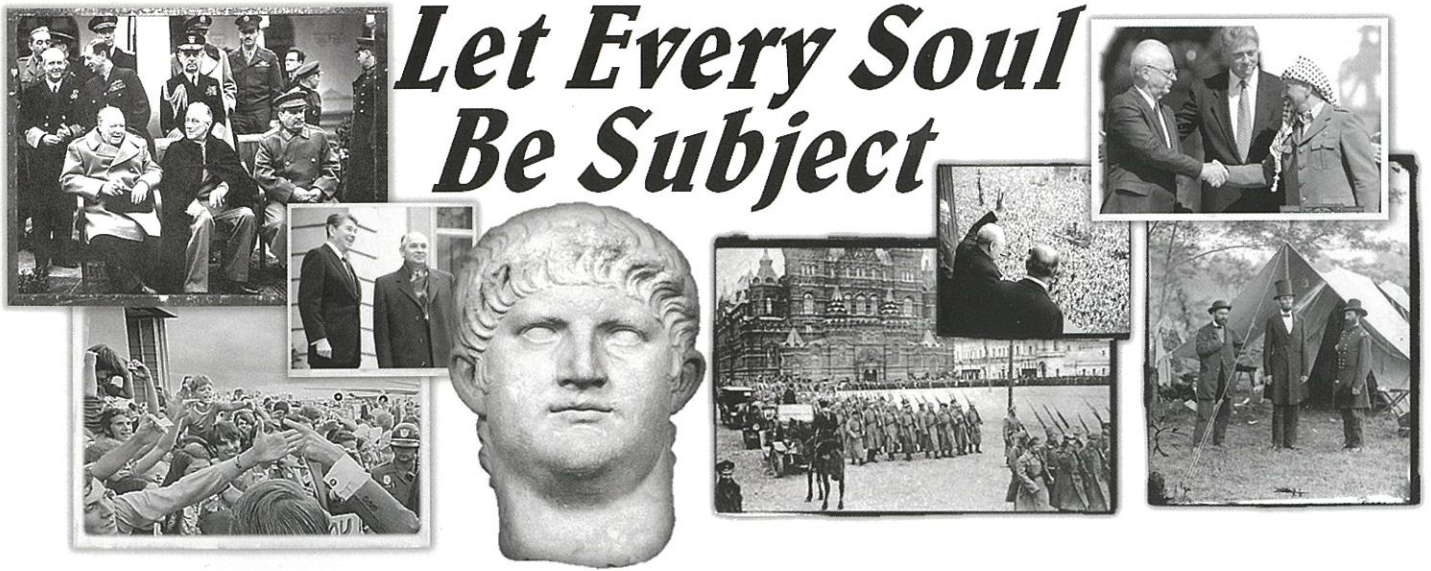


Let Every Soul Be Subject



By Erich D. Schwartz

Paul's Word to the Governed

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing (Rom 13:1-6, KJV).

How is an evil ruler a “minister of God...for good”? We may have trouble swallowing these words in relation to our own modern governments, but for Paul, the “powers that be” were the powers of Nero’s Rome. It was Nero (reigned 54–68 AD) who was “not a terror to good works, but to the evil,” and it was to Nero that Paul willingly paid his tax.

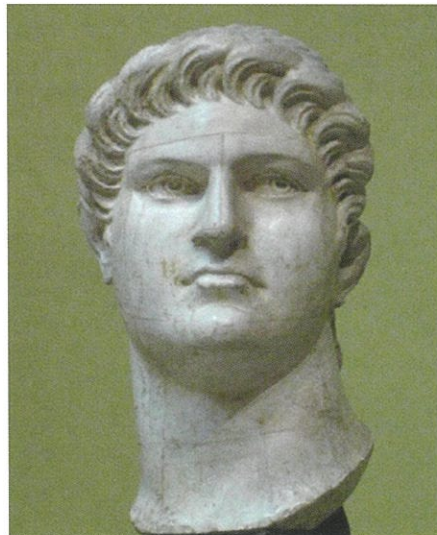
What would tax dollars in Nero’s empire go to fund? The answers seem very modern.

Nero’s Government Programs

Foreign Intervention, Ethnic Persecution

In first-century Britain, the Iceni King Prasutagus named as

heirs his two daughters and Nero. On Prasutagus’s death, Nero’s Rome took all. The extremity of Rome’s reach was the rape of those daughters, the scourging of Boudicea, wife of Prasutagus, the enslavement of the king’s relatives, and the theft of the ancient holdings of the leading Iceni. The fighting that followed ended in the death of a few hundred Romans and 80,000 Celts. Thus a generous or prudent or perhaps foolish act by Prasutagus had opened the door to Roman rapine and an ethnic purge (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chaps. 31–37).



Shakko 2007, Wikimedia Commons
Bust of the Roman emperor Nero (ruled 54–68 AD). One of the most evil of emperors in human history, Nero was the Romans’ 13 “minister of God,” used by Him for the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Enhanced Interrogation, Execution (of Political Foes)

Closer to home, Nero was applying the tax money towards more focused murders. Having been accessory to the quiet assassination of Emperor Claudius (Suetonius 1796: par. 33), Nero, upon a vicious grudge, arranged the death of Claudius’s son, 14-year-old Britannicus (Tacitus 1952: bk. 13, chaps. 15–17).

After failing in his plot to kill his mother, as by accident, at sea, Nero proceeded more boldly to accuse her of treason and to require her death. To her home he sent an execution squad. Seeing the sword of death drawn upon her, she bid the soldier, “Smite my womb.” “But the emperor, when the crime was at last accomplished, realised its portentous guilt. The rest of the night, now silent and stupified, now and still oftener starting up in terror, bereft of reason, he awaited the dawn as if it would bring with it his doom” (Tacitus 1952: bk.

14, chaps. 5–10). Nero continued to be haunted by the deed, plagued with terrible nightmares all his days, yet he paused not in an evil progress.

To divorce his wife Octavia and marry his mistress Poppaea, Nero had Octavia’s slave girls tortured to extort false testimony of Octavia’s infidelity. Though some slaves succumbed, many did not. Octavia’s torturous murder followed: “The veins of



Waterhouse 1878

The Remorse of the Emperor Nero after the Murder of his Mother. Nero was haunted by his matricide more than his other murders, but he did not sorrow unto repentance (2 Cor 7:9): he continued in evils unabated.

every limb were opened,” whereafter she was “killed outright by the steam of an intensely hot bath.” Her head was conveyed to Rome (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chaps. 60–64).

The emperor ordered the assassinations of Romans rising in power in Germany and Asia Minor—Sulla and Plautus. Both heads were delivered him in Rome. He mocked the gray hair of Sulla; of Plautus’s head, he asked, “Why would you have been a Nero?” (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chap. 59). Nero also directed the deaths of such as Torquatus Silanus and Atticus Vestinus among his hundreds of high-level victims (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chaps. 57–59. bk. 15, chap. 35), some by caprice “upon the most frivolous pretences” (Suetonius 1796: pars. 35, 37).

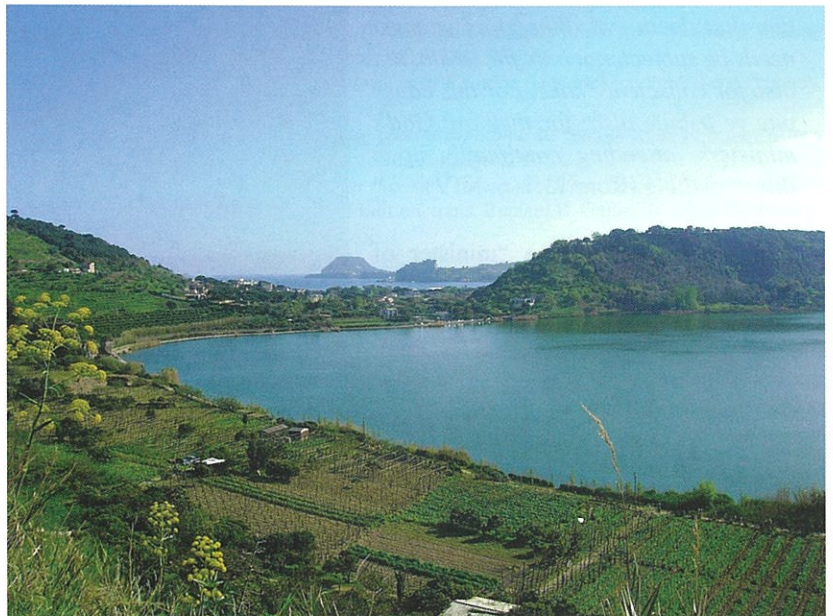
Disaster Relief, Urban Development, Infrastructure, Shovel-Ready Jobs

The readers of this article likely represent a spectrum on the issues of the size and scope of government, but we may agree that government bloated yet contained in one small man is a design for disaster.

The Great Fire of Rome fairly destroyed the city in Nero’s time—of its fourteen districts, four “remained uninjured, three were leveled to the ground, while in the other seven were left only a few shattered, half-burnt relics of houses” (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 40). Tacitus and Suetonius and the body of the citizenry tended towards the view, or outright concluded, that the fire was set on by Nero himself, who, according to report, while Rome burned appeared as if on stage in the house

of Mecaenas singing of the fall of Troy, and who seemed to seek the founding of a new and glorious, Neronian city. The great government relief program began with the removal of corpses. Nero prohibited private persons from sorting through their ruined property as government workers cleared the mess with hands that would leave

questions of ownership and authority (Suetonius 1796: par. 38). Strict government codes, most designed to limit the spread of fire, directed the rebuilding. A grid featuring broad streets was laid upon the landscape; house height was limited; property walls were now separate, not shared; and stone replaced wood (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chaps. 38–43). Order and beauty were undeniable; the expense—economic and moral—had yet to be paid.



Mentnafunangann 2011, Wikimedia Commons

Lake Averno (Avernus) whence Nero intended to lead an expensive and hopeless canal to Rome. In the Baiae region around Lake Averno, Nero held sumptuous revels. In the nearby sea he attempted the assassination of his mother, which he later effected on land.

Around this time seized with a great spirit of civil engineering, Nero entertained an impossible vision of leading water from Lake Avernus through a dry land offering little water of its own, or through hills into the Tiber (basically Naples to Rome), a distance of over 130 mi (210 km), “of breadth sufficient to permit ships with five banks of oars to pass each other” (Suetonius 1796: par. 31). The wasted work survived as his great canal to nowhere (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 42). Similarly, and with equal failure, in Achaia, he attempted to cut a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth to separate the Peloponnesus from mainland Greece for the passage of ships (Suetonius 1796: par. 19).

Eminent Domain, State Parks, Death Tax

After the fire, Nero dedicated lands as lavish imperial (or “state”) parks (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 42). To finance his projects, especially the renovation and reconfiguring of the city of Rome, his measures included seizing the estates of those whose written wills were not favorable to him (Suetonius 1796: par. 32).

Tax Code Revision, Unbalanced Budget, Deficit Spending



AIMare 2009, Public Domain

The Via Appia. This famous Roman Road from the fourth century BC, surviving to our day, describes an approximate route for Nero’s proposed canal from Lake Averno to Rome. Follow the Appian Way from Rome to Sinuessa, then extend it to Puteoli: over that route, in excess of 130 mi (210 km)—indeed, Suetonius estimated the project at 160 mi, longer than the Suez and Panama Canals combined!—Nero was woefully unsuccessful in chipping out a canal.

A building project that Nero actually completed was his palace, “The Golden House,” spanning from the Palatine to the Esquiline Hill.

Of its dimensions and furniture, it may be sufficient to say thus much: the porch was so high that there stood in it a colossal statue of himself a hundred and twenty feet in height; and the space included in it was so ample, that it had triple porticos a mile in length, and a lake like a sea, surrounded with buildings which had the appearance of a city (Suetonius 1796: par. 31).

and private persons” (Suetonius 1796: par. 38).

He thought there was no other use of riches and money than to squander them away profusely; regarding all those as sordid wretches who kept their expenses within due bounds; and extolling those as truly noble and generous souls, who lavished away and wasted all they possessed...He was himself extravagant and profuse, beyond all bounds...He never wore the same garment twice...It is said, that he never travelled with less than a thousand baggage-carts; the mules being all shod with silver, and the drivers dressed in scarlet jackets of the finest Canusian cloth, with a numerous train of footmen, and troops



Marten253 2008, Wikimedia Commons

Nero’s Imperial Palace on Palatine Hill. Expanded after the Fire, Nero’s palace was part of his extravagant building program to raise a glorious new city, Neronia.

of Mazacans, with bracelets on their arms, and mounted upon horses in splendid trappings (Suetonius 1796: par. 30).



Motte2011a, Wikimedia Commons

Radiate Youth. This marble piece thought to be from the Neronian period depicts a shining young man. Attractive youths were not safe with the emperor.

Sexual Orientation Rights, Redefinition of Marriage, Bioethics

A few decades after Augustus's official affirmation of marriage, Nero's personal sexual activity was increasingly perverse, violent and public. It is unclear whether his incestuous inclination towards his mother was consummated (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chap. 2). Married women, Vestal Virgins, young boys were not safe from his onslaughts. He did what he could, beginning with castration, to effect a sex-change operation on one young Sporus, whom he married publicly, and with whom he paraded, as with a wife, through Greece and Rome. His sexual violence in the arena, against men and women bound to stakes, defies any modest description. He not only patronized and exalted the most corrupt and virulent libidos in society: as their chief, he led them in triumph (Suetonius 1796: pars. 27–28; Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 37). All of these actions were done with great ceremony and expense.

“Investment” in the Arts

Nero established for Italy an entertainment culture that sought out, on a moral plane, the least common denominator. From rabble to nobility, all were invited and compelled to spend on vanities, and to present themselves as coarse players on a stage. “Never did a more filthy rabble add a worse licentiousness to our long corrupted morals” (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chap. 15).

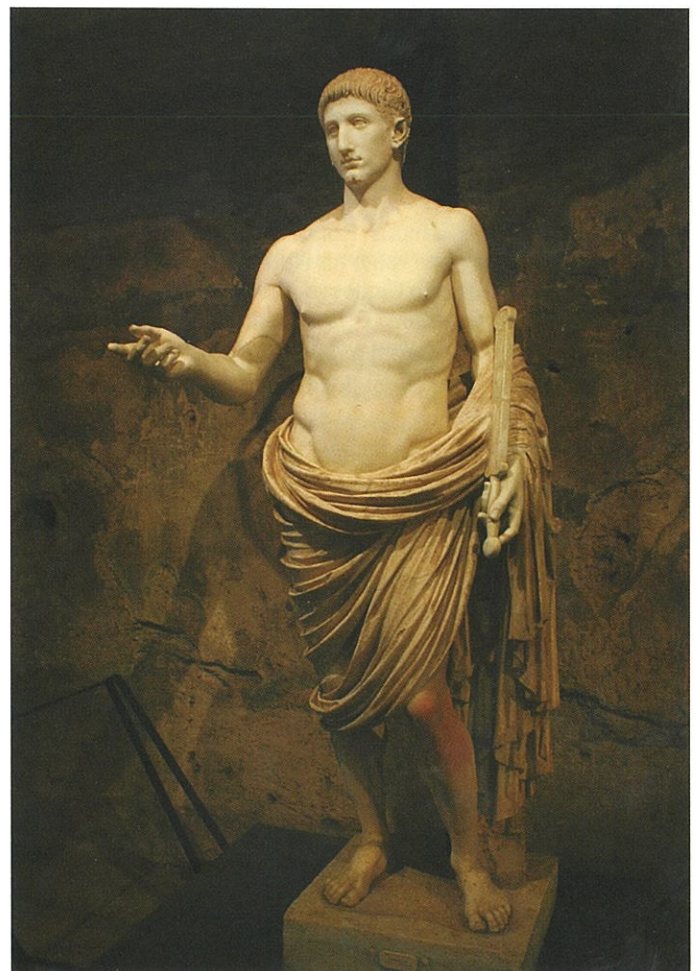
He established gymnasia; he “sponsored” (at public expense) plays and games, such as the Juvenal and Circensian, where the lavishly expensive and grandly ridiculous were the goal.

Many thousand articles of all descriptions were thrown amongst the people to scramble for; such as fowls of different

kinds, tickets for corn, clothes, gold, silver, gems, pearls, pictures, slaves, beasts of burden, wild beasts that had been tamed; at last, ships, lots of houses, and lands, were offered as prizes in a lottery....He presented the public with the representation of a naval fight, upon sea-water, with huge fishes swimming in it....Icarus, upon his first attempt to fly, fell on the stage close to the emperor's pavilion, and bespattered him with blood (Suetonius 1796: pars. 11–12).

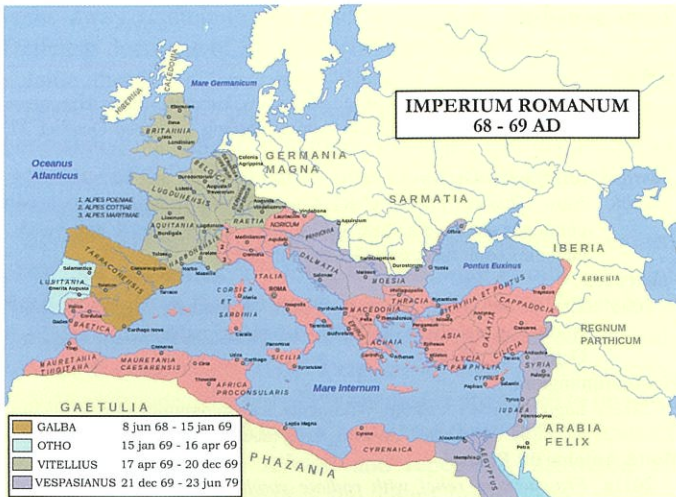
He himself, like an ancient Mussolini, delighted in displaying his prowess in arts and sports, performing at the Circus Maximus and throughout Greece and Rome (Suetonius 1796: par. 22). He hired professional applauders (Suetonius 1796: par. 20), intimidated competitors and bribed judges.

During the time of his musical performance, nobody was allowed to stir out of the theatre upon any account, however necessary; insomuch, that it is said some women with child were delivered there. Many of the spectators being quite wearied with hearing and applauding him, because the town gates were shut, slipped privately over the walls; or counterfeiting themselves dead, were carried out for their funeral (Suetonius 1796: par. 23).



Motte 2011b, Wikimedia Commons

Statue of a Youth, Semi-nude, in Heroic Pose (Neronian Period?). Upon Greek “principles,” Nero promoted immodesty in the arts, as in life.



Steerpike 2008, Wikimedia Commons

Roman Empire at the End of Nero's Reign. The empire, even under so corrupt a ruler as Nero, or even temporarily divided as here under Nero's immediate successors, had, under God's providence, a coherence vital to the spread of the gospel. Rome protected Paul in the East, and transported him half the breadth of the empire so that he could testify of God in an imperial court.

One of the last straws of excess to enrage the impoverished Romans near the violent end of Nero's life, was when "there arrived from Alexandria a ship, which was said to be freighted with dust for the wrestlers belonging to the emperor" (Suetonius 1796: par. 45).

Nero, Minister of God

How, then, was Nero the Romans' minister of God?

Fear and Goodness

The people feared Nero, and both good and evil people could run afoul of the tyrant. Yet the evil had more to fear twice over. Nero, more especially in his early reign, sought a face of good for himself, and he only with difficulty could dispatch the good, whereas the evil could be justly accused and quickly dealt with. Moreover, Nero must have seen multiple threats in the evil, because they might work their selfish (anti-Neronian) wills freely without the compunction of



Siemiradski 1876, Public Domain

Nero's Torches. Nero, driven by an informed public censure for his burning of Rome, maligned Christians, whom he turned into human torches to illuminate his city of revels. The spiritual light that blazed in Christians' martyrdom raised respect and compassion in pagan hearts, and opened a door for the Gospel.

morals, while the good would be cautious, prudent and provident in action. Nero was not godly—he spent his life preparing himself a hot place in hell—but he was the minister of God for good, in that he, though inadvertently, promoted goodness through fear.

Empire and Kingdom

At this time in Rome's history, the very existence of an emperor did much to hold together that empire that God had raised up for the spread of His Kingdom. About 1500 mi (2400 km) away, Paul, whose Roman citizenship had saved his skin, his life and his testimony (Acts 22:25–29, 23:27), appealed to Nero Claudius Caesar. Paul may have met his death upon his appeal to the tyrant, but God's purpose was fulfilled, that Paul should appear in Rome before Caesar (Acts 23:11, 27:24), and that "the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear" (2 Tm 4:17).

Shame and Glory

Perhaps Nero's greatest shame was the torture of innocent Christians whom, to assuage his general censure, he officially blamed for the Fire of Rome.

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 44).

Tacitus observes that the people, though they had esteemed Christians to be perversely irreligious, were now moved with

compassion for them, for the torture “was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed” (Tacitus 1952: bk. 15, chap. 44). Thus, as with the persecutors at the time of Stephen (Acts 11:19), Nero’s evil was a catalyst for the spread of the gospel.

Conclusion: Render unto Caesar, Render unto God

After Nero’s execution of his mother,

there occurred...a thick succession of portents, which meant nothing. A woman gave birth to a snake, and another was killed by a thunderbolt in her husband’s embrace. Then the sun was suddenly darkened and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning. All this happened quite without any providential design; so much so, that for many subsequent years Nero prolonged his reign and his crimes (Tacitus 1952: bk. 14, chap. 12).

The providence that Tacitus failed to discern was the glory that would come to God and his Church in the face of Nero’s evil, a glory that would outlive the fiendish autocrat and that is a martyrs’-blood foundation stone of the Church down to our own day. Nero was evil, but ultimately in the hand of God he was a minister of good purposes.

Yes, it is biblically clear that we must pay taxes to even a murderous government. That is our rendering unto Caesar (Mt 22:21). Do we finance murder? Well, the government has its account, and we have ours: Nero is now eternally settling his account with the LORD, while our current account is to obey our governmental minister. The greater despot he is, the more our obedience is taxed. The more we obey the despot (as long as we do not disobey God—Dn 3, 6), the more we throw ourselves into the merciful hands of the Almighty. That is our rendering unto God.

Paul wrote Romans 13 during the reign of one of the worst rulers in history so that Christians throughout history would recognize their absolute compulsion to honor their governors, and so to trust and honor their heavenly King.



Classical Numismatic Group 2008, Wikimedia Commons
Nero Sestertius (coin), 64–66 AD. Obverse: Nero wearing the laurel wreath. Reverse: Nero, seated, lavishing largesse upon a citizen; the goddess Minerva stands in the background. The two sides relate, respectively, affirmatively and negatively to the two sides of the Matthew 22:21 command, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

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