



China Resource Center Organizational Policy Paper on Romans 13 **Mike Falkenstine, Executive Director**

One of the key elements of the issue of foreigner intervention in religious affairs in China is the Biblical imperatives that are found throughout Scripture. This paper is a through examination of Romans 13 and what this passage of Scripture says about how we as followers of Christ ought to relate to governments, and in our case, the Chinese Government. It is clear that as we obey governments, we obey God. So then why are so many foreigners willingly disobeying the Chinese governments' laws about foreigner involvement in religious affairs? Why do they feel they have to be clandestine in their ministry? What are they trying to hide? Aren't we called to let our light shine before men? And is there more the Bible says about this issue that gives them the Biblical authority to operate as they are? These are all questions that we feel are pertinent, and questions that we try to answer in this policy paper. This is such an important aspect of God's work in China that we cannot overlook or underestimate its importance. Let's dive headlong into this crucial issue.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”
Romans 13:1-7 (ESV, underline mine)

This is a tremendous passage of Scripture that gives us a great starting point into God's intention of why we have governmental structures and how we ought to relate to them as believers. This is also a passage of Scripture that is easy for Western Christians to ignore. Whether we are driving 15 miles over the speed limit or ministering inside the country of China, God has given us governmental authority for a reason. And because this passage of Scripture is a command, it deserves our full attention as we look at our involvement in Chinese religious affairs. In this passage of Scripture, Paul gives us encouragement to willingly place ourselves under the authority of our civil government- both in spirit and in deed. God gives us government to instill order and prevent anarchy. Governments exist because He willed them to exist and He actively establishes each and every government. It is easier for us to obey laws from a government that is ideologically democratic, but God in Romans 13 does not make a distinction between the forms of government. We must obey them all because He establishes them all. As such, it is clear from this passage in Romans 13 that those who serve in a governmental position are referred either as 'God's servants' and 'ministers of God' on three different occasions. That is really something, isn't it? It is hard at times to look at civil servants as God's servants as well. These civil servants purpose, according to Romans 13, is two fold: to do good and to commend what is good. Isn't that true overall? Most governmental employees are 'regular people.' They are doing their job to help and serve their country.

So it is clear in this passage that since God has ordained, instituted, and given authority to governments, resisting their authority is really resisting God. I certainly understand that there are times that a government will ask us to do something that goes against God's law, and that is a different situation. I will touch on this in a later section of this paper, but most of the time Romans 13 applies to our lives. As Matthew Henry wrote in his

commentary on this passage, *“However the persons (of the government) themselves may be wicked.... yet the just power which they have must be submitted to and obeyed.”*¹ And regardless of whether the laws make sense to us or not, rebellion against those laws takes us outside of the boundaries of authority that God has given to nations. When we rebel against government's laws, we do so willingly and knowing the consequences. For example, there is a street in my city that seems to be perfectly fitted for a 50 mph speed limit. Everyone drives 50 mph, and the 40 mph definitely seems too slow. But for whatever reason, the city traffic authorities have kept the 40 mph speed limit in place. I'm sure that they have a good reason for their rational. So if I continue to drive 50 mph, I am willingly disobeying the law. And I do so knowing that if I get caught driving 10 mph over the speed limit, there is a chance that I could get a ticket, which is a form of punishment because I would have to pay a fine. The situation in China is exactly the same. You can come to China and disregard Decree 144, the March 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs, and other pertinent laws and do ministry 'in hiding', but you do so knowing that there is a chance that you could get thrown out of the country because you disobeyed China's laws about foreigner involvement in religious affairs. The trouble we see with that is this: I'm concerned what we are saying when we blatantly disobey China's laws in this area. The government has set up certain laws by telling us as foreigners how we can and cannot be involved. So we know the laws as we go into China and in my opinion, to break those laws communicates a lack of biblical respect of authority and a poor understanding of Romans 13. This principle is reiterated in I Peter 2:13-14, ***“Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men; whether to the kind, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”*** (NIV) In addition, in Romans 13 Paul is clear that governmental authorities aren't out to get people who obey the laws. They only hold wrath for those who disobey the laws. Finally, Paul is also clear that we need to obey governments, not only to do what is right, but also out of conscience. In other words, in God's eyes it is the right thing to do. And with so many opportunities to work within the confines of Decree 144, our consciences can be clear as we are invited to participate as equal members with our Chinese brothers and sisters. As John McArthur writes in this commentary, *“Christianity and good citizenship go hand and hand.”*²

The second question in terms of the Biblical study of this issue is this: Are there any other Bible verses that seem to contradict or add more understanding to the principle in Romans 13? The most common of these verses is Acts 5:26-32, when Peter and the apostles appeared before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had forbade the apostles from preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem. In fact, they had already been imprisoned once and were freed by the Holy Spirit.

“Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (ESV)

This is an interesting passage of Scripture because as I first began to study it, it seems to contradict Romans 13 because Peter so clearly states that they *'must obey God rather than men.'* The question from this passage for me is: Are we supposed to submit to governmental authorities (which are full of 'men'), or are we supposed to boldly go out and proclaim the Gospel, regardless of what men and governments think? The answer to that question requires a deeper look at this passage. In particular, we need to look at who the Sanhedrin was and what role they played in society during the time that Acts was being lived out. The Sanhedrin was a Jewish religious legislative body whose authority came from the Romans, who were the ruling government of the day. In doing some research, I found out that they had several key characteristics. First, they were a political authority and had powers of jurisdiction as the supreme court of Jewish law, but could not impose the death penalty. They had the ability to administer the criminal law, had independent powers to police, they were empowered to judge cases that did not involve the death penalty. They received their authority from the Roman government. Because the Romans knew little about Jewish law and traditions, they allowed the high priests to serve as a 'middle authority' between them and the Jewish people. But for the sake of this paper, the question is: Was the Sanhedrin of this day the governing authority? Because if they were, then when Peter tells them that they must obey God rather than men, it is a clear cut example of when we as Christians can disobey governments' commands in favor of God's. This is why this issue is so important. Let's go even deeper: The King James version of the Bible translates the “governing authority” of the ESV as “higher powers” in Romans 13. There are two Greek words here that make up this idea. The first one is **huperecho**, which means

1. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991
2. John McArthur, *The McArthur New Testament Commentary Romans 9-16*, Moody Publishers, 1994.

higher or supreme. The second word here is **exousia**, which means authority, jurisdiction, power. We could then translate these two words as 'Supreme higher authority.' This is key because it is clear that the Sanhedrin's power was limited to the extent that the Romans would allow them to have power. As Merrill Unger writes in his Bible Dictionary, ***“Thus the Sanhedrin had a tolerably extensive jurisdiction, the serious restriction being that the Roman authorities could at any time take the initiative and proceed independently.”*** He also writes that the Romans would “impose certain restrictions” on the Sanhedrin. This principle that the Sanhedrin's power was limited is showed again in John 18:28-37 when the high priests had no governmental authority to judge Jesus, who they viewed as a criminal. They had to bring him to Pilate, who was the Roman governor. The high priests were not the “supreme authority,” they were a secondary authority. When Peter then gave his response, “We must Obey God, not man,” he was not disobeying an order just given by a governmental authority, but to a group of legalistic men who only had limited power. They were adhering to the principle we find in Romans 13, which is key to this discussion.

Our submission has limits

Our submission to governmental authorities does have its limits. There are times when our obedience to the state would clearly call for us to be disobedient to God. Whenever God's laws are in direct conflict with the laws of the state, civil disobedience is our duty as Christians. This brings us to two important questions in this paper: The first is 'Does the Chinese governmental religious affairs regulations ask us to disobey God's law?' This is a difficult question, but I would argue strongly that the Chinese governmental religious affairs regulations do not ask us to disobey God's law. Because what are the Chinese governmental religious affairs regulations saying, in a nutshell? The Chinese government is saying to us that they want to hold the keys of ownership of the church to themselves and that we can be involved on their terms. This is their church. I've often be perplexed at the response of foreigners when I talk with them about this issue because having the Chinese church own their own church is the goal of missions. To have a people group self-sustain their own church, without the support of outsiders is what a missionary prays for and works toward. To put this issue into deeper perspective, imagine what you would think if the 'tables were turned' and Chinese Christian missionaries wanted to minister in your community in your city. Imagine them treating us like we've been known to treat them. I bet that if some of my Chinese Christian friends walked into your church in your home city and told your elder board that they were taking over all evangelism and discipleship programs, your church would react in a very similar way as what we see in the Chinese governmental religious affairs regulations. This may seem to be a ridiculous example, but isn't it really what some foreigners want to do in China? What too many times we communicate is that we know better than the Chinese Christians, so we should be able to do as we please. The second point here is that as Christians, we have a duty, a responsibility to live our lives as 'salt and light.' Remember Jesus' words in the book of Matthew:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:13-16 (ESV)

In this passage of Scripture, Jesus calls us to season those lost souls around us and to act as a beacon of light for those who are yet without Christ. And yet, if we are so scared of being 'found out' by the Chinese government for what we are doing, how can we possibly fulfill this command? There is something inherent in the Christian that we must be salt and light. If you have truly accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you have no other choice. As we walk daily with Christ, we will be salt and light. What we do with that fruit is up to us. Will we put our light under a basket so that we will be safe from the Chinese government? We have chosen to treat the Chinese governmental officials with respect and take a more open approach to ministry. We believe that this verse suggests that in order for a ministry to stay hidden, it must stay small. If a ministry becomes large, it cannot be hidden. We've chosen to look and see all that is possible in China today, rather than focus on the few things that are not possible.