

Distance, Tolerance, and Honor Six Theses on Romans 13:1–7

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Introduction

In Romans 13:1–7, Paul writes to Christians at Rome circa AD 57 to be subject to governmental authorities. The reason Christians should submit is that “no authority exists except by God’s doing, and those that do exist have been put in place by God” (v. 1). Consequently, to oppose such authorities is tantamount to opposing God (v. 2). Paul elucidates God’s use of such authority: a ruler is God’s servant to reward beneficence and to punish malefactors, even with the sword (vv. 3–4). Therefore all must submit to it, acknowledging God’s use for the state in their conscience (v. 5). Paul calls these authorities “God’s servant for your good” (v. 4) and even refers to them as God’s λειτουργοί (“ministers”)—a word often used of finance officials but that in Christian language might carry sacral overtones (v. 6).¹ All are to submit to these authorities by respectfully paying them tribute (vv. 6–7).

From this passage (and others), the Lutheran Confessions conclude that Scripture “not only approves secular governments but also subjects us to them” (Apol XVI.6), and permits us to take part in “legitimate civil ordinances” as “good creations of God” (Apol XVI.1; AC XVI) and to serve our neighbor actively in the state’s structures as judges, soldiers, and so on. This is a faithful interpretation of biblical teaching. Of course, an undiscerning satisfaction with this can spawn attitudes toward government and civil policy that are unbiblical and encourage un-Christian action—allowing us to use civil liberties as a “veil” for wickedness (cf. 1 Pt 2:16). In some cases, Christians reason that any behavior is legitimate simply if it is part of the structures of God’s good “servant.” This logic can extend also to policies and agendas, so that honoring this servant necessitates espousing its ideology and silencing dissenting voices, because what the state supports must necessarily be what God commands (or at least happily permits?) his people to do. As Christian support for state-sanctioned atrocities attests, such reasoning has wrought disastrous effects at various points in history.

In our context various governmentally advocated agendas and laws—particularly, though not only, in recent years—remind us that “American” does not always equal “Christian.” However, aided by a continually divided bipartisan system, it is all too easy

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to respond to government-sponsored iniquity by simply allying with the agenda and ideals of a different political party on the grounds that it opposes what we oppose. This may be a good move in certain respects, but it can be just as problematic as equating “Christian” with whatever the current reigning party advocates, because it still looks to an entity not bound to God’s word as a moral authority and allows our thinking to be shaped by it rather than by Christ (cf. Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23; Phil 2:5; Col 3:10). The assumption that one’s preferred party (whatever party it is) represents the Christian ethos can facilitate unrepentant attitudes and actions when, for instance, Christians mimic toward their neighbors the hateful attitudes and rhetoric of that party’s politicians and media personalities in defense of a particular cause or ideal. Further, because American politics are both polarized and polarizing (and the situation is rarely different when theologians take up the politico’s banner), such a partisan poise can also blind one to the immoralities espoused by one’s favored party and can bring one quickly to dismiss others outright—no matter their positive stances. Whether this is due to well-intended pragmatism or something else, it leaves little room for dialogue among Christians called to discern God’s will (Rom 12:2; Eph 5:10).

Matters of Christian ethics are not *adiaphora* on which we can define ourselves merely in opposition to a party wrong on another issue. The Christian call to be faithful in doing right by all people—born and unborn, “rightly” and “wrongly” poor, “rightly” and “wrongly” rich, immigrant, foreigner, enemy, and prisoner—cannot be muffled by any law (cf. Gal 5:23b), is not relativized when believers step into the realm of the state, and cannot be polarized simplistically along party lines. As labels, parties, and laws continually change, Christians must fear God more than being labeled “liberal” or “conservative” by their peers, must love God more than the comfort of partisan solidarity, and must continually submit themselves to God’s word in faithful discernment and repentant practice.

The intent of this article is not to resolve contemporary ethical and political questions, which would require addressing and evaluating various matters of policy and casuistry. This article is also not meant to encourage or discourage voting for any particular candidate or policy.² This article aims, rather, to make an exegetical contribution by offering observations on pertinent but often neglected features of Romans 13:1–7. These observations are intended to help in future theological and ethical dialogue. They will be presented as theses, followed by comment and discussion.

1. This text is addressed to Christians in the context of extra-ecclesial love.

Some have argued that this passage does not fit its immediate context and must be an interpolation.³ But no manuscript evidence supports this assertion, and issues of style or argument provide little internal evidence to judge the passage inauthentic.⁴ Indeed, though this text may appear an “alien body”⁵ within Romans 12–15, it neither contradicts nor breaks from Paul’s illumination of ways—both general and particular—in which believers’ love is to manifest itself toward insiders and outsiders. As a consequence of the new life they do and will possess in Christ, Christians are depicted as priestly servants, presenting their individual bodies as one collective sacrifice to

God as their worship (12:1). In 12:9–21 Paul uses strings of participles and adjectives to depict what the life of Christ’s body (12:4–8) is to look like among its members, all under the “heading” of “unpretentious love” (v. 9).⁶ Therein Paul punctuates this exhortative depiction with direct commands (vv. 14, 16b, 19–21). This exhortation has both an intra-ecclesial emphasis, regarding Christians’ conduct toward other Christians (vv. 10, 13, 16), and an extra-ecclesial emphasis, regarding Christians’ conduct toward “all” (vv. 17–18; cf. Gal 6:10; 1 Thes 5:15; and Ti 3:2, where this is also connected to submission to governmental authorities).⁷ Both are profoundly theological and socially impractical. Within the church, Christians are to treat one another like family members (“brotherly love,” v. 10), because all who are in Christ are God’s children and heirs with Christ, for they have a share in the promised offspring of Abraham (Rom 8:14–17; Gal 4:4–7; cf. 3:7–18; 4:21–5:1). This in-Christ relationship necessitates a change in interpersonal relations: for example, Philemon is expected to receive Onesimus back as a “brother in the Lord” *and* “in the flesh” merely because Onesimus has become a Christian (Phlm 15–18), an action that could have cost Philemon public honor and thus business. In contrast to their pagan neighbors—who, Tertullian says, used familial appellations as a “pretense of affection”⁸—Christians are called to act with unpretentious brotherly love toward those in this “family.”⁹

Regarding outsiders, Paul encourages charity, peace, and submissiveness. This too would have had significant social consequences, especially in Paul’s final injunction to defer vengeance to God’s eschatological wrath:

Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave that to [God’s] wrath, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine—I will repay!” says the Lord.” Rather, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him water. For by doing so you will heap coals of fire upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:19–21)

This final command seems of special interest to Paul not only in view of the number of words devoted to it but in that he felt a particular need to argue it on biblical authority (Dt 32:35; Prv 25:21). This causes it to stand out in form and tone from the preceding exhortations, which are poetically connected “like pearls on a string.”¹⁰ Such emphasis is to be expected, as this injunction involves matters of public (in)action and vulnerability. Roman society knew no 911 calls and very little due process for those on the lower end of the social chain: “nothing short of a major riot or the murder of a member of the elite was likely to attract the attention of the urban cohorts or vigiles, the local force whose main remit was to deal with fires. You were on your own—or, rather, you were part of whatever group you belonged to that might defend you.”¹¹ If a member of the congregation was wronged, honor and survival demanded that the “family” seek vengeance. One might have expected that Paul’s exhortations to “brotherly love” would entail precisely such vengeful efforts from Christians on one another’s behalf, and here Paul protects against such potential misunderstanding. Modern readers might be surprised to find Paul, in the name of unpretentious love, exhorting Christians to effectively shame their enemies with “burning coals” of kindness, but this is a small concession

when injustice would empirically triumph if vengeance were not enacted.

Rather than seeking to vindicate God through the *self*-vindication of his people, Paul calls Christians to endure in the assurance that *God* will vindicate them at the judgment. Christians will, in a derivative way, participate in judging outsiders by virtue of their association with the Judge (Mt 19:28 and parallel; 1 Cor 6:2–3; cf. Rom 2:27), but this universal act of judging is only to commence on the last day. Until then, judgment and punishment are only to be enacted *within* the church—and even then are aimed at the sinner’s contrition and repentance (1 Cor 5:1–6:8; 1 Tm 1:19b–20). Wrongdoers and persecutors outside the church are not to be recompensed except by God’s hand, which is here distinct from his people’s action.¹² God does have a vengeful servant in the state (διάκονος ἑκδικός, Rom 13:4), but what his people are to rely on when wronged is God’s eschatological vengeance (12:19–20).

In anticipation of this vindication, Christians are called to care for their enemies despite a personal sense of justice—an act that bears witness to their salvation and their enemies’ condemnation (Phil 1:27–30; 2 Thes 1:3–12).¹³ Christians certainly did beg for this judgment with some impatience (echoing many psalms). But, as in Revelation, such cries are always met with a call to renewed patience coupled with the promise that God is in control and will bring vindication at a determined but unpredictable time, after wickedness and oppression are brought to their full measure (Rv 6:9–11; cf. Dn 8:23; 9:24).¹⁴

Romans 13:1–7 fits directly into this context. Here Paul is still dealing with Christians’ behavior toward outsiders and continues the more logical tenor that began in 12:19b.¹⁵ This time the outsider is the Roman government and its officials, and the Christians’ duty to “live peaceably with all” (12:18) necessitates non-retaliation toward (potentially abusive) Roman authorities.¹⁶ Romans 13:8–14 then continues to treat Christian behavior, but with a return to the intra-ecclesial focus on “one another.” Toward outsiders this means that Christians should render their dues (ὀφείλαί) to the authorities (13:7), but their only due (ὀφείλετε) to insiders is “love,” named five times in 13:8–10. Assurance of Christ’s return and God’s vindication calls for and enables believers to give up regard for themselves in service to God and neighbor and in submission to the state. Paul does not break from his depiction of the church’s existence to expound a metaphysics of the state in 13:1–7; he is elucidating one entailment of Christian love as it relates to the Roman authorities, an issue likely on the mind of believers in the capital city.¹⁷ This suggests that, as we apply this pericope, our application should evince the spirit of Paul’s entire discourse here.¹⁸

2. The “authorities” Paul acknowledges are those of the Roman Empire.

This statement may seem obvious, but it bears repeating.¹⁹ Some applications skip immediately from governmental authorities in verse 1 to speak of all sorts of God-ordained authority structures from family to employers and beyond. This reads through the lens of Luther’s masterful exposition of the fourth commandment through natural law and his dictum that “the home is the source of all things public.”²⁰ However, if this move is made too quickly, it can distance Paul’s teaching from its original referent

(Rome) and consequently lessen the force and, perhaps, the shock of what he says.²¹

There was plenty of reason for Paul's addressees to resent Rome, economically and theologically. Oppressive tax practices were protested in the city about this time (see below). The Jews were expelled from the city in AD 49 under Claudius (as Paul would have known through Prisc[illa] and Aquila; Acts 18:2) and had apparently returned again under Nero before Paul wrote Romans (cf. Rom 16:3–5), which would have greatly affected the congregation.²² Christian assemblies that looked like synagogues to the Romans may have enjoyed some Jewish privileges²³ but may also have been despised on that account.²⁴ Those that did not look like synagogues received no such leniency, and some were charged with practicing “foreign religion”—a high crime.²⁵ Further, some in Paul's audience may have assumed that the Messiah's resurrection meant the imminent routing of pagan rule (cf. Acts 1:6), that serving the Lord meant acknowledging “God alone as ruler and governor,”²⁶ or even that donning the armor of God meant preparing for historico-eschatological holy war (cf. 1QM).²⁷

Paul speaks directly of *these* Roman authorities, “not merely of authority in general or government in the ideal.”²⁸ Nor does he appear to distinguish between official and office here. ἐξουσία can be abstract or refer to spheres of authority but, in the plural, coupled with ὑπερέχω and in the context of taxpaying (vv. 6–7), certainly includes and likely refers to the “being who exercises authority.”²⁹ The people currently in positions of power have been put there by God (v. 1b). Paul is calling the high officials of Rome God's servant and ministers (vv. 4, 6). Though Rome may act unjustly (as Paul knew from imprisonments and beatings with Roman “rods”; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:23, 25) and may use its sword cruelly in the enforcement of taxes (as Philo protested, *Spec.* 2.92–95; 3.159–163), Paul calls for submission to the Roman authorities because (not insofar as) they are God's servant, specifically “devoted” to collecting taxes (v. 6) and maintaining what one might call “moral order” by deterring wrongdoing and rewarding good (vv. 3–4; cf. 1 Pet 2:14–15). The fact that he describes Rome thus suggests that this moral order should be understood quite broadly, but still attests to Paul's conviction about its positive role in God's providential economy.

3. This text does acknowledge violent, penal capacities of state government.

A second ground Paul provides for submission to these authorities is that “rulers are not a terror to good work but to evil” (v. 3).³⁰ Those who do good can expect commendation, but evildoers should fear, for that authority “does not bear the sword in vain; for it is God's vengeful servant to bring wrath upon one who does evil” (v. 4). At first glance readers often infer that the “sword” evokes the image of “the actual sword in the hands of the executioner who inflicts the death penalty on criminals.”³¹ This is overconfident in view of lexical and historical data. Those select officials who held such authority bore the distinctive *xi,foj* as a sign thereof.³² The *ma,caira* (the short sword of which Paul speaks here) was worn by legionaries,³³ patrolling soldiers (Mk 14:43, 48 and parallel; Acts 16:27), and even private individuals (Lk 22:36, 38). In this light, the image of the “sword” Paul evokes may point less to Rome's threat of official capital punishment than to coercive (and often abusive) patrols of soldiers. It may also allude

to the threat of force against those who refused to pay taxes since, in Alexandria at least, the Roman soldiers who accompanied tax collectors were referred to as “sword-bearers” (μαχαλιροφόροι), which makes particular sense in view of verses 6–7.³⁴

Still, tax enforcers did occasionally coerce with the threat of death. Further, in Christian contexts μάχαλιρα was used at least metonymically for governmental execution (Acts 12:1),³⁵ and the evocation of the “sword” as a deterrent need not exclude execution even if this is not its primary reference. Paul’s language and logic indicate that a *coercive* and *punitive* capacity belongs to Rome and that this should deter evildoing. As one commentator summarizes: “The phrase does not, then, directly refer to the infliction of the death penalty; but in the context of first-century Rome, and against the OT background (Gn 9:4–6), Paul would clearly include the death penalty in the state’s panoply of punishments for wrongdoing.”³⁶ This should not be denied. However, those who apply this verse without further discussion as a *command* that all governments must employ the death penalty should interpret with nuance, for Paul’s reference to the “sword” would have also encompassed other uses and abuses of force by patrolling soldiers.³⁷

4. This text is not addressed to the authorities, but only speaks of them to Christians.

At no point in this passage does Paul speak to the Roman government. This passage focuses solely on the duty of Christians *toward* the state, not on their duty as enforcers or legislators *within* the state. They are not conceived as overlapping identities. We might expect that, had a prefect asked Paul what he must do to be saved, he would have responded with his own words in Acts 16:31, perhaps adding a call to do justice (like the Baptist’s in Lk 3:13–14). But Paul does not address such a constituency, probably because no such consistency existed. Whereas Paul’s imprisonment for Christ was a witness to those in the imperial guard (Phil 1:13; cf. 4:22), there was likely no magistrate in the tenement churches of Rome at this time.³⁸ “The possibility that Christians, who had absolutely no political influence, could one day insist successfully on a humane form of government corresponding with the demands of the gospel—and could then even bring this about—does not yet lie in the field of vision of the New Testament texts.”³⁹

Failing words directly addressing the state, one might have expected the affirmation of God’s lordship to occasion a warning directed at the state, a turn taken in some Jewish literature (e.g., Wis 6:3–5). But Paul only speaks to Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarizes well: “It is once again Christians who are addressed here, not the authority. . . . Paul does not intend to instruct the Christian community about the tasks of those in authority, but instead *only deals with the tasks of the Christian community toward authority*.”⁴⁰ Paul does not here add “an important word about the diligence which is required in magistrates.”⁴¹ He does not give permission or instruction to the Roman authorities at all. He does not address a Christian’s duty in the case that he holds a position of authority within government. Paul teaches about the place of the state in God’s economy to an exhortative conclusion, that maintaining peace with outsiders in obedience to God entails paying tribute and honor to Rome.

5. Paul emphasizes taxpaying as a concrete application of this teaching.

When reading and appropriating the teaching of the epistles, in passages where an inspired writer provides an application of the teaching he has promulgated, we must not be satisfied with only understanding the doctrine assumed or communicated, but must also attend to the perlocution that the author explicitly stated that doctrine should effect. Such conclusions should also be applied among us if we are to be faithful to the doctrinal content communicated.

As the specific, argued prohibition of vengeance in 12:19–21 emphasized one (likely controversial) expression of the exhortation to live at peace with all (12:18), so Paul’s argument that all must submit to the state for the sake of fear and conscience leads to a direct (and certainly controversial) concrete application: Christians must pay taxes to Caesar (13:6–7).⁴² Taxation was a particularly sensitive issue then as now. In AD 58 public protests were made against a new *vectigal* tax (Gk. τέλος), now to be collected in addition to the *tributum* (Gk. φόρος), protests which were likely preceded by a period of resentment and resistance.⁴³ Closer to home for Paul, taxation was a sensitive theological topic in conservative Jewish circles, of which he and his audience would likely have been aware. Despite some privileges, taxation remained to them a sign of subjugation, and for some it became a litmus test of allegiance to God—one posed to Jesus (Mk 12:13–17 and parallels).⁴⁴

Paul here asserts, based on the authorities’ role in God’s economy, that Christians must submit by paying *both* taxes—the *tributum* (φόρος) and the *vectigal* (τέλος, v. 7).⁴⁵ He does not command this on the grounds that it gives needed financial support to (only) the good tasks of government, but as a duty owed (ὀφειλή)—and this to a regime that publicly used its funds for idolatrous and immoral purposes. This is a necessary realization of the submissive and respectful posture (“fear and honor”) Paul commands in verse 7 out of which Christians render duties to all.⁴⁶ Christians’ devotion to the Living God meant precisely that they must pay all taxes to Rome, which was the direct opposite of what a growing number of Jews thought people whose God was “Lord” should do and of what many Romans thought was fair. In the inspired apostle’s mind, this teaching about the state enjoins Christians to pay their taxes despite theological or economic objection. This presumably does not prohibit Christians *as* taxpayers from other forms of (respectful) dissent, but there appears to be no room here for outright refusal to pay taxes.

6. Paul does not here depart from Old Testament, Jewish, and apocalyptic attitudes toward pagan regimes.

In understanding the implications Paul may have intended or not intended with his statement that governmental authorities are “put in place by God” and are his “servants,” it will be fruitful to note that this sentiment was nothing new, but is continuous with Old Testament and later Jewish literature as well (barring some extremists). This position was held during Israel’s monarchic period (Prv 8:15–16; 21:1) and was maintained when God’s people were under pagan rule—the latter of which provides a situation more comparable to Paul’s and our own. Jeremiah is commissioned to tell for-

eign kings (and Zedekiah) that God is sovereign over rulers and puts them in place as he wills, and that he now wills their submission to Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 27:1–15). The book of Daniel witnesses several such sentiments, where it is the Lord who puts people in places of authority (Dn 2:21; 4:17, 25, 32).

Consequently, the people are to pray for their pagan rulers, a position Paul maintains (1 Tm 2:1–4). This is the express content of Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles, in which they were commanded to “seek the peace [שלום] of the city into which I exiled you, and pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its peace will be your own” (Jer 29:7). Accordingly, prayers were offered twice daily for “Caesar and the people of Rome” up to the outbreak of the first Jewish Revolt in AD 66.⁴⁷ This was later preserved in the Mishnah, echoing Jeremiah: “Pray for the peace [שלום] of the ruling power, without fear of which men would have swallowed each other alive.”⁴⁸

However, this axiom that all governmental rule was under God’s power and put in place by him alone was never understood to exonerate rulers of wickedness or imply that their actions and policies are things God wanted his people to emulate or participate in. *Even when* its policies contribute to good order and deter wrongdoing, “what goes for the state” does not necessarily go for God’s people. The books of Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation all make the point that God asserts his lordship over pagan emperors and even puts particular rulers in place. But God’s lordship is exercised simultaneously through and against these rulers—for the good of the people, the judgment of the people, and often to the ruler’s own condemnation and the empire’s demise.

In John’s Apocalypse, the state is one of the instruments through which God brings wrath upon the world in anticipation of the final judgment. As the first three seals are opened, riders are dispatched bringing imperialism, warfare, and economic upheaval (Rv 6:1–6). It is the ten “horns”—future kings that make war on the Lamb (17:12–14)—that destroy “Babylon,” “for God put it into their hearts to carry out his intention, to be of singular purpose and hand their reign over to the Beast until the words of God are fulfilled” (17:17). John conceives of the state simultaneously as God’s instrument and as an enemy of Christ and Christians, one that will be judged and destroyed. The Beast is even allowed to “make war on the saints and to conquer them” by the power received from these kingdoms, a prophecy that calls for continued perseverance and faith (13:7, 10; 14:12; cf. chs. 2–3).

A similar perspective can be found in the Scriptures of Israel that nurtured the faith of Paul and John alike. Assyria—to which the Israelites turned for protection when their faith in God failed⁴⁹—is both God’s powerful instrument and the wicked empire against which God will vindicate himself and his people. Yahweh calls Assyria “the rod of my anger—the staff in their hands is my indignation!” But Assyria is bent only on destruction and filled with a pride for which God, who used this empire’s pride and malice to carry out the curses of his covenant, will also judge it (Is 10:5–19; cf. 2 Kgs 19:27–28). The pagan empire is God’s instrument to punish iniquity and is simultaneously opposed to the true God, for which God will punish it after his purposes have been fulfilled.

Babylon also bears the “sword” of Yahweh to make war (Ez 30:24–25). The Lord calls its emperor Nebuchadnezzar “my servant” (Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). He is even rewarded by God for his “service” (LXX λειτουργία, Ez 29:20; cf. Rom 13:6!). Such language certainly witnesses to God’s authority over and use of Babylon but, for the biblical authors, still did not imply that their policies revealed God’s will for his people’s behavior, as the episode with Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael attests (Dn 3).⁵⁰ Nor did it mean that God’s people, when in positions of governmental authority, were permitted to follow the norms and expectations Babylon had of its authorities (Dn 1; 6). God raised up Egypt, but will judge it for its pride (Ez 29:4; cf. chs. 29–32). And the consummate enemy, projected onto “Gog” of “Magog,” God will raise up against his people only to destroy them, to get glory over them and save his own (Ez 38:4; see chs. 38–39; cf. Ex 9:16). In John’s vision, that enemy is the summation of earth’s distant kingdoms, whose rage against God and his saints—prompted by God himself—will usher in the judgment day and the final defeat of all evil.⁵¹

In the book of Daniel, God “has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory” and even “human beings, wherever they live” to Nebuchadnezzar (Dn 2:37–38). Still, the pride and self-deification of the king (3:18, 28; 4:30) bring God’s judgment upon him (4:25; cf. 5:18–28) and his councilmen (6:7, 24). God exercised his authority over and in these rulers to vindicate his people and to spread his renown.⁵² One can even say that God’s provision of order and commendation through this pagan regime makes it a “servant for your good” in the way Paul describes Rome. But this did not entail that God established Babylon eternally or that he exercised his authority over Babylon to the exclusion of the other kingdoms in the world. Daniel’s vision sees one kingdom rise after another until God holds court and vindicates his people *against* these empires (Dn 7; cf. 2:36–45). There is still evil to be done by these kings (11:27, 36), and even the saints will suffer worse things by their hand (8:24; 12:7). But God will assuredly vindicate those who endure in faithfulness.

I contend that Paul evinces the same attitude toward the Roman Empire even in Romans 13:1–7. Paul, here as elsewhere, stands firmly grounded in these Christ-events and the promises God has confirmed, and in that always looks and moves forward in expectation and hope.⁵³ Like his prophetic forerunners, Paul reminds the Romans, who need encouragement in suffering (cf. Rom 5:3–5; 8:18, 35–36), that God is even now in control of all and moving all things toward his goal (esp. Rom 8:18–39). And here he reminds them that this is true even regarding the authorities of Rome. Christians are therefore to submit to them and fervently love their neighbors in anticipation of their eschatological vindication. Some might argue that Paul has a more positive view of God’s use for pagan regimes than, say, John in Revelation, but this likely reflects a difference in genre and purpose.⁵⁴ The genius of the apocalyptic genre is to “pull back the curtain” on what God is doing and will do in his authority in the present age (often with reference to pagan political powers) to ultimately deliver his people and judge the world; Paul, on the other hand, is making a concrete application of what that world-view means for Christian behavior toward the state in this aeon of suffering and hope.⁵⁵

Paul knows and professes that through pagan rulers like Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus,

and Nero, God benefits his people and deters maleficence. But he also knows that Rome crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:8) and that all powers and authorities—natural and supernatural—are defeated and will be destroyed under Christ’s banner (Col 2:15).⁵⁶ Paul can hold the position that governments deter wrongdoing and reward good as God’s servants while still maintaining that God has asserted his lordship against theirs in the death and resurrection of Christ, in which the baptized share (Rom 6:3–11). It is this twofold biblical conviction that allows him both to command taxpaying and honor for the state as God’s servant for this purpose (Rom 13) and to say that, when Christians use the state’s legal system in disputes with each other, they sin and misunderstand their identity in Christ (1 Cor 6). There, Paul does not commend them for peaceably taking their concerns to the systems God’s “servant” set up for settling disputes. Instead, he shames them: it is deplorable not only that there are quarrels between Christians (v. 7), but that they are going to the pagan court against each other for redress (vv. 5–6a). Paul simply asks, with a logic that can come only from the wisdom of the cross, “Why not rather be wronged?” (v. 7). Legal structures in the hands of government are divine means of preserving order, but even these are not all in sync with the identity of believers, who are to follow Christ in dying and even being willingly wronged rather than using legalities to assert their rights against their brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

Peter Stuhlmacher writes that Paul’s posture toward governmental authorities can be thought of in terms of *distance* and *tolerance*.⁵⁷ But Paul’s valuation of them suggests that we add *honor* as well. We may conclude with a broad sketch of these, making no claim to comprehensiveness. It is hoped that these will provide a helpful rubric as we continue to consider our calling as Christians in America.

Distance is simply assumed between Christians and the state. Distance operates from the knowledge that, no matter one’s national context, our identity is found first and last in Christ. Though a Christian lives in two kingdoms she or he is still one Christian, and is called to follow Christ in both. In any vocation, we are to promulgate the righteous, impractical, and suffering love of God revealed in Christ and to embody it toward one another within the world. Distance allows us to set our focus here first—in private actions, in our interactions with those whom we deem our opponents, and in our public advocacy. Distance also allows the Christian to evaluate the state critically as one who is, in a sense, an outsider—one who makes use of his temporary home but holds on loosely to the structures of the present age, which will pass away (cf. 1 Cor 7:31). This provides space for a discerning, repentant, prayerful submission to God’s specific revelation on every issue—regardless of labels, rhetoric, and partisanship—to see what is mandated and what is forbidden, what is merely permissible and what is in line with the Spirit and the new creation (Gal 5:25; 6:16). Such discernment is called for even in matters that are legal and contribute to good order, lest we be rebuked like the Corinthians for assuming that civil norms and Christian ethics automatically coincide.

Within this assumed distance, we come to *tolerance*. Tolerance operates from the confidence that in good and bad governments, God is in control and working all things

to the judgment of sin and the vindication of those in Christ. This allows us to refuse aggressive revolt even when wronged, outraged, or dissatisfied. It allows Christians even in hostile political environments to make use of citizen's rights when they are not out of sync with our identity, as Paul did in Acts. Tolerance provides space for the Christian to live as a sojourner in the present age under God's providence, living at home in this age and among its powers until they "command what God forbids or forbid what God commands,"⁵⁸ in which case we must "obey God rather than people" (Acts 5:29; cf. AC XVI).

Honor is the more positive side of this same coin. Lest we think we need only "grin and bear" the state, God calls us to actively honor the authorities he has put in place over us. With confidence in God's providence, honor recognizes that governmental authorities are ordained by God "for your good" and calls us to support them—by paying taxes even when they are felt illegitimate, by praying for the authorities even when we would consider them our enemies or even God's. Honor recognizes the positive function for government within God's economy, especially in preserving order. And honoring the authority precisely as *God's* "servant" means that we should, without spite, expect God to use this servant for his glory, perhaps in the ways he has done in the past. God raises these servants up to destroy them by others and show his power. He allows them to persecute and test the fidelity of his people, providing the church an opportunity for dissent and witness (even martyrdom) within the world. God gives them over to the nation's own sins, filling up the measure of their iniquity unto the judgment day. The authorities are God's servant for good. But looking at the biblical witness that provides the context of Paul's thought here, one realizes that, apart from broadly maintaining order, much of God's intent for particular governments and political events lies in the realm of his hiddenness. We do not have access to his intent for our nation in these respects; what we do have is Christ Jesus—God's revealed Word—and his claim on us, his people. It is by this Word that we know forgiveness, even for sins we commit in trying to discern how faithfulness should look in a given instance. And it is by this Word that we are daily called to repent of wrong actions and attitudes for the sake of our neighbor, as we seek to live out the conforming of our minds to the mind that was also in him.

Endnotes

¹ In the LXX the *leitourgía* word-group is used in conjunction with service in the tabernacle, Solomon's temple, and the second temple (Ex 28:35; 2 Chr 35:10; Ezr 7:24) and of non-cultic service more generally (2 Sm 13:18; Ez 29:20; Sir 10:25). Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 669; Johannes Friedrich, Wolfgang Pöhlmann, and Peter Stuhlmacher, "Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1–7," *ZTK* 73 (1976): 131–166, at 136. Paul's use of this term for Rome was particularly offensive to Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 391–392.

² NB: this essay was written and submitted to *Concordia Journal* in summer 2013, long before many of 2016's hot-button issues surfaced. Readers are asked to bear this in mind!

³ Interpolation-theories listed in Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 664; cf. John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (TPINTC; London: SCM Press, 1989), 26–32.

⁴ See Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 782–784.

⁵ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 352.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 774; cf. Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 286; Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 303; contra Käsemann, *Romans*, 343 (but see 349). “Love” as an independent virtue is certainly not Paul’s theme here (or elsewhere), but *Christian love borne by the church* is (cf. Jewett, *Romans*, 758). When the church and her unity are mentioned, ἀγάπη is present as the edifying and unifying gift of those bound together by the Spirit awaiting Christ’s return (Rom 12:9; 13:8–10; 14:15; 1 Cor 12:27–14:5; Eph 3:17; 4:15–16; 5:1–2; Col 3:12–17; 2 Tm 2:22).

⁷ Some see all of Romans 12:14–21 to have non-Christians in view, but joining others in rejoicing and mourning (v. 15) is probably particularly directed toward sympathetic fellowship among Christians. τὸ αὐτὸ φρονοῦντες (v. 16) is an exhortation to harmony within the church (cf. Rom 15:5; 2 Cor 13:11) and has an expressly Christian character in Paul, for whom the “mindset” that is to be shared is the self-sacrificing humility of Christ (Phil 2:2; 4:2). Thus Colin G. Kruse labels 12:14–16 as “Relationships without *and* within the Christian Community” (*Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 479, emphasis added); cf. Dorothea H. Bertschmann, “The Good, the Bad and the State: Rom 13:1–7 and the Dynamics of Love,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 232–249.

⁸ *Apol.* 39.8.

⁹ For the social implications of Romans 12 see Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 98–126.

¹⁰ Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer (Röm 12–16)* (EKKNT VII/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 18.

¹¹ Oakes, *Reading Romans*, 125.

¹² Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 799; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Rhetoric of Violence and the God of Peace in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Paul, John, and Apocalyptic Eschatology: Studies in Honour of Martinus C. de Boer*, ed. Jan Krans et al. (NovTSup 149; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 61–75.

¹³ Cf. Joseph Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 225–227.

¹⁴ See J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought*, trans. Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 31–36.

¹⁵ Cf. Friedrich et al., “Situation,” 152–153.

¹⁶ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer* (NTD 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 184.

¹⁷ Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 393–394.

¹⁸ Similarly John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 196. Yoder argues that Paul’s vengeance-prohibition forbids Christian participation in the government’s “vengeful” service through its military (ibid., 192–214). But military service, while not commanded, is permitted in the New Testament (Lk 3:14).

¹⁹ Against Mark D. Nanos’s reading of the “authorities” as synagogue officials, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 681 n. 1 and Stefan Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1–7: Paulus und der politische Diskurs der neronischen Zeit* (WUNT 243; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 299–230 n. 427.

²⁰ “Domus est fons omnium rerum publicarum” (WA 40/III, 220.4–5). See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie: Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2nd ed. 2004), 128–138.

²¹ E.g., R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1945), 789, 791. Despite his accurate comment that, “The rulers’ = ‘authorities’ and ‘the authority,’” he proceeds to distinguish them: “Paul does not say ‘the rulers’ are God’s ministers, for they may abuse the authority, may wreck the state. He calls the *authority* ‘God’s minister,’ for he refers to its exercise which accords with God’s own arrangement” (emphasis original).

²² Cf. Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4. See John Granger Cook, *Roman Attitudes toward the Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian* (WUNT 261; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 11–28. For its significance to Paul’s audience see Schnelle, *Paulus*, 330–336, cf. 30.

²³ See Josephus, *Ant.* 16.162–166; 19.278–291.

²⁴ See Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 180–195.

²⁵ Stuhlmacher, *Römer*, 175 reminds us that in AD 58 a Roman woman was apprehended on the charge of practicing *superstitio externa*, outsider-religion (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.32.2): “The noblewoman was indeed acquitted [...], but the incident documents how easily those who no longer belonged to the synagogues and belonged to the house-congregations of a foreign cultural religion (as judged by the Romans) could be regarded with hatred and suspicion.” Cf. too Cassius Dio, 52.36.

²⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 18.23.

²⁷ Zealotry proper has not yet arisen in the city of Rome. “But there is no reason to think that Romans [sic] Jews would not have been affected by the attitudes of Palestinian Jews; and one would have to say the same about Jewish Christians in Rome” (Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 662).

²⁸ Martin H. Franzmann, *Romans* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 231–232.

²⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 795; cf. Käsemann, *Romans*, 355–356; Jewett, *Romans*, 788; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 760; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975–79), 2:659–660; William Sanday and Arthur C. Hedlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 5th ed. 1902), 366.

³⁰ For rhetorical analyses see Robert H. Stein, “The Argument of Romans 13:1–7,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 325–343.

³¹ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 792.

³² Cf. Dio Cassius, 53.13.6–7; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.42.

³³ Polybius, 6.23.8.

³⁴ See Friedrich et al., “Situation,” 140–145 and the references in LSJ s.v. μαχαίροφόρος.

³⁵ Cf. Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 4.2.

³⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 802 n. 54. Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 668; Dunn, *Romans*, 764.

³⁷ Though the LCMS does not require congregants to affirm that every government must “bear the sword” in this way, it does aver that the state’s use of capital punishment “accords with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions” (Resolution 2-38, New York 1967). Within the Confessions, Luther maintains that the fifth commandment does not address God’s prerogative to take life or the government’s right or capacity to slay the wicked (LC I.180–181).

³⁸ It is debated whether Paul’s imprisonment was in the city of Rome when he wrote Philippians. A plausible option is Ephesus; many contend for Caesarea (a few for Corinth). Regardless, the spread of the gospel among the “praetorian guard” and the “household of Caesar” (Phil 1:13; 4:22) does not necessitate the conversion of the prefect. “The references to the ‘praetorium’ can allude to the residence of any provincial governor (and do so exclusively in the rest of the NT: Matt 27:27; Mark 15:16; John 18:28, 33; 19:9; Acts 23:35), and ‘those of the imperial household’ can refer to slaves or freedmen in the imperial service located in Rome, Ephesus, or elsewhere” (Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, rev. Ralph P. Martin [WBC 43; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004], xliii). Further, if Paul wrote Philippians while imprisoned in Rome, his comments there postdate Romans and are still out of view here.

³⁹ Stuhlmacher, *Römer*, 185. Note that when addressing social relationships between Christian superiors and inferiors, Paul enjoins reciprocal duties to both (wives submit and husbands love; children obey and parents do not provoke, etc.; Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; cf. 1 Pt 2:13–3:7). However, when addressing the social relation of governor and governed, Paul only has injunctions for the governed. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that while there were Christian husbands, slave owners, and parents to be addressed, there was no governmental superior in the audience Paul envisioned for this letter.

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 241–242 (emphasis original).

⁴¹ Philip Melancthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. F. Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 2nd ed. 2010), 220.

⁴² The γάρ of v. 6, coupled with διὰ τοῦτο, makes τελέετε an indicative (contra NJB), but ἀπόδοτε in v. 7 is clearly imperative. Some see Paul here assuming that the Roman Christians do pay taxes in v. 6 and thus using it as a further “practical” proof of their consciences’ acknowledgement that these authorities are from God (e.g. Stein, “Argument,” 341). But this does not diminish the exhortation to taxpaying, as the imperative to render φόρος and τέλος makes clear. See Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 399; Jewett, *Romans*, 798; Ziesler, *Romans*, 314; Dunn, *Romans*, 766; Matera, *Romans*, 294, 296, 301. Perhaps a better rendering of v. 6a would be, “For this is also why you are supposed to pay taxes,” maintaining the indicative assumption without compromising the admonishing tenor.

⁴³ Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.50–51; Suetonius, Nero 10. See Friedrich et al., “Situation,” 153–159; further references in Schlier, *Römerbrief*, 391; Dunn *Romans*, 766. Krauter, *Studien*, 153–154 dismisses this too quickly. Further, his objection that we should not expect Paul to use technical terms in such a “poetic” verse is unconvincing (*ibid.*, 230). We have already noted the change of tone from the poetic picture of the church to the more direct and concrete arguments against revenge, which here flow into equally direct and logical exhortations to pay taxes out of respect for God and the rulers. It is perfectly reasonable to see Paul using such terminology to this purpose, especially if he knew of or expected unrest regarding taxation in his audience.

⁴⁴ See Thomas E. Schmidt, "Taxation, Jewish," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 1163–1166; Dunn, *Romans*, 766–768; cf. Franzmann, *Romans*, 231.

⁴⁵ See also Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 669–670; Tobin, *Rhetoric*, 395, 400.

⁴⁶ The authorities are obviously included in the "all" of 13:7 (Moo, *Romans*, 805), though some question whether they alone are included. As this verse serves as a transition between extra-ecclesial and intra-ecclesial exhortations, one could read it as a universalization of the principle that honor and dues must be paid to everyone (Christian or non-Christian) according to their station (cf. Wilckens, *Römer*, 38). In this case, paying "honor" and "fear" to those owed them would encompass the submission and respect enjoined for other superiors (as in Col 3:18–4:1, etc.) as well as rulers. Cranfield's argument (*Romans*, 2:670–673) that Paul meant to reserve "fear" for God alone (as in 1 Pt 2:17) to the exclusion of the rulers is possible in such a general exhortation, but the emphasis on the authorities' function as ministers of God's wrath would prepare one easily to hear in v. 7 that, precisely because they fear God, they should fear his "vengeful servant" (cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 687).

⁴⁷ Josephus, *B.J.* 2.197.

⁴⁸ *m. 'Abot* 3:2.

⁴⁹ 2 Kings 15:19; Hosea 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:2 (ET 12:1); cf. 13:6.

⁵⁰ Luther says regarding this passage that, despite Babylon's reward for its "service," this work was not thereby "good and pleasing to God" (*LW* 34:169, cf. 170). Similarly Yoder, *Politics*, 198.

⁵¹ Though only Satan is depicted as deceiving these nations in Revelation 20:7–10, it is clear from 16:12–16 that this is begun at God's initiative in the sixth angel's "bowl of wrath." See also 18:17–21, where an angel calls birds and beasts to feast on the flesh of those nations assembled against God after their imminent destruction (echoing Ez 39:4).

⁵² Nebuchadnezzar (Dn 2:46–49; 3:28–29; 4:2–3, 34–37); Belshazzar's queen (5:11–12); Belshazzar (5:29); Darius (6:26–27).

⁵³ See Beker, *Triumph*. Unfortunately, Beker himself is unable to see how this text fits his framework (idem, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980], 322–327).

⁵⁴ Cf. the non-apocalyptic John 19:11, where Jesus acknowledges Pilate's authority as "from above."

⁵⁵ Among many books on Jewish "apocalyptic," a still-helpful resource is D. S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

⁵⁶ Cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (WUNT 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 345–387, despite the more directly anti-empire rejoinder in N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013), 1307–1319. For a useful (though mostly negative) discussion of and response to anti-imperial readings of Paul see Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁵⁷ Stuhlmacher, *Römer*, 183–185.

⁵⁸ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 3rd rev. ed. 2006), 377.



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