

Appendix 3:

Subordination and Revolution:

What About Romans 13?

If we are aliens and strangers to the powers of the world, how do we relate to those powers? It makes sense that two of the longer New Testament passages on relating to the powers are coupled with even longer passages on nonconformity. The popularly misquoted Romans 13 is surrounded by exhortations to *not* conform to the patterns of the world, love one's enemies, and overcome evil with good. The passage in 1 Peter 2: 13ff on submitting to authority is woven into a larger tapestry about Christians living as aliens and strangers to the ways of the world. So before we hastily jump to the conclusion that these passages support Christian war or violence, we must understand what they actually say and their placement in overarching New Testament themes.

Because of space limitations, we'll address only Romans 13 in this book. Let's start by reading Paul.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

—Romans 13:1–7

We'll note some talking points about this text.¹

(1) To study any text with an appropriate sympathy, one must give it the benefit of the doubt before judging it. One must allow the text to be "innocent until proven guilty." This means we must assume that the author (in this case, Paul) is intelligent enough not to contradict himself or herself. If there is coherence in Paul's thought, then we can use his clear passages to illuminate passages that are harder to understand. Granting this, we can assume that Paul's point in Romans 13 harmonizes with the rest of his politics. Without this initial sympathy, we might fail to understand a text. The critical eye, squinting with distrust, cannot see clearly.

¹ It would be hard to cite all of the places where John Yoder has influenced these short observations. His remarks in *The Politics of Jesus* (especially the chapter "Let Every Soul Be Subject") have thoroughly influenced our understanding. Readers would do well to go beyond our sketch and read his work and the works from which he draws.

And it's a disservice to an author to reconcile apparent contradictions in different texts by "balancing" them, concluding, for example, that "Christians need both a violent side and a peaceful side." Others simply write off Romans 13 as either a later compromise in Paul's originally radical politics, or another author's later addition to a largely nonconformist epistle. But what if, instead of having two contradicting points, Paul had a single point? Let's assume that nowhere in Romans 13:1–7 is Paul saying anything that contradicts what he says at the end of the previous chapter:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. . . . Live in harmony with one another. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:14–21

(2) Note that the text says God orders "*all* authority." As we asked before, what would this text sound like to a German Christian under Hitler's rule or an Iraqi Christian under Saddam's rule? It is easy to blindly use this text to support some militaristic adventure of Constantine or the United States and assume its divine sanction, but this overlooks the fact that "all" must include *all* authorities: Nero, Domitian, Pilate, Mao Tse-tung, Saddam Hussein, Hitler's Third Reich, and so on. Also, there is no place in the text where these authorities, under the right conditions, are considered divinely inspired (therefore worthy of obedience) or, not meeting some criteria, are considered divinely condemned (therefore worthy of disobedience). The text does not give ordination only to democratically elected governments, but includes dictators!

When certain governmental standards (which have been imported into this text from elsewhere) are not met, some Christians like to introduce an exception: "We must obey God rather than men." But this phrase was intended not to provide an exception to the rule but serve as a clue to the overarching politics of the people of God: they always obey God rather than men, *and* they always subordinate to all authorities.

That God establishes all authority does not mean that God approves of all authorities. The point is rather that God is to be considered greater than, not equal to, all the powers of this world. Even the best democracy in the world isn't worthy of allegiance, for God is sovereign even over it. "Established" here means that God orders the powers, as a librarian orders books but doesn't necessarily approve of their content. After all, Paul speaks of a government that "rewards the just," but he also has extensive experience with persecution under its rule, and John of Patmos later refers to the powers (in Revelation 13) as the great whore. That God "ordered" pagan Assyria to chastise Israel (Isaiah 10) is similar to Paul's point. Isaiah made no hint that God approved Assyria or the violence it used, but Israel was to trust that, in their suffering, they were not outside of God's sovereignty. Jesus echoed this belief when he declared to Pilate, "You would have no power if it were not given to you from above," while obviously acknowledging Pilate's abuse of this power. Or remember back to when Israel demanded a king despite God's warnings of what kings would do to them, and "in God's anger God

gave them a king.” And now we ask God to save us from ourselves and our kings and presidents.

(3) Because Paul gives no conditions for a disciple to be subordinate to the authorities, we see he is talking about something deeper than disobedience or obedience. Paul, in fact, did not use the word *obey* (which would imply the sense of bending one’s will). He used the word *subordinate*, which means that you simply consider yourself *under* their *order*. This word is not about patriotism, pledging allegiance, or any affection for the powers. Paul isn’t trying to convince unpatriotic Christians to pledge better allegiance. Rather, Paul’s problem is the opposite: he must convince Christians, who are not conforming to the patterns of this world, not to overthrow the government!² Paul is helping disciples understand the futility of such endeavors, encouraging them to keep on the path described in Romans 12 (and all of Jesus’ life and teaching), and not fly off into a new and hopeless project of vying for power. As Paul makes clear in chapters 9 through 11, Gentiles need to see themselves not as participants in the political dramas of upheavals and revolutions but as part of the set-apart people of God which were begun through Abraham and Sarah.

Subordination is not simply a helpful spiritual caveat to remind the Christian to stay humble. It’s a necessary safeguard against violence and power. It’s difficult to find a time in history when the revolutionary, through violence and coercion, doesn’t become a new oppressor. As we mentioned in chapter 2, Jesus knew this was the case in his people’s recent history with the Maccabeans. Thus Jesus rejected the Zealots’ goal to “take the power back” from Herod or Pilate. Paul too is rejecting the Zealots’ impulse and opting for revolutionary subordination. As with Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the only thing that should be done with the ring of power is dissolve it in the fire, not put it in the hands of “a pious man.”

If this ever becomes confusing, one need simply look at the example of Jesus’ death at the hands of the powers to understand subordination. The way Jesus interacted with the temple courts and with Pilate displays a subordinate yet revolutionary heart. Jesus never obeyed their whims and wishes—indeed, his wild action in the temple precipitated his arrest—and yet he also nonviolently subordinated to arrest.³ He understood the powers as fallen but lovingly navigated through their hands, speaking truth that their power had blinded them to. To overcome evil, he would not resist it but suffered and absorbed it.

(4) Many warrior Christians like to refer to the “just war tradition.” And apparently Romans 13 is at the heart of this theory’s constitution. As you read through

² [A few years before this epistle Priscilla and Aquila had been expelled from Rome in connection with a tax revolt, and a new revolt was brewing under Nero. Paul’s point is that the insurrectionist motives behind this are missing the gospel’s methods of revolution. \(See Klaus Wengst, *The Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* \(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987\), 82.](#)

³ “The conscientious objector who refuses to do what a government demands, but still remains under the sovereignty of that government and accepts the penalties which it imposes, or the Christian who refuses to worship Caesar but still permits Caesar to put him or her to death, is being subordinate even though not obeying” (John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 209).

the text, you'll notice there is no place where sanction is given to the Christian to take up arms or even try to become the one who "governs by the sword." Indeed, the Christian identity is upheld in this text, as it was a chapter before, as radically distinct from the powers. For Paul, the powers and the state are clearly a "they," because he pledges allegiance to another Lord. Much just-war reflection fails not only in its logic and application but also in its preconception: their "we" is not the church but the state. In response to the question, "What should we have done in World War II?" we must ask, "Who is *we*?" If you are a Christian and your citizenship is in Jesus' kingdom, reflection begins not with the powers but with the church. The church should not have religiously supported, fought for, and obeyed Hitler. The church should have been enacting the teachings of Jesus. The church should have been taking in Jews and others who were hunted. In many instances the church *was* doing these things, but this is not the history we learn. Each of these instances, as in the case of Schindler or in our Celestin story or with the midwives in Egypt, are acts of holy subversion and disobedience. We are blessed to learn the lessons of history through the small, faithful ones in the Church (instead of through gigantic military history).

Not only does Romans 13 make no mention of Christians and the sword, it also doesn't talk about the state and war. When the text refers to the sword (v. 4, *machiara*: "short dagger"), the Greek word used refers not to war but to the symbol of local policing—it is the sword Roman officers would carry while accompanying tax-collectors. There are many Greek words that refer to war, but *machiara* is not one of them.

But if we must talk about the state and war, "just war" is the most identifiable tradition in the church. If Christians actually held to this theory, they would never go off to war. Just-war theory isn't a "justify any war" theory. It defines a just war by stringent criteria and was intended to criticize governments, minimize violence, and define several reasons wars were wrong. It should not be used to encourage Christians to abandon Jesus' teachings.

All major denominations, including just-war churches, declared the recent Iraq war unjust and illegitimate. (But why have many congregations in these denominations allowed their members to go off to war?) The only major denomination that we know of to officially sanction the war, the Southern Baptists, did so for reasons other than just-war criteria. (And we might ask whether this denomination would have sanctioned the war if the US president were an atheist and not a "born again Christian.")

(5) Only when the state resists evil and rewards good can the state be considered God's servant. The conditional word "attending" (also "give their full" v. 6, *proskarterountes*) helps us read the verse to say "they are servants of God *insofar as* they busy themselves with governing (resisting evil and rewarding good)." When this condition is met, it's not as if the Christian would join in resisting evil—no, they are still called to *overcome* evil as agents of the gospel, not agents of wrath. And as we said before, if this condition is not met, it's not as if Christians are justified in overthrowing the government either!⁴

⁴ "The conception of a 'state properly so called,' in the name of which one would reject and seek to overthrow the state which exists empirically, is totally absent in the passage. In the social context of the Jewish Christians in Rome, the whole point of the passage

In a similar way, the fact that the prophets speak of what a good king should do doesn't change the fact that kings were not part of God's original plan but a breaking of God's heart (1 Samuel 8). The condition is simply to define for the Christian a broad conception of what the state is doing, which is not what the Christian is doing.⁵ The act of resisting evil is what Paul and Jesus explicitly prohibited for Christians (Romans 12; Matthew 5).

It may be argued that this reading of Romans 13 leaves the dirty work of violence to the state while Christians keep their hands clean. Paul, indeed, understands that the powers play a role. (Paul had been protected from riot violence by this pagan government. Doubtlessly he was grateful for this, but he also seemed to be indifferent to this protection when he declared, "To live is Christ and to die is gain.") The powers' role is simply part of the old order that is passing away and crumbling.

It's as if an old castle, deteriorating and full of holes in the walls from war, is being rebuilt. The powers, partly responsible for creating the cycles of war, protect the castle from further bombing and set up scaffolds and girders to keep the building from crumbling on everyone's heads. They mitigate the mess they haven't yet become convinced to stop making. Meanwhile, those committed (the church) to the renewed castle make peace between the warriors who destroyed the castle, redesign its architecture, rework the plumbing, and so on. But if the reworkers resort to constructing gun turrets on the walls, they simply assure the tightening of the cycle that destroyed everything. This analogy, like any, falls short. But the picture is that the old order plays a role, but it's a limited and largely negative role. Rather than trying to save a sinking ship, Christians are to be helping people get into lifeboats. To the extent that people play a part in the old order of violence and power, they prolong and maintain it. Put simply, "the most effective way to contribute to the preservation of society in the old aeon is to live in the new."⁶

Moving from Romans 13, we'll take a short look at two small occasions that would make one wonder about Jesus' teachings on resisting evil.

a) Matthew 10:34. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a 'man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—your enemies will be the members of your own household.'"

To understand what he was actually saying it is necessary to see this phrase in its context. This verse is couched in his discussion about his disciples acting as innocent sheep, not fearing the powerful, being persecuted and losing one's life, and taking up one's cross—all nonviolent postures. It is also necessary to note what the in-family strife means. Jesus is here quoting Micah 7, a text that loathes the shedding of blood and

was to take out of their minds any concept of rebellion against or even emotional rejection of this corrupt pagan government" (Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 200).

⁵ "Christians are told (12:19) to never exercise vengeance but to leave it to God and to wrath. Then the authorities are recognized (13:14) as executing the particular function which the Christian was to leave to God ... the function exercised by the government is not the function exercised by the Christians" (Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 198).

⁶ [John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* \(Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003\), 83.](#)

acknowledges the chaos surrounding “the day God visits you.” God’s visitation—which Jesus hints as the very meaning of his life—is accompanied by division between people. Jesus does not rejoice in this division though he recognizes its inevitability. The presence of truth and love in a violent world is a recipe for disaster—it even provokes disaster; consider Herod’s slaughter of the innocents—and Jesus says his disciples must be ready to live through it. Jesus’ kingdom, though small as a mustard seed and humble as a dove, is also as bold and incisive as a sword. But this kingdom, written in this very passage, is to be spread through homeless visitations, not through force. There seems to be no reason to think that Jesus is here changing his mind on loving one’s enemies.

b) Luke 22:35-38 Then Jesus asked them, “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?”

“Nothing,” they answered.

He said to them, “But now if you have a purse take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.”

The disciples said, “See, Lord, here are two swords.”

“That is enough,” he replied.

This is part of a larger conversation about power at the last supper. Jesus’ disciples had apparently been unable to understand the meaning of his discussions on suffering and nonviolence. Over the course of this dinner conversation, Jesus had been trying to tell them that the kingdoms of this world wield power and demand service, but his kingdom was about serving others and self-sacrifice. As in many cases where Jesus would draw out props to make a point (e.g. the coin in the fish’s mouth), Jesus here needs to draw out a dangerous prop: the sword.

To prove his point, Jesus helps his disciples remember that *they don’t need anything*—which they acknowledge. With that in mind, he will help them understand that they also do not need a sword.

Very explicitly, Jesus equates the carrying of a sword with being a “transgressor.” This phrase references the beautiful passage of Isaiah 53 on how God’s glory is best known through humiliation and suffering and not apparent strength or majesty. To teach one of his most radical lessons on nonviolence, Jesus will incur the embarrassing reputation of going down with terrorists and insurgents, and not the potentially meaningful status of a blameless martyr. “He will be numbered with the transgressors.” Jesus even stripped his self of the ennobling innocent appearance of nonviolence. While he could go down with his unblemished personal character intact, to teach a lesson he will risk the misguided and violent wills of his disciples marring his reputation. (His final healing miracle will then be to clean up after the mess of his disciples’ violence by healing an arrestor’s ear.) This makes radical, counter-intuitive claims about the very nature of God and even what we mean by the word “God.” Is not humiliation and

suffering the very opposite of God? Now he will appear before court as being one of the insurgent terrorists who cut people's ears off.⁷

If calling the sword the transgressor's tool is not obvious enough, the outcome of the lesson is univocally clear. The very next scene is in Gethsemane where the disciple will use those swords. His disciples ask, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" As one disciple strikes an arrestor, Jesus yells, "No more of this!" and heals the wound. This is the commonly known time when Jesus also states, (in other gospels) "put your sword away," and "those who live by the sword die by the sword." After healing his arrestor, Luke's gospel shows Jesus punctuating this lesson of nonviolence with a question, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53).

Nowhere in all of the New Testament is a disciple of Jesus found carrying a sword again.

⁷ When the disciples find the swords that will mark their very sinfulness, Jesus says "enough." John Yoder comments: " 'Enough,' cannot mean that two swords would be enough for the legitimate self-defense against bandits of twelve missionaries traveling two by two. He is (in direct parallel to Deut. 3:26, where YHWH tells Moses to change the subject, *LXX hikanon estin*) breaking off the conversation because they don't understand anyway" (The Politics of Jesus, p. 45).