for what they were doing under their kings. Does Romans 13 really address a change in political status, if the people had been ruled by kings for a millennium, and in recent centuries, often foreign pagan ones? Since this looks like a hole in Runyan’s exegetical argument for his interpretation of Romans, something should be said about it.

After Romans 13:1-7, Paul continues with the theme that though free from the Law, the Romans were not to abuse that liberty, and that there were still righteous obligations. In this context, Runyan argues, Paul is not addressing the case of what to do in the about tyrannical rule. Rather the question is, what authority exists after the Law has passed, and what should be our response and attitude toward this authority? Paul then describes what authority God has put in place and what its purpose is.

Having laid out the general context and flow of the argument, Runyan turns to the specific language of these seven verses. First, “Let every person be **subject** to the **governing authorities** ...” ‘Governing’ is sometimes translated surpassing or better. It could, but need not, be taken as a reference the quality of these authorities, suggesting the obedience is urged to those who are deserving of it. The traditional interpretation, preserved in the Authorized Version, is that ‘governing authorities’ is ‘higher powers’. The popes used actually to claim that since they were the higher power (*potestatibus sublimioribus*), compared to everyone else in the world, this text meant that the Holy Roman Emperors were supposed to be subject to them. Runyan’s next point is

about the word “authorities”, that “the language at this point denotes a power that is given the right to enforce the law, but not to implement or execute its own will.” How do we know this? Runyan doesn’t say, but the word is *exousiais*, and a glance at Liddel and Scott shows us that *exousia* means “power or authority to do a thing”, Arndt and Gingrich list several meanings centering around the power of an office. The idea is a commissioned authority for a function.

“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” This teaches, Runyan says, that God is King. “All authority which we experience in this life is subordinate to God’s final, ultimate authority.” They exist “to do His will.” (p. 16) Runyan puts this under the category of general Providence. God ordains everything, and so that include civil rulers too. That applies to evil things as well. Paul had just mentioned Pharaoh in Romans 9, whom God raised to the throne and also hardened. In fact: “The devil exists, and wields great power, all under the will and authority of God. And yet, the people of God are commanded to resist him throughout Scripture.” (p. 18) After reviewing several texts about how God commissions people to oppose evil, Runyan sums this up as “Possessing authority that comes from God is not the same thing as possessing God’s *sanction*, and approval to rule.” But isn’t that what “authority” as distinct from mere “power” is? Isn’t that what we just learned about the meaning of *exousia*, the word used again for authority in this clause? His argument has gone astray, for he should have said that not all power has authority, or else that authority is limited to the purpose for which it was instituted.

At this point we should point out that Runyan seems to be using the terms ‘power’ and ‘authority’ in the common contemporary usage, as does this review, but that older books on political theory and authority will use them differently according to tradition going back to Aristotle, in which ‘power’ means the right to do something, and ‘authority’ means the exercise of the right.

“Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” This is still “speaking about government as a concept” according to Runyan, giving God’s intended function for it. The Christian is not to be an anarchist, but to recognize God’s purpose for appointing authorities. But, to show that this does not mean all actual governments, Runyan reviews Biblical examples of opposition to governments: Moses to Pharaoh, Rahab to her city, the book of Judges with its repeated uprisings, Elijah and Ahab, Daniel vs. the king of Babylon, and Peter vs. the Sanhedrin. Therefore the laws of human government are not the same thing as the will of God.

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad...” The text goes on to speak of the ruler as God’s servant. If the ruler refuses to serve God, is that the government being spoken of here? Runyan says no. Next the text describes this service as that of God’s avenger against wrongdoers. This, Runyan thinks, places a limitation on extent of the authority of government. It is not authorized to implement the welfare state or the nanny state.

He next considers an objection. Paul was writing to the Romans who were under the emperors, who as in the case of Nero were very bad people indeed. If Paul could tell the Romans to submit to that government, how much more should we today readily submit to ours! But Runyan replies that this begs the question. It assumes that Paul was describing the Roman regime, when in fact Paul was described the proper nature of government. As proof, he points out the description of Rome as the fourth beast in Daniel’s vision, the way it is described in Revelation, and to the fact that the Roman government killed Jesus. That depiction of government does not fit the government that Paul has been describing. Paul also adds, “Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval.” Yet the government in Rome would soon behold Paul, and under Nero persecute those Romans to whom he was writing, because they were doing

what is good. This contradicts what Paul says about government, which proves he was not talking about that Roman state.

“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.” Here Runyan takes up the question of when we should obey or disobey a government. “A government that is working (imperfectly, we would even grant) to do the right things by enforcing godly laws, has every right to the support and subjection of it Christian citizens.” (p. 32) It may not be easy to see the line between “rulers who are on the right path, though failing badly at times, and those who have forsaken the way altogether” but he thinks that the present American government is “in full rebellion against God.”

“For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing...” The “very thing” according to Runyan is obeying God. But as the authorities are in rebellion, therefore their taxes are theft. He then considers the question of prudence. It may be wise to pay the taxes, just as it may be wise to hand over your money in a stickup so that you don’t get shot.

But it is more complicated than that. I pay taxes to the Federal government, the state, the county and the city. Also to the foreigners up in Canada. Do they all become legitimate or illegitimate at once? When the federal government tried to shut down the economy because of the so-called epidemic, the state refused to go along and close businesses, but instead left the matter to cities and counties, where the governor said the responsibility belonged. But then the city shut down businesses for a time on its authority. Must I evaluate them all the same way, or must I make a separate judgment for every form of government?

“Unjust government cannot collect a just tax, no matter how they label it.” But if there is a fire can I call the fire department, or is that illegitimate too? What about the county ambulance service? Is it legitimate when I benefit, but illegitimate when it costs me? Runyan doesn’t say anything about this.

In his summary section, which follows, in which he reviews the whole passage he puts it differently. “To the degree the civil ruler uses his God-given authority to carry out this mission in service to God, you, Christian freed-man, are obligated to submit to him with a willing mind...” (p. 38) Just before it had been a matter of either legitimate or illegitimate like an on/off switch. Now it is a matter of degrees. We owe partial obedience in proportion to how the ruler uses his authority. This is a different theory of authority altogether. How would it work, anyway? How can one access the degrees?

Runyan next launches into a discussion of negative and positive commands and their reciprocal implications. That is, if we are commanded not to steal, then we have a duty to preserve our neighbor’s property by returning it if we find it. If we are commanded to do something, then we are forbidden from doing the opposite. The implication that Runyan wants to make is that if we are commanded to submit to the rulers who are serving God, than the implication is that we are to resist those who are not. For this he appeals to the Reformed tradition of interpreting the commandments.

Actually, it is more complicated. Here are the rules, as laid out by John Brown of Haddington:

I. Wherever a duty is required, the contrary sin is forbid; and wherever a sin is forbid, the contrary duty is required.

II. Wherever a sin is forbid, every sin of the same kind, and every cause, occasion, and appearance thereof, are also forbid; and where a duty is commanded, every duty of the same kind, and all the means of performing it, are required.

III. Whatever we ourselves are bound to be, do, or forbear, we are bound, according to our stations, to do all that we can to make others to be and do the same.

IV. That which is forbid is never to be done: but actions required are only to be performed when God gives opportunity.

V. The same sin is forbidden, and the same duty required, in different, nay, in all the commandments, in different respects.

VI. No sin is ever to be committed in order to avoid a greater; but some duties required must give place to others. Our natural duties to God must be preferred to our natural duties to men, Acts iv. 19. v. 29. And the positive worship of God must sometimes give place to the natural duties of necessity and mercy towards men, Hos. vi. 6.

There is a difference between prohibitions and duties. One may never disobey a prohibition, but duties are to be performed when possible, and duties exist in a hierarchy. So you can't just invert a duty into a prohibition, at least not in the tradition that Runyan is appealing to.

The first objection in the second part of the book is, "But, didn't Jesus say we're supposed to 'render unto Caesar?' This, Runyan says, is a deliberately vague answer to avoid a trap. It does not say what we are supposed to render onto Caesar, except that it is what he is due, and not just to Caesar, but to everybody to whom something is due. What is Caesar due? The answer, Runyan says, is in Romans 13, which he has just explained. Since the government of the United States is under the Constitution, in that case Runyan says that rendering Caesar his due is "making sure that the government stays within the confines of the Constitution." (p. 49) But the idea that a constitution can be a power would be denied by the typical proponent of an Always Obey theory, who tend to think that power is delegated to persons.

The second objection is: "But, instead of Resisting Tyrants, shouldn't we submit where we can, and only resist if we are ordered to sin?" Up until this point Runyan has been refuting the Always Obey doctrine of submission to authority. But this is really a different theory of submission being introduced here, and we need to make some distinctions.

The first question one must answer in one of these theories is, what is the government? In other words, who has legitimacy? John Locke put it this way.

A Man can never be obliged in Conscience to submit to any Power, unless he can be satisfied who is the Person, who has a Right to Exercise that Power over him. If this were not so, there would be no distinction between Pirates and Lawful Princes. (*First Treatise*, 81, 121)

The problem can come up another way between two governments. Some states are now passing nullification laws, making Federal laws and regulations that extend beyond the Federal government's constitutional authority illegal in those states. So there is a choice of which government to obey, which could turn on which one you are more afraid of, or on which one has the legitimacy. The problem posed for the Christian is that Locke based legitimacy on consent. Government was originally established by the consent of the people, and that is the notion that our contemporary civil governments claims to operate under. (Also, consent implies limited government, because no one would consent to anything else, therefore legitimate government is always limited government.) But the Bible seems to teach that the legitimacy of government comes

from God, and so it would seem not to depend on consent. That, at least, is what the Christian Always Obey theories teach. There were some attempts in the Middle Ages to split this up and make power come from God and authority from the people (in the old Aristotelian meaning of the terms). Anyway, it is possible to create complicated theories that purport to acknowledge the place of both origins of authority. But if two governments are disputing the boundaries of the authority, and both appeal to the consent theory, how do you sort it out if you don't acknowledge consent as the source of authority?

The Obey When Possible theory is that there are commands from a legitimate government that are contrary to God's commands, and in that case we must obey God rather than man. Runyan is denying that the government is legitimate if it does not serve God, so he rejects the premise of this theory. Just as it is wrong to obey the devil, just because he is the devil and not because of the nature of his command, so it is wrong to obey a government that is an abomination, which according to Proverbs 16:12 is what a wicked ruler is. Runyan's next objection is one that does not apply to all versions of this theory. He says that is that is wrong to wait to resist "until I *personally* am order to sin." Some hold that as soon as the government begins to violate the rights of your neighbor it is necessary to speak out against the injustice and denounce the government's conduct, but not reject the government's authority or attempt to overthrow it. In fact these theories sometimes urge strong resistance to the state, as long as it does not reach the point of disobedience, and except when we are commanded to disobey God's command, and then we must disobey. Of course, from Runyan's point of view we are commanded to disobey such a state in the first place, so it is all moot.

Another objection is "So, are you saying we should all become criminals and anarchists as we disobey the government?" Runyan points out that not only is the government under God's law, but we are too, so we are always under the obligation to act lawfully, in terms of God's law, which is what the government should be enforcing anyway.

There are other theories of resistance to tyranny that base themselves on a different explanation of what this authority is that God has granted to government and how it reaches the government. One or them, for example, is that the authority comes from God's law, and the government administers this authority when and just so far as it governs by God's law. But to address these would be to complicate the book with political theory, and would be beside the purpose of refuting the Always Obey theories.

The third part of the book is Application. This is partly about attitude and partly some practical considerations.

If this book is reprinted in the future, I hope the author can rethink his arguments and clear some of them up. It would also help for him to address a few more points. I realize that the danger is that if he goes into theory he will lose the readers. He is probably gaining a lot of interest from a new audience. Things have gotten far beyond the abuses he lists in his book. For example the Federal government has created a disease and released it on the public with the support of some states in order to suppress their rights, destroy their livelihoods, crush dissent and steal an election. Everybody now knows that the government is coming after them.