

**The Christian Community
and Political Responsibility:
Romans 13:1-7**

by Jon M. Isaak

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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 NRSV)

Paul’s counsel in Romans 13:1-7 has had a significant impact on Christian communities who are sorting out their political responsibility (see Dick; Neufeld). Global and local crises continue to cause much suffering and keep current the question, What is the Christian community’s political responsibility?

Interpretations of Romans 13:1-7 have varied through its history of informing Christian reflection on political responsibility (Toews, 51-53). Initially the text was received as an exhortation urging Christian communities not to resist the state’s efforts to govern, without any endorsement of the state or its policies. However, by the fifth century, it was read quite differently. Paul’s exhortation originally aimed at Christians was reversed to make two rather exalted claims about the state: (1) the state is justified in its use of force (and even violence) to protect its interests (which are argued to be derivative of God’s interests), and (2) the church is responsible to lend full support to the state’s execution of justice (which is argued to be derivative of God’s justice).

After the church’s rise to political power beginning in the fourth century, it was Augustine in response to the fall of Rome in the year 410 that clearly set out a vision for a worldwide society where the church played a major role. In his view the church was part of the anticipated “Heavenly City” that used the means of the “earthly city” in its “pilgrimage” toward “heavenly peace” (see *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 17). Augustine’s vision for church-state relations continues to inform contemporary western thinking.

The transformation of Romans 13:1-7 has been remarkable. A text that initially said very little about the state was eventually read to say much about the state and about the Christian community’s political responsibility to align itself with the state. Many today would argue that the contemporary western appropriation of Romans 13:1-7 with its strong endorsement of the state still resonates with the thrust of Paul’s vision for Christian political responsibility. Is this tenable? Perhaps the cultural and contextual factors that led to the transformation of the interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 are more significant than many allow.

In this essay I will again explore Paul’s much-debated exhortation in Romans 13:1-7 in order to recover a sense of the early Christian vision for political responsibility that drove Paul to write these words in the first place. I will show that the contemporary western interpretation cannot be accepted as a valid contextualization, but must be seen as a significant reversal of the thrust of Paul’s vision for Christian political responsibility. My aim is to clarify Paul’s vision for Christian political responsibility by paying close attention both to the social world from which the text emerged and to the western social context within which this text has taken root. The fruit of this enterprise will be to set out an alternative reading for contemporary appropriation, one which resonates more deeply with the vision for Christian political engagement that characterized Paul and the early Christians. In our increasingly post-Christian western world, I

suggest that such an alliance with early Christian communities may be increasingly more comprehensible.

THE DOMINANT WESTERN READING OF ROMANS 12 AND 13

Before beginning a close reading of Romans 13, it is helpful to be reminded how Romans 12 and 13 are typically interpreted by Christians in the western world. In the quote below, Skillen and Pavlischek, respected Christian political analysts, articulate a Protestant interpretation of Romans 12 and 13 (see Luther, 163-65; Calvin, 280-81). In this view the government is understood to be instituted by God and mandated to execute God's judgments (note the continuity with Augustine's Christian theology of the state). While the paragraph is short, it gives a clear sense of what might be called the dominant western reading of Romans 12 and 13.

To put the issues in sharp relief, I suggest that the paragraph be read with the following three questions in mind: (1) According to Skillen and Pavlischek, what role does Jesus now play in the church and society? (2) How is the Christian to think about personal justice and state-sponsored public justice? and (3) How is the relationship between the church and the state conceptualized?

In Romans 12, we would argue, Paul is indeed affirming that the people of God must not try to preserve themselves by means of taking out personal vengeance against their neighbors. Such violence begets more violence. That is the very reason why God, not for the first time in Jesus, but long ago at the foundations of Israel, established offices for the purpose of conducting public, impersonal judgment. Those offices of judges and courts and kings were commissioned to enact justice precisely so that the cycle of personal vengeance could be stopped. In Romans 13, then, Paul is reiterating the teaching about one of God's gracious blessings for all people that is fully consistent with the new administration of the world by Christ. Divinely appointed officials (not just in Israel) have been appointed by God to enact a measure of God's punishment against crimes to protect Christians as well as non-Christians so they don't have even to think about exercising personal vengeance to achieve justice. (Skillen and Pavlischek, 443)

In regard to the questions posed above, Skillen and Pavlischek claim that Jesus heads up the "new administration," but that things continue as they have from the "foundation of Israel." In other words, it is largely "business as usual," only now there is a new boss; the means and exercise of power are the same as before (i.e., exclusion, scapegoating, violence, etc.). How then is the Christian to think about personal justice and state-sponsored public justice? According to Skillen and Pavlischek, these are meant to be different. A Christian is morally prevented from using personal vengeance (as in Rom. 12), yet the state is mandated by God to execute public or impersonal justice (as in Rom. 13). The two are not the same. The Christian as an individual is guided by one set of standards and the state another, almost as if there are two kingdoms operating at the same time.

So how is the relationship between church and state conceptualized? For Skillen and Pavlischek, while the gap between the two kingdoms exists, the Christian community retains much confidence in the state's potential for good, because it has God's endorsement and governs in God's name. Christians are told to be grateful that the state executes "God's punishment," so that they need not "have to even think about exercising personal vengeance." There is direct correspondence between God, the state, and the church. Furthermore, the church aims to transform the state gradually so that, over time, Christian values inform the state and in the end the synthesis is complete: God, the state, and the church are one.

This is not the only way to read this text. In fact, it is unlikely that this is how the Roman Christians received Paul's instructions. An alternative reading answers the above three questions quite differently. A close examination of the text and of our western context will yield, I believe, an interpretation that is more christologically rigorous, more ethically consistent, and more politically discerning. While it may seem presumptuous to reverse centuries of interpretation, I join a vocal minority of voices calling for a reassessment of Christian political responsibility (see Yoder, Toews, Hays, Johnson, Wink).

PAUL'S VISION FOR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

A close reading of Romans 13:1-7 begins by noting that this text is part of, and should not be separated from, a larger section in Paul's letter to the Romans (12:1--13:14) where Paul describes the transformation associated with being identified with God's people (Yoder, 197). Paul has just completed a lengthy eleven-chapter argument showing that God is indeed faithful, and God has not broken the covenant with God's people. Now, beginning with chapter 12, Paul turns to spelling out the implications for Jews and Gentiles of being identified with the newly reconfigured people of God, gathered around Jesus.

In effect, Paul explains how Jesus' faithful life serves to reconstitute God's people, to fill out the understanding of God, to expose death-dealing powers for what they are, and to enable others to follow Jesus' way. Paul characterizes this movement as being "in Christ" and as effecting a real moral transformation. Something new actually happens to the person who becomes a Christian and is joined to this newly reconfigured people. 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.

After Paul sets out the basis for the transformation of moral consciousness (12:1-2), he then explores how the Christian community's corporate existence (as one body) reshapes its own values (12:3-8). Next, Paul turns to several practical implications for what it means to live this righteous corporate life (12:9--13:10). It is in this last section where Christian political responsibility is addressed. Paul proceeds to set out three "norms" that characterize his vision for the behavior of the "new collective" that gives witness to God's newly redefined people.

Norm #1: Overcoming Evil with Good (Rom. 12:9-21)

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21 NRSV). Paul begins by listing virtues that are standard moral exhortations. His list of classical virtues--love, honor, hope, patience, generosity, hospitality--would have been well-received by first-century Romans (Johnson, 183). However, in a rather bold move, Paul then subverts the standard moral theory by calling believers to a life characterized by nonstandard behavior: "bless those who persecute you," "associate with the lowly," and "do not repay anyone evil for evil." This is not typical behavior (Johnson, 183). Instead, the norm for Christian morality is to be informed by the life of Messiah Jesus. In contrast to the typical social code of paying back enemies, Paul holds up the template of Jesus to counter humanity's natural desire for revenge (note the echoes of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7).

Paul continues with reminders to "live peaceably with all" and "never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath [of God]" (12:17-19). For Paul, this is not passive acceptance of evil with gleeful delight in imagining some future time when our enemies "will really get it!" No, for Paul, the language of "wrath" is simply the most graphic way of expressing the consequences experienced when people deny their true identity as God's beloved. "The consequences of persistent rejection are horrible," says Paul, because by removing ourselves from God's love, we cannot live. The potential for such destruction cannot be minimized.

Important to note is the way Paul backs up his assertion: vindication is God's prerogative (12:19). What exactly does this mean? It appears that God's "vengeance" is different from human vengeance. Typically people understand vengeance to be based on the removal of previous good will. However, because God's love for creation does not change, God's vengeance must have more to do with the "public righting of wrong" (Kraus, 210).

At first glance, then, Paul's picture of the ultimately redemptive character of God's vengeance would seem difficult to square with the obscure reference to doing good to enemies--in such a way that it "will heap burning coals on their heads" (12:20). How could this match with God's redemptive vengeance? It sounds like a form of psychological revenge: a manipulative technique to get the enemy to say, "I'm sorry."

While most commentators associate the cryptic image of "burning coals" with punishment or shaming (in some way or other), it may well be a reference to an ancient Egyptian reconciliation ritual (Klassen, 343). Apparently, by giving coals of fire to the one you have wronged, you show that you are sorry for hurting them (fire is a valuable commodity for desert people where wood for cooking and heating is not in abundance). Paul takes this ancient figure (Prov. 25:21-22) and modifies it for his purpose here--such life-giving demonstrations of restored relationships are regularly to characterize the hope the Christian community brings to all interactions.

If this is the meaning of the proverb, Paul has used it very effectively to illustrate the shape of Christian behavior in all human interactions. "Heaping burning coals on the head" is not manipulative. It is a significant life-giving act to heap fire-starting coals into the neighbor's--and even enemy's--pot so that they may carry them on their heads back to their campsites to use and enjoy. In this way, the community is not "overcome with evil, but overcomes evil with good." Such behavior is not passive in the face of evil. On the contrary, the Christian community aggressively engages in a campaign to overcome evil using the "weapons" that Jesus himself used: acts of love and kindness (Klassen, 348).

Norm #2: Non-aligned Submission to the Governing Authorities (Rom. 13:1-7)

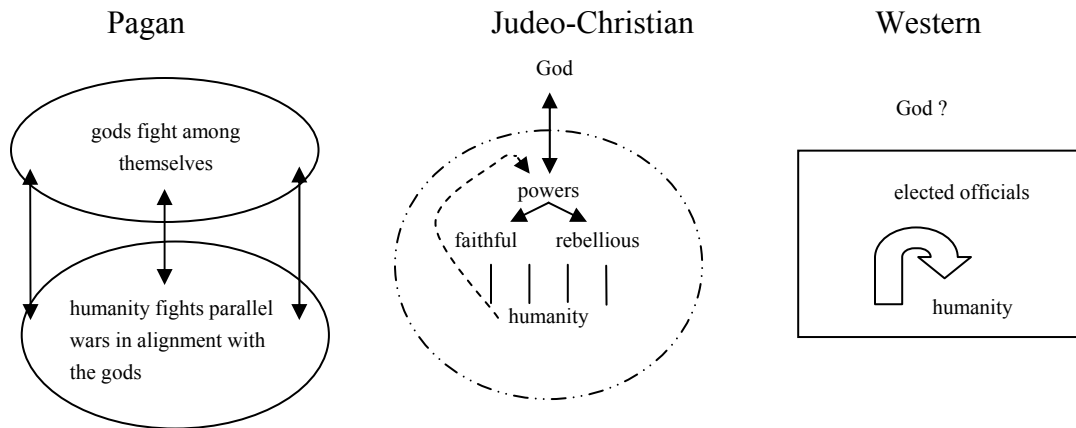
"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1a NRSV). If the cultural allusion to "burning coals" is difficult to imagine, these instructions in Romans 13:1-7 are even more problematic for people living at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Why? Quite simply, western society has quite a different view of government. Unlike Paul, we live in a world where democracy means governments are to submit to the will of the people--not the other way around (people submitting to the will of the government, as Paul seems to assert). Every politician I hear says that this or that bill or proposition is good, not for the government, but for the American people!

For Paul, the notion that government is the extension of the people is completely unimaginable (Johnson, 186). Paul is describing a worldview in which the emperor is the government. The emperor is supreme. At the same time, in the Judeo-Christian worldview, the emperor is somehow "ordered" by God (Yoder, 203). What might that mean?

Paul's view of the state is rather ambivalent. Paul did not experience Rome as an enemy (otherwise his later appeal to Caesar for a fair hearing makes no sense), nor as a willing ally (as his efforts to persuade Felix, Festus, and Agrippa of the truth of the Gospel show). Instead, Paul seems to be granting things as they are in his world. Governments have always exercised varying forms of hierarchy, power, and authority (often domination and oppression), and are to be respected as "ordered" by God--that is being "told where they belong."

Paul is simply voicing a classic Judeo-Christian worldview 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 live now in qualified subordination to the powers, one day they will join Messiah Jesus in judging/redeeming the powers (1 Cor. 6:3). This will amount to an inversion of the hierarchy, which explains the “heel” and “footstool” language that characterizes the final “wrap up” of the Messiah’s appearing (Ps. 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:25; Rom. 16:20; Heb. 10:13). At any rate, the Judeo-Christian worldview is noticeably different from the pagan and the western worldviews.



In the pagan system, chaos rules and the gods fight among themselves to bring order to the chaos. Humanity is obligated to one god or another and in some way carries on the celestial conflict in a parallel manner on earth against fellow human beings (Hiebert, 117-18).

By way of contrast, the Judeo-Christian worldview begins with God, prior to the chaos (Gen. 1:1), who 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 by giving witness of God’s way to “the powers” and by completing this process with Messiah Jesus at the end of the age (Hiebert, 118-23).

Contemporary western democracy is quite different from either of the other two systems. Here elected officials derive their power and authority from the people that elect them. God’s involvement (or even that of the powers) is unnecessary for the logic of this system. A “nonpowers” construal of the state would have been unimaginable for Paul. To complicate matters further, not only does contemporary western democracy say much *less* than Paul would about the character of the state, but most popular Christian theology says much *more* about the state than this text allows (Käsemann 1969, 205-6; 1980, 354). Paul should not be heard in Romans 13:1-7 to give the state automatic endorsement nor to call for the church’s automatic allegiance to the state.

For Paul, 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 world as it was then known (Johnson, 187). And Paul had good reason to be optimistic. Rome was remarkably tolerant of Christianity at first--until the beliefs of the early Christians (e.g., refusal to give primary allegiance to the emperor) began to threaten the authority of Rome later in the second and third centuries.

Paul never imagined a situation like ours where government is “us” and not “them.” So, what can we say? Is Paul’s vision so foreign that it is inaccessible at the beginning of the twenty-first century? I do not think so. A close reading reveals a much more nuanced interaction with the social structures than is often understood. I believe that it is possible to develop imaginative analogies that can place contemporary faith communities within the theological vision articulated by Paul on the occasion of a very particular situation in Rome. Such an exercise will go a long way toward helping Christian communities chart a vision for political responsibility.

With this in mind, four ideals--along with corresponding implications--can be drawn from these seven verses.

(1) God orders the powers. Paul situates his instructions by drawing on the Genesis creation stories, in which 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 is good (floods, earthquakes, etc.), or that it is 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.”

For Paul, the powers include the civil authorities and the spiritual powers they represent. These powers are not “ordained” (KJV), “established” (NIV), or “instituted” (NRSV) by God. All three English renderings suggest God’s endorsement and are too strong a translation of the Greek word *tassô*. Instead, the powers are “ordered” by God (Yoder, 203). The state can only claim qualified endorsement by God. As “ordered” by God who is good, these powers (governments) have a responsibility to do good--whether they do or not is another question (they are faithful or rebellious to varying degrees). Nevertheless, the church labors with God’s spirit to bear witness respectfully to the rebellious powers, inviting them to abandon their death-dealing policies and to resume alignment with the life-giving purposes of God. This task is one that occupies the church for the duration of these last days and is rightly characterized as “revolutionary subordination,” or the “politics of Jesus” (Yoder, 190-91). Voluntary subordination is a truly subversive approach to the powers because it is a whole new way of living within the current political system, whatever it happens to be. It is also profoundly missional and is understood as witness to the world (1 Cor. 7:12-16). Such is the political responsibility of the Christian community--a community that will not be complete until the eschaton when it joins the returning Messiah to bring all things in line with God’s purpose (1 Thess. 4:17).

The particular occasion that generated Paul’s counsel for restraint here in Romans 13:1-7 appears to be rooted in an attempt by some Christians to join with their Jewish friends in an anti-Roman tax revolt (Borg, 205-18). However, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that they should not be insubordinate to the state, because it is a temporary institution serving God’s purpose (how well it does, remains to be seen and is subject to assessment). Paul 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). However, this does not mean all resistance (even tax resistance) is ruled out; it would be hard to imagine Paul endorsing or participating in government policies that went expressly against the foundational principle of loving enemy that he just set out. Nor can Paul be held responsible for the way later so-called “Christian states” twisted his words into mandating patriotic duty.

Implication: *Christians are to be self-critical citizens of the state while subordinating themselves to its rule, thus giving witness to God’s ongoing mission to order all creation according to God’s purpose.*

(2) Christians should give government what it is due. Paul’s focus is on the Christian community’s responsibility to exercise good judgment. How are the various appeals that come from “the authorities” to be sorted out? Again Paul draws on the Jesus tradition. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God that which belongs to God” (Mark 12:17). Paul’s words, “pay to all what is due” (13:7) are probably an early commentary on that saying of Jesus (Toews, 52).

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). Christians are to test and discern the ethical value of political policies. By what criteria? The claims of the state are to be measured by the claims of love. Does the policy promote wholeness and life? This is what love does.

Implication: *The claims of the state are subject to evaluation; they are not absolute, but must be measured by the claims of love.*

(3) Christians are to stand under the government. Paul does not use the most common word for obedience (*hypakouō*) in 13:1 and 13:5 (Yoder, 212). Instead he uses a more general word, meaning “to submit” or “to stand under” (*hypotassō*). There is a difference between societal obedience (that which is automatic and unreflective) and internal consent (that which is offered only after reflection and assessment). Such reflection and assessment is the “middle step” that must be inserted in all church-state relations. The middle step is necessary because conscience (or 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 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. This middle step, which was obvious to Paul because of his worldview, is one that must be consciously reinserted because the western worldview masks “the powers” and their influence on institutions like government. Westerners 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 system of domination that uses violence to maintain itself (Wink, 39).

Unfortunately, there are many examples of church-state relations where middle step discernment has not been activated. Too often Paul’s words have been abused by so-called “Christian governments” to silence any opposition to policies that are patently “unchristian” (e.g., unjust economic and human relations). 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 lifelong mandate to “unmask” the powers and invite them to restoration.

Implication: *There may be times when internal alignment (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.*

(4) The government uses the dagger. The sword (*machaira*) in 13:4 refers to the small dagger used by the police to ensure compliance (Yoder, 206). There is nothing said here about the state’s right or duty to exercise capital punishment. Until the fifth century, this text was understood as a call to peacemaking in relation to the government; 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.

Contrary to that interpretation, Paul’s aim appears to be more about calling Christians to a nonconformist (12:1-2) and a nonviolent (13:1-7) stance in the world, including their stance toward government. Just because God orders the powers does not mean that rulers will always do God’s will. Yet, the Christian community is called to faithfully give witness to God’s ongoing

mission to order all creation according to God's purposes. Whether the authorities pay attention is a different question (Toews, 53).

Implication: *Paul's reference to the dagger concerns the policing function of the state. It does not legitimize execution or the use of violence in defense of justice. Paul is saying Christians should not take up arms for or against the government.*

Norm #3: Love Which Fulfills the Torah (Rom. 13:8-10)

"Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10b NRSV). Speaking about the obligations of citizenry, Paul says Christians are to owe nothing (taxes, honor, respect). Then Paul moves in a different direction. He circles back to Torah, Israel's living guide. While the social norms of respect, honor, and taxes are to be met by the Christian community, there is one debt that remains. The Christian community remains obliged to show love continually in an ongoing manner. In so doing, the Torah is fulfilled.

So the whole reason for the community's existence is grounded in love. What does Paul mean by love? He claims that the whole law is summed up by the command to "love your neighbor as [you] yourself [would like to be treated]" (13:9; also Gal. 5:14; cf. Matt. 7:12; Mark 12:31; John 13:34). While he does not say it here explicitly, Paul considers the love of God to be embodied (demonstrated) most concretely in Jesus. Paul is clearly in the mainstream of early Christianity which saw in Jesus the self-revelation of God's love: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16 NRSV; cf. Eph. 5:2, 25).

The norm of love that Paul is talking about is one of adherence to Jesus who binds the church's destiny to his and makes the story of the church his story. Authentic love calls people to repentance, to transformation, and to life--all of which are seen most clearly in the way of Jesus, which led to the cross and the resurrection. This is God's way of reaching out, and it becomes the way for all as well (Phil. 2:5-11). In this way, the Torah is fulfilled. Not only does Jesus fulfill the purpose of the law (Rom. 10:4), but he is also the climactic expression of everything that the Torah pointed to all along.

Assessing the Three Norms

So, how does this alternative reading stand up to the scrutiny of the three questions I posed to Skillen and Pavlischek? What is the fruit of this alternative reading?

The three norms drawn from Paul's occasional instruction to the Roman Christian community give expression to a vision for Christian political responsibility that is rigorous, consistent, and discerning. First, the alternative interpretation is more christologically rigorous. Jesus, as the self-expression of God, sets out not only God's way of reaching out, but also the way for all humanity as well. Second, the alternative reading is more ethically consistent. The Christian community's ethic of personal judgment does not differ from its sense of what constitutes state-sponsored public justice because both are shaped by the way of Jesus. Third, the alternative rendering is more discerning of political responsibility. The church's mandate as "sign" of the kingdom is to give witness to all, including the state, by engaging and inviting all creation to realignment according to the way of God as demonstrated by Jesus.

APPROPRIATING PAUL'S VISION FOR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY TODAY

If in fact the alternative reading of Romans 12 and 13 given above is at all representative of its earliest reception, what guidelines might be set out for contemporary appropriation of these two chapters? I suggest three guidelines for embodying the witness of Romans 12:9--13:10 today.

First, the moral conversion to which all are invited to participate goes deeper than traditional moral instruction. Certainly the standard virtues of society (love, respect, and excellence) are promoted, but more fundamentally, Paul is speaking about a moral vision that drives virtues that are not traditionally valued. Paul calls for a reevaluation or reassessment of values empowered by the transformation of the moral conscience (12:1-2) in order to be aligned with God's kind of love shown concretely in the life of Jesus. Such reevaluation should also give shape to the contemporary negotiation of values. This will likely mean, as it did then, that down becomes up, foolishness becomes wisdom, humility leads to glory, and evil is overcome with good.

Each subsequent Christian community, as a "living sacrifice," must discern just how it should express (embody) the moral vision shaped by Jesus and what this vision means in the face of global crises. Essential to such a reevaluation is coming to terms with humanity's identity as God's beloved, which makes itself evident in loving/living the way God does. In the middle of the many calls to join state-sanctioned vengeance and retribution, the biblical metaphors like "exiles" and "aliens" call the church to a different way: one that resists Augustine's call to employ the means of "earthly city" to promote the "Heavenly City." The church functions, not as the Kingdom of God, but as a "sign" of the Kingdom of God, continuing to invite all creation to the possibility of reconciliation, healing, and life in Christ (Kraus, 173).

Second, a great deal of imagination is needed in order to appropriate texts like Romans 12 and 13. The cultural gap between Paul's symbolic world and our own is significant. We may as well get used to the fact that what Paul viewed as self-evident (e.g., burning coals as sign of restoration, 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 these culture-bound expressions give witness to God's living Word, and that God's spirit is sufficient to work with this "problem."

The promise that accompanies such a "problem" is that through creative and imaginative discernment, people can be drawn into the drama of God's ongoing creation work. Christian communities in every context are invited to develop metaphorical bridges that connect Scripture's prophetic/apostolic witness with their contemporary contexts. Through community discernment, ways can be found to appropriate the vision that drives the text and to reexpress 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 this gap" is to insert the "middle-step" of reflection and assessment back into Christian political engagement. The step that was obvious (and unstated) for Paul is not obvious today. Government policies that promote domination, oppression, or enslavement, will quickly become self-evident when tested against the way of God as demonstrated by Jesus.

Third, Romans 13:1-7 must be read with considerable care and caution. It has a very negative history-of-effect. 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 (Johnson, 189). So, while Paul is expressing a predemocracy worldview, no longer valued by most westerners, the hermeneutical gap can still be bridged by exercising imaginative appropriation.

The moral vision that Paul tapped into calls Christians to choose voluntarily to comply with and to engage the basic political/social structures of the society within which they live without giving up their primary allegiance, which is reserved for God's rule/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, 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 Romans 13:1-7, yet in ways that Paul could not have imagined.

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