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Romans 13:1–7 in relation to Nigerian Christians' attitudes towards social activism

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Romans 13:1–7 teaches absolute submission to constituted authorities, for which reason some Christians argue against challenging government orders or policies. There are problems with this position in view because of the fact that not all governments can be validly said to have been constituted by God; it is also clear that sometimes government policies do not only neglect, but also actually violate the rights of the people. Employing the exegetical study and analytical approach, this article examined the passage in relation to Nigerian Christians' attitudes to social activism. The study revealed that in Romans 13:1, Paul made a general statement that does not necessarily preclude exceptions. The examination of the passage in its historical context also showed that Paul must have been influenced by the benevolent nature of the contemporary Roman government. Paul might have written differently if he wrote after 62 CE when Nero began his repressive policies. Hence, this text is interpreted out of context, if it is given a general application. Such an application would also contradict the teaching of the Bible to confront social injustice. The passage is applied to Nigeria, assessing what ought to be the attitude of Nigerian Christians to social activism, given particularly the prevalent economic inequalities in the country.

Keywords: Social activism; Christians; The Book of Romans; Nigeria; Human Rights.

Introduction

In Romans 13:1–7, Paul teaches that Christians should submit to constituted authorities, because they are constituted by God. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad; they are God's servants for the good of the citizens. Christians must be subject to authorities not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. It is for the same reason that they pay taxes to the authorities. As a further demonstration of submission, Christians should render to all persons what is due to them: taxes, revenue, respect and honour.

In the history of the interpretation of this passage, 'the dominant questions have concerned the relationship between the passage and the actual experience of government' (Gaventa 2017:12). In Nigeria, as in many other places, some Christians hold onto a literal interpretation of the text, arguing against disobeying government policies unless obedience to them would warrant a direct disobedience of God's own commandment. Others view this position as obviously problematic given the fact that not all governments act according to the will of God. Confusion is thus created as to the right Christian attitude to political authorities, especially when they come up with policies that run contrary to people's rights. Hence, since the inception of Christianity, few biblical texts 'have more directly effected Christian action towards' political authorities (Thompson 2015:1). Perhaps because of this confusion, 'the history of the interpretation of Rom. 13:1–7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning' (Moo 1996:806). Romans 13:1–7 is therefore most relevant in determining Christian attitude to social activism, because activism usually involves civil disobedience to government policies that are deemed as inappropriate or as violating the rights of the people. A study of this text is highly relevant in Nigeria where social activism is often warranted because of the frequent violation of the citizens' rights particularly from the economic perspective. Therefore, employing the exegetical study and analytical approach, this article assesses the relevance of Romans 13:1–7 for Christian attitude to social activism in Nigeria. To achieve this aim, the article begins by examining the concept of social activism and Christian attitude to it. It goes on to do an exegesis of the text and relates it to the general position of the Bible on social justice. Finally, the article draws out the implication of the study for Christians' attitude to social activism in Nigeria.

Christians and social activism

Activism is an action carried out on behalf of a cause, usually going beyond conventional or routine practice, and 'typically being more energetic, passionate, innovative, and committed'

(Martin 2007:n.p.). Social activism is therefore defined as an organised action embarked upon by a group with a view to improving certain social conditions without regard to normative status (Parsons 1937). Social activism may occur in the context of a nation, 'an organization, such as a corporation, government department, political party, or labor union' (Martin 2007:n.p.). Social activism is usually carried out to challenge policies and practices that the activists deem inappropriate or as violating their rights or those of others, thereby 'trying to achieve a social goal, not [*necessarily*] to obtain power themselves' (Martin 2007:n.p.). In this way, social activists may be mediators between establishments and workers or governing authorities and the masses. According to Taib (n.d.), 'social activists act as intermediaries between the ideals of society and the actual organizing social, political, religious and economic life of members of a community, society or nation'.

> Usually, the methods of carrying out social activism are the nonviolent types in form of public protests, such as rallies, marches, or public meetings [*which may involve*] speeches, slogans, banners, picketing, singing … [*or*] noncooperation, such as disobeying social customs, producers' boycott, withdrawal of bank deposits, and a wide variety of strikes. (Martin 2007:n.p.)

Civil disobedience is a very regular form of social activism. It is 'an act of deliberate disobedience to laws or policies of a state with the aim of advocating a change or cancellation of those laws or policies' (Adelakun 2016:19). As expressed by Redekop (2001:n.p.), civil disobedience is 'a conscientious, public, non-violent act contrary to law'. Thus, the intent of a civil disobedience is to draw attention to some policy or action of government or an organisation with a view to having it changed. Those engaged in the action generally do so, because the policy in question runs contrary to their conscience or rights and those of others. However, sometimes activism may be violent in forms such as attacks on persons or physical property of government or organisation. In recent times, cyber activism has emerged, which:

> … involves using the Internet to communicate and organize traditional actions and as a direct form of activism itself, such as bombarding a website or sending large files to slow down a system. (Martin 2007:n.p.)

Throughout history, social activism has been witnessed in every sort of political system. For example, in the United States in the 1960s 'a new understanding of activism emerged as a rational and acceptable democratic option of protest or appeal' (Olson 1965:n.p.). In the Western world, activism has had major impacts through social movements such as the Labour Movement, the Women's Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Movement (Meyer & Tarrow 1998). It has 'played a major role in ending slavery, challenging dictatorships, protecting workers from exploitation, protecting the environment, promoting equality for women, opposing racism, and many other important issues' (Martin 2007:n.p.).

Today, some Christians argue that social activism is contrary to the Bible, – an argument that is based on several texts, particularly Romans 13:1–7. Hunt (1998) claims that:

> … there is not one example in the entire Bible of political or social activism ever being advocated or used by God's people … [*It is true that*] there are numerous cases of *civil disobedience* in Scripture but it was *never* engaged in for the purpose of forcing an ungodly society to obey biblical principles. (n.p.)

Therefore, social activism 'is in contrast with the biblical injunctions except where disobedience to the human government would be pertinent so as to obey God's command' as in the case of Peter and other apostles in Acts 4:18–20 and 5:29 (Uzoigwe 2011:75). Hunt further argues that Christ consistently rebuked Israel's religious leaders, but he never spoke out against the injustices of Roman civil authority. Jesus did not 'advocate, organize, or engage in any public protests to pressure Rome into changing its corrupt system' (Hunt 1998:n.p.). Rather, he submitted to unjust authorities, as Romans 13 tells us what we should do today. Therefore, instead of protesters, what contemporary Christendom needs are prophets like Enoch, Noah and preachers of righteousness to call the world to repentance:

> Christian activism is not Christian. [*Rather*] it represents a detour from the straight path the church is to walk before the world. It can confuse the real issues, lead to compromise and unholy alliances, and divert time and effort that would better be used in proclaiming the gospel. (Hunt 1998:n.p.)

Similarly, Whelchel (2015) reports that:

> Fundamentalist Christians in America largely retreated from the public square and any kind of social action during the first part of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, as Christian attempts like the Moral Majority failed to positively re-engage culture, many Christian leaders disparaged Christian social activism, saying it detracted from the fundamental responsibility of proclaiming the gospel. (n.p.)

In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims alike engage in social activism, to challenge unpopular policies of government such as increase in the price of fuel. The labour unions are well known for their strike actions for, among other demands, the increase in wages. For most parts of 2018, many of the Christian denominations staged protests against mass killings by herdsmen (Kayode-Adedeji & Mohammed 2018). However, it is important to note that, occasionally, some Christians who condemn social activism, cite the Romans 13 passage. For example, in 2017, my branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) went on strike to demand for salary arrears and some other entitlements. At a point, when the state government ordered members to go back to work or lose their jobs, a few Christians complied with the order, claiming that the Bible says they must obey constituted authorities. This attitude tallies with the opinion of Uzoigwe (2011) as mentioned earlier, that civil disobedience is not in conformity with biblical injunctions unless in instances where government order detracts from God's command. Her (Uzoigwe 2011:75) premise is that 'The authority that rulers possess comes from God. Man is just but a caretaker that must in turn account for his stewardship.' To this end, this article undertakes a thorough study of Romans 13:1–7 with a view to assessing its relevance for Christian attitudes towards

social activism in Nigeria. For a proper understanding of the text, this article has to take into account the relation of Paul, the author, to the Roman church.

Paul and the church in Rome

Unlike some of the other epistles of Paul, which he addressed to churches he founded himself, Paul wrote the book of Romans to a church he did not establish. Evidence in the book indicates that he had, in fact, not visited this church at the time he wrote the letter, but only longed to preach in Rome on his way to Spain (Uzoigwe 2011:37; cf. Rm 1:15; 15:22–29). The references cited depict 'Paul's imminent arrival in Rome, en route to the virgin mission field that lay in the western reaches of the Empire, namely Spain' (Timmins 2018:389). Romans 15:24 suggests that Paul intends to visit and enlist the support of the Roman Christians on his way to Spain. There is internal evidence that Paul most probably wrote this letter from Corinth. In Romans 16, he sends greetings to numerous members of the Roman church who appear to have been his previous acquaintances, among whom is Gaius, described as host to him (Paul) and the whole church (v. 23), because Paul was staying with Gaius in Corinth at the time of writing. This individual has been identified by some as Titius Justus, mentioned in Acts 18:7, whom the apostle had lodged with in Corinth during his missionary work in that city (Sackey 2011:34). Much evidence attests to Paul's stay in Corinth (2 Cor 13:1, 10), which has been popularly fixed at the end of his third missionary journey to Greece (Thompson 2015:3; cf. Ac 20:3–6). To this end, many have suggested that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in Corinth between 56 and 58 CE (Moo 1994:1115; Sackey 2011:34; Uzoigwe 2011:37). Bruce (1985:13) fixed the date specifically to 'during the winter of AD 56–57 which Paul spent at Corinth'.

As mentioned earlier, Paul sends greetings to many members of the Roman church (Rm 16), whereas he had never been to Rome at the time of writing. It is suggested that Paul should have come to know these persons during his previous missionary activities east of the Mediterranean, particularly at Corinth. Paul's acquaintance with these individuals is probably linked with the event of the edict of Emperor Claudius in 49 CE by which all Jews were expelled from Rome over constant rioting at the instigation of 'Chrestus'. This incident is most likely a reference 'to violent debates within the Jewish communities over the claims of Christians that Jesus was the "Christ" [*in Greek Christos*], corrupted here as "Chrestus"' (Moo 1994:1115; cf. Thompson 2015:3). This expulsion would have included Jewish Christians such as Priscilla and Aquila who had left Rome for Corinth on account of the edict (Ac 18:1–3; cf. Bruce 1985:17; Winter 1994:1161). Bruce (1985:17) opines that Priscilla and Aquila were most likely Christians before they met Paul and were probably members of the original Roman group of believers. At the time of Paul's writing, many of these Jews were probably back in Rome – an event that was well known to him (Bruce 1985:17; Sackey 2011:30; Uzoigwe 2011:37). Thus, prior to the edict of Claudius and Paul's letter, 'the Jewish community in Rome had played a major role in the formation of the Christian congregation' in that city (Sackey 2011:26). Bruce (1985:16) notes that Jewish families had been part of the Diaspora in Rome as early as the 2nd century BCE before Pompey added to their numbers in consequence of his conquest of Judaea in 63 BCE. In 59 BCE, Cicero makes reference to the size and influence of the Jewish colony in Rome. Before the edict of Claudius in 49 CE mentioned earlier, in 19 CE 'the Jews of Rome had been expelled from the city by a decree of Emperor Tiberius, but in a few years they were back in as great numbers as ever' (Bruce 1985:16). By the late 50s CE, the Jewish 'community [*in Rome*] … numbered between 15 000 and 60 000' (Sackey 2011:26).

How the Christian congregation in Rome emerged before Claudius' edict is not clear, but Acts 2:10 makes reference to the presence of Jews and Proselytes from Rome in Jerusalem on the day of the Pentecost – the date Bruce (1985:15) suggests as 30 CE. It is therefore plausibly suggested that Jewish pilgrims from Rome, who were converted through the preaching of Peter on that day, planted the gospel among the Jewish population back in the capital city (Moo 1994:1115; Thompson 2015:3). It was formerly suggested that Paul's audience in Rome was composed only of Jewish Christians (Jewett 2007:70), but internal evidence within the book (cf. Rm 1:13; 15:14–19) indicates that the Roman church also included Gentiles. Bruce (1985:17) states that, in 57 CE, 'the Christians in Rome included not only Jewish but Gentile believers'. However, the expulsion of 49 CE would have had a significant effect on the composition of the Christian community in Rome in that the Gentiles who had hitherto been in the minority would now be left as the only Christians in the city (Moo 1994:1115). Hence, although Jews had been allowed to go back to Rome, at the time of Paul's writing 'gentiles were in the majority in the church, and had come to dominate both its leadership and theological tone' (Moo 1994:1115; cf. Bruce 1985:17; Sackey 2011:39).

An exegesis of Romans 13:1–7

The book of Romans presents a variety of subjects loosely connected and thus viewed differently by different authors, for which reason almost every author has a different approach to its outline. For instance, Moo (1994:1118) divides the book into four major parts, in which Paul discusses the gospel of Christ as it relates to righteousness, salvation, Israel and the transformation of life. Thompson (2015:7) has three parts. The first eight chapters deal with a Christian enchiridion; the second section concerns the role of Judaism in relation to the gospel (Romans 9–11); and the final section includes principles and concepts for Christian living (Rm 12–15). Most authors place Romans 13, which begins from 12:1, in the last major part and recognise Romans 13:1–7 as dealing with Christians' responsibility towards civil authorities. However, the issue of the relation of Romans 13:1–7 to its literary

context has been a subject of debate among New Testament scholars. Appearing in the midst of poetic exhortations on love, the text appears to some:

> … to occur abruptly with seemingly little connection in the subject matter. [*Hence*] some scholars [*have*] also called the vocabulary of 13:1–7 un-Pauline, all to suggest that this text has been redacted. (Thompson 2015:9)

For instance, Morrison (n.d.) regards this unit as a parenthesis inserted by Paul, independent of its context. He states: 'Since in Romans 12:9–21 the different items are only loosely connected a close logical connection between 13:1–7 and its context is hardly to be expected' (cited in Sackey 2011:39). In the opinion of Kasemann (1980), the unit is an independent block:

> … an alien body in Paul's exhortation [*therefore*] … it has to be expounded in terms of itself, and only subsequently, in the light of 12:1 f., can it be understood as an instruction on the theme of Christian worship in everyday world. (p. 352)

However, Thompson (2015:7) asserts that Romans 13:1–7 is in harmony with its literary context in view of contextual and stylistic considerations. Concerning its immediate literary context, in Thompson's view, the passage is in harmony with Paul's final section on Christian living which begins from Romans 12:1. In Romans 12:1–21, he instructs Christians not to conform to the patterns of this world; they should be humble, particularly in discharging their roles in the church and must live in love. Paul also teaches that sanctified living in general means overcoming evil with good. Then come Romans 13:1–7 on Christians' attitude to government, after which the apostle continues with his theme of love in the Christian life. Christians must pay all debts except the debt of love to one another (Rm 13:8). Thompson (2015:7) emphasises, 'And so we find the themes directly before and after Romans 13:1–7 dealing with Christian living, especially … towards unbelievers.' Thus, the scholar interprets Romans 13:1–7 as part of the teaching on showing love to unbelievers. He states:

> An address concerning Christians and their response to earthly authorities is exemplary for illustrating Paul's thoughts on loving unbelievers through acts of humility … and living very differently than unbelievers. (p. 8)

Stylistic features, which Thompson finds, linking Romans 13:1–7 with its immediate context, include the recursion of *kakos* [bad] and *agathos* [good] in 12:21 and 13:3, 4 – each of the terms dealing with the ethical action of Christians towards unbelievers in both contexts. While this debate is not important for the focus of this article, it should be stated that the language of Romans 13:1–7 is clearly different from that of love towards unbelievers; rather, the text is clearly an order to obey political authorities. Kasemann (1980) seems to be right when he says, as noted earlier, that only broadly, in light of Romans 12:1 and further, Romans 13:1–7 can be understood as an instruction on the theme of Christian everyday living. Therefore, the text 'has to be expounded in terms of itself' (Kasemann 1980:352).

Behind Paul's injunction in Romans 13:1–7 lie certain basic principles. Firstly, in verse 1, he instructs Christians to be subject to the governing authorities, because all authorities are instituted by God. Here, because *exousia* [authority] appears with *huperechō* [to govern], the term refers to civil authorities (Thompson 2015:12). In view of the reference to *pasa psuchē* [every soul] and the authorities that all people are governed by, Paul must be 'referring to the abstract class of civil authority encompassing all governing personnel and institutions' (Thompson 2015:12). This is in contrast to the suggestion by some that *exousiai* [authorities] here connotes angelic powers. Their argument is that Paul is demanding obedience to political authorities in view of the heavenly powers which are embodied in them or which stand behind them (Kasemann 1980:353). However, this suggestion is inappropriate, because the passage is clear and does not, in any way, lend itself to a figurative interpretation. Moreover, 'in the authentic Pauline letters [*apart from Heb 1:14*], angelic powers are not spoken of as servants in the divine creation but as forces … hostile to the community and the faith' (Kasemann 1980:353). To further debunk the argument for angelic powers, Kasemann (1980:353) points out that, in Romans 13:1–7, the apostle is using the vocabulary of Hellenistic administration. For instance, the phrase *exousiai tetagmenai* [instituted or appointed authorities] describes prominent Roman officials (Kasemann 1980:353). Gaventa (2017:15) plausibly explains Paul's concept of authorities being established by God, using Paul's reference to Pharaoh as an illustration. In Romans 9:17, Paul cites selectively from God's words to Pharaoh in Exodus – so much so that where the Septuagint (LXX) reads 'you have been kept' (*dietērēthēs* – Ex 9:16), Paul reads, 'I raised you up' (*exēgeira se*). Paul is thus saying that God raised Pharaoh up in order to demonstrate his (God's) power in him. In this way he emphasises God's role in putting the Egyptian ruler in place as an authority; Pharaoh is no more than God's passive instrument. Therefore, Gaventa (2017) states:

> To say that authority is established by God is to make a statement about God rather than about any authority or ruler. Pharaoh is of no interest to Paul apart from God's action in him, and the same would be said of the authorities in Rom 13. Taking Pharaoh into account confirms that, when Paul identifies the authorities as established by God, Paul is not exalting the authorities – he is instead putting them in their place, their subordinate place. (p. 16)

The verb *to submit* is the translation of the Greek *hupotassesthō* which is said to be 'a gnomic present used to state a general, timeless fact or idea. Here Paul … is using a gnomic present to declare a general fact' which he will go ahead to substantiate (Thompson 2015:13). Thompson (2015:14) asserts that, from Paul's substantiation in Romans 13:1–7, compliance is certainly the dominant feature of submission. For instance, as will be seen in Romans 13:6, Paul highlights compliance to taxation. Therefore, by submission Paul means that Christians must comply with the ordinances of government. It is uncertain, however, if Paul means absolute compliance. There is the suggestion that in Romans 13:1 Paul simply states the Jewish belief well attested in the Old Testament,

namely that God ordained all civil authorities (Is 45:1; Jr 25:9; Dn 4:32), and the Jews in Rome would have thus understood him (Keener 1993:441). Another opinion is that loyalty to the state was a standard literary topic among ancient writers (Keener 1993:441). Paul's instruction then is 'framed in traditional, conventional terms circulating in Hellenistic Jewish Diaspora communities' (Byrene & Harrington 1996, cited in Uzoigwe 2011:44). Credence to the fact that Paul might be giving a general instruction on submission to constituted authorities, which his audience was familiar with, is found in the similar instructions in 1 Peter 2:13–17 and Titus 3:1–2 (cf. 1 Tm 2:1–3). The closeness in these texts indicates 'that here we are dealing with an attitude, a set pattern of instruction shared across a range of early Christian communities' (Uzoigwe 2011:44). Moo (1994:1153) shares the view that Romans 13:1 is a general statement about how the Christian should relate to government, but he is quick to point out that the general rule does not preclude exceptions even when such exceptions are not spelt out. In other words, in this passage Paul does not intend to say that Christians should not resist civil authorities if occasion demands. Gaventa's illustration with Paul's citing of Pharaoh, as discussed earlier, is also relevant here. When Paul cites the Egyptian wicked ruler as an authority instituted by God, he is not unaware of the aspect of the exodus narrative in which God uses Moses to resist Pharaoh; hence, in the apostle's order to submit to all authorities, it is unlikely that he intends to rule out exceptions.

The second principle is that those who resist authorities, resist what God has instituted and will therefore incur judgement (Rm 13:2–4). Although not so stated, if rebelling against authority means rebelling against what God has instituted, then to rebel against authority is to rebel against God himself. This thought is seen more clearly in the King James Version (KJV), which states that those who resist authorities, resist the ordinance of God (Rm 13:2). This is the premise for their judgement, which will be carried out by the authorities. God has appointed the ruler as his own minister (*diakonos*) for the good of the people, but it is also the duty of the ruler to punish bad conduct (Rm 13:4). This fact is seen in the expression that rulers hold no terror (*phobos*) for those who do right (*agathos*), but for those who do wrong (*kakos*). Thompson (2015:16) explains that *phobos* refers here 'to a concrete (not abstract) understanding, something terrible/awe-inspiring, a terror not the abstract concept of fear, alarm, fright'. This is because the Roman city officials had an actual reign of terror against the manifestation of the concept. Right or good work (*ergon* – Rm 13:3) in this context designates an action that is correct from the civil perspective, 'as opposed to objectively good action, that is, work or action that is socially acceptable, helpful, or beneficial' (Thompson 2015:16). As Kasemann (1980:353) puts it, in this context *agathos* connotes not moral qualities, but characterises political good conduct. Correlatively, *tō kakō* (Rm 13:3) refers to work or action that is bad or evil (Thompson 2015:16).

Paul continues that Christians do not have to fear authorities if they do what is right, but if not, the ruler does not bear the sword for nothing; it is the symbol of his power of judgement, for God has appointed him 'to keep order and peace, that is, to do *diakonos*' (Thompson 2015:18). In this way, the power of the sword and commendation of worthy citizens are correlative to each other (Kasemann 1980:353). However, Gaventa (2017:15) observes that the idea that the authority is the *diakonos* [agent] or *leitourgos* [servant] of God (Rm 13:4) for the good of the people has no parallels elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. To the contrary, 2 Corinthians 11 indicates that Paul's own experience with some authorities proves that, rather than enjoying their goodwill, he went through imprisonment, beating and stoning. It then becomes clear, in line with his remarks about Pharaoh as noted earlier, that by asserting the role of the authorities for the good of the citizens, Paul does not mean that the authorities 'themselves will the good or that they will do the good' (Gaventa 2017:17). Their identification by Paul as God's servants or agents does not say anything about the 'rightness of their own intentions or actions [*but sets*] them out only in relation to God'; neither does their being servants or agents of God mean that they will do what is right (p. 17).

In verse 5, Paul says that Christians must be subject to authorities not only to avoid punishment, but also for good conscience, and this leads him to the last principle (Rm 13:6–7). This principle is that it is for the reasons mentioned in Romans 13:5 that Christians pay taxes and other dues to the authorities, because they are God's ministers (*leitourgoi*) in charge of that obligation. In other words, taxes (*phoroi*) 'also function in the same way as the sword [*that is*] as a reminder that God has put earthly authorities over us' (Thompson 2015:19). Earlier in Romans 13:4, Paul has used *diakonos* for 'minister', but here he uses *leitourgoi* for the term. Thompson (2015:19) notes that in Romans 13:6, Paul uses *leitourgoi* for the first time as a label for civil authority. The term may apply to servants of the state (Rm 13:6), religious servants (Heb 8:2; Rm 15:6) and generic aides (Phlp 2:25). Paul concludes the section by saying that Christians ought to pay not only taxes, but also all that are due to the authorities such as revenue (*telos*), respect (*phobos*) and honour (*timō*). *Telos* may be in form of indirect tax, toll-tax or custom duties (Thompson 2015:19). It is important to note that, while in verse 4 *phobos* is translated as fear, here it means respect or reverence. *Timē* is translated here as honour, but may also mean respect (Thompson 2015:19). In view of the repeated commands to Roman Christians to pay taxes, some scholars have:

> … argued that Paul fears specifically the involvement of Roman believers in some form of tax revolt, [*and being*] concerned about the potentially harmful result of such behavior, Paul urges the communities to respect the authorities and pay their taxes. (Gaventa 2017:14; cf. Moo 1996:791)

This suggestion is, however, unlikely, because Paul's command is not only for payment of taxes, but also calls for respect and honour to the authorities. Also, as Thompson (2015:19) rightly observes, Paul is here 'not warning his audience, but rather commending them for paying taxes'.

This exegesis has shown that when Paul instructs the Roman Christians to be subject to civil authorities, he is not using a figure of speech but talking literally, having in mind concrete features of the Roman government. At the same time, however, the exegesis proves that Paul does not mean unconditional obedience, and this is where the significance of the exegesis for the present study lies. The fact that Paul does not intend an unconditional obedience to authorities, is further supported by the historical context of the text as demonstrated in the next section.

Romans 13:1–7 in its historical context

As Thompson (2015:2) rightly observes, understanding the historical context is essential for a proper understanding of texts such as Romans 13. As mentioned earlier, Paul wrote his epistle around 57 CE; Nero had been emperor since 54 CE and would reign till 68 CE (Thompson 2015:4). Hence, many speculate whether such:

> … an evaluation of the administration of government [*as in Rm 13:1–7*] can be contemplated for the time when Nero was emperor. He has such a bad reputation that it is thought difficult to imagine that Paul's comments can be taken as descriptive of the situation at the time. (Kaye n.d.)

However, it is popularly suggested that Nero's repressiveness had not started by the time Paul wrote the book of Romans. Before Nero, Rome had experienced humane rulers such as Augustus and Claudius. For example, Claudius (41–54), Nero's immediate predecessor, was voted by the Senate of Rome as:

> … the most dynamic emperor when he died in 54 AD … Nero, on his ascension to the throne was [*therefore*] celebrated as the glorious leader who would usher in yet another Golden Age. (Georgi 1991, in Sackey 2011:22)

And when Nero came to power, he pledged to uphold the role of the Senate and the rule of law. He actually promoted Greek values and promised to end the practice of issuing commands through imperial agents (Griffin 1984:1076). Nero was 'inclined to humane reform particularly in the matter of indirect taxation' (Kaye n.d.; cf. Thompson 2015:4).

It is suggested that by 57 CE, Nero 'was still under the benevolent influences of Seneca and Burrus, rather than the reprobate Tigellinus … [*and*] had not yet begun persecuting Christians or repressing other groups' (Keener 1993:441). These advisors helped rule until 62 CE when Nero assumed full control of the empire (Thompson 2015:4). In Kaye's explanation, when Nero became emperor in 54 CE at the age of 17 'he was strongly under the influence of his mother Agrippina, particularly in palace affairs until … 59 [*when*] she was killed by Anicetus, a freedman and tutor of Nero' (cf. Thompson 2015:4). It was not until 62 CE that Nero began his repressiveness, 'restoring the brutal practice of secret majesty trials with summary executions of political opponents … including the eventual execution of the apostle Paul himself' (Jewett 2007, cited in Sackey 2011:20). It is therefore plausibly suggested that Paul's view of government in Romans 13:1–7 was influenced by his knowledge of the contemporary Roman administration. Particularly instructive here are Romans 13:3 and 4 where he states that 'rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad … for [*the ruler*] is God's servant for your good … to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer' (Revised Standard Version – RSV). Kaye's view (n.d.) is close to this position when he states that:

> Romans 13:3, 4 are a comment on the actual situation at the time of writing … [*that is*] it refers to the actual powers to which the Romans were subject … In other words, the theological projection of verse 1 refers to the particular Roman authorities, and it is made possible because of the value judgment which is placed on their activities.

Thus, when Paul wrote Romans 13:1–7, he must have been influenced by his awareness of the benevolence of the government under which the Roman Christians operated. In other words, Paul would have written differently if he wrote in the years after 62 CE during Nerobegan's political oppression. It is for this reason that Paul's instruction here cannot be generalised for all times and contexts. As will be shown in the following section, apart from quoting the passage out of context, such a generalisation would contradict the general position of the Bible on attitude to civil authorities with regard to social justice.

Social justice in biblical perspective

The Hebrew word commonly used for 'justice' in the Old Testament is *mishpat*. It is used to designate almost any aspect of civil or religious government, and is capable of a variety of meanings, but in 'essence … [*in the OT*] justice has to do with one's rights and duties under law' (Richards 1991 cited in Ademiluka 2017:295; cf. Culver 1980:948). The word *sedeqa* [righteousness] and its several derivates are also sometimes used synonymously with *mishpat* to mean 'justice'. When used in its ethical aspect, the term connotes the conduct of men and women towards one another. For instance, the *saddiq* [righteous one] is one who endeavours to fulfil the commands of God in regard to others. The righteous, as Job, cares for the poor, the orphan and the weak (cf. Jb 29:12–15; Stigers 1980, cited in Ademiluka 2017:298).

The Bible copiously indicates that God desires an orderly society where justice reigns supreme. Thus, in the Torah:

> [*God*] prescribes a brotherly and sisterly social order … [*He perceives*] the tyrannical oppression of the people of Israel in Egypt [*as*] the archetype of politically-motivated social injustice (Ex 2:23–25; 3:7). [*Hence*] … he leads Israel … [*out of Egypt*] 'to himself' (Ex 19:4), to Mount Sinai … [*where*] he establishes the foundations of Israel as a free people living according to an order of social justice [*giving*] them the Ten Commandments [*as*] … a kind of constitution … for a society that respects the life and dignity of fellow humans. (Markl 2011:n.p.; cf. Ex 20:2–17, cf. Dt 5:6–21)

In this way, from the beginning of the people of Israel's story, the Bible recognises that:

> … the totalitarian exercise of power always leads to social injustice, [*and that*] only by broadening its horizons to include more than the particular interests of specific individuals or groups can a society establish socially just foundations. (Markl 2011:n.p.)

The Bible also recognises that the maintenance of social justice in a society involves the assurance of the fairness of its legal system. Hence, the Torah prescribes a legal system that ensures fairness to all (Lv 19:15; 24:22). The prophets sought to uphold this standard by constantly upbraiding unjust laws and judges (Is 10:1–2; Am 5:7, 15). In the psalms, God himself is depicted as the archetype of the just judge (Ps 9:4), as he loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5; Markl 2011). The Torah does not leave out the economic aspect of justice, explicitly recommending a fundamental commitment to the poor (Dt 24:12–22). Perhaps, commitment to justice as the overarching principle of the Old Testament is seen in Micah 6:8 when the prophet declares that what the Lord requires of man is 'to do justice, and to love kindness …'. The type of society the Old Testament envisages, then, is one in which social justice is embraced by all in terms of 'the way that material resources and social advantages are distributed and made accessible' (Mangayi 2014:134).

This Old Testament idea of social justice is further developed in the New Testament. This is seen in Jesus directing his teaching towards the goal of social justice, recommending an egalitarian method of governance (Markl 2011; cf. Mk 10:42–44). Paul builds on this notion by postulating that the common belief in Christ makes all believers equal (Markl 2011; cf. Gl 3:28). Furthermore, Jesus teaches his followers to always consider how best to help others in need – which is the burden of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the sayings on love for one's neighbours (Mt 25:40; Mk 12:28–34; Lk 10: 29–37). In a way, social justice was, then, the focus of Jesus' gospel, and for him it means having the 'sense of social responsibility for the poor' (Apata 1993:52; cf. Lk 4:18).

The Bible does not only present an idea of social justice, but also indicates what injustice is, and depicts correct attitudes towards it. In biblical perspective, social injustice means inflicting wrong upon the less privileged, that is, those people who were always at the receiving end of injustice, severally referred to as 'the poor', 'widows', 'children', 'aliens', 'strangers' and particularly 'the needy'. The term *the needy* often refers to the poor generally, but in the judicial context (e.g. Am 2:6), it may connote 'those who cannot resist or those who have to bend to superior will and strength, those who socially have no means of redress' (Motyer 1994, cited in Ademiluka 2017:303; cf. Strydom 1995:401). The needy are the people that the Bible brings to centre stage continually as the oppressed and marginalised poor; it is their victimisation that is particularly viewed as social injustice (Mi 2:9; Am 2:6).

Many biblical texts also indicate what is expected as the right attitude towards social injustice. In the first place, the Bible demonstrates that 'God backs vehemently those groups who are particularly vulnerable to suffering from social injustice' (Markl 2011). As Pieterse (2012:18) puts it, in the Old Testament, for example, 'prophetic theology and preaching is critical of injustice and addresses suffering in communities [*always taking*] side with the poor and humble'. Hence, in Exodus 22:21–23, the Israelites are warned not to oppress the sojourners, and shall not violate the rights of widows and orphans. The prophetic books are replete with criticism and condemnation of injustice against the needy. In this regard, Micah 3:2–3 condemns the rulers who heartlessly exploit the needy, while Isaiah 10:1–2 criticises the lawmakers for making decrees to legalise their atrocities against the needy. Amos 6:1, 4–6 similarly condemns the rich who live in luxury without concern for the poor. Some texts actually use words that are suggestive of a call for some form of action in support of the downtrodden. For instance, Proverbs 31:8–9 states, '*Open your mouth* for the dumb, for the rights … of the poor and needy', while Psalm 82:4 commands, '*Rescue* the weak and the needy; *deliver* them from the hand of the wicked' (RSV). The prophets use similar action words in their preaching against injustice. For instance, Isaiah 1:17 tells the Israelites to 'seek justice, *correct* oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, *plead* for the widow'. Similarly, in his preaching to the house of Judah, Jeremiah 22:3 declares, 'Do justice and righteousness, and *deliver* from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed …'[1]

As a matter of fact, instances of social activism are discernible in the Bible. There are two categories of them, namely those passages in which obedience to political authority would mean a direct violation of God's own commandment, and instances in which authorities are disobeyed even when their orders do not directly contradict God's commandment. The book of Daniel (in chapter 3) provides two instances of the former category: the first being the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego where they refused King Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship his golden image. The second account is in Daniel 6, where Daniel disobeyed King Darius' order that all his subjects must pray only to him for 30 days (Adelakun 2016:21; Redekop 2001). The latter account is similar to the instance in Acts 4:18–20; 5:29 where the apostles chose to obey God rather than man, when they were ordered to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. In the second category, many have recognised, as a form of social activism, the Hebrew midwives' disobedience of the Pharaoh's order to kill Hebrew male babies (Ex 1:12–21). Another instance of civil disobedience, is Rahab's protection of the Israelite spies who lodged in her house against the order of the King of Jericho (Jos 2:1–21; Adelakun 2016:21).

The exodus narrative (Ex 1–12) has been recognised by many as lending itself for use as a liberation text, and has thus been appropriated by Christians across generations to

1.The historical contexts of these texts cannot be easily identified, but in their canonical context they are intended for the reader's appropriation in his or her own context. Hence, these verses are supportive of social activism.

support social activism (Ademiluka 2015:13–33; Redekop 2001). The story exhibits several liberation-theological motifs, but perhaps the most significant for social activism is the involvement of human agency: the first instance of which has been recognised above in the activities of the Hebrew midwives. Also relevant are the roles of Moses' mother and sister in saving his life, when he would have been killed in compliance to the Pharaoh's order (Ex 2:1–10). As the story goes on, Aaron also plays an important role alongside Moses (Ex 7:1–2). Nevertheless, Moses most centrally represents the role of human agency in the liberation drama. At the beginning of the programme of deliverance from the Egyptian bondage, God announces the divine intention, and almost in the same breath, commands Moses to go to the Pharaoh to effect this desired outcome (Ex 3:8a, 10). In Exodus 5–12, 'Moses engages in the difficult face-to-face confrontations and negotiations with the Pharaoh over Israel's fate' (Birch, Brueggemann & Fretheim 2005:121). Commenting further on the role of Moses in the exodus, Birch et al. (2005) state that:

> The significance of the role of human agency in the narrative negates any reading that would settle for passive human waiting for God's action alone to oppose oppression and injustice. Trust in God's liberating power requires human participation in the processes that call and send persons like Moses to engage the oppressive powers of every generation. The leadership required of those who attend to Moses' role in this story will involve confrontation and struggle in the socio-political order, facing the pharaohs of every age. (p. 121)

As Wong (2012) rightly affirms, the motifs of the exodus narrative:

> … on domination/subjugation, oppression/liberation, diasporic experience and ethnic identification are inviting to readers with a (post) colonial history to whom these thematic elements have been a vivid part of their living reality. (p. 139)

In view of these potential liberation motifs, the story has been reinterpreted and appropriated in diverse ways by different groups in modern times. For example, in the early 1800s to the mid-20th century, the exodus narrative played a significant role in African American history when the civil rights activists employed it as a catalyst for social change in the United States (Coomber 2012:123–136). In the civil rights movement, a number of black theologians incorporated social activism into the Christian religion, making the story of the Hebrew exodus to play a significant role. Martin Luther King Jr and the other leaders of the movement evoked the deep-rooted cultural narrative of the Hebrew exodus, thereby allowing African Americans to relive the story in their own day. King Jr particularly:

> […] referred to this perceived connection with the ancient Hebrews, when he wrote that Moses' stand before the pharaoh was an opening chapter in a continuing story. The present struggle [*against racism*] is a later chapter in the same story. (Coomber 2012, cited in Ademiluka 2015:24)

It is noteworthy that most of the instances of disobedience to civil authority, which are not related to direct contravention of God's commandment, are from the Old Testament. It might therefore be argued that social activism does not have support in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the fact that there are rarer instances in the New Testament, does not amount to an invalidation of the Old Testament instances. Moreover, the teaching of Jesus and Paul on equality, as discussed earlier, would support the Old Testament instances rather than contradict them. Apart from this, instances abound in the Gospels in which Jesus himself carried out civil disobedience, particularly in his attitude to the Sabbath. For example, whereas in Jewish law it is unlawful to do any work on the Sabbath, in Matthew 12:1–8 Jesus allowed his disciples to pluck grains to eat on a Sabbath as they walked through a farm. When the Pharisees accused him of breaking the law, Jesus defended his disciples' action with the argument that the priests in the temple profaned the Sabbath, because their duty was 'work' in the rabbinic sense, but it was justified by its holy purpose. Jesus also violated the Sabbath law by performing healing on the Sabbath (Mt 12:9–14).

The Bible does not only condemn social injustice, but actually teaches that it should be confronted, which is in harmony with the position that Romans 13:1–7 does not forbid civil disobedience if and when there is need for it. This suggestion is aptly supported by Thompson (2015) when he states:

> In Romans 13:1–7 we do not find contradictions to the rest of Scripture, but we do find some new thoughts that help Christians understand how their response to the governing authorities fits within their lives of sanctification. (p. 10)

The next section assesses the implication of this conclusion for Christian attitude to social activism in Nigeria.

The implication of the study for Christian attitude to social activism in Nigeria

The implication of this article for today, is that in accordance with Romans 13:1–7, Christians ought to be subject to constituted authorities inasmuch as such authorities uphold their rights. In situations where their rights are violated or neglected, Christians have the right to demand for justice in line with the position of the Bible on social justice. As seen in the preceding section, the Bible enjoins the righteous to defend the cause of the needy. This has been rightly interpreted in modern times as a calling for Christians as embodied by the church to rise against injustice in the society. In this regard, Mangayi (2014:134) opines that the church 'is by nature and calling an indispensable agent for fostering social justice'. To this end, it is imperative for the church to participate in 'the process of socio-political and economic liberation for the realization of justice' (Uchegbue 2013:149). That the church has a calling to foster social justice, means that it has a responsibility towards others. In the words of Bonhoeffer (1971), '[*T*]he church is the church only when it exists for others [*sharing*] … in secular problems of ordinary human life' (cited in Mangayi 2014:135). The church therefore

has a responsibility to raise its voice in a society plagued with social injustices. By not doing so, implies that the church is disobedient to Scripture. Moreover, for its message to be effective, the church has to be pragmatic in attending to the living conditions of its members. Hence, Steve Biko (1978) states that 'Christianity cannot remain abstract and removed from the people's environmental problems … [*It is*] through engaging with societal problems such as social and economic inequality … that the significance of the Christian message is rediscovered' (cited in Headley & Kobe 2017). Kruger (2009:410) puts it pragmatically that, preaching on God's love, mercy, hope, redemption and so on, may be powerless in the face of hunger.

Hence, in Nigeria, Romans 13:1–7 in terms of unconditional obedience to constituted authority, is not applicable because of the constant neglect and violation of the rights of the citizenry. The context is one in which social injustice is characterised by economic exploitation by the ruling class and their appointees. Employing various avenues, these politicians use their privileged positions 'to allocate to themselves a disproportionate slice' of the nation's resources (Ogunyemi 2012, cited in Ademiluka 2017:308). Apart from enjoying salaries and allowances that are well above those of the ordinary citizens, the legislators, for instance regularly allocate votes to themselves in addition to taking commercial bank loans, which most often are for their personal aggrandisement. Hence, the former governor of the Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi, might be correct when he said that 25% of Nigerian annual budget goes to the legislators as salaries and allowances (Ademiluka 2017:308). Corruption on the part of the rulers as social injustice in Nigeria, is buttressed by the fact that many dignitaries have been accused of or indicted for financial crimes in recent times. A former head of state, former governors, legislators, ministers and other highly placed government functionaries have stolen large sums of money – some of whom are still being tried in court till date.[2]

The concomitant effect of the injustice of corruption is the impoverishment of the Nigerian people. As the resources that are meant to be expended on the economy are diverted into private accounts, jobs are not created and thus leading to the high rate of unemployment in the country. For several decades now:

> It is as if there has been a permanent embargo on employment. The number of graduates roaming the streets desperately in search of job increases yearly by the thousands. Groups of retirees and retrenched workers have joined the number of beggars on the streets. (Ademiluka 2007:37)

Unemployment in turn, has partly led to the current high rate of poverty in Nigeria. This fact is buttressed by a 2016 United Nations report which made Nigeria one of the poorest countries in the world with over 64% of its population living below the poverty line (Opejobi 2016, cited in Ademiluka 2018:179). Thus:

> … in spite of the vast human and material wealth with which Nigeria is endowed … the majority of Nigerians can be classified as marginal citizens who have learnt to accommodate themselves into the culture of poverty [*suffering*] inadequacy of food … poor health services, constant deterioration in the educational system, unemployment et cetera. (Uchegbue 2013:147; cf. Apata 1993:53)

The Nigerian context engenders social activism; it creates a milieu for Christians to discharge the biblical obligation to defend the cause of the downtrodden. Therefore, the church in Nigeria has a duty to intervene in the economic deprivation being suffered by the Nigerian people. This call is most timely in view of the fact that the church has rather been passive in this responsibility. Although the various denominations have their ways of assisting the 'poor by means of alms, clothing, food, and accommodation' (Apata 1993:55), preaching is rarely focused on the prevalent economic inequality in the country and the responsibility of government to address it. To this end, the church has to identify more with its members in their deplorable economic conditions. It has to be more alive to its biblical obligation, as discussed earlier, to plead the cause of the needy, to rescue and deliver the oppressed, and to correct oppression. In carrying out this duty, the church can use non-violent methods of social activism, particularly the use of speeches. Henceforth, preaching should challenge those in positions of power and wealth for the exploitation of the vulnerable (Kruger 2009:424). Speaking out may also take the form of official statements from institutions such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and other ecclesiastical bodies, confronting unjust and exploitative policies of government 'with Christian values and ideals' (Uchegbue 2013:149). To achieve the same purpose, the church can also 'provide an alternative voice through the establishment of … independent media' (Uchegbue 2013:149). To call the attention of government to the economic plight of its members, the church may also use other non-violent approaches such as public protests, rallies and marches. Very importantly, the church should encourage Christians to participate fully in union activities in their various employments with a view to fostering social justice. Gospel musicians, preachers on radio and television should also be encouraged by the church to expand their focus to include the clamour for social justice.

Conclusion

In Romans 13:1–7, Paul instructs the Roman Christians to submit to all constituted authorities. However, the exegetical study of the text reveals that Paul made a general statement that does not necessarily preclude exceptions. Moreover, the examination of the passage in its historical context shows that Paul must have been influenced by the benevolent nature of the contemporary Roman government. That is to say that Paul might have written differently if he wrote after 62 CE when Nero began his inhuman policies. The text is therefore not applicable to all times and contexts; otherwise it would be contradictory to the general biblical teaching to confront social injustice. In the Nigerian context, Romans 13:1–7 is not applicable in the sense of unconditional

2.We need not dwell much on the issue of corruption in Nigeria here, because many scholars have written on it (e.g. Ademiluka 2007:24–37; 2015:13–33; 2017:294–316; Uchegbue 2013:141–154).

submission to government in view of the prevalent violation of the economic rights of the Nigerian people. Therefore, the Nigerian context creates a milieu where the church has to lead its members to abide by the biblical obligation to defend the cause of the needy through non-violent methods of social activism.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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