

HOW FAR DOES MY ALLEGIANCE GO? (Romans 13.1-7)

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“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God....” (Romans 13:1-7)

For almost 2000 years, Paul’s counsel in the first part of Romans 13 has shaped and influenced the way Christian communities sort out political responsibility—their relationship and interaction with governing authorities.

Today is no different. We ask the same questions: What is the Christian community’s political responsibility? What role does the church play with governing authorities? Just what does it mean to be “subject to the governing authorities”? How far does our allegiance go? Are we to obey government absolutely?

Again, we turn to Romans 13:1-7 to help us sort it out. But before we can understand what Paul is saying and how to apply his counsel today, we should understand the context in which these words were written—both within Scripture and within history.

In Scripture

Paul’s words in Romans 13 are familiar to most of us. We’ve heard them from preachers in the pulpits and politicians on their stumps. But before we look at the verses themselves, let’s take a look at why Paul wrote them in the first place.

Romans 13:1-7 is part of a larger section in Paul’s letter to the Romans (12:1-13:10) where he describes the transformation associated with becoming a follower of Jesus and being included in God’s people.

Paul has just completed an eleven-chapter argument showing that God is faithful and continues the covenant begun long ago. Beginning with chapter 12, Paul starts to spell out for Jews and Gentiles the implications of being identified with the newly reconfigured people of God. By joining the people of God, now gathered around Jesus, people access their true identity and find that Jesus’ story becomes their story as well.

In effect, Paul explains how Jesus’ faithful life on earth gathers God’s people, fills out our understanding of God, exposes death-dealing powers for what they are and enables others to follow Jesus’ overcoming way. Paul characterizes this transformation as being “a new creation” and effecting a real moral conversion. People are changed.

Paul sets out the basis for this transformation in 12:1-2: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed

to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” He then explores how the Christian community’s existence as one body reshapes its own values in 12:3-8: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought” and “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to the others.”

Next, Paul turns to several practical implications for what it means to live this righteous corporate life (12:9-13:10), including: cling to what is good, be devoted to and honor one another, be spiritually fervent, serve, share God with others, practice hospitality, bless those who persecute you, live in harmony, do not be proud or conceited, do not repay evil for evil, do right, live at peace with those around you, do not take revenge but overcome evil with good (12:9-21). In the last part of this section, Paul embeds the instructions regarding Christian political responsibility (13:1-7): “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities”

At first glance, the instructions about government seem pretty clear. But if we take a closer look, we find Paul’s counsel to “be subject to the governing authorities” is problematic for people living at the beginning of the 21st century.

Why? Quite simply, western society views government differently than Paul did in his day.

In history

We live in a democracy, which means government is to submit to the will of the *people*. When politicians lobby for a bill, they argue that it will be good not for the government but for the American people.

That is radically different from Paul’s day and his assertion that people are to submit to the will of the *government*. For Paul, the notion of government as an extension of the people is unimaginable. Governments in Paul’s day exercised varying forms of hierarchy and authority (often domination and oppression). In that world, the emperor was the government—a state ruled by one, not the extension of the people. The emperor was supreme. At the same time, Paul and his Jewish-Christian contemporaries viewed and respected the emperor and the governing powers as “ordered” by God—that is, as being “told where they belong.”

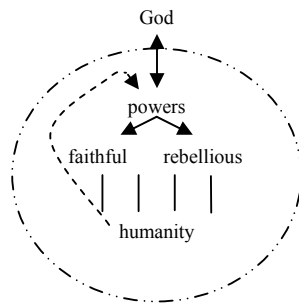
How does this work? Paul is simply voicing a typical Jewish-Christian world-view, where there are three basic levels in the hierarchy: God, the powers and humanity, in that order (Ps. 8:5; Heb 2:7). Paul, like other early Christians (Acts 5:29), was convinced that even though Christians now live in qualified subordination to the powers (rulers, principalities, spirits, angels, etc.), one day they would join the victorious Messiah Jesus in judging and redeeming the powers (1 Cor. 6:3). This amounts to an inversion of the hierarchy, which explains the “heel” and “footstool” language that characterizes the final “wrap up” and “ordering” of the Messiah’s appearing (Ps 110:1; 1 Cor 15:25; Rom 16:20; Heb 10:13).

Thus Paul’s view of the state is rather ambivalent and detached. Rome was not an enemy (he appealed to Caesar for a fair hearing) but neither was it a willing ally (as his efforts to persuade Felix, Festus and Agrippa of the truth of the gospel show). It was expedient to be on good terms with Rome. He probably saw Rome as the means by which the gospel could be promoted and extended into the then known world. And Paul had good reason to be optimistic. Rome was remarkably tolerant of Christianity at first. However, this changed

when the beliefs of the early Christians, like the refusal to give primary allegiance to the emperor, began to threaten the authority of Rome later in the second and third centuries.

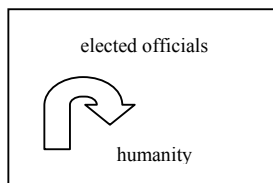
So, as we work to interpret Paul’s instructions about government, we have to keep in mind that we are dealing with two different world-views.

◆ New Testament world-view. The Jewish-Christian worldview begins with God, before the chaos (Gen 1:1). God creates the cosmos and orders “the powers” to carry out God’s purpose. Essential to this view is that humanity is invited to participate in God’s ongoing creation “ordering” by giving witness of God’s way to “the powers” and by completing this process with Jesus at the end of the age.



◆ Western world-view. Contemporary western democracy is quite different. Here elected officials derive their authority from the people that elect them. In this system, God’s involvement with the powers is unnecessary. Technically, God nor the powers are part of the system at all.

God ?



The system of western democracy itself grants less authority to the state than Paul does, as God’s involvement is minimized or absent. In a democracy system, the state is not granted authority by a person or God but by the masses. Interestingly, most popular Christian theology in America grants much *more* authority to the state than this text or the system of democracy allows, often claiming automatic divine endorsement for the state and calling for automatic allegiance of the church to the state.

Paul’s vision

While Paul never imagined a situation like ours where government is “we” instead of “them,” his vision is still accessible and relevant to us today.

A closer reading reveals more about our relationship to government than we often take away from this passage. With a little thought and some imagination, we can place our contemporary faith community within the vision articulated by Paul—even though it was

written in a particular time and situation far removed from us. This will go a long way toward helping us chart our own political responsibility.

Four ideals for Christian political responsibility can be drawn from these seven verses.

◆ Qualified endorsement of government. We need to be careful about translating Romans 13:1. Common translations indicate the governing authorities and the powers they represent are “ordained” (KJV), “established” (NIV), or “instituted” (NRSV) by God. However, these renderings—which suggest God’s endorsement—are too strong a translation of the Greek word *tassô*. A more correct rendering is that the powers are “ordered” by God—something initiated at creation, clarified at the cross/resurrection, and to be completed at the Lord’s return.

It is important to note that, in using this language, Paul is drawing on the Genesis creation stories where God brings “order” to the chaos. However, just because God created the natural order and called this ordering “good” does not mean that all that happens in nature (floods, earthquakes, etc.) is good or complete. In a similar way, while governments operate under God’s order, what they do may in fact be against God. Furthermore, God cannot be held responsible for rebellious powers or for what they do, even though ultimately God will “bring them into line.”

So, the state or government can only claim qualified endorsement by God. As “ordered” by God, who is good, these powers or governments have a responsibility to do good. Whether they do or not is another question.

The church’s role is to labor with God to bear witness respectfully to rebellious powers, inviting them to abandon their death-dealing policies and resume alignment with the life-giving purposes of God. This task is rightly characterized as “non-aligned submission” or “revolutionary subordination”—a truly subversive approach because it is a whole new way of living within a political system, no matter what it happens to be. It is also profoundly missional and a witness to the world (1 Cor. 7:12-16). This is the political responsibility of the Christian community, which continues until Jesus returns and brings all things in line with God’s purpose, thus completing the “ordering” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Paul’s counsel probably had an immediate application to his readers. He was most likely responding to an attempt by some Christians to join with their Jewish friends in an anti-Roman tax revolt. Paul reminds the Roman Christians that they should not be insubordinate to the state. He likely saw the payment of taxes as a way of showing love to the tax collectors. A peaceful situation would need to exist between the Roman government and the church if Paul was to use Rome as a base for his westward mission to Spain (Rom 15:28-29).

This does not mean all resistance—even tax resistance—is ruled out. It would be hard to imagine Paul endorsing government policies that went expressly against the foundational principle to “overcome evil with good” that he just set out a few paragraphs before (12:9-21). Indeed, Paul would probably have strong words for so-called “Christian states” that later twisted his counsel into mandating patriotic duty.

So, what are the implications of this ideal? *Christians must be critically thinking citizens of the state while subordinating themselves to its rule, and they must give witness to God’s*

ongoing mission to order all creation according to God's purpose.

◆ Exercise good judgment. How are the various appeals that come from “the authorities” to be sorted out? Paul says, “Pay to all what is due” (13:7). His words are probably an early commentary on Jesus’ words, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God that which belongs to God” (Mark 12:17). In this way, Paul reminds the Romans that while the coins stamped with Caesar’s image belong to him, Christians are to give God that which is stamped with the image of God: their very lives (12:1-2).

The implications? *The claims of the state are subject to evaluation—they are not absolute, but must be measured by the claims of love.* Christians are to test and discern the ethical value of political policies against the standards of God’s order and love, like those described in 12:9-21. We need to ask if the policy promotes wholeness and life, for that is what love does.

◆ Under government but not absolutely. Interestingly, Paul does not use the word that means “to obey” in verses one and five, but a word that means “to submit” or “to stand under” (*hypotassô*). Instead of blind obedience, Paul suggests an internal consent, which comes only after reflection and assessment. This reflection and assessment is an important “middle step” because internal alignment is precisely that which is to be given to no one but the Lord Jesus Christ (12:1-2).

Paul says the Christian community is to stand under government because of conscience (13:5). In other words, Christians stand under government because it is right for God’s children to be supportive of good government—not simply because they are told by their governments to do so. Notice that the emphasis is on “good,” or that which aligns with God’s good purpose. When Paul asks, “Do you wish to have no fear of authority?” (13:3), he does not answer his own question by saying, “Then do what the authority says.” Instead, Paul says, “Do what is good.”

The middle step of discerning whether the action of the government is good or not must be inserted into Christian political responsibility and church-state relations. This middle step was obvious to Paul because of his world-view. However, it must be consciously re-inserted today because the western world-view masks the death-dealing ways of “the powers” and their influence on institutions like government. We are easily fooled into thinking that democracy by definition operates in the interests of the people (i.e., government of the people, for the people, by the people), when in fact it is often part of a larger power system promoting injustice and oppression.

There are many examples of church-state relations where the middle step of discernment was not taken. Too often, so-called “Christian governments” abuse Paul’s words in order to silence any opposition to policies that are patently unchristian. The silencing of Christian opposition to systematic genocide and ethnic cleansing in Nazi Germany, South Africa, Rwanda and elsewhere illustrates what happens when the middle step of discernment is not consciously embraced. While “the powers” are not often able to “hear” critique because they are guided by self-interest and self-preservation, this does not release the church from its hope-filled and life-long mandate to “unmask” the powers and invite them to restoration and to God’s order.

Implication of Paul’s words? *There may be times when internal alignment or conscience*

(which now belongs to God) requires serious and responsible disobedience, such as when obedience to government would mean disobeying God's good purpose for the world.

◆ Lethal force not acceptable. “But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain” (13:4). It is common to hear this verse used to support the use of lethal force by governments. However, the sword (*machaira*) referred to here is the small dagger used by the police to ensure compliance. There is nothing said about the state's right or duty to exercise capital punishment. Paul is talking about the policing function of the state, not about execution or the use of violence in defense of justice.

Until the fifth century, Paul's words were taken as a call to peacemaking in relation to the government by the early church. Only after the rise of imperial Christianity was the text reversed and used as the basis for a Christian theology of the state and as a warrant for the state's use of lethal force in executing justice.

Ironically, when this verse is read in context, Paul's aim appears to be more about calling Christians to a non-conformist (12:1-2) and a nonviolent (13:1-7) stance toward government rather than the more common interpretation of supporting the use of lethal force. Just because God orders the powers, does not mean that whatever the ruler does is God's will. Instead, the Christian community is called to give faithful witness to God's ongoing mission to order all creation according to God's purpose. Whether the authorities pay attention is a different question.

The implication? *Christians should not take up arms for or against the government.*

Paul's vision today

Paul calls the church to engage its political responsibility in a particular way. The church functions not as the Kingdom of God but as a “sign” of the Kingdom of God, inviting all creation to reconciliation, healing and life in Christ.

So, how can we apply Paul's vision today?

◆ Bridging the gap. We need a great deal of imagination in order to appropriate texts like Romans 13. The cultural gap between Paul's world and our own is significant. We may as well get used to the fact that what Paul viewed as self-evident—the state as representative of cosmic powers, etc.—may not be obvious for us.

Bridging the gap is difficult but not impossible. The Christian community confesses that God's living Word crosses cultures and is sufficient to negotiate the “gap.” The promise that accompanies the “gap” is that through creative and imaginative discernment, people can be drawn into the drama of God's ongoing creation work of ordering the powers. Christian communities in every context are invited to develop metaphorical bridges that connect Scripture with their contemporary contexts. Through community discernment, we can find ways to appropriate the vision and re-express it for faith communities in different times and cultures. In this way, very different cultural norms can still be transformed and shaped by the deep structure of Scripture.

One practical way to “bridge the gap” is to insert the “middle-step” of reflection and

assessment back into Christian political engagement. That step—obvious for Paul—is not obvious today. Government policies that promote domination, oppression or enslavement, will quickly become evident when tested against the life-giving way of God as demonstrated by Jesus.

◆ Read with care, caution and boldness. Romans 13 has a very negative history. It has been misread to promote the notion of a “Christian state,” to demand unquestioning allegiance and to justify the extermination of others deemed as threats.

The vision that Paul tapped into calls Christians to choose voluntarily to comply with and to engage the basic political and social structures of society without giving up their primary allegiance, which is reserved for God’s rule and reign. In this way, the Christian political responsibility involves subverting the political system from within and inviting all creation to join in God’s ongoing mission to bring life and wholeness to all.

Given this mission, the Spirit of God continues to use Paul’s words in Romans 13 to shape contemporary Christian political responsibility. Today it is conceivable that there would be situations where civil disobedience (and not compliance) or where “running for elected office” (and not detachment), would in fact resonate with the deep structure of Roman 13 but in ways that Paul could not have imagined.

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