



EXPOSITION

Monthly e-Bulletin from Virginia Beach Theological Seminary



From My Window

On January 9, 1776 a print shop on Third Street in Philadelphia published an untitled essay by Thomas Paine, which we know today as *Common Sense*. By its third printing a month later, it was sweeping the colonies. Soon 100,000 copies were in circulation. Its thesis was a call for liberty through war with Great Britain. Though the essay was admired by many, John Adams wrote of its fatal flaw: "The writer has a better hand at pulling down than building up." Adams' insight calls attention to Paul's words to the church at Rome (14:19–20a): "Pursue things that make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God." May these words of grace be our lasting legacy as we care for one another in the Body of Christ.



Charles & Jackie Shannon are a dynamic and talented couple who got married in the summer of 2009. Charles graduated from Regent University in 2011, and then, in his words, "We looked for a seminary that was sound in doctrine, practical in its development of ministers, and focused on service in the local church." This led him to VBTS. The decade of 2010–20 was filled with both blessing and hard work. During this time, Charles graduated from VBTS with the MBS (2013) and the MBSC (2019); he launched a significant urban ministry called *The Theology of Mission* to teach intercity leaders and pastors the Word of God; and he planted the flourishing *Mission Church* in 2017 near Old Dominion University in Norfolk. On top of all that, God gave them five children! Charles and Jackie have modeled what it means to labor in love and serve with joy for the cause of Jesus Christ. Charles says, "My passion for ministry is to see diverse people connect with the triune God, to help them become disciples serving with joy for the good of their neighbors, and to broadcast everywhere the fame of Jesus." Thank you, Charles and Jackie, for your beautiful testimony of God's grace!



“Be Subject to Governing Authorities” (Rom. 13:1)

In recent days, conservative evangelical churches have been struggling to respond to the variety of civil judgments which come from local, state, and federal authorities. Some of these regulations have been difficult because they seem to stand at odds with God’s desire for his church. For example, Hebrews 10:25 calls for believers “not to neglect meeting together.” One pastor from Colorado put it this way, “Our local government will not allow churches to meet in person, so we are weighing our response.” What this pastor and many others are trying to do is balance the *ad hoc* judgments of their civil leaders with a proper understanding of Romans 13:1, “be subject to governing authorities.” Indeed, this text is the starting point for the believers’ response in this age of grace. So let’s think through this important topic together.

The Spheres of Human Relationships. Every believer lives simultaneously within at least four spheres during his or her earthly journey: in union with Christ, in a biological family, in a church family, and in a secular state (government). Being united with Christ, we are “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Therefore, our attitudes and actions in each of the other spheres no longer reflect our “former manner of life” (4:23). Romans 12:1–2 explains why this is so: having been embraced by “the mercies of God” we now serve God as a “living sacrifice.” Therefore, being *in* Christ means that we will live *like* Christ in our relationships with family, church, and government.

The Contextual Unity of Romans 12–13. The four sections of Paul’s exhortations in these chapters are bracketed by the expressions “this age” (12:2) and “the day is at hand” (13:12). The idea is that while we live in this present age, we live in light of the any-moment return of our Lord—“the hour is upon us” (13:11). Upon this foundation we live **1)** as transformed people (12:1–2), **2)** with transformed brothers and sisters (12:3–8), **3)** exercising transformed love (12:9–21), and **4)** reflecting transformed values—toward our neighbors and our state (13:1–10). It is important to note that Paul expects all believers to live this way—without exception. Textually, all four sections either stand together, or not at all. It is not an option to select certain exhortations to follow, while disregarding others.

The Point of Romans 13:1. Moo teasingly writes that the interpretation of 13:1 has “a history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning” (806). Paul’s idea of submission (“be subject”) points to the heart attitude and describes believers’ interactions with spiritual leaders (1 Cor. 16:16), with each other (Eph. 5:21), and with wives to husbands (Eph. 5:24). In the case of our civil leaders, Paul places submission as a key element. Our Spirit-awakened conscience understands that our leaders “have been appointed by God” (13:1b). God’s sovereignty in government is the backbone of Paul’s logic and should be the conviction of his people.

A Critical Distinction. In all human spheres—family, church, and government—submission is never absolute; our supreme allegiance is to our Head, Jesus Christ. So how should we respond to an executive order that would prohibit us from following God’s Word? Consider Daniel 1. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah exercised submission to the King in training, education, daily routines, and the changing of their names. However, in clear conscience they could not follow the King’s decree regarding diet. Yet their response was not hostile—it was humble and gracious (Dan. 1:8–16). This illustrates the critical distinction we must seek to model toward our own secular authorities. If God’s Word prohibits us from a specific *action* of submission, we may still respond with an *attitude* of submission fitting of those *in* Christ called to be “living sacrifices... discerning the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God” (12:1–2).