

BaptistWay: Civic responsibility and neighborly love

November 6, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Nov. 22 focuses on Romans 13:1-14.*

This passage, especially its first seven verses, has caused tremendous trouble for interpreters. Throughout history, Romans 13:1-7 has been invoked in support of reigning governments, standing as a biblical and theological justification for obedience and loyalty to the powers-that-be. When considering the original context of the letter, this might shock us as we realize the ruling authorities in Rome at the time this letter was written were potentially hostile toward Christianity.

In fact, some of the early church fathers were concerned about governments that persecuted Christians, and whether obedience is demanded in these situations. So what is Paul actually talking about when he advises, “Everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (v. 1)?

Demoting Roman authorities

In the first century, Roman emperors understood their status and prestige to be established by the Roman pantheon of gods, and eventually Roman emperors saw themselves as manifestations of these gods as well. In this light, Paul’s statement “there is no authority except that which God has established” (v. 1) subtly subverts the Roman schema. As Paul indicates, government—even pagan government—is established by God, effectively demoting the Roman authorities. While they may have temporal power—and perhaps even a great deal of it—they remain under God’s authority.

Nonetheless, Paul states Christians should be obedient to those

governmental powers since they provide order and structure to society. This is part of the “good” they bring about (v. 4). However, those authorities, whether they acknowledge it or not, also are subject to God’s oversight and could be judged by God if they fail to rule well. Consequently, for Christians, submission to these authorities is part and parcel of one’s obedience to God.

In previous sections of Romans, we have seen Paul draw deeply from his Jewish heritage and God’s covenants with Israel. Something similar is at work here. In the early sixth century B.C., the Babylonians took a group of Judeans into exile. These people, who represented some of the best and brightest in Judah, imagined their stay far from their homes in Babylon would be temporary. Soon, they thought, God would deliver them from imprisonment in that pagan territory.

‘Seek the peace of the city’

Thus, there was no need to settle in for the long haul, and they should avoid doing so. You can imagine their surprise when the prophet Jeremiah wrote them a letter stating: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile” (Jeremiah 29:5,7).

The Judean exiles are told to support the empire that just captured them. In other words, they should vote in Babylonian elections, send their children to Babylonian schools, and perhaps make friends with their Babylonian neighbors. Likewise, the Roman Christians—and by extension, us—are to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” where they find themselves. In short, Paul wants them to live faithfully in a land that is not their own while planting roots in that same land.

Often, this passage is read in isolation from what surrounds it. Romans 13:8-10 discusses love, as does Romans 12:9-21. This should signal to us

that this section about governmental authorities concerns the living out of Christ-like love. That is, the admonition to withhold vengeance is repeated by noting that ruling authorities “bear the sword” as “God’s servants, agents of wrath” (12:19; 13:4). Moreover, granting honor and respect as well as paying taxes highlight the importance of “liv(ing) at peace with everyone” (13:6-7; 12:18).

In the Gospels, when Jesus was asked about imperial taxes, he said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17). Similarly, Paul advises the Roman Christians to “give to everyone what you owe them” (v. 7). The word used here is the same used in 13:8: “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.”

This also is reminiscent of the ancient philosophers’ notion of justice as giving to everyone “what is due.” In other words, obedience to the ruling authorities, even when unjust, is not solved through additional injustice. Instead, Christians pursue such obedience as “a matter of conscience” or as a matter of doing what is right.

Caution against revolution

Occasionally, we observe our civic authorities and imagine different leaders—or a different group of leaders—would solve the problems that presently ail society. Sometimes such rhetoric hints at the need for revolution. In this passage, we might hear Paul cautioning against such thinking. Different leaders do not change the overall situation, which is based on the use of power. Therefore, submission to the powers-that-be reorients our vision to see the ways in which any group of leaders is inadequate, even as obedience is required.

With this in mind, we should remember submission to authorities does not necessarily mean being a good citizen. That is, Paul is not offering blanket approval to the Roman imperial regime, or any regime for that matter. He

is saying Christians should live wisely, even as strangers in a strange land.

In context, we should see our submission to governing authorities in light of Christ's revolutionary love, not conforming to the pattern of this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). In other words, understanding the relationship between the present and what is yet to come, we should live faithfully, shunning the activities of the night and embracing those of the day (vv. 11-14).