

SUBMITTING TO THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES TODAY

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1. INTRODUCTORY

In Southern Africa, as is often the case in the rest of Africa, the relationship between "church and state" is an important one. This is the case not only because of the importance of politics in the lives of (South) Africans, but especially because of the churches' involvement in human relations and society. It is therefore all the more surprising that such few exegetical studies were done in this field in the past two decades. Some historical ("The Church Struggle" of De Gruchy is a good example) and some ethical studies lightens this somewhat dark picture.

There are *two fundamental issues* at stake in the relationship between "church and state": on the one hand the role/office/task of the civil authorities¹, and on the other the attitude and responsibilities of christian citizens toward the civil authorities. The latter demands our attention in this article, especially the responsibility to submit to the authorities. Two other responsibilities which can be identified are the praying for those in authority and the prophetic responsibility.

The command to submit² to the civil authorities (Rm 13, Tt 3 and 1 Pt 2) calls up different visions in the minds of different people: some see it as *absolute subjection*, others as a *necessary evil* the christian has to contend with. A study of these New Testament passages, especially in their context, presents a total different and refreshing picture — one which definitely has something to say for the believing South African of 1983.

2. THE EXEGESIS OF THE "SUBMITTING PASSAGES"

Careful and systematic exegesis of the passages in question, taking into account their context and structural unity with the rest of the letters in which they appear, brought forward the following perspectives:

— submission to the civil authorities means first and foremost that the believer places himself *under and in the order* of the civil ("state") authorities; the context of especially Rm 13 points to "hypo-taxis" (literally "under the order") as the best possible meaning of the clause:

— this submission should be in a *willing, voluntary* (Rm 13:5 " . . . for conscience sake" and 1 Pt. 2:13" . . . for the Lord's sake"), and *convinced* way (of especially the convinced character of the Greek word for 'obedience' in Tt. 3:1, which is closely connected to submission);

— one of the most prominent "themes" in all of these passages is that of "*good works*", meaning *works of faith* (cf Rm. 12:21, 13:3c, 8; Tt 2:7; 14, 3:1c, 8c 14; 1 Pt. 2:12, 14, 15, 20). It is clear that one form of good works is the submission to the civil authorities, making the submission a part of the believer's life of faith;

— the *concrete forms of submission* in Rm 13 is the payment of taxes, “fear” (a better translation would be “respect”) and honour; in Tt 3 : 8c the submission is to be materialized in amongst other things, in the total service to the neighbour (as part of the “world” on the same level as the civil authorities), and in 1 Pt. 2 : 13, 17 the form of the submission is obedience and honour.

3. THE OBJECTS OF THE SUBMISSION

Submission is due to all authority, but for our purpose it is especially due to:

- *institutions of civil authority* (cf the use of “*eksousia*” in Rm. 13 : 1, 2 and Tt 3 : 1);
- *persons* in position of civil authority, because of their office, calling by and responsibility to God (cf “*archontes*” in Rm. 13 : 3, Tt 3 : 1 and especially 1 Pt. 2 : 13);
- *decrees* of civil authority, i.e. the result of the acts of civil authority (cf 1 Pt. 2 : 13).

4. THE BASIS AND REASONS FOR THE SUBMISSION

There are numerous reasons for the submission, but the *basis of all of them is God* — his command to the believer, his calling of civil authorities as his servants (“*diakonos*”) and their responsibility to Him. In the relevant passages the basis is put into words: “*for conscience sake*” (Rm 13 : 5) and “*for the Lord’s sake*” (1 Pt. 2 : 13).

The reasons for the submission flowing from this basis, are the fact that God ordained (“*created*”) the civil authorities, the fact that He gives them the commission to be “*to the good*” of the believer (seen especially in law, order and peace), and the fact that He “*willed*” the civil authorities as his servants.

5. THE CHARACTER OF THE SUBMISSION

Without repeating the matters raised in par. 2, it is important to elaborate on the relation between submission and works of faith. It can be said that the submission is *qualified* as to its nature by *works of faith*. Apart from the fact that it is part of the believer’s life of gratitude to submit, the submission is more than merely being a “*good citizen*” — it is characterized by the “*faithlike*” quality. The conduct of the believer towards the civil authorities should (only) be in the form of good works of faith, in christian liberty (1 Pt. 2 : 16) and as part of the gratitude to God for the salvation in Christ (Tt 3 : 3-8). In addition to this, obedience to the civil authorities (where applicable as a form of submission) should have a special character, that of the *conviction that God commands it* (Tt 3 : 1, cf of the meaning of “*peitharchein*”).

6. THE LIMITATION OF THE SUBMISSION

The critical reader would have thought by now that a word about the limitation of the submission is necessary. And the submission to the civil authorities is indeed not absolute. Firstly there is a “*built-in*” limitation in the passages themselves. The fact that submission is commanded by the same God who instituted the authorities and uses

them as servants for the good of His children, is in itself a limitation. This is enhanced by the fact of the believer's *primary stewardhood and obedience to God* (1 Pt. 2 : 16) and the greater fear (as against the honour of men) owed to God (1 Pt 2 : 17). Furthermore the submission is especially limited by its form as good works of faith. This means that the submission can never be blind and/or absolute, total subjection. If the believer lives his life of gratitude, doing good works of faith, he will of necessity submit to the civil authorities. The implication on the reverse side is clear: the believer *may not do "evil works"* (of unbelief), not even to submit to the civil authorities or to obey them and their commands. An explanatory word about the "evil works" is necessary: every deed opposed to God's commands in Scripture, or contrary to the sense of believing gratitude shall be considered not a good work of faith, and therefore in God's eye evil and resulting from disobedience and unbelief.

Secondly, and even more conclusively, is the limitation of the submission given in Ac 4 and 5, where the apostle Peter talks of the "*greater obedience*" to God, when he tells the Sanhedrin: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (KJV)³. A short evaluation of these statements is necessary.

It is important to notice that Peter mentions a greater obedience to God and *not* (merely) *disobedience to men*: he therefore does not deny the civil authorities the submission owed to them, but emphasizes that the christian has a greater and more important obedience (and submission). His words to the Sanhedrin may not be taken as spoken to (merely) church leaders and therefore not applicable to the civil authorities: the Sanhedrin functioned as the "senate and supreme court of the Jewish nation" (FF Bruce, Commentary on Acts, 1976 : 97), and was acknowledged by the Romans as such.

From the exegesis of this and other relevant NT passages it is clear that the greater obedience to God is founded in the absolute sovereignty of Christ (cf Mt. 28 : 18, Col 1 : 16, 2 : 10, 15) and the relativity of human authority compared to that of God. But we find more illuminating results when we ask under what circumstances the greater obedience comes into effect. The background and the exegesis of the passage in Acts and other relevant passages indicates that when:

- the *acknowledgement and worship* of the triune God (cf the evil civil authority of Rev. 13);
- the *preaching* of and the witnessing to *the gospel* of Jesus Christ ("For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" Ac 4 : 20, also Ac 5 : 32); and
- the *christian's life* of thanksgiving through good works of faith (cf the submitting passages, Peter and the apostle's healing of people in the Name of Jesus) *is interfered with or prohibited* (even from the side of the civil authorities) the christian cannot do anything else but to be more obedient to God and therefore not obey such commands or prohibitions.

On the other hand, and this admittedly requires further study, the greater obedience to God has a distinctive and provisional

character. It is the writer's conviction that the greater obedience *cannot be equated with civil disobedience* and that the latter may not be propagated by christians with reference to Ac 4 and 5.⁴ The greater obedience to God is;

- *non-violent* (cf the reaction of the apostles after their release from prison, Ac 5 : 26);
- *non-reactinary and non-demonstrative* (especially the positive nature of the greater obedience demands this);
- done out of faith and from being filled with the Spirit (cf the apostle's prayerful consideration of the situation, Ac 4 : 24 and the result of this prayer, Ac 4 : 31).

7. THE AIM OF THE SUBMISSION

For the sake of completeness, the aims of the submission should be noted as the prevention and ending of the slander of the unbelievers (1 Pt. 2 : 15). and the changing of their ignorance. Ultimately the submission has a *missionary* and therefore glorifying purpose: *the glorifying of God.*

8. THE RELEVANCE OF THE SUBMISSION FOR TODAY

There are two parties concerned with the submission: the church and the civil authorities.

In connection with the *church*, it is necessary to point out (even, because of lack of space, only in passing) that the reformed confessions also acknowledge the submission to the authorities and its limitations. The 36 st article of the Belgic Confession explicitly mentions the submission and qualifies it with the fact that it should be done in everything that is not in conflict with the Word of God. The Westminster Confession) (art. 23) asks "obedience" and subjection "to their authority for conscience' sake, but is only implicitly concerned with the greater obedience when it speaks of "lawful commands" which should be obeyed. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 39) mentions the submission in the treatment of the fifth commandment.

On the institutional level, the command to submit has implications in connection with the church's confession(s). Without elaborating on art 36 of the Belgic Confession, it is noteworthy that this article is the most important reformed confession on the subject of relationship of church and civil authorities. In a time of turbulence in church matters, as well as on the socio-political level, the question can be put legitimately: is this confession alone still sufficient to still the waters and let the church confess what the Bible says in this regard? In a time when the predestination was questioned, the reformed churches gathered (Dordrecht 1618-9) to produce the Confession of Dordt. When it is kept in mind that the submission is not merely a peripheral matter, but concerns the believer's life of good works, as part of his sanctification, the necessity for study by the "institutional" church is certain.

In the *everyday lives of christians* the submission also has important implications. The perspective that the submission is part of the believer's life of gratitude is very significant in this respect.

This puts the submission to the civil authorities on a level *above party politics*, white and black politics and ideological differences. The command is addressed to all believers, with the qualification that only good works of faith are true submission, and that evil works (contrary to Scripture) cannot be submission — and should not be submission.

A further important aspect is the perspective of total community involvement of the believer, as part of the command to submit: the christian should *serve the community*. In a country like ours, where polarization (even between christians) and poverty are growing, the responsibility of the christian is to *do* the Gospel through visible works of reconciliation and charity.

In practice this means that South African christians should *respect* the office and persons of the civil authorities, even if they do not agree politically and even if they have not voted for them. On the other hand the *limitation on the submission* demands that christians discern prayerfully and serenely in which cases greater obedience is necessary with regard to the authorities and their decrees. The way in which one is more obedient to God should be in accordance with the Scriptural principles. Here further ethical study is urgently needed.

The submission which is owed to them also has *implications for the civil authorities*. It burdens them with the responsibility to be servants of God, to the good of (all) christians. Their actions should gain and keep the respect of the citizens, and show that they are worthy of the submission. This should be true of their person office and actions. With regard to the limitation on the submission, it is important for (at least believing) persons in authority to realize that the believer has a responsibility to be more obedient to God. Laws and regulations impeding and obstructing the worshipping of God, the proclaiming of the Gospel and the putting into practice the faith of christians through good works, will (and should) have *greater obedience to God* as a result. This point naturally raises interesting and pressing questions concerning *some South African legislation* (not to mention the practice in many “whites only” churches). To prevent this, dialogue amongst other things, is necessary between (especially the state) authorities and the christian churches.

These are a few perspectives on the responsibility of the christian to submit to the authorities. Presumably there are numerous issues flowing from these which demand our urgent attention. With these in mind, christians can go to the more practical side, always keeping in mind that the submission — and the greater obedience to God — has a ultimate aim the glory of the true God.

1. This writer prefers the term “civil authorities” to the more abstract and impersonal “state”. The reasons for this preference are the view of Scripture that those in government have a Godgiven office and personal responsibility, and the fact that the abstraction “state” negates this and contributes to vagueness and neutrality.
2. Although most English translations use “submit”, the Latin word “subordinatio” is a far better translation of the Greek verb “hypotasso”. Be-

cause of the negative connotation of the English "subordination", the terms "submit" and "submission" is used, but with the force of "subordination"

3. This translation unfortunately does not bring forward the sense of the Greek word that is used to say "more" ("million"); the Afrikaans "Ons moet aan God *meer* gehoorsaam wees as aan die mense" is a better translation.
4. There may be other grounds for civil disobedience (although I personally doubt it), but a study of the roots (definitely unchristian and a least unreformed) and methods of civil disobedience convinced me that it is not the way of the (reformed) christian.

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