

James M. Willson, *The Establishment and Limits of Civil Government: An Exposition of Romans 13:1-7* (American Vision, Inc., 2020) Originally published in 1853.

The book is essentially an extended analysis of the Romans passage, followed by a consideration of objections. There is also a Foreword by Gary DeMar and an Introduction by Archie P. Jones. DeMar mainly argues that the poor response of German churches to the assumption of power by the National Socialist Workers Party was due to a wrong view of Romans 13 and of Matthew 22:21 (“render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”). The evangelical culture (presumably he means both 1930s Germany and today’s America), DeMar says, is pietistic with an extremely narrow view of the authority of Jesus. This is no good in the face of a highly detailed and methodical plan by anti-Christian forces to take over a society. DeMar calls attention to the many levels of civil government which all are “governing authorities” of Romans 13, and should be used to limit central state action, and Christians need also to use “our voices and votes”. DeMar also points out that as Willson’s book came out so long ago, it is not compromised by involvement with recent political issues.

Archie Jones says that “Christians throughout the world are beset by civil governments which function more as ministries of Satan than as ministries of the living God.” In the case of America he blames Christians for allowing anti-Christian intellectuals to set the course of society and government for the last two hundred years or more. While he sees a great Christian influence up through the time of the founding of the American republic, by “1853 when the Rev. Mr. Willson published this work Christians had largely ceased to be salt and light to American society.. . . Despite the fact that civil government is a ministry of God, they had lost interest in it, as Willson rightly complains.” Christians then turned to revivalism, emotionalism and spurious revelations, and finally defeatist eschatology. He also cites all the un-Biblical reformers and ideologues who came on the scene with plans to transform society and social benefits that others were to pay for.

Meanwhile American Christians forgot the purpose of government—to serve God. Willson’s book “also highlights another important point made by the author and denied by too many Christians: the ‘good works’ and ‘evil works’ to which Paul refers have to do with ‘outward acts’ prohibited by *both tables of God’s law*.”

The author’s Preface summarized the historical circumstances of the theological disputes over the degree of submission or resistance to civil government in England in the latter seventeenth century. He takes particular note of the late defenders of the doctrine of non-resistance writing after the time when it was a life and death issue, these being Robert Haldane and Thomas Chalmers. He then notes “another class of expositors” who “still hold and teach, as the doctrine of this passage, that so long as a government exists, whatever be its character, it is entitled to, and may demand, in the name of God, a conscientious obedience to its laws, unless they conflict with the laws of God.” This view “gains no countenance from the teachings of Paul” as the passage only deals with a power “which answers in some good measure the ends of its institution.” (p. 6) To this he adds a quotation from Bishop Benjamin Hoadly to the same point.

The earlier chapters of the book are an examination and exposition of the text. Each chapter than ends with a section of Inferences or Remarks. Chapter 7 is a longer chapter answering objections, especially in the light of other texts of Scripture. There are five appendices where he gives a more detailed look at terminology or a point of interpretation and then a final “Essay on Submission to the Powers That Be.”

Willson begins the book proper with an analysis of the key vocabulary of the passage and a view of its usage elsewhere: powers, higher powers, and submission. In connection with this term, Paul commands a subjection “voluntarily, freely, and cheerfully”. Willson notes that there is another type of submission to despotic power. “So also, the Christian may be compelled to yield a kind of submission to overwhelming power.” But the language of Paul shows that such a power is not in view here, but “an obedience originating in an intelligent perception and appreciation of its character, design, and happy fruits.”

In the second chapter he considers what it means that the power is from God. There is a sense in which every power is from God, even that of Satan. “Does Paul mean no more than this? Assuredly he means something far different.” Subjection to every power because it has this basis “would invest with the sanctions of the divine name the most flagrant usurpation and the most unrelenting despotism.” Further, he notes that “Providence is not a rule of action.” Here he makes a passing reference to Garibaldi’s actions against the Papal States as clinching the point against automatic support of the political status quo. What Willson thinks Paul is saying is “that there is no authority properly exercised over men, but that which God has established.”

He then uses Biblical examples, quoting Hosea 8:4. “They have set up kings, but not by me; they have made princes, and I knew (approved) it not.” and Daniel’s depiction of the Roman Empire as a “beast”. He points out that if that beast were ordained of God, then the stone which smashes it would be different ordinations of God fighting each other. (Of course one could say that what was depicted was the establishment, duration, and end of a power, the whole course of its history ordained by God.)

He then argues that the injunction not to resist authority does not apply to authority that has exceeded its limits. Willson says that the first person to absolutely deny this and say that power must be obeyed in all circumstances was Hobbes, whose views scandalized England. On the other hand disobedience to legitimate government incurs divine punishment.

In the Inferences section of this chapter he touches on the topic of political theory.

It is a subtle question, and one that in some respects possess a practical importance—whether civil power is, in the aggregate, a collection made up of contributions of rights thrown in by individual members of the commonwealth—each resigning a portion of his own. By no means. No man has a right to take own own life, and yet society has the right to inflict capital punishment, and, moreover, such a notion is entirely inadmissible on another ground. Man was made for society, and, hence, so far is he from being necessarily restricted in his rights in the social state, that it is as a member of society alone, that he can enjoy all the privileges and perform all the duties of manhood. (p. 40)

In other words, Willson is rejecting natural rights theory in its modern forms. That the state derived its power of the sword from the member’s power of suicide was not held by such theories. They derived it from the right of self-defense or from a primitive right of punishment, or from an idea of unlimited liberty which everyone gave up, except the ruler. Willson’s other argument is that man was not made for a state of nature, so his rights are not derived from such a state.

He also argues against natural law being anything close to a sufficient guide to the laws that civil government must follow, and holds that revelation is necessary for this purpose.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul refers to the action of the government for good, and says that the ‘power’ is a minister for good. This Willson takes as not descriptive but a command about what the government should do. “Faithful to his calling and to the great interests of social and moral order, the upright civil functionary, whether in a higher or an inferior station, will not permit God’s authority to be impugned, or the interests of society to suffer, from unrestrained lawlessness—from flagrant breaches of the peace—from rampant immorality—from gross, avowed and open hostility to the name and law of God.” In the Inferences section Willson says: “It is evident that the Apostle enjoins subjection only to such governments as answer the ends of the institution of magistracy.” His second point under Inferences is “Civil government should extend its protection to every class, and particularly to the more feeble.” Under his exposition of this it is clear that he has in mind slavery, and it is the government of the United States that he is censuring. “3. That many, at least, of the existing governments of the world, have not claim to conscientious acknowledgment.” Here he explicitly goes after Austria as one such because of its religious persecution. Later in the book he returns to the point that the United States is another one, chiefly because of slavery. Also interesting is his point 8 which is not much acknowledged today: “The infliction of penal sanctions by national authorities is not solely for reformation, but, also, and even primarily, for the vindication of the law.” (p. 69)

Throughout these chapters it is fairly evident that Willson is upholding the view of civil government of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, that is, of the Westminster Confession without the revisions of 1788, weakening the obligation of the state to support the Christian church and doctrine. This is another basis for his objection to the government of the United States. His position on this point, therefore, matches that of only a tiny minority today. Some readers will have trouble sorting this out from the rest of what Willson has to say. If this is Paul’s meaning, then we note that it took 1,500 years before a state matching his description came into being.

In the essay on submission to civil government which forms the final appendix to the book, Willson once again takes up a bit of political theory. He says the humans are left free to choose the form of government to suit the times and the state of things so long as “all civil enactments are to be brought to scriptural test—none of these must run counter to the moral law.” (p. 149) And yet throughout the book he takes it as evident that obedience is not due to usurpers and oppressors, so he must have some ideas about how a just government could be formed.

There is a little book by Gordan Runyan, *Resistance to Tyrants: Romans 13 and the Christian Duty to Oppose Wicked Rulers*, which is roughly based on Willson’s book. Though very brief and extremely popular in style it possess two advantages over Willson’s book. First it does not get into the all the pre-1788 Presbyterian ideas about government, and second, it places Paul’s argument in Romans 13 into the context of Paul’s discussion up to that point, which is very helpful in understanding why Paul went into the subject of civil government the way he did.