

"The Powers That Be"

WILLIAM J. COLEMAN



The Authorized Version of the English Bible was completed in 1611. James VI of Scotland and I of England was then on the throne, having ruled England for eight years, and was to reign fourteen years more. His idea of governing was that he had a "divine right" to absolute supremacy in both church and state. And he passed this theory of "divine right" down to his son, Charles I, and to his grandsons, Charles II and James II, in full force. It was a Stuart right.

The translation of Romans 13 suited this Stuart idea perfectly. "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers." These Stuarts were kings and they had the power. They had the army, the navy, the courts and the constabulary. "For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God." They had the divine right. "Whoso-

ever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." Could anything be more complete? And the passage does not say a word about any misuse of this power. There is no modification of the theory.

The Covenanters and Puritans, resisting the tyranny of the Stuarts, had to face this passage of Scripture and they were believers in the Bible.

I question this word "powers" as a correct translation of the Greek *exousia*. My attention was called to this shortly after the Revised Version came out by a change in the translation of this same word in two other texts. The Authorized Version of Matt. 28:18 reads, "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." The Revised Version reads, "And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." The other passage that struck me was John 1:12.

The Authorized Version reads, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." The Revised Version reads, "But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God."

Why was not this same word *exousia* translated *authority* or *right* in Romans 13:1?

One may have authority and not have power and one may have power and not have authority. One may forfeit authority by its misuse, but if one has power, he may continue to use it, regardless of right. Look at the Stuarts. Look at Hitler. Look at Mussolini.

Authority is defined in the Standard Dictionary as "the right to command and to enforce obedience, the right to act by virtue of office, station, or relation." The idea of *right* is in *authority*.

The Greek word *exousia* is found over one hundred times in the New Testament. In the Authorized Version it is generally translated *power*. In the Revised Version the translation *power* is changed to *authority* twenty-eight

times, to *right* twice, to *liberty* once and to *jurisdiction* once. It seems to me that it should have been changed to *authority* three more times.

How would Rom. 13:1 read with *authority* in the place of *power*? "Let every soul be subject unto those that have authority. For there is no authority but of God; those that have authority are ordained of God." Or, using the meaning of *authority*, "Let every soul be subject unto those that have the right to rule. For there is no right to rule but of God; those that have the right to rule are ordained of God."

This meaning seems to fit all through the passage. God does not require submission to those who have no right to rule, or who have forfeited it by misrule. Our Covenanter forefathers would have had less difficulty with this passage if it had read *authority* instead of *power*. And, I think, we would have understood it more easily ourselves. Matt. 28:18 and John 1:12 are greatly changed for the better by the translation, *authority* and *right*. Why not Romans 13:1