In the history of doctrine, three biblical passages dominate political theology. Jesus’ statement that one must “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Paul’s statement on governing authorities in Romans 13, and Peter’s declaration that one must serve “God and not man” in Acts 5. Among these three (and a few others cited less often), the sheer number and weight of references to Romans 13 outweighs all the others.¹ So much so that one scholar has argued, “Chapter 13: 1–7 of Paul’s letter to the Romans became perhaps the most influential part of the New Testament on the level of world history.”²

Romans 13 provides the best view into sixteenth century political theology because it touches on the two fundamental aspects of political thought: the responsibilities of those governing and the obligations of the governed. In Romans 13, Paul states that Christians are to be subject to authority because governing authorities are ordained by God.³


³ Romans 13. 1–7: “Omnis anima potestatibus sublimioribus subdita sit. Non est enim potestas nisi a deo. Quae autem sunt a deo, ordinata sunt. Itaque qui resistit potestati, dei ordinationi resistit. Qui autem resistant, ipsi sibi damnationem acquirunt. Nam principes non sunt timori boni operis sed mali. Vis autem non timere potestatem? Bonum fac & habebis laudem ex illa. Dei enim minister est tibi in bonum. Si autem malum feceris, time. Non enim sine causa gladium portat. Dei enim minister est: vindex in iram ei qui malum agit. Ideoque necessitate subditi estote: non solum propter iram, sed etiam propter conscientiam. Ideo enim & tributa praestatis. Ministri enim dei sunt, in hoc ipsum servientes. Reddite ergo omnibus debita: cui tributum, tributum: cui vectigal, vectigal: cui timorem, timorem: cui honorem, honorem.” BIBLIA Sacra Veretis & Novi Testamenti, (Paris: Guillard, 1568), this is one of the last printings of the Latin Vulgate before the Clementine revised edition of the 1590s; “Let every soule submyt hymselfe vnto the auctoryte of the hyer powers. For there is no power but of God. The powers that be, are ordeyned of God. Whosoeuer therfore resysteth power, resysteth the ordinaunce of God. But they that resyst, shall receaue to them selfe damnacyon. For rulers are not fearfull to them that do good, but to them that
Christians must submit not just because they fear the consequences of disobeying (i.e., civil and criminal punishment), but more importantly because of conscience. The conscience of the Christian requires submission because the Christian understands that when one obeys governing authorities one is obeying God from whom they derive their power.4 The relationship between governed and governing was intensely debated and discussed in the sixteenth century because the introduction of religious diversity deeply complicated the relationship between the Christian and the state. What role should the ruler play in the administration of religion within his or her realm? What should a ruler do when those under his care diverged from his command? The role of the subject was no less fraught with confusion. Should one change one’s theological opinion just because the king says one must? What right does the king have to enforce religious conformity? Must one not serve God first? Can one refuse and if one does, what limitations are placed on that refusal? For the first time in centuries, Christians in Europe were confronted with governments hostile to their faith. For the first time since the Arian emperors of the fourth century, Christians were faced with a government that claimed to be Christian and yet disagreed fundamentally with them on what the content of...