

Commentary: Digging into Paul's view on God and government in Romans 13

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Read a companion article by Dennis Wiles: [What to do with Paul's views on government in Romans 13](#)

Paul's injunction in Romans 13:1—"Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God"—has provoked much discussion.

Some interpret these words as giving tyrants a blank check. Luther concludes, "Christians should not refuse, under the pretext of religion, to obey men, especially evil ones" (*Lectures on Romans*). Such a view particularly confounds those who have experienced only a democratic form of government.

It should be noted first that Paul is not writing a treatise about good government and does not address the danger of the governing authorities becoming idolatrous and evil (see Revelation 13; 17:1-19:10). He gives only one side of the story, how Christians are to live peaceably with the state.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "The starting point of St. Paul's thinking is always the Church, and his sole concern is its well-being and manner of life. So much so, he feels obliged to warn the Christians to refrain from any unjust or evil conduct themselves, but does not utter a single word of reproach to the State."

Romans 12 as context for Paul's words in Romans 13

Paul's admonitions in 13:1-7 should be read as a continuation of his exhortations in chapter 12. Paul expects the attitudes and actions that are to typify believers' relationships with their fellow believers should also typify their dealings with the governing authorities. "If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). "Overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

Paul's rationale for submitting to the governing authorities is both theological and practical. The passage brims with God-language with six references to "God" in seven verses.

Paul knew his Scripture. He knew governments are recognized as instruments of God's wrath in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (see also Daniel 2:37-38).

The declaration, "There is no authority except from God," however, is subtly subversive. It can mean "for authority does not exist *if it is not* from God" (see Hosea 8:4). However one reads it, this statement fundamentally overturns any ideology that would exalt a nation's ruler or gods.

Roman propaganda, for example, claimed Rome ruled the world because her gods were stronger than the gods of all other nations. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they exist only because God instituted them, and they are only "God's servants." What Paul leaves unspoken that all Christians recognize is this: Only Jesus is Lord and the Savior and Ruler of the world (Romans 15:12).

The purpose of government

Governing authorities are necessary to foster order for the common good (Romans 13:2-4). God desires order and justice rather than anarchy and the vendettas of lynch mobs (see Acts 22-23).

God does not install authorities to do as they please but delegates them to enable their people to prosper. The command to pay the various taxes in 13:6-7, which resonates with the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25), assumes the government requires financial resources to carry out this public service.

What if they fail in this purpose? Since Paul introduces “conscience” as a motive for obedience (Romans 13:5), he does not advocate servile, blind obedience. It must be vigilant and discerning (see Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

Christians obey, not because they simply fear the government’s retaliatory punishment or because they want to curry its approval. They do so for the sake of a good conscience.

Bonhoeffer writes: “If only Christians will concentrate on perceiving what is good and on doing it as God commands, they can live ‘without fear of the authorities.’ ... What has the Christian to fear, so long as he remains faithful to his Lord and does that which is good? ‘... It does not matter what others do, but what we do. Do that which is good, without fear, and without limit or reserve” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

Government and the end

Paul’s view of the end time also figures into his evaluation of the governing authorities. The end is near (Romans 13:11-12). He concludes the letter by saying, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20). In his context, such statements mean Rome is *not* “an empire

without end,” as Virgil has Jupiter proclaim in the *Aeneid*. “The time is short” (1 Corinthians 7:29), and therefore, all human governments are essentially lame ducks.

Paul’s strategy in relation to government

Paul’s admonitions also are practical. I believe his primary concern is the church’s mission. I believe he is speaking strategically.

He knew the Emperor Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome over an uproar (Acts 18:2). Attracting unfavorable attention from the governing authorities unnecessarily might hinder that mission to the world. Roman toleration of Christians might facilitate it.

His instructions also are framed by the renunciation of force (Romans 12:21) and the love command (Romans 13:12). Revolution is not the way forward. Vengeance belongs only to God (Romans 12:19).

Paul knew of the resistance to Rome that was budding in Palestine, and he does not want Christians to become ensnared in such futile movements. He would not have been surprised by the outcomes of the Jewish armed revolts against Rome in A.D. 66–70, 115–17 and 130–32. Utter disasters! The last revolt resulted in Jews being banned from Jerusalem and the ruined city becoming a Roman colony renamed Aelia Capitolina (after the Emperor Hadrian’s surname) with the temple mount now dedicated to Jupiter.

Paul wasn’t naïve

Paul is not politically naïve. Rulers are not always a dike against evil. They often can become conduits of evil by exploiting their power of the sword. He states, “The rulers of this age crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians

2:8).

He knew Christians were in a position of vulnerability, subject to persecution, suffering, hardships and death (Romans 5:3-5; 8:18, 31-39; 12:14, 17). At least three times, Roman magistrates had him beaten with rods (2 Corinthians 11:25; see Acts 16:22).

Paul's theology, however, accords with Jesus's response to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

Paul affirms and trusts in God's absolute sovereignty. The mysterious hand of God that "raised up Pharaoh" (Romans 9:7) can use even evil governments to display God's power so that, in the end, only God's name will be proclaimed in the whole earth.

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