

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND KINGDOM POLITICAL ETHICS IN ROMANS 13:1-7¹

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I. Introduction: Paul's call to love the authorities

Rev Dr Timothy Njoya, the former presiding bishop of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Africa, recalled that during one of his confrontations with Kenya's second President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi's security officers, they asked him: "Rev Njoya, doesn't the Bible that you preach to us, say you should submit to the governing authorities?" This question by the officers helps us to see that many understand Paul as teaching unquestioning submission to the authorities. This paper will investigate what exactly Paul instructs the Roman Christians to do in relation to governing authorities. In other words, it asks the question: "What is Paul's teaching to the house churches of Rome on how to relate with rulers?" This paper will establish that Paul's teaching is a call to love the authorities and – by implication – to live holy lives.

II. Context of Romans 13:1-7

The issue of context is important when reading all of Paul's letters. Romans 13 is no exception. According to Ben Witherington, "...Paul's letters are *ad hoc* in character dealing with specific situations, and these subjects are largely determined by needs of the moment. These letters are not compendiums of Paul's random thoughts on given subjects."² Katherine Grieb echoed this when she said that this passage should not be read divorced from its historical context "as if it were a timeless source for a Christian doctrine of Church and state."³ The story of Rev Dr Njoya cited above is not unique as many empires use this passage to keep all opposition at bay.

The general context of the letter to the Romans was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were coming back to the city of Rome and finding Gentiles fully in charge of the church. Paul wrote to reconcile these two groups with the gospel. The immediate context of Romans 13 was that Paul had in mind what made the Jews to be driven out of the city and now

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from the English Standard Version.

² Ben Witherington III, "Transcending Imminence: the Gordian knot of Pauline eschatology." in *"The Reader must Understand": Eschatology in Bible and Theology*. (ed. Mark, Elliott, and Kent Brower; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 177.

³ A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 123.

that they are back Paul did not want the Christian community to cause civil disobedience.⁴ Katherine Grieb was right to note that “...the imperial sword is not idle: it continues to threaten destruction of the most vulnerable population, namely, the Jews around and among the Roman Christians. Disruptive actions on the part of the Roman Gentile Christians would have placed the lives of their Jewish and Jewish Christian neighbours in danger.”⁵

It has been widely noted that Romans 12:1 and Romans 15:13 form an extended section of paranaesis or ethical exhortations which forms the immediate context for our passage.⁶ Herman Ridderbos underscored the connection between 12:1 and 13:1-7, observing that “...the Christian life as liturgy, the service of God in everyday life” has to do with “obedience to earthly authorities”.⁷ Likewise, F. Godet remarked: “We have seen that Paul, after pointing to the Christian consecrating his body to God’s service, places him successively in the two domains in which he is to realize the sacrifice of himself: that of *spiritual* life properly so called, and that of *civil* life.”⁸ Reading these two chapters together will ensure that our section be seen in the context of love. In 13:1-7, love is applied to government as well; Paul demonstrated how the people of God were to express love towards the governing authorities.

James Dunn believed that Romans 13:1-7 – rather than being a call to political quietism – was actually “a call for good citizenship, on the assumption, no doubt partly at least that civil disorder and strife benefits no one (least of all the little people)”⁹ Paul was fully aware that good citizenship served the missionary enterprise (particularly his plans to evangelize Spain), which would result in the commendation of the gospel to those of good will.¹⁰ This passage if divorced from this context will continue to do more harm just as the history of the church has shown.

⁴ Grieb, 125. See also William M. Greathouse and George Lyons, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Romans 9-16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 173; and James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, vol. 38b in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 2009), 766.

⁵ Grieb, *The Story of Romans*, 125.

⁶ J. N. Bailey, "Paul's Political Paraenesis in Romans 13:1-7" *Restoration Quarterly* 46, no. 1: 11-28 (2004); *New Testament Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 6, 2012).

⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: William.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975) 321.

⁸ F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (trans. A. Cusin and Talbot W. Chambers; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 439.

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: William.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 679.

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: William B.

III. The gospel and the empire in Paul's thought

For us to understand Paul's teaching in Romans 13, we have to approach it against the backdrop of Paul's thoughts on the relationship between the gospel that reveals the righteousness of God in Romans and the Roman Empire. Much of the understanding that currently exists is because Paul for the most part has been reduced to a religious preacher who has nothing to say politically. Paul must be seen "...as an ambassador for a king-in-waiting, establishing cells of people loyal to this new king, and ordering their lives according to his story, his symbols, and his praxis, and their minds according to his truth."¹¹ For Paul the gospel of Jesus Christ is the real good news not Caesars gospel.¹² What Paul says about the gospel has to be seen as a challenge to all other pretensions.

Joerg Rieger's remarked that – for Paul – "...Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection represent a logic that diametrically opposes empire and redefines the notion of lordship."¹³ N. T. Wright observed that Paul's gospel was a challenge,

...to the lordship of Caesar, which, though certainly 'political' was also profoundly 'religious.' Caesar demanded worship as well as 'secular obedience; not just taxes, but sacrifices. He was well on the way to becoming the supreme divinity in the Greco-Roman world, maintaining his vast empire not simply by force, though there was of course plenty of that, but by the development of a flourishing religion that seemed to be trumping most others either by absorption or by greater attraction. Caesar, by being a servant of the state, had provided justice and peace to the whole world. He was therefore to be hailed as Lord, and trusted as Savior. This is the world in which Paul announced that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was Savior and Lord.¹⁴

Romans 13:1-7 has to be interpreted with this understanding of Paul and the empire. It is very clear from the proceeding discussion that Paul did not always say yes to the emperor. Rather, the gospel he preached was in many ways opposed to the imperial cult.

Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 680. See also Greathouse & Lyons, 173.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and politics* (ed. Richard A. Horsley; Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2000); *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, EBSCO host (accessed July 12, 2012), 160-183.

¹² N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel," 160-183.

¹³ Joerg Rieger, *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 23.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel," 160-183.

IV. Paul's Teaching in Romans 13:1-7

Paul commands *πασα ψυχη* (everyone) to submit oneself to the governing authorities (v.1). Submission as noted by William Greathouse and George Lyons is to be differentiated from the "obedience" or the offering that belongs to God alone.¹⁵ The word used *upotavssw* is in the middle or passive, meaning this is something one does to oneself voluntarily.¹⁶ Dunn says it "has the clear sense 'subject, subordinate,' ... 'subject oneself, be subjected, subordinate.'"¹⁷ This concept is also used of the relationship between slaves and their masters, wives and their husbands in other Pauline writings.

Clearly submission is something that ought to characterize all of the relations of the holy people of God because they are to "Submit to one another in the fear of Christ" (Eph. 5:21)¹⁸ Since Christian submission is done in the fear of Christ, it is qualitatively different from the one we find in the world. Gerhard Delling notes that "Even the *upotajssesqai* of those who are properly subordinate does not stay the same when done under the control of dependence on the Lord, though externally it is rendered in exactly the same way as by others...for the demand now has a specific Christian basis...as the community is subject to Christ."¹⁹ It is from this vantage point that when the Christian community submits to the authorities they are actually demonstrating love. The nature of love is that it cannot be forced, hence the phrase "subject oneself."

All are to submit voluntarily because all authority is not only given but also established by God (v.1b). Here Paul acknowledged the sovereignty of God over all powers. It has been noted that Paul was drawing on Jewish understanding of God's relationship with world powers. Israelite wisdom tradition had taught that, "...the holding of political office and wielding of political power were understood as part of the grand design of the universe. The King was therefore a divinely appointed agent for organizing and imposing a just order upon earth which would embody the requirements of wisdom."²⁰

¹⁵ Greathouse and Lyons, *Romans 9-16*, 175.

¹⁶ Gerhard Delling, "Upotassw," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VIII (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 39-46.

¹⁷ James D. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 760-761.

¹⁸ Delling, "Upotassw," *TDNT*, 8: 39-46

¹⁹ Delling, "Upotassw," *TDNT*, 8: 39-46

²⁰ R.E Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992) 96.

James Dunn cited Jewish scriptures to show where Paul is coming from: “ Prov. 8:15-16, ‘By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles govern the earth’; Wisd Sol 6:3 reminds boastful rulers, ‘Your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High’ ...”²¹ This is a reminder not just to the house churches of Rome but to those in the halls of power in Rome or anywhere else that God is the ultimate authority. The authority they have has been given them by the one who has the power not only to place but remove. Clearly, Paul shared with his Jewish wisdom teachers “the assumption ...that the system of justice which the king maintains, and over which he is the presiding head, is wholly just and fair system.”²²

Greathouse and Lyons referenced Robert Jewett, who asked a forgotten question: "Which God according to Paul orders worldly authorities?" This God is not any of the Roman pantheon or the ‘divine’ emperor Nero, it is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jewett observed: “If the Romans authorities had understood this argument, it would have been viewed as thoroughly subversive. That the Roman authorities were appointed by the God and Father of Jesus Christ turns the entire Roman civic cult on its head, exposing its suppression of the truth.”²³ N.T Wright shed more light on Paul’s declaration on what it means to be under God:

...(this) is itself a Jewish point over against pagan ruler-cult. Caesar did not, normally, owe allegiance to anyone except himself, and perhaps, though at a surface level, the traditional Roman gods. Paul declares, with massive Jewish tradition behind him, that Caesar is in fact responsible to the true God, whether or not he knows it. This is an undermining of pagan totalitarianism, not a reinforcement of it.²⁴

This truth requires that ultimate submission of the holy people of God is then, to God rather than to the powers.

This leads us to the issue of abuse of authority that God gives. Should the people of God submit to powers that usurp God’s power? James Dunn held that “Abuse of that authority will be under God’s judgement; submission is determined by the same God-ordained limits.”²⁵ Paul would share this dictum, "it is necessary to obey God rather than persons" (Acts 5:29) with his

²¹ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 761.

²² Clements, 101.

²³ Jewett quoted in Greathouse and Lyons, 175.

²⁴ N.T. Wright, "Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans," in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically* (ed. C. Bartholomew; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 173-195.

²⁵ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 762.

fellow apostles. John H. Yoder supported this position when he said: “God is not said to create or institute or ordain the powers that be, but only to order them, to put them in their place.”²⁶

Understanding submission is extremely important in that not everything that the authorities do is in line with God’s purposes. Yet we must be careful to note that Paul is not addressing a situation where the authorities are abusing their powers but where they are functioning as they should.

Rebellion against the authorities who are functioning in their God ordered manner, is rebellion to God (v.3). Rebellion is not the right way to express love to the authorities; it is acting contrary to love. Those in authority hold terror for those who rebel against them and those who live as the holy people of God rulers hold no terror for them (v.3). Here again Paul was informed by his Jewish heritage as noted by Clement: “...the king stands at the head of a just order, to oppose him and thereby to incur his wrath, is to act against that order so as to render oneself liable to a deserved punishment.”²⁷ Similarly those who do good, ‘...he is God’s servant to do you good’ (v.4). The ruler is also a servant of God to those who do wrong: "He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (v.4) A good ruler does not punish those who do good, only those who do wrong.

In 13:6, Paul moved from using a general word diakonov (servant) in 13:4 to leitourgoi; (minister) a cultic word. Strathmann noted: “...rulers...are leitourgoi Qeou: because they minister to God’s will by suppressing evil and promoting good.”²⁸ Paul employed cultic language, and by so doing he was tearing down “...the division between sacred and secular...: where in 12:1 the language of the cult is extended to everyday life, here he does not hesitate to describe the obligations and functions of the state as ministry commissioned by and on behalf of God...”²⁹ Paul was addressing Christians in Rome not as citizens of the New Jerusalem but as citizens of Rome.³⁰ This is very significant for what it means to live as Holy people of God, for there is no secular or sacred service. Rather, God is served in all spheres of life not just within the four walls of the church.

²⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 203.

²⁷ Clement, *Wisdom in Theology*, 101.

²⁸ H. Strathmann, “leitourgovV” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, IV* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 229-231.

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 767.

³⁰ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 767.

It is also critical to note that submission to the authorities is not done because of fear but for conscience sake (v.5). If something bothers one's conscience it is sinful; the holy people of God are to avoid anything sinful. Paul was giving guidance on how to live a holy life in relation to the authorities. The Roman Christians were "...obliged to make responsible moral choices in the realm of government that will not violate their sense of what is right."³¹ The other side of conscience is also very critical as Stephen C. Mott affirmed: "From the fact that conscience is to be a motivating force in obeying government a basis may be inferred for disobeying government when its actions are not in conformity with the voice of informed conscience."³² This way conscience is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is the reason for obedience and on the other it also becomes the reason for disobedience.

Romans 13:7 is the climax of this passage in that it spells out how love to the authorities may look. Love is expressed in giving, hence: "Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes, if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour" (v.7). This verse has generated controversy over what Paul meant when he instructed Romans who are known to have been exempt from tribute to pay tribute. Jon Nelson Bailey provided the best explanation:

The first of Paul's four parallel phrases that express what he means by "fulfill your obligations to everyone" is simply "tribute to whom tribute is due." As indicated in the comments on 13:6, it is not completely clear what specific tax Paul had in mind if he was referring to actual taxes paid by the Romans. However, the combination of φόρος with τέλος suggests that Christians in general were to pay all applicable taxes.³³

According to J Isaak, "Paul likely saw the payment of taxes as a way of showing love to the tax collectors."³⁴ Here allusions are made to the Jesus tradition³⁵, specifically when Jesus counseled, 'Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God' (Mark 12:17). It is clear when Roman 13 is read with Jesus' words in the background that "The state is

³¹ Greathouse and Lyons, 179.

³² Stephen C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 150.

³³ J. N. Bailey, 11-28.

³⁴ J. Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility : Romans 13:1-7." *Direction* 32, no. 1 (2003): 32-46. *New Testament Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 6, 2012).

³⁵ Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12:1-15:13* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 112-13.

placed within limits and made subject to criticism. There is a duty to God apart from that to Caesar.”³⁶

V. Toward a holiness theology of the state

The holy people of God have to live in the in-between times, the already and the "not yet." Human attempts at providing law and order are an aspect of the not yet. The history of the church has shown us that the people of God find themselves in different power arrangements. In the modern world, the most preferred system of governance is democracy, the rule of the people. What is clear in Romans 13 is that no matter what system of government Christians find themselves in, they are to respect authority, for there is no authority except that which God has established. This is indeed a call to recognize the sovereignty of God. The people of God ought to be aware that God is in charge even when Nero or Hitler is in power.

Good governments are those that will reward good behaviour and punish bad behaviour. This was true in the ancient world and it remains true today. Paul was addressing such a situation in Romans 13, just like in 1 Peter 2: 13 it is assumed that the “government conform to the highest ethical and religious standards.”³⁷ In such a situation, the holy people of God are to live holy lives. They are to fulfil their responsibilities both to the state and to God. Christians were to see themselves as citizens of two worlds, Roman citizens and those whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

The other side of submission to the authorities is that sometimes the rulers act contrary, rewarding evil and punishing good. In such a situation, the saints are called to have "patient endurance and faithfulness" (Rev 13:10). We have already stated that Paul is not addressing such a situation. Yet it is also very clear that Paul's message would have been considered politically subversive. To take Romans 13 and apply it to this situation would be failing to take its unique context into consideration. Yet it is important to note that even in Romans 13, Paul is clear about the limits of submission. God is the one who reigns supreme, not Caesar. If what God desires is contradicted by Caesar, we obey God. In the words of Ernst Kasemann: “Christian

³⁶ Mott, *Biblical Ethics*, 151.

³⁷ Mott, *Biblical Ethics*, 150.

obedience comes to an end at the point where further service becomes impossible—and only there.”³⁸

Even as we talk about disobedience, we must also hear Paul’s words: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Earlier, he said: "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Romans 12:20). Isaak captured the meaning of these words:

'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.³⁹

Every other place Paul’s seems to be saying to the people of God, your proper response in all situations is to do good. The Christian community only has the weapons Jesus used, namely, acts of love and kindness.⁴⁰ This is also extended to relations with the state since Romans 13:1-7 falls in the same section.

The people of God are to work for the transformation of everything to be in line with God’s good purposes. Not everything is the way things ought to be. The holy people of God “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.”⁴¹ Witnessing is very crucial, for it is the mission of the church in the world, and that witness (to all including the powers) ought to be above reproach.

VI. Conclusion: Loving those in authority

Romans 13:1-7 has to be read carefully due to its potential (which has been seen in the history of the church) to encourage political quietism/unquestioning obedience to the state or endorsement of all the use of violence by the state. Both of these aspects are not what Paul is saying. Rather, Paul is calling the people of God to demonstrate the holy of God to love toward

³⁸ Ernst Kasemann, quoted in Stephen C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 150.

³⁹ J. Isaak, “The Christian Community” 32-46

⁴⁰ William Klassen, “Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge? (Rom. 12:20; Prov. 25:22),” *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963): 337-350.

⁴¹ J. Isaak, 32-46.

those in authority, a message consistent with Romans 12. This is the only debt the people of God have to each other and even those outside the church.

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